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# THE SKEWED PATH: ESSAYING AS UN-METHODICAL METHOD

*There will always be much of accident in this essentially informal, this un-methodical, method.*

Walter Pater

## I. THE ESSAY AND THE HUMAN SCIENCES

Is the essay literature or philosophy? A form of art or a form of knowledge? The contemporary essay is torn between its belletrist ancestry and its claim to philosophical legitimacy. The Spanish philosopher Eduardo Nicol captured the genre's uncertain status when he dubbed it "*almost* literature and *almost* philosophy" (Nicol 1961:207).<sup>1</sup> The problem is hardly a new one. It goes back

<sup>1</sup> In this essay I have used English-language editions when possible, occasionally

to what Plato called the “ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy, and more recently to the German Romantic theorist, Friedrich Schlegel, who called for a mode of criticism which would be at once philosophical and poetic. But today, when the status of critical discourse is up for grabs, reflecting the crisis of knowledge in the universities, the question of the essay takes on a new urgency. Now the predominant form of writing in the human sciences, it cannot avoid the challenge to define itself according to the prevailing standards of scientific knowledge and method.

Despite the essay’s interdisciplinary prominence, it has fallen largely to literary critics and theorists to debate the generic status of the form. In Anglo-American letters, this debate is unavoidably filtered through the long-standing question of the nature and function of criticism. A century or so ago, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde evoked criticism as art, while Matthew Arnold and others held it to the less glamorous role of mediating the great tradition. Nowadays, matters are not so simple. The case for creative criticism is being made in North American universities by deconstructionists, a school of *avant-garde* theorists informed by the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. These theorists stress the imaginative status of criticism while downplaying its cognitive and philosophical aspects. A common strategy is to question the conventional distinction between literary and critical discourse. Since no mode of discourse can escape rhetorical figuration—so runs the deconstructionist adaptation of Friedrich Nietzsche’s argument—should we not give up the pretense that criticism can operate as a neutral metalanguage producing adequate descriptions of poetic texts? Why not simply join in the fun of writing and playful interpretation (Derrida 1978:292)? Why should criticism not draw upon the productive freedom, energies, and techniques of art, if these are indeed equally available to all forms of writing (Ulmer 1983)?

The *avant-garde* position is understandable as a reaction both to sterile academic criticism and to the scientific ethos of modern society. But the move to blur the distinctions between art and criticism is no less an over-reaction now than it was a hundred

modifying a translated passage for nuance or emphasis. Translations from non-English editions, as in the case of Nicol’s text, are mine.

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years ago, when Wilde exhorted the critic to be an artist and flee the “dim, dull abyss of fact” (Wilde 1975:16). Indeed, the move is chancier now, because it may further undermine the already weak position of humanistic study in the universities and in society at large. By associating criticism with *l'esprit de frivolité*, deconstructionists may suppose that they are tweaking the nose of positivism. But they risk abandoning the field to positivistic method by trivializing other modes of inquiry. Whatever the intent, to deny the possibility of metalinguistic functions and genre distinctions, and to insist that criticism and philosophy are not different in kind from literature, is surely to weaken the essay's claim to be a legitimate medium of critical inquiry—a claim on which its future in the human sciences is bound to depend in large measure. Several important questions emerge in this regard. What are the cognitive and philosophical claims, and what is the methodological status, of the critical essay? What degree of autonomy does essayistic method retain *vis-à-vis* systematic philosophy? Can these claims be honored without disowning the rhetorical flexibility and spontaneity long associated with the genre? Must one choose between the essay as literature and the essay as philosophy, or can it be both, to the detriment of neither? The aim of the present essay is to explore the answers given to these questions by several important modern theorists, and to draw some conclusions as to the place of the essay in the contemporary human sciences. It will be argued that essaying is a mode of thought poised between literature and philosophy, art and science, holding the antinomies of imagination and reason, spontaneity and discipline, in productive tension; and that its antinomian character makes the essay the most adequate form for interdisciplinary research and writing.

## II. BETWEEN SELF AND SYSTEM: THE ESSAY REDISCOVERED

Walter Pater may be credited with rediscovering the essay as the “strictly appropriate form of our modern philosophical literature [...]... the essay came into use at what was really the invention of the relative, or “modern” spirit, in the Renaissance of the sixteenth century” (Pater 1912:174-175). Pater's assumption that a

