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# *The Essay as Form\**

by T.W. Adorno

“Destined, to see the illuminated,  
not the light.”  
Goethe, *Pandora*

That in Germany the essay is decried as a hybrid; that it is lacking a convincing tradition; that its strenuous requirements have only rarely been met: all this has been often remarked upon and censured. “The essay form has not yet, today, travelled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago; the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art.”<sup>1</sup> But neither discontent with this situation, nor discontent with the mentality that reacts to the situation by fencing up art as a preserve for the irrational, identifying knowledge with organized science and excluding as impure anything that does not fit this antithesis: neither discontent has changed anything in the customary national prejudice. The bestowal of the garland “writer” still suffices to exclude from academia the person one is praising. Despite the weighty perspicacity that Simmel and the young Lukács, Kassner and Benjamin entrusted to the essay, to the speculative investigation of specific, culturally predetermined objects,<sup>2</sup> the academic guild only has patience for philosophy that dresses itself up with the nobility of the universal, the everlasting, and today — when possible — with the primal; the cultural artifact is of interest only to the degree that it serves to exemplify

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\* Adorno’s “Der Essay als Form” was written between 1954 and 1958 and first published as the lead essay of *Noten zur Literatur I* in 1958. It is now contained in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974). The essay is published here in English with the permission of Suhrkamp Verlag.

1. George Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT, 1974), p. 13.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 10. “The essay is always concerned with something already formed, or at best, with something that has been; it is part of its essence that it does not draw something new out of an empty vacuum, but only gives a new order to such things as once lived. And because he only newly orders them, not forming something new out of the formless, he is bound to them; he must always speak “the truth” about them, find, that is, the expression for their essence.”

universal categories, or at the very least allows them to shine through — however little the particular is thereby illuminated. The stubbornness with which this stereotypical thought survives would be as puzzling as its emotional rootedness if it were not fed by motives that are stronger than the painful recollection of how much cultivation is missing from a culture that historically scarcely recognizes the *homme de lettres*. In Germany the essay provokes resistance because it is reminiscent of the intellectual freedom that, from the time of an unsuccessful and lukewarm Enlightenment, since Leibniz's day, all the way to the present has never really emerged, not even under the conditions of formal freedom; the German Enlightenment was always ready to proclaim, as its essential concern, subordination under whatever higher courts. The essay, however, does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creatio ex nihilo*. Luck and play are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete — not where nothing is left to say. Therefore it is classed among the oddities. Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle. Its interpretations are not philologically hardened and sober, rather — according to the predictable verdict of that vigilant calculating reason that hires itself out to stupidity as a guard against intelligence — it overinterprets. Due to a fear of negativity *per se*, the subject's effort to break through what masks itself as objectivity is branded as idleness. Everything is supposedly much simpler. The person who interprets instead of unquestioningly accepting and categorizing is slapped with the charge of intellectualizing as if with a yellow star; his misled and decadent intelligence is said to subtilize and project meaning where there is nothing to interpret. Technician or dreamer, those are the alternatives. Once one lets oneself be terrorized by the prohibition of going beyond the intended meaning of a certain text, one becomes the dupe of the false intentionality that men and things harbor of themselves. Understanding then amounts to nothing more than unwrapping what the author wanted to say, or, if need be, tracking down the individual psychological reactions that the phenomenon indicates. But just as it is scarcely possible to figure out what someone at a certain time and place felt and thought, such insights could not hope to gain anything essential. The author's impulses are extinguished in the objective substance they grasp. The objective abundance of signifi-

cations encapsulated within each spiritual phenomenon, if it is to reveal itself, requires from the person receiving them precisely that spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is chastised in the name of objective discipline. Nothing can be interpreted out of a work without at the same time being interpreted into it. The criteria of this process are the compatibility of the interpretation with the text and with itself and its power to release the object's expression in the unity of its elements. The essay thereby acquires an aesthetic autonomy that is easily criticized as simply borrowed from art, though it distinguishes itself from art through its conceptual character and its claim to truth free from aesthetic semblance. Lukács failed to recognize this when he called the essay an art form in a letter to Leo Popper that serves as the introduction to *Soul and Form*.<sup>3</sup> Neither is the positivist maxim superior to Lukács' thesis, namely the maxim which maintains that what is written about art may claim nothing of art's mode of presentation, nothing, that is, of its autonomy of form. The positivist tendency to set up every possible examinable object in rigid opposition to the knowing subject remains — in this as in every other instance — caught up with the rigid separation of form and content: for it is scarcely possible to speak of the aesthetic unaesthetically, stripped of any similarity with its object, without becoming narrow-minded and *a priori* losing touch with the aesthetic object. According to a positivist procedure the content, once rigidly modelled on the protocol sentence, should be indifferent to its presentation. Presentation should be conventional, not demanded by the matter itself. Every impulse of expression — as far as the instinct of scientific purism is concerned — endangers an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject; such expression would thus endanger the authenticity of the material, which is said to prove itself all the better the less it relies on form, even though the measure of form is precisely its ability to render content purely and without addition. In its allergy to forms, as pure accidents, the scientific mind approaches the stupidly dogmatic mind. Positivism's irresponsibly bungled language fancies itself to be responsibly objective and adequate to the matter at hand; the reflection on the spiritual becomes the privilege of the spiritless.

None of these offspring of resentment are simply untruth. If the essay disdains to begin by deriving cultural products from something underlying them, it embroils itself only more intently in the culture industry and it falls for the conspicuousness, success and prestige of products designed for the market place. Fictional biographies and all the related commercial writing are no mere degeneration but the perma-

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3. Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, pp. 1-18.

ment temptation of a form whose suspicion toward false profundity is no defense against its own turning into skillful superficiality. The essay's capitulation is already evident in Sainte-Beuve, from whom the genre of the modern essay really stems. Such works — along with products like the biographical sketches of Herbert Eulenberg,<sup>4</sup> the German model for a flood of cultural trash-literature, all the way to the films about Rembrandt, Toulouse-Lautrec, and the Holy Bible — have promoted the neutralizing transformation of cultural artifacts into commodities, a transformation which, in recent cultural history, has irresistably seized up all that which in the eastern bloc is shamelessly called “the cultural heritage.” This process is perhaps most striking in the instance of Stefan Zweig, who in his youth wrote several discerning essays, and who finally, in his book on Balzac, stooped so low as to describe the psychology of the creative artist. Such writing does not criticize basic abstract concepts, mindless dates, worn-out clichés, but implicitly and thereby with the greater complicity, it presupposes them. The detritus of an hermeneutic psychology is fused with common categories drawn from the *Weltanschauung* of the cultural philistines, categories like those of personality and the irrational. Such essays mistake themselves for that kind of feuilleton journalism with which the enemies of form confuse the form of the essay. Torn itself becomes unfree and sets itself to work in the service of the socially performed needs of its customers. The moment of irresponsibility, in itself an aspect of every truth that does not exhaust itself in responsibility toward the status quo, will account for itself when faced with the needs of the established consciousness; bad essays are no less conformist than bad dissertations. Responsibility, however, respects not only authorities and committees but the object itself.

The bad essay chats about people instead of opening up the matter at hand; in this the essay form is somewhat complicitous. The separation of knowledge from art is irreversible. Only the naiveté of the literary entrepreneur takes no notice of this separation; he thinks of himself as at least an organizational genius, and simply chews up good art-works into bad ones. With the objectification of the world in the course of progressing demythologization, science and art have separated from each other. A consciousness in which perception and concept, image and sign would be one is not, if it ever existed, to be re-created with a wave of the wand; its restitution would be a return to chaos. Only as the completion of the mediating process would such a

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4. [Herbert Eulenberg (1876-1949), author of *Schattenbilder (Silhouettes)*, a collection of biographical miniatures of notables published in 1910. Translator's footnote.]

consciousness be thinkable, as a utopia just as that on which idealist philosophers since Kant had bestowed the name of creative intuition, and which failed them whenever actual knowledge appealed to it. When philosophy supposes that by borrowing from art it can do away with objectifying thought and its history — with what is usually termed the antithesis of subject and object — and indeed expects that being itself would speak out of a poetic montage of Parmenides and Jungnickel,<sup>5</sup> it only approximates a washed-out pseudo-culture. With peasant cunning legitimated as primordiality, it refuses to honor the obligation of conceptual thought to which it has subscribed as soon as it has employed concepts in statements and judgments. At the same time its aesthetic element remains a second-hand thinned-out cultural reminiscence of Hölderlin or Expressionism, or possibly of *art nouveau*, simply because no thought can entrust itself to language as boundlessly and blindly as the idea of a primal utterance deceptively suggests. Out of the violence that image and concept do to one another in such writings springs the jargon of authenticity in which words tremble as though possessed, while remaining secretive about that which possesses them. The ambitious transcendence of language beyond its meaning results in a meaninglessness that can easily be seized upon by a positivism to which one thinks oneself superior; and yet, one falls victim to positivism precisely through that meaninglessness that positivism criticizes and which one shares with it. The playing chips of both are the same. Under the spell of such developments, language, where in the sciences it still dares to stir, approximates pseudo-art; and only that scientist proves, negatively, his fidelity to the aesthetic who in general resists language and instead of degrading the word to a mere paraphrase of his calculations prefers the charts that uninhibitedly admit the reification of consciousness and so produces a sort of form for reification without resorting to any apologetic borrowing from art. Of course art was always so interwoven with the dominant tendency of the Enlightenment that it has, since antiquity, incorporated scientific discoveries in its technique. Yet quantity becomes quality. When technique is made absolute in the art-work; when construction becomes total, eliminating what motivates it and what resists it, expression; when art claims to be science and makes scientific criteria its standard, it sanctions a crude preartistic manipulation of raw material as devoid of meaning as all the talk about “Being” (*Sein*) in philosophical seminars. It allies itself with that reification against which it is the function of functionless art, even today, to raise its own however mute and

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5. [Ludwig Heinrich Jungnickel (b. 1881 in Vienna), painter and handicraft artist well known for his animal woodcuts. This and the following passage refer to Heidegger. Translator’s note.]

objectified protest.