continuous “modern” sensibility motivates the essay since Montaigne, the first essayist, seems slightly anachronistic today. The serenity we find in the writings of Montaigne (and, to an extent, in Pater as well) is harder to come by nowadays. To be sure, the essay is still “an expression of the self thinking,” as Alfred Kazin wrote to introduce the 1961 anthology, *The Open Form*. But the essaying self is much attenuated. One can no longer seriously pretend, as Kazin does, that the essay (or anything else) expresses “the individual’s wholly undetermined and freely discovered point of view” (p. x). Since Marx and Freud, discovering one’s point of view has come to mean discovering what determines it. One finds now a roughly inverse proportion between self-affirmation in a piece of discourse and the degree of philosophical seriousness accorded to it—unless the essayist is an acknowledged expert. The contemporary mind divides all forms of reason into scientific and subjective. To read Montaigne now is to realize that the contemporary essayist travels under a more rigid protocol, within more carefully patrolled boundaries. Going through the disciplinary checkpoints of the knowledge industry, the essayist (the masculine pronoun will be used in this text) must declare his intentions. Are his writings subjective or objective? Opinion or knowledge? Classified as opinion, they may pass; few will take them seriously, anyway. But if they claim to know something, they must be accompanied by the proper documents certifying their use of scientific method, and showing the fruits of its application. Whereas Montaigne wrote with one eye on the world and the other on himself, the modern essayist, *sub specie academiae*, works with one eye on the object of study while the other nervously reviews the method by which he is authorized to know or interpret.

The unity of experience one encounters in Montaigne’s writings was not a given but an achieved unity, forged in the midst of the civil and religious wars of the late sixteenth century. The medieval worldview was shattered, the Copernican revolution had begun, education and public life were chaotic, the wrenching paradigm shift toward modernity was underway (Barfield 1977:14). Montaigne’s serene individualism was anchored in the stoical and humanist traditions of *culture de l’âme*, combining self-cultivation and practical wisdom (Friedrich 1968). Only this inner security can

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account for his exemplary “negative capability”, the high tolerance for doubt and contingency which pervades his work.

Pater shrewdly identified Montaigne’s essays with the dialectic method of Plato’s dialogues. Both forms, dialogue and essay, convey the flow of discursive reasoning, with or without the presence of an interlocutor. Both genres cut a circuitous path, approaching the truth obliquely, acknowledging the role of contingency and occasion. The method of both genres is, for its genuine practitioners, “coextensive with life itself;... there will always be much of accident in this essentially informal, this un-methodical method” (Pater: 185-86). Like Socrates, Montaigne has the wisdom of his ignorance; he knows that he knows not. Unlike Socrates, however, Montaigne is a true skeptic: he suspects that certain knowledge is unattainable through reason. Throughout the essays, he mocks human pretensions to systematic knowledge, whether in scholastic dogma, medicine, or humanist educational reforms. “I do not see the whole of anything,” he informs us. “Nor do those who promise to show it to us” (Montaigne 1981:219). The great scientific and geographical discoveries of the sixteenth century are for him only proof that we were once deceived by our certainties, and will doubtless be so again. His only doctrine is the *docta ignorantia*, “learned ignorance”—the wisdom that comes from accepting nescience and finitude as part of the human condition. This stance did not entail turning away from the pursuit of truth, or learning; but it is the *quest* for knowledge, the pleasure of the chase, that Montaigne revels in, not its goal. He flouts the humanist equation of method with systematic presentation (Gilbert 1960:69-73). As taught in the schoolbooks, the purpose of method was to facilitate knowledge by reducing all subjects to the bare essentials, thereby saving the student or reader from the idle *curiositas* of meandering authors, and from the trouble of discovering the material for himself. Scorning the humanists’ well-marked shortcuts, Montaigne preferred the crooked path of actual experience.

His use of the term *Essais* to name his writings was already a methodological choice (Friedrich: 353-56). To essay is to experiment, to try out, to test—even one’s own cognitive powers and limits. The word connotes a tentative, groping method of experience, with all its attendant risks and pleasures. One who

essays sets out with no predetermined path or destination, no particular aim in mind, save the discovery of reality. Detours are welcomed; they may lead to self-knowledge. Montaigne may digress from some topic, but not from himself: "It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I... I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming" (761). Montaigne cannot be dismissed as a self-absorbed humanist ideologue. To watch the self navigating a world in flux has little or nothing to do with narcissism, everything to do with close observation and critical reflection. "I do nothing but come and go. My judgement does not always go forward; it floats, it strays... Nearly every man would say as much, if he considered himself as I do" (426). Long before Rimbaud's discovery that *je est un autre*, Montaigne had recognized the decentered quality of selfhood. Long before Freud, he had debunked the uninterpreted self as a reliable foundation for knowledge: "Our dreams are worth more than our reasoning. The worst position we can take is in ourselves" (427). Montaigne appeals instead to mobility and chance. He invites the reader to join him for a stroll. "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely" (219). His strategy of anticipated digression evokes the *ordo neglectus*, the insouciant style cultivated by the Renaissance man of the world (Friedrich: 350, 359-64). He refers to himself ironically as "a new figure: an unpremeditated and accidental philosopher" (409). For Montaigne, in short, there is no unbridgeable gap between self and world; subject and object are one, as he tells the reader from the outset: "I am myself the matter of my book" (2). Montaigne's essays constitute not only a mode of writing but a form of life; they are inseparable from the sentient self of the essayist.