But although art and science have separated from each other in history, their opposition is not to be hypostatized. The disgust for anachronistic eclecticism does not sanctify a culture organized according to departmental specialization. In all of their necessity these divisions simply attest institutionally to the renunciation of the whole truth. The ideals of purity and cleanliness bear the marks of a repressive order; these ideals are shared by the bustle of authentic philosophy aiming at eternal values, a sealed and flawlessly organized science, and by a conceptless, intuitive art. Spirit must pass a competency test to assure that it will not overstep the official culture or cross its officially sanctioned borders. The presupposition is that all knowledge can potentially be converted into science. Theories of knowledge that distinguish pre-scientific from scientific consciousness have therefore grasped this distinction as one of degree only. The fact that this convertibility has remained a mere assertion and that living consciousness has never really been transformed into scientific consciousness, points to the precariousness of the transition itself, to a qualitative difference. The simplest reflection on the life of consciousness would reveal just how little acts of knowledge, which are not just arbitrary premonitions, can be completely caught by the net of science. The work of Marcel Proust, no more lacking than Bergson's in scientific-positivistic elements, is a single effort to express necessary and compelling perceptions about men and their social relations which science can simply not match, while at the same time the claim of these perceptions to objectivity would be neither lessened nor left up to vague plausibility. The measure of such objectivity is not the verification of asserted theses through repeated testing, but individual experience, unified in hope and disillusion. Experience, reminiscing, gives depth to its observations by confirming or refuting them. But their individually grasped unity, in which the whole surely appears, could not be divided up and reorganized under the separated *personae* and apparatuses of psychology and sociology. Under the pressure of the scientific spirit and of an ever-present desire latent in every artist, Proust attempted, by means of a scientifically modelled technique, a sort of experimentation, to save or reproduce a form of knowledge that was still considered valid in the days of bourgeois individualism when the individual consciousness still trusted itself and was not yet worried about organizational censure: the knowledge of an experienced man, that extinct *homme de lettres*, whom Proust once again conjures up as the highest form of the dilettante. No one would have thought to dismiss as unimportant, accidental or irrational the observations of an experienced man because they are only his own and as such do not lend themselves readily to scientific

generalization. Those of his discoveries which slip through the meshes of science certainly elude science itself. Science, as cultural science (*Geisteswissenschaft*), negates what it promises to culture: to open up its artifacts from within. The young writer who wants to learn at college what an art-work is, what linguistic form, aesthetic quality, even aesthetic technique are, will only haphazardly learn anything at all about the matter; at best he will pick up information ready culled from whatever modish philosophy and more or less arbitrarily slapped on to the content of works currently under discussion. If he turns, however, to philosophical aesthetics he is beleaguered with highly abstract propositions that have neither a connection with the works he wants to understand, nor with the content after which he is groping. The division of labor within the *kosmos noetikos* (intelligible world) into art and science is not, however, altogether responsible for this situation; the internal boundaries between art and science will not be obviated by good will or over-arching planning. Rather, the spirit irretrievably modeled on the pattern of the control of nature and material production forgoes both recollection of any surpassed phase that would promise any other future and any transcendence vis-à-vis the frozen relations of production; this cripples the technical intelligence's own specialized procedure precisely with regard to its specific objects.

With regard to scientific procedure and its philosophic grounding as method, the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest consequences from the critique of the system. Even the empiricist doctrines that grant priority to open, unanticipated experience over firm, conceptual ordering remain systematic to the extent that they investigate what they hold to be the more or less constant pre-conditions of knowledge and develop them in as continuous a context as possible. Since the time of Bacon, who was himself an essayist, empiricism — no less than rationalism — has been “method.” Doubt about the unconditional priority of method was raised, in the actual process of thought, almost exclusively by the essay. It does justice to the consciousness of non-identity, without needing to say so, radically un-radical in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total. “Perhaps the great *Sieur de Montaigne* felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of *Essays*. The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy. The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness — the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life — and even emphasizes it with ironic modes-



ty.”<sup>6</sup> The essay does not obey the rules of the game of organized science and theory that, following Spinoza’s principle, the order of things is identical with that of ideas. Since the airtight order of concepts is not identical with existence, the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine — deeply rooted since Plato — that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against that ancient injustice toward the transitory, by which it is once more anathematized, conceptually. The essay shys away from the violence of dogma, from the notion that the result of abstraction, the temporally invariable concept indifferent to the individual phenomenon grasped by it, deserves ontological dignity. The delusion that the *ordo idearum* (order of ideas) should be the *ordo rerum* (order of things) is based on the insinuation that the mediated is unmediated. Just as little as a simple fact can be thought without a concept, because to think it always already means to conceptualize it, it is equally impossible to think the purest concept without reference to the factual. Even the creations of phantasy that are supposedly independent of space and time, point toward individual existence — however far they may be removed from it. Therefore the essay is not intimidated by the depraved profundity which claims that truth and history are incompatible. If truth has in fact a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in truth; the *a posteriori* becomes concretely the *a priori*, as only generally stipulated by Fichte and his followers. The relation to experience — and from it the essay takes as much substance as does traditional theory from its categories — is a relation to all of history; merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what is nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity; the claim that social-historical contents are nevertheless supposed to be only indirectly important compared with the immediate life of the individual is a simple self-delusion of an individualistic society and ideology. The depreciation of the historically produced, as an object of theory, is therefore corrected by the essay. There is no salvaging the distinction of a first philosophy from a mere philosophy of culture that assumes the former and builds on it, a distinction with which the taboo on the essay is rationalized theoretically. The intellectual process which canonizes a distinction between the temporal and the timeless is losing its authority. Higher levels of abstraction invest thought neither with a greater sanctity nor with metaphysical content; rather, the metaphysical content evaporates with the progress of abstraction, for which the

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6. Lukács, p. 9.

essay attempts to make reparation. The usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality. But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal. Its weakness testifies to the non-identity that it has to express, as well as to that excess of intention over its object, and thereby it points to that utopia which is blocked out by the classification of the world into the eternal and the transitory. In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth.

The essay simultaneously suspends the traditional concept of method. Thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter, not from referring it back to something else. In this the essay becomes polemical by treating what is normally held to be derived, without however pursuing its ultimate derivation. The essay freely associates what can be found associated in the freely chosen object. It does not insist stubbornly on a realm transcending all mediations — and they are the historical ones in which the whole of society is sedimented — rather the essay seeks truth contents as being historical in themselves. It does not concern itself with any supposed primeval condition in order to contravene society's false sociality, which, just because it tolerates nothing not stamped by it, ultimately tolerates nothing indicative of its own omnipresence and necessarily cites, as its ideological complement, that nature which its own praxis eliminates. The essay silently abandons the illusion that thought can break out of *thesis* into *physis*, out of culture into nature. Spellbound by what is fixed and admittedly deduced, by artifacts, the essay honors nature by confirming that it no longer exists for human beings. The essay's Alexandrianism replies to the fact that by their very existence the lilac and the nightingale, wherever the universal net allows them to survive, only want to delude us that life still lives. The essay abandons the main road to the origins, the road leading to the most derivative, to being, the ideology that simply doubles that which already exists; at the same time the essay does not allow the idea of immediacy, postulated by the very concept of mediation, to disappear entirely. All levels of the mediated are immediate to the essay, before its reflection begins.

As the essay denies any primeval givens, so it refuses any definition of its concepts. Philosophy has completed the fullest critique of definition from the most diverse perspectives, including those of Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. But science has never adopted this critique. While the movement beginning with Kant, a movement against the scholastic residues in modern thought, replaces verbal definition with an understanding of concepts as part of the process in which they are

temporally embodied, the individual sciences insist stubbornly on the pre-critical job of definition — and do so for the sake of the undisturbed security of their operation. In this regard the neopositivists, who identify philosophy with scientific method, agree with Scholasticism. The essay, in contrast, takes the anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure, and introduces concepts directly, “immediately,” as it receives them. They gain their precision only through their relation to one another. In this, however, the essay gets some support from the concepts themselves. For it is a mere superstition of a science exclusively concerned with the appropriation of raw materials to believe that concepts are in themselves undetermined, that they are first determined by their definition. Science requires the image of the concept as a *tabula rasa*, in order to secure its claim to domination; the claim to be the sole power at the head of the table. Actually, all concepts are already implicitly concretized through the language in which they stand. The essay begins with such meanings and, itself being essentially language, it forces these meanings on farther; it wants to help language, in its relation to concepts, to grasp these concepts reflectively in the way that they are already unconsciously named in language. That effort is already envisaged by the procedure of meaning-analysis in phenomenology; only there the relation of concepts to language is fetishized. The essay remains as skeptical of this as it is of definition. Without apology the essay draws on itself the reproach that it does not know beyond a doubt just what is to be understood as the real content of concepts. For the essay perceives that the longing for strict definitions has long offered, through fixating manipulations of the meanings of concepts, to eliminate the irritating and dangerous elements of things that live within concepts. Yet the essay can neither do without general concepts — even language that does not fetishize the concept cannot do without concepts — nor does it treat them arbitrarily. It therefore takes the matter of presentation more seriously than do those procedures that separate out method from material and are indifferent to the way they represent their objectified contents. The *how* of expression should rescue, in precision, what the refusal to outline sacrifices, without, however, betraying the intended matter to the arbitrariness of previously decreed significations. In this Benjamin was an unequalled master. Such precision, however, cannot remain atomistic. Not less, but more than the process of defining, the essay urges the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of this texture. Actually, the thinker does not

think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it. While even traditional thought draws its impulses from such experience, such thought by its form eliminates the remembrance of these impulses. The essay, on the other hand, takes them as its model, without simply imitating them as reflected form; it mediates them through its own conceptual organization; it proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically.

The way in which the essay appropriates concepts is most easily comparable to the behavior of a man who is obliged, in a foreign country, to speak that country's language instead of patching it together from its elements, as he did in school. He will read without a dictionary. If he has looked at the same word thirty times, in constantly changing contexts, he has a clearer grasp of it than he would if he looked up all the word's meanings; meanings that are generally too narrow, considering they change depending on the context, and too vague in view of the nuances that the context establishes in every individual case. Just as such learning remains exposed to error, so does the essay as form; it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security, a lack which the norm of established thought fears like death. It is not so much that the essay ignores indisputable certainty, as that it abrogates the ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, and not in a hoarding obsession with fundamentals. Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem* hidden to the essay itself, and not from an obvious *terminus a quo*. In this the very method of the essay expresses the utopian intention. All of its concepts are presentable in such a way that they support one another, that each one articulates itself according to the configuration that it forms with the others. In the essay discreetly separated elements enter into a readable context; it erects no scaffolding, no edifice. Through their own movement the elements crystallize into a configuration. It is a force field, just as under the essay's glance every intellectual artifact must transform itself into a force field.