His refusal to separate self from method, the living subject from experienced object, places Montaigne on the far side of the great epistemological divide inaugurated by Sir Francis Bacon, for whom methodological self-renunciation was the necessary price of progress. Bacon conceived method as a way of screening out the contaminating passions and prejudices of the concrete knowing subject, the better to enlist nature in the service of human ends. Though he did not foresee the imminent triumph of scientific method, Montaigne's own "unmethodical method," grounded in

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the pleasures and pains of the bodily self, is already an implicit critique of instrumental reason (Friedrich: 153-55). His mode of essaying, tracking the spontaneous self, is his answer both to scientific method and to philosophical systems. Instinctively refusing to adapt the self to the constraints of systems, Montaigne rubs modernity against the grain. Or is it precisely this refusal which makes him our contemporary? Systems need the individual subject only as a foundational principle. They need only the subject *qua* rational being: *Je pense, donc je suis* (thus Descartes). To which Valéry would reply: *Parfois je pense, parfois je suis*. Montaigne managed to do both, to think and to exist, at the same time.

### III. THE VICISSITUDES OF THE MODERN ESSAY

Notwithstanding Pater's invocation of a "relative" or "modern" spirit extending from Montaigne's century to our own, the intellectual conditions of the modern essay are no longer those of the essayist from Bordeaux. Intervening is what Max Weber called the progressive rationalization or "disenchantment" of the world. The triumph of secular reason over religious authority, the social and political upheavals of western Europe and the rise of the bourgeoisie, the emergence of the modern nation-states, the expansion of printing and the public sphere—all of these things initially multiplied the possibilities of the individual. But with the rise of mass media and the trivialization of public discourse, along with the exponential increase and specialization of knowledge and information, the individual's relation to culture was complicated enormously. Essay-writing was not immune to the growing instrumentalization of culture, nor to the resultant fragmentation of thought and attenuation of individuality. With the expansion and commercialization of the public sphere, the essay moved away from the meditative self-portrait into more specialized forms. The process was of course not linear or uniform; it varied by national and cultural context. Sometimes it took the form of unbridled subjectivism: Karl Kraus rebuked the *feuilletonistes* of late nineteenth-century Vienna for their narcissistic impressionism (Janik and Toulmin 1973:79-80). In England, by contrast, the personal essay dropped out of sight between Lamb and Beerbohm,

giving way to the journalistic review. There, the critic functioned as “the middleman, the interpreter, the vulgariser” (Hunecker 1919:151). For Virginia Woolf, commenting on the difficulties of expressing personality in essay-writing, journalism exacted “the penalty which the habitual essayist must now be prepared to face. He must masquerade. He cannot afford the time to be himself or to be other people. He must skim the surface of thought and dilute the strength of personality” (1948:304). Yet the problems arising from the instrumentalization of culture were not to be dissolved, *pace* Woolf, by “triumphs of style,” or “knowing how to write.” The tissues of experience had hardened; the essayist’s dialogue with the world no longer flowed easily back and forth, as in Montaigne, through the prose membrane of the essay. A full diagnosis would have to consider not only the pressures of writing for the public, but also the reading habits and needs of that public. Surveying the previous half-century of British essaywriting, Woolf could still assert in the 1920s that the essay’s sole purpose was to give pleasure. “Today tastes have changed,” Auden would write a few years later, explaining the decline of the essay as a form of *belles-lettres* in terms of the diminished pleasure modern readers take in authorial subjectivity: “We can appreciate a review or a critical essay devoted to a particular book or author, we can enjoy a discussion of a specific philosophical problem or political event, but we can no longer derive any pleasure from the kind of essay which is a fantasia upon whatever chance thoughts may come into the essayist’s head” (Auden 1974:396).

Perhaps the best evidence of the specialization of modern thought is the rigid distinction often drawn between the essay and systematic philosophy. This distinction codifies the alienation of thought from lived experience which Montaigne protested in his essays. A rigorous modern exponent of strict generic boundaries in philosophical prose is the Spanish philosopher Eduardo Nicol, who defines the essay as a marginal genre of philosophy. In his view, the essayist’s task is to speak of sundry issues in a nontechnical style to a general public; to illuminate particular phenomena against the background of ideas. Employing both images and concepts, the essay is “*almost* literature and *almost* philosophy.” Essayist and philosopher practice distinct modes of cognition: the philosopher methodically follows up the threads joining one



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problem to another, rather than remaining attached, like the essayist, to the strand linking the single fact to an isolated problem or idea (Nicol 1961:209-13). The professional philosopher may of course adopt the essay as an expository vehicle. But essayist and philosopher stand in opposite relation to it as a medium of presentation: "For the born essayist, the essay is a way of thinking; for the born philosopher, the essay is an occasional form, a convenient way of expounding his previously reached conclusions." For the essayist, the genre "is like a theatre of ideas in which the rehearsal and the final performance are combined." The philosopher, by contrast, rehearses his ideas in private, before publishing them (208). Nicol does not deny the essay its place as a legitimate minor form; he only insists that the essayist accept the rules and lesser status of the genre, and that he does not try to claim the prestige of philosophy, the inherently superior calling. For the result would be chaos—a "confusion of genres". Nicol rebukes José Ortega y Gasset, the greatest Spanish philosophical essayist (and in temperament close to Montaigne) for just such a blurring of genres. Protesting the tendency of Ortega and his compatriots (especially Miguel de Unamuno) to make the self and its surroundings, rather than truth, the protagonists of their essays, Nicol lays down the law: "One must either serve the self or serve philosophy" (239). The choice is ultimately between ideology and science; between *doxa*, mere opinion, and *epistēmē*, scientific knowledge (150).

But the modern critical-philosophical essay—as instanced not only by Unamuno and Ortega but also by Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, to name but a few—does not passively accept Nicol's law. Instead of bowing to philosophical systems, the essay—if one may adopt Adorno's device of personifying the genre to characterize the tacit aims of its practitioners—refuses to subordinate its own method to norms handed down from above. It flouts the imperialism of scientific method, while trespassing over the boundaries of the academic disciplines. At its most combative, modern philosophical essayism recalls Nietzsche's taunt, in *Twilight of the Idols*, that the will to system betrays a lack of integrity (1982:470).

#### IV. BETWEEN SYSTEM AND FRAGMENT: THE ESSAY REINVENTED

Though it was Pater who first designated the essay the “strictly appropriate form of our modern philosophical literature,” it was central Europeans schooled in the German tradition of philosophical aesthetics who did most to justify this designation. Thinkers in this tradition, from Lessing to Adorno, considered thought inseparable from its mode of presentation (*Darstellung*). The German Romantics Schlegel and Novalis, striving to create criticism which would bridge poetry and philosophy, held that minor forms such as aphorism, fragment, and essay were able, through ironic self-reflection, to engender metaphysical inquiry of the highest order (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1978). Like the Idealism from which it derived, Romantic essayism was largely eclipsed by the positivistic turn in European thought in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the turn of the present century, however, the moment was right for the resumption and fuller development of philosophical essayisms (Luft 1980:18-22). Nietzsche had been hammering away at the pillars of idealist systems while academic philosophers were engaged in propping up the tottering Neo-Kantian edifice, and in salvaging what they could from the rubble. Vitalist and aestheticist thinkers were in revolt against positivism and scientific method. Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Simmel were attempting to establish an independent methodology for the *Geisteswissenschaften* (“human sciences”). Writers such as Georg Simmel, Robert Musil, Rudolph Kassner, and Georg Lukács were producing brilliant essays in cultural criticism.

In his 1911 collection, *Soul and Form* (1974), Lukács, a young Hungarian critic, inquires into the plight of the modern essay, which he identifies with *Kritik*, or criticism. How is it, he asks, that the writings of the greatest essayists, by giving form to a vital standpoint or *Weltanschauung*, manage to transcend the sphere of science and attain a place next to art, “yet without blurring the frontiers of either”? How does such form “endow the work with the force necessary for a conceptual re-ordering of life, and yet distinguish it from the icy, final perfection of philosophy”? According to Lukács, “Form *is* reality in the writings of critics; it is the voice with which they address their questions to life.”

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Whereas the modern essayist uses the occasion of reviewing prior texts to formulate his essential questions, Plato, in Lukács' view the original and greatest essayist, needed no "mediating medium", and was able to pose his questions directly to life. For Plato, by Lukács' account, lived in a golden age when man's essence and his destiny were in harmony, and so could be captured in artistic form. Having lost that harmonious life-world, the modern essayist finds no Socrates (for Lukács, "the typical life for the essay form") to serve as a vehicle for his own ultimate questions. The modern essay "has become too rich and independent for dedicated service, yet it is too intellectual and multiform to acquire form out of its own self," causing most critics to adopt a certain frivolity as their very "life-mood." The symbols and experiences drawn from other works do not suffice. Lukács maintains that the essayist is typically a precursor to a grand system, awaiting "the great value-definer of aesthetics, the one who is always about to arrive... [the essayist] is a John the Baptist who goes out to preach in the wilderness about another who is still to come, whose shoelace he is not worthy to untie." But is the essayist then a mere harbinger who is rendered superfluous by the arrival of the grand system? There is pathos, but also a deep ambivalence, in Lukács' messianic longing for a system. This longing for wholeness (hardly uncommon in Central Europe on the eve of World War I) registers a partial protest against the fragmentation of life; but Lukács senses that the transcendence he envisions would involve subordinating his concrete individuality to a higher ideal or purpose, be it the Idea or a stand-in. In this pre-Marxist phase of his work, Lukács concludes that the essay's unfulfilled longing does have independent value; it is "a fact of the soul with a value and an existence of its own: an original and deep-rooted attitude towards the whole of life... The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging" (Lukács 1974:1-18).