The essay gently defies the ideals of *clara et distincta perceptio* and of absolute certainty. On the whole it could be interpreted as a protest against the four rules that Descartes' *Discourse on Method* sets up at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory. The second of these rules, the decomposition of the object into "as many parts as possible and as might be necessary for its adequate solution,"<sup>7</sup> formulates that analysis of elements under whose sign traditional theory

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7. René Descartes, *A Discourse On Method*, trans. John Veitch (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1951), p. 15.

equates a conceptual order with the structure of being. But the object of the essay, the artifact, refuses any analysis of its elements and can only be constructed from its specific idea; it is not accidental that Kant treated art-works and organisms analogously, although at the same time he insisted, against all romantic obscurantism, on distinguishing them. The whole is to be hypostatized into a first principle just as little as is the product of analysis, the elements. In opposition to both, the essay is informed by the idea of that interaction which in fact tolerates the question of elements as little as that of the elementary. Neither are the specific elements to be developed purely out of the whole, nor vice versa. The artifact is a monad, yet it is not; its elements, as such of a conceptual kind, point beyond the specific object in which they gather themselves. But the essay does not follow these elements to that point where they legitimize themselves, on the far side of the specific object; otherwise it would turn into a bad kind of infinity. Rather, the essay comes so close to the here and now of the object, up to the point where that object, instead of being simply an object, dissociates itself into those elements in which it has its life.

The third Cartesian rule, “to conduct my thoughts in such an order that, by commencing with the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex,”<sup>8</sup> is sharply contravened by the form of the essay in that it begins with the most complex, not the most simple, which is in every instance the habitual. The essay as form will be a good guide for the person who is beginning to study philosophy, and before whose eyes the idea of philosophy somehow stands. He will hardly begin by reading the easiest writers, whose common sense<sup>9</sup> will skim the surface where depth is called for; he will rather go for the allegedly difficult writers, who shed light on what is simple and illuminate it as a “stance of the mind toward objectivity.” The naiveté of the student, to whom the difficult and formidable seems good enough, is wiser than the adult pedantry that admonishes thought with a threatening finger to understand the simple before risking that complexity which alone entices it. Such a postponement of knowledge only prevents knowledge. In opposition to the cliché of the “understandable,” the notion of truth as a network of causes and effects, the essay insists that a matter be considered, from the very first, in its whole complexity; it counteracts that hardened primitiveness that always allies itself with reason’s current form. Whereas science treats the difficulties and complexities of an antagonistic and monadologically split reality according to the

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8. *Ibid.*

9. [In English.]

expectation of this society by reducing them to simplifying models and then belatedly differentiates them with fabricated material, the essay shakes off the illusion of a simple, basically logical world that so perfectly suits the defense of the status quo. Its differentiation is no supplement, but its medium. Established thought readily ascribes that differentiation to the mere psychology of the author and then thinks that it has adequately dealt with it. The pompous scientific objections to over-sophistication actually do not aim at the impertinently unreliable method but at the irritating aspects of the object which the essay reveals.

The fourth Cartesian rule that one “should in every case institute such exhaustive enumerations and such general surveys” that one “is sure of leaving nothing out” — this ultimate principle of systematic thought — reappears unchanged in Kant’s polemic against Aristotle’s “rhapsodic” thought. This rule corresponds to the particular objection to the essay that, in the words of the schoolmaster, it is not exhaustive, while it is clear that every object, and above all a cultural object, encloses endlessly many aspects, the choice among which can only be determined by the intention of the knower. The “general survey” would only be possible if it were determined in advance that the object in question can be fully grasped by the concepts which treat it; that nothing is left over that could not be anticipated by these concepts. Following that assumption, the rule requiring the exhaustive enumeration of the individual elements claims that the object can be presented in an airtight deductive system: a supposition of a philosophy of identity. As a practical technique of thought, as for example in its insistence on definition, the Cartesian rule has outlived the rationalistic theorem on which it was founded: a comprehensive general view and a continuity of presentation is urged even upon empirically open scientific procedure. In this fashion the intellectual conscience that should, in Descartes’ philosophy, keep watch over the necessity of knowledge is transformed into the arbitrariness of a “frame of reference.”<sup>10</sup> In order to satisfy a methodological need and to support the plausibility of the whole, it becomes an axiomatic doctrine that is being set up as the gateway to thought while no longer being able to demonstrate its own validity or proof. Or, in the German version, it becomes a “project” (*Entwurf*) that, with the pathos-laden claim of reaching into being, simply suppresses its subjective conditions. The insistence on the continuity of thought’s process tends to prejudice the inner coherence of the object, its own harmony. A continuous presentation would contradict material that is full of antagonisms as long as it did

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10. [In English.]

not simultaneously define continuity as discontinuity. Unconsciously and far from theory, the need arises in the essay as form to annul the theoretically outmoded claims of totality and continuity, and to do so in the concrete procedure of the intellect. If the essay struggles aesthetically against that narrow-minded method that will leave nothing out, it is obeying an epistemological motive. The romantic conception of the fragment as an artifact that is not complete in itself but openly striding into infinity by way of self-reflection, advocates this anti-idealist motive even in the midst of idealism. Even in its manner of delivery the essay refuses to behave as though it had deduced its object and had exhausted the topic. Self-relativization is immanent in its form; it must be constructed in such a way that it could always, and at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over. The unanimity of the logical order deceives us about the antagonistic nature of that on which it was jauntily imposed. Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its concern is always a conflict brought to a standstill. While the essay adjusts concepts to one another by virtue of their function in the parallelogram of the forces of the materials, it shrinks back from the over-arching concept under which particular concepts should be subordinated; what the over-arching concept merely pretends to accomplish, the essay's method recognizes as insoluble while nevertheless attempting to accomplish it. The word "essay" — in which thought's utopia of hitting the bull's eye unites with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional nature — indicates something, like most historically surviving terminologies, about the form, the importance of which is magnified by the fact that it results not programmatically but as a characteristic of the form's groping intention. The essay must let the totality light up in one of its chosen or haphazard features but without asserting that the whole is present. It corrects the isolated and accidental aspects of its insights by allowing them to multiply, confirm, and restrict themselves — whether in the essay's proper progress or in its mosaic-like relation to other essays; and it does so not by abstracting characteristic features from its insights. "Thus the essay distinguishes itself from a scientific treatise. He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing."<sup>11</sup> The discontent with this procedure, the feeling that it could

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11. Max Bense, "Über den Essay und seine Prosa," *Merkur* 1:3 (1947), 418.

all go on indefinitely, has its truth and untruth. Its truth, because in fact the essay comes to no final conclusions and makes explicit its inability to do so by parodying its own *a priori*; it is then saddled with the guilt that is actually incurred by those forms that erase every trace of arbitrariness. Yet that discontent with the essay is at the same time untrue because, as a constellation, the essay is not arbitrary in the way that it seems to a philosophical subjectivism which translates the exigencies of the object into those of its conceptual organization. The essay is determined by the unity of its object, together with that of theory and experience which have migrated into the object. The essay's openness is not vaguely one of feeling and mood, but obtains its contour from its content. It resists the idea of the master-work that reflects the idea of creation and totality. Its form follows the critical thought that man is no creator, that nothing human is creation. The essay, always directed towards artifacts, does not present itself as a creation; nor does it long for something all-embracing, the totality of which would resemble creation. Its totality, the unity of a form thoroughly constructed in itself, is that of non-totally; one that even as form does not assert the thesis of the identity of thought and thing, the thesis which in its own content the essay rejects. Freedom from the pressure of identity occasionally provides the essay (and this is lacking in official thought) with an aspect of ineffaceability, of inextinguishable color. In Simmel certain foreign words — *cachet, attitude* — betray this intention, without it being treated theoretically as such.

The essay is both more open and more closed than traditional thought would like. It is more open in so far as, through its inner nature, it negates anything systematic and satisfies itself all the better the more strictly it excludes the systematic; residues of the systematic in the essay such as the infiltration of literary studies with ready-made, wide-spread philosophical commonplaces, by which these studies try to make themselves respectable, are of no more value than psychological banalities. On the other hand, the essay is more closed in that it labors emphatically on the form of its presentation. The consciousness of the non-identity between presentation and presented material forces the form to make unlimited efforts. In that respect alone the essay resembles art; otherwise, on account of the concepts which appear in it and which import not only their meaning but also their theoretical aspects, the essay is necessarily related to theory. To be sure, the essay relates itself to theory as cautiously as to the concept. It neither deduces itself rigidly from theory — the cardinal fault of all Lukács' later essayistic work — nor is it a down-payment on future syntheses. Disaster threatens intellectual experience the more strenuously it ossifies into theory and acts as if it held the philosopher's stone in hand. And yet,



intellectual experience itself strives by its own nature toward such objectification. This antinomy is mirrored by the essay. Just as it absorbs concepts and experiences, so it absorbs theories. However, its relation to them is not that of a standpoint. If this lack of a standpoint is no longer naive and dependent on the prominence of its objects; if the essay rather uses the relationship to its objects as a weapon against the spell of beginnings, it parodically practices the otherwise only feeble polemic of thought against mere standpoint philosophy. The essay swallows up the theories that are close by; its tendency is always toward the liquidation of opinion, even that from which it takes its own impulse. The essay remains what it always was, the critical form *par excellence*; specifically, it constructs the immanent criticism of cultural artifacts, and it confronts that which such artifacts are with their concept; it is the critique of ideology. "The essay is the form of the critical category of our mind. For whoever criticizes must necessarily experiment; he must create conditions under which an object is newly seen, and he must do so in a fashion different from that of a creative author. Above all the fragility of the object must be probed, tested; this is precisely the meaning of the small variation that an object undergoes in the hands of its critic."<sup>12</sup> If the essay is accused of lacking a standpoint and of tending toward relativism because it recognizes no standpoint lying outside of itself, then the accusation implicitly contains the conception of truth as something "ready-made," a hierarchy of concepts, an image of truth that Hegel destroyed in his dislike of standpoints: in this the essay touches its polar opposite, the philosophy of absolute knowledge. The essay would like to cure thought of its arbitrariness by taking arbitrariness reflectively into its own procedure instead of masking it as spontaneity.