The method of the modern essayist—that of commentary and critique—is no longer "co-extensive with life". He needs the "mediating medium" of other works, other lives, to give meaning to his own. Indeed, as a specialist in cultural commentary, he has *become* a mediating medium. Is it the essayist's destiny to find himself by losing himself? Not, at any rate, the way Lukács went

about it—as one may observe by way of epilogue to his early theory of the essay. After becoming a communist in 1918 and participating in the Hungarian revolution, he went on in the 1920s to write *History and Class Consciousness* (1971), the most influential work of Marxist philosophy since Marx. Placing Marxist theory under the aegis of the Hegelian category of totality, Lukács in effect posited a secular version of the System he had heralded in messianic tones in his earlier work. Forced immediately to recant his Hegelian-Marxist synthesis, he nevertheless remained in the Party, which he regarded as his “ticket to history”. Lukács’ commitment to the idea of totality is mocked by the Stalinist “system” at whose service he placed himself; and his Marxist works are haunted by his earlier defense of the essay’s fragmentary and solitary authenticity.

If Lukács’ self-sacrifice did not bring the salvation he hoped for, there is irony in the fact that his recanted work stimulated a countering, anti-Hegelian school of thought: the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which used Lukács’ own insights to criticize the totalizing tendencies of his Hegelian Marxism (Jay 1973). The defense of the essay’s philosophical legitimacy was continued by two critics associated with this school: Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. In the methodological introduction to his 1928 study of German baroque tragic drama (1977), Benjamin draws a line between knowledge, which may be possessed, and truth, which may only be represented: “For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object—even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth [method] is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form.” Whereas philosophy as system “weaves a spider’s web between separate kinds of knowledge in an attempt to ensnare the truth as if it were something that came flying in from the outside,” Benjamin posits a nonacquisitive ideal for philosophy: truth as the representation of ideas. He sees in the treatise or esoteric essay, which he compares to a mosaic, the proper form of this alternative philosophy: “Its method is... representation. Method is a digression. Representation as digression—such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic... The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea”

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(1977:27-30). Thus began Benjamin's career of experimentation with fragmentary forms in criticism, forms displaying little or no "uninterrupted purposeful structure", ranging from extended treatise and commentary to surrealist pastiche, essay, and thesis.<sup>2</sup> His work continued the process of reversing the classical primacy of totality over fragment (as represented by Goethe's distinction between symbol and allegory), a reversal which Lukács had tentatively begun in his early theory of the essay. Like Lukács, Benjamin gave the opposition not only aesthetic but also historical, ontological, and ethical freight, coming to see his task as that of "redeeming" concrete phenomena from the refuse of history as they were abandoned by systems in their march toward generalization. To this end, he used surrealist montage to light up cultural phenomena in a sudden "profane illumination." This "micrological method" of theorizing (he borrows the term from Schlegel) influenced his friend, Adorno, who would later argue in *Negative Dialectics* that "Philosophy should not philosophize *about* concrete things, but rather *out* of those things" (1973:33). Whereas the pre-Marxist Lukács had assigned the essay an independent value, yet one inferior to that of the system or "grand aesthetic," Benjamin's prose experiments made fragmentation into a method. Adorno, in turn, developed Benjamin's ideas into a full-scale theory of the essay. Just as Benjamin had attempted to restore allegory to its rightful place among baroque literary forms, so Adorno set out, in his 1931 inaugural address at the University of Frankfurt, to reclaim the essay's heritage of radical "empiricism" which had been lost in the nineteenth-century idolization of systems. He preferred the essay's "risk of experimentation" to the complacent security of systems. Since philosophy had failed in its effort to grasp the whole of reality through self-sufficient reason, it was time to give up stale systems, and to rely instead on the essay as a method of philosophical interpretation based on the dialectical encounter between thinking subjects and concrete historical phenomena. This encounter would be fragmentary, experimental, and critical: "For the mind [*Geist*] is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin's interest in fragmentary form was evident in his 1920 dissertation on the German Romantic theory of criticism (Benjamin 1973).

existing reality” (Adorno 1977:132-33).

In a key 1958 essay, “The Essay as Form” (1984), Adorno hones his definition of the genre as an immanent critique of systematic method. The essay is said to reject the identity principle upon which all systems are based—the epistemological assumption that their network of concepts mirrors the structure of reality; that subject and object, the *ordo idearum* and the *ordo rerum*, are identical (1984:158). What motivates identity thinking, in Adorno’s view, is the urge to dominate or control reality: “The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of every idealism” (1973:23). Without using the label, Adorno equates the essay genre with his own philosophical position—that of “negative dialectics,” or dialectics without synthesis. Refusing the traditional concepts of truth and method, the essay becomes *anti*-method; its opposition to systems is its form-determining principle. Radicalizing a position adumbrated by the German Romantics and developed by the early Lukács and then by Benjamin, Adorno embraces fragmentation as the essay’s very source of truth—thus opposing Lukács’ later (Hegelian-Marxist) validation of universal over particular, totality over fragmentation.