Hegelian philosophy, to be sure, remained trapped in the inconsistency that it criticized—the abstract, over-arching concept, the mere "result," in the name of an internally discontinuous process, while at the same time, in the idealist tradition, speaking about dialectical method. Therefore the essay is more dialectical than the dialectic as it articulates itself. The essay takes Hegelian logic at its word: neither may the truth of the totality be played off immediately against individual judgments, nor may truth be reduced to individual judgments; rather, the claim of the particular to truth is taken literally to the point where there is evidence of its untruth. The risked, anticipatory, and incompletely redeemed aspect of every essayistic detail draws in other details as negation; the untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself is the element of its truth. Untruth certainly also resides in the essay's

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12. *Ibid.*, 420.

basic form, in its relation to what is culturally preformed and derived as though it were something in-itself. But the more energetically the essay suspends the concept of some first principle, the more it refuses to spin culture out of nature, the more fundamentally it recognizes the unremittingly natural essence of culture itself. Up to the present day, a blind natural interconnectedness, myth, perpetuates itself in culture. It is precisely this upon which the essay reflects: its proper theme is the interrelation of nature and culture. It is not by coincidence that, rather than “reducing” the artifact, the essay immerses itself in cultural phenomena as in a second nature, a second immediacy, in order through persistence to remove the illusion of immediacy. The essay deceives itself as little as the philosophy of origins about the difference between culture and that which underlies it. Yet for the essay, culture is not some epiphenomenon superimposed on being that must be eliminated, but rather what lies underneath is itself artificial (*thesei*), false society. Thus, for the essay, origins have no priority over the superstructure. The essay owes its freedom in its choice of objects, its sovereignty vis-à-vis all priorities<sup>13</sup> of fact or theory to the circumstance that for it all objects are equally near the center, to the principle that casts a spell over everything. The essay refuses to glorify concern for the primal as something more primal than concern for the mediated, because to the essay primacy itself is an object of reflection, something negative. It corresponds to a situation in which the primal, as a standpoint of the mind within the falsely socialized world, becomes a lie. It covers a wide territory from the enshrinement as primal words of historical concepts extracted from historical languages, to academic instruction in “creative writing;”<sup>14</sup> from craft-shop primitiveness to recorders and finger-painting;<sup>15</sup> in every instance the pedagogical necessity sets itself up as a metaphysical virtue. Thought is not exempt from Baudelaire’s rebellion of poetry against nature as a social reservation. Even the paradises of thought are only artificial, and in them the essay indulges. Since, according to Hegel’s dictum, there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not mediated, thought may only hold true to the idea of immediacy by way of the mediated, but it becomes the prey of the mediated the instant it grasps directly for the unmediated. Cunningly, the essay settles itself into texts, as though they were simply there and had authority; without the illusion of the primal, it gets under its feet a ground, however dubious, comparable to earlier theological exegesis of holy writings. The essay’s impulse, however, is

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13. [In English.]

14. [In English.]

15. [In English.]

the exact opposite of the theological; it is critical: through confrontation of texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each text intends even in spite of itself, to shatter the claim of culture and move it to remember its untruth — the untruth of that ideological façade which reveals culture's bondage to nature. Under the glance of the essay second nature becomes conscious of itself as first nature.

If the truth of the essay gains its momentum by way of its untruth, its truth is not to be sought in mere opposition to what is ignoble and proscribed in it, but in these very things: in its mobility, its lack of that solidity which science demands, transferring it, as it were, from property-relationships to the intellect. Those who believe they must defend the intellect against the charge of a lack of solidity are the enemies of intellect: intellect itself, once emancipated, is mobile. As soon as it wants more than simply the administrative repetition and manipulated presentation of what already exists, it is somehow exposed; truth abandoned by play would be nothing more than tautology. Thus historically the essay is related to rhetoric, which the scientific mentality, since Descartes and Bacon, has always wanted to do away with; that is, until, appropriately in the age of science, rhetoric decayed and became a science *sui generis*, the science of communication. Of course rhetoric has always been a form of thought which accommodated itself to communicative language. It directed itself to the unmediated: the substitute-satisfaction of its audience. Yet the essay preserves in the very autonomy of its presentation, through which it distinguishes itself from the scientific mode of communication, traces of the communicative with which science dispenses. The pleasures which rhetoric wants to provide to its audience are sublimated in the essay into the idea of the pleasure of freedom vis-à-vis the object, freedom that gives the object more of itself than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas. The scientific consciousness, which is directed against any anthropomorphic idea whatsoever, was always closely bound up with the reality principle and similarly hostile to happiness. While happiness is supposedly the goal of all domination over nature, it always appears to the reality principle as regression to mere nature. This can be seen even in the highest philosophies, including Kant's and Hegel's. Reason, in whose absolute idea these philosophies have their pathos, is denounced by them as something both pert and disrespectful as soon as it challenges the established system of values. Against this inclination the essay rescues a sophistic element. The hostility to happiness of official critical thought can be felt particularly in Kant's transcendental dialectic: it wants to eternalize the boundary between understanding and speculation, and, according to its characteristic metaphor, to prevent any "roaming around in intelligible worlds." While self-critical