In his 1931 address, Adorno had associated the essay as a method of interpretation with an earlier (Baconian) notion of philosophy as an *ars inveniendi* (“art of invention”). “But the *organon* of this *ars inveniendi* is fantasy. An exact fantasy... which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement...” (1977:131). The oxymoron “exact fantasy,” suggesting the irreducible tension between the subject and the object of cognition, evokes the ideal of a disciplined spontaneity—as compared to traditional philosophical method, which banned spontaneity altogether. Adorno took this notion further in his 1958 essay. Instead of subsuming particular phenomena under first principles and definitive concepts, the essay form “urges the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience... the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of this texture.” In the genre’s rhetorical mediation of concepts, subject and object interact; “the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual

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experience, without simplifying it... the essay proceeds... so to speak, in methodically unmethodical fashion.” The locution “methodically unmethodical” (echoing Pater, wittingly or not) indicate again that in its rebellion against systematic method, the essay does not obey mere whim or subjective fantasy. “The essay is determined by the unity of its object” (1984:160-65). Its task, which Adorno elsewhere identifies with that of criticism itself, is to follow “the logic of the object’s *aporias*” (1967:32). Since the object—for Adorno, always part of social reality—is itself contradictory, “antagonistic,” the essay is structured accordingly. “Self-relativization is immanent in its form; it must be constructed in such a way that it could always, at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented, and gains its unity only by moving through fissures, rather than by smoothing them over... Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its concern is always an arrested conflict” (1984:164). Adorno’s essayism flouts the Cartesian precept to articulate continuously and exhaustively, moving from the simplest elements to the most complex. Instead of trying to present arguments in a foolproof deductive sequence, the essay “co-ordinates elements, rather than subordinating them; and only the substance of its content, not the manner of its presentation, is commensurable with logical criteria” (170). The essay shares with art a moment of playful autonomy, a “pleasure principle” which mocks the stern “reality principle” of systems (168). Answering Lukács, who placed the essay next to art, Adorno acknowledges that the essay “acquires aesthetic autonomy... [but] distinguishes itself from art through its conceptual character and its claim to truth free from aesthetic semblance” (153).

Adorno’s argument would partly corroborate Nicol’s claim that the essayist thinks as he writes, “with the stroke of the pen” (Nicol:124). While the systematic philosopher employs rhetoric as a supplementary device to summarize the results of his thinking, the essayist does not separate the conceptual and the rhetorical moments of thought. Both moments interact in the genre’s unmethodical method. For Adorno (unlike Nicol), the aesthetic dimension of presentation does not vitiate but rather enhances the essay’s truth claims. Adorno’s own antinomian method is enacted stylistically through paradox, irony, oxymoron, and chiasmus. In such locutions as “methodically unmethodical,” “exact fantasy,” and “arrested conflict,” the dialectical play of opposites works



against the illusion of stasis, identity, or totality. To say that Adorno's essays turn dialectics into a fine art would not be a loose metaphor. A trained musician, he considered Arnold Schoenberg's serial method of composing a worthy model for philosophical exposition: just as Schoenberg's technique was "dialectical" in its avoidance of dominance and hierarchy, and in its overthrow of traditional tonality, so negative dialectics in Adorno's writings methodically overturns the hierarchies and rules of traditional philosophy (Buck-Morss 1977:129-131). To read Adorno's essays is to be compelled to think dialectically. Their form is their method, crystallized. This is not to say, however, that they faithfully reproduce the actual flow of Adorno's thought. The essay is neither a mirror of nor a window onto the writer's empirical mental process. Such a reproduction would be impossible, even if one were interested in attempting it (see Adorno 1974:80-81). Buffon's dictum that *le style, c'est l'homme* is at best an ideal which may be approached asymptotically but never realized. For the essay, even when it adopts fragmentation as an aesthetic device, is still a constructed, intentionally ordered artifact. As the example of Montaigne makes clear, it is the medium not only of self-revelation, but also of self-revision. The rhetorical function of the critical or philosophical essay is not to portray or mimic thought, but to convey the feeling of its movement, and thereby to induce an experience of thought in the reader. Suggesting ways of approaching a problem rather than providing definitive solutions, it lets the reader feel the motion of transgressing epistemological boundaries—which is why Lukács was right in saying that the crucial thing about the essay's judgment is not the verdict but the process.

Notwithstanding their internal urge to closure, systems are, historically considered, only temporary paradigms, "interim reports" in the search for truth (Collingwood 1933:198). Often critical and innovative in their initial phase, they tend to inertia and stasis. No longer responding to the situation which engendered them, they become obstacles to perception and experience, and must in turn be undone by new essays of thought. This is the historical insight contained in Adorno's conclusion that "The essay's innermost formal law is heresy" (1984:171). Nor can Adorno's negative dialectics escape the historical fate of systems.