reason should, according to Kant, keep both feet planted on the ground, indeed should ground itself, it follows its innermost principle and seals itself off against anything new as well as against curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought, that is also upbraided by existential ontology. What in the content of his thought Kant projects as the goal of reason, utopia, the production of humanity, is disbarred by the form of his thought, the theory of knowledge; it forbids reason to go beyond the realm of experience, which, caught in the machinery of mere material and unchangeable categories, is reduced to that which always was. But the object of the essay is the new as something genuinely new, as something not translatable back into the staleness of already existing forms. By reflecting the object without doing violence to it, the essay silently laments the fact that truth has betrayed happiness and thus itself; this lament incites the rage against the essay. In the essay the persuasive aspect of communication, analogously to the functional transformation of many traits in autonomous music, is alienated from its original goal and converted into the pure articulation of presentation in itself; it becomes a compelling construction that does not want to copy the object, but to reconstruct it out of its conceptual *membra disjecta*. But the objectionable transitions in rhetoric, in which association, ambiguity of words, neglect of logical synthesis all make it easy for the auditor, yoking him to the speaker's will: all these are fused in the essay with its truth-content. Its transitions disavow rigid deduction in the interest of establishing internal cross-connections, something for which discursive logic has no use. It uses equivocation neither out of slovenliness nor in ignorance of their proscription by science, but to clarify what usually remains obscure to the critique of equivocation and its mere discrimination of meanings: whenever a word means a variety of things, the differences are not entirely distinct, for the unity of the word points to some unity, no matter how hidden, in the thing itself; however, it is obviously not the case that this unity, as claimed by contemporary restorative philosophies, can itself be taken simply as a unity of linguistic affinities. Here as well the essay verges on the logic of music, the stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition; it aims at appropriating for expressive language something that it forfeited under the domination of a discursive logic which cannot be circumvented, but may be outwitted in its own form by the force of an intruding subjective expression. For the essay is not situated in simple opposition to discursive procedure. It is not unlogical; rather it obeys logical criteria in so far as the totality of its sentences must fit together coherently. Mere contradictions may not remain, unless they are grounded in the object itself. It is just that the essay develops thoughts differently from discursive logic. The essay neither makes deductions

from a principle nor does it draw conclusions from coherent individual observations. It co-ordinates elements, rather than subordinating them; and only the essence of its content, not the manner of its presentation, is commensurable with logical criteria. If, thanks to the tension between presentation and what is presented, the essay — compared with forms which indifferently convey a ready-made content — is more dynamic than traditional thought, it is at the same time, as a constructed juxtaposition of elements, more static than traditional thought. In that alone rests the essay's affinity to the visual image; except that the essay's static quality is itself composed of tensions which, as it were, have been brought to a standstill. The slightly yielding quality of the essayist's thought forces him to greater intensity than discursive thought can offer; for the essay, unlike discursive thought, does not proceed blindly, automatically, but at every moment it must reflect on itself. This reflexion, however, does not only extend to the essay's relation to established thought, but also to its relation to rhetoric and communication. Otherwise the essay, while fancying itself meta-scientific, would become vainly pre-scientific.

The relevance of the essay is that of anachronism. The hour is more unfavorable to it than ever. It is being crushed between an organized science, on one side, in which everyone presumes to control everyone and everything else, and which excludes, with the sanctimonious praise of "intuitive" or "stimulating," anything that does not conform to the status quo; and, on the other side, by a philosophy that makes do with the empty and abstract residues left aside by the scientific apparatus, residues which then become, for philosophy, the objects of second-degree operations. The essay, however, has to do with that which is blind in its objects. Conceptually it wants to blow open what cannot be absorbed by concepts, or what, through contradictions in which concepts entangle themselves, betrays the fact that the network of their objectivity is a purely subjective rigging. It wants to polarize the opaque, to unbind the powers latent in it. It strives to concretize content as determined by space and time; it constructs the interwovenness of concepts in such a way that they can be imagined as themselves interwoven in the object. It frees itself from the stipulation of those attributes which since the definition in the *Symposium* have been ascribed to ideas; the notion that ideas "exist eternally and neither come into being nor pass away, neither change nor wane;" "A being eternally created in itself and for itself;" and yet the essay remains idea, in that it does not capitulate under the burden of mere being, does not bow down before what merely is. It does not measure what is by some eternal standard, rather by an enthusiastic fragment from Nietzsche's later life: "If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves

but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in ourselves nor in things: and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harpstring just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event — and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.”<sup>16</sup> This with the exception that the essay mistrusts such justification and affirmation. For the happiness that Nietzsche found holy, the essay has no other name than the negative. Even the highest manifestations of the intellect that express happiness are always at the same time caught in the guilt of thwarting happiness as long as they remain mere intellect. Therefore the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy’s secret purpose to keep invisible.

*Translated by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will*

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 532-533.

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