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Relentlessly polemicizing against systems, his method finally becomes one itself (Wohlfarth 1979:979). Instead of dissolving received standpoints, it stakes out a position; it *takes a stand*.<sup>3</sup>

In this respect, Adorno's practice of the essay stands at the antipodes from that of Montaigne. The individual is still the locus of experience for negative dialectics, as in Montaigne's essays; but the function of subjectivity has changed radically. In contrast to Montaigne's affirmation of the self in all its richness and contingency, Adorno's ideal essay entails "the liquidation of all opinion or mere viewpoint, including the one from which it begins" (1984:166). The essayist practices a self-restraint which is at once epistemologically and rhetorically motivated. So that the subject may experience the object without dominating it, the personality is kept in abeyance. The cognitive subject becomes an instrument of objectivity in Adorno's theory. His essays do of course reveal an individualized *persona*, and an unmistakable philosophical style. But excessive self-reference and pathos on the essayist's part, "*à la Montaigne*", are implicitly proscribed as violations of philosophical decorum. Sublimated, the essayist's imagination now has an official methodological role to play: that of "exact fantasy", in the service of negative dialectics. Only in oblique references and in certain aphoristic fragments (in *Minima Moralia*, for instance), would Adorno let down his guard to an extent, alluding to his own personal experience. Such allusions hint at the ethical basis of his philosophical position and, by implication, of his theory of the essay. "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," he once wrote (1967:34). Instead of following his early musical proclivities, Adorno took up Benjamin's mission of rescuing through interpretation those undervalued or superseded aspects of existence which systems left by the wayside. Instead of "writing poetry" (or music), he wrote cultural criticism—essays—which he believed to be the only acceptable way of philosophizing in the era of Hitler and Stalin. So it may be said that in Adorno, the essay is subtly re-instrumentalized in its very critique of instrumentalization. The essay's vaunted autonomy and playfulness are limited by the duties

<sup>3</sup> The word "system" derives from the Greek roots *syn* and *histanay*, meaning "to stand together."

assigned to it by Adorno's theory: the methodological task of exact fantasy, and the implicit ethical burden of resisting the world's totalitarian sway.

## V. VARIATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ESSAYISM

The current crisis of knowledge might be described in terms of a dialectic between fragmentary and totalizing modes of thought—between essay and system. On the one hand, in an era threatened by totalitarianism, the inherent tendency of systems to closure, and their operational role in what has been called the “political economy of truth” (Foucault 1980:131-33), continues to make the system suspect as an epistemological and discursive norm. On the other hand, the fragmentary-essayistic mode championed by some *avant-garde* critics matches only too well the accelerating compartmentalization of knowledge in academic institutions and in society at large. If critical thought does not aspire in principle to comprehend the entire sociocultural complex in which it operates, but remains content with constructing allusive montages in a limited domain, it ceases to be critical and begins to reproduce rather than challenge the *status quo*. This dilemma confronts the French post-structuralists Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault—whose works, collectively, constitute the most significant development in contemporary continental essayism. These thinkers, no less than the Frankfurt School critical theorists discussed earlier, have felt the magnetic pull of philosophical systems—whether phenomenological, structuralist, Marxist, or psychoanalytical. And like the German theorists (the later Lukács being the obvious exception), the French post-structuralists have resisted the systematic temptation by privileging fragmentation as an aesthetic and methodological principle.<sup>4</sup> Where the two schools of theory diverge is in their respective justifications of this principle. For the German theorists—still working, albeit critically, within a humanist-idealist paradigm—essayistic fragmentation

<sup>4</sup> The epithet of nationality is used here as a convenient label. The differences between the two schools doubtless owe as much to generational factors as to national origin.

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serves two aims. First, it preserves freedom of imagination as a necessary moment of the essaying process; and second, it signals that the knowing subject in the process no longer plays the constitutive role reserved for it in idealist systems, but that it defers instead to the object of cognition, following the “logic of its *aporias*.” Contrariwise, the French theorists (the francophile Benjamin anticipates the post-structuralist view in this respect), extending the German post-Hegelian critiques of idealism and wishing to eliminate all vestiges of Cartesianism and humanism from their thinking, pronounce the Subject anachronistic and the Author dead. They are apt to justify discursive discontinuity with reference to the free play of language or textuality operating autonomously, with no conscious subject in control (Barthes 1977); or to the libidinal vagaries and intensities which are found conspicuously at play even in critical or theoretical discourse (Lyotard 1974). Jean-François Lyotard exposes the lingering pieties and authoritarian power-claims of theory conceived as metalanguage or master discourse, advocating instead a “paganized” discourse in which the search for truth becomes an “affair of style” (Lyotard 1977:9-10). If the Frankfurt School critical theorists regard consciousness as the locus of ideology and the scene of critical thought, the post-structuralists are preoccupied instead with language and discourse, looking less to epistemology than to *avant-garde* art and aesthetics for their discursive models. Utopian in either case, the essay is for the German theorists a *cognitive* or *epistemic* utopia; for the French thinkers it would be, to use Roland Barthes’ phrase, a “utopia of language” (Barthes 1979:8).

This is not to suggest that the two schools have equal investments in the genre. The German thinkers ascribed to the essay the heroic role of defending critical and creative thought against the encroachments of instrumental reason, as embodied in systems. By contrast, the French thinkers have resisted identifying their projects with established genres, even questioning the very notion of genre (Derrida 1980). They have at times distanced themselves from the essay in particular (Lyotard 1974:303), doubtless because they mistrust discourses of self-representation, whether the self appears in the foundational role of the Cartesian *cogito* or in the more congenial guise of Montaigne’s essays.

Despite such demurrers, the French theorists belong well within the tradition of philosophical essayism. It is telling that Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, systematic critics of bourgeois individualism in their early works, both make the self (in distinct ways) a central concern of their late works, and each pays final homage to the essay as well. Foucault, citing the desire to “stray afield of oneself” as the motivation of his work, defines the essay as “the living substance of philosophy... an “ascesis,” *askesis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (1986:8-9).

More significant in the present context than their differences is the fact that both schools respond, in overlapping historical phases, to the conditions of contemporary knowledge and research by producing essays as unmethodical method. Whatever their differences in terminology, both schools rebel against the primacy of systems and method. Both refuse demands for absolute objectivity—demands which usually mean bowing to another’s construction of the object. But it is not epistemological anarchy that these theorists propose; it is rather the methodological recognition of contingency. In a passage of method in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes of deconstruction’s (momentary) departure along a “traced path” from the age of logocentrism: “The *departure*” is radically empiricistic. It proceeds like a wandering thought on the possibility of itinerary and of method. It is affected by nonknowledge as by its future and it *ventures out* deliberately... We must begin *wherever we are...*” (1976:162). But neither school practices straightforward empiricism; both view thought as rhetorically and textually mediated. The essay’s rhetorical method is not the traditional *inventio* based on manipulation of catalogued *topoi* or commonplaces: “Topological thinking... knows the place of every phenomenon, the essence of none” (Adorno 1967:33). Theorists of both schools refuse to separate the acts of thinking and writing, to regard writing as a mere instrument of thought. Faced with Nicol’s option to serve the self or serve philosophy, they refuse the alternative. Unlike the systematic philosopher who rehearses his thoughts in private, deleting all traces of contingency from his discourse, the essayist, mindful that all thought is circumstantial, reflects on the circumstances of his own discourse, making them serve the thought at hand.

Revealing rather than concealing its rhetorical character, the

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essay carries on its Socratic mission: the critical discussion of culture in the public sphere. In practice if not always in theory, both schools would agree with Adorno (echoing Bense 1947:420) that the proper function of the essay is *Ideologiekritik*, the critique of ideology (1984:166).<sup>5</sup> Its principal domain is the critical interpretation of texts. For this reason, theories of the essay necessarily have a hermeneutic dimension. The essay's mode of cognition is, in Wilhelm Dilthey's terms, "idiographic" rather than "nomothetic," concerned with understanding particular cases rather than with finding general laws. Max Bense's argument that the essay's method is "experimental" (1947:417-18;424) may be taken in a nonpositivistic sense: the essay makes heuristic and hermeneutical "probes" of phenomena, without utilitarian or universalizing intent.<sup>6</sup> Of the hermeneutical principles common to the essayism of both (German and French) schools of theory, the most basic one is that there is no unconditioned standpoint; which is why the essayist must continually reflect on the context of discourse, and why in its very form the essay will bear traces of that contextuality. In this respect, there are striking parallels between Adorno and Derrida. In their approach to text, both negative dialectics and deconstruction operate as a *negative hermeneutics*. As readers, both Derrida and Adorno seek the anomaly, the exception which thwarts the rule. As critics, both juggle binary oppositions to reverse traditional metaphysical hierarchies, showing not how to construct texts or systems of interpretation, but how to undo canonical ones.<sup>7</sup> And as theorists, both Adorno and Derrida are ultimately driven by philosophical systems, in their very attempt to deconstruct them. Unfortunately, under the present conditions of knowledge and its dissemination, in which even the subtlest critical model is destined for commodification, the work of each theorist has tended to become mechanized, reified by its adherents, as though the price of its

<sup>5</sup> Adorno cites Max Bense's characterization of the essay as "the form of the critical category of our mind" (Bense 1947:420).

<sup>6</sup> Bense at one point likens the essay's "experimental method" to that of physics (417-18). For counter-arguments to this analogy, see Bruno Berger (1964: 115-27).

<sup>7</sup> Each thinker's interpretive practice has been compared to "negative theology": on Adorno, see Buck-Morss (1977: 90); on Derrida, see Handelman (1983: 98-129).

popularity were parodic exaggeration of the programmatic tendencies latent in each mode of essaying.

The essay's task is more difficult than ever, combining—to return to my initial example—the disciplinary functions of literary criticism with the broader one of ideology-critique. In the former, *intradisciplinary* capacity, the critical essayist must stay abreast of the considerable advances in techniques of analysis; he must be a specialist. In the broader capacity of counter-ideologist, however, he must relate cultural experience to the larger social complex—a complex in which the critic may, at certain junctures, find himself in strategic alliance with art against the imperial claims of theory. Though in the modern period, “the separation of art from knowledge is irreversible... [this] opposition should not be hypostatized” (Adorno 1984:154-56). But it seems unlikely that justice can be done to both functions by a mode of criticism which plunges into the text or art work on the work's own terms. The old plea for creative criticism, renewed by American deconstructors (e.g., Hartman 1980), might be compatible with the claim that the essay practices unmethodical method: “unmethodical” insofar as it draws on the same unregulated faculties and energies that empower art, the essay is “methodical” insofar as it bends to the more prosaic chores of humanistic knowledge—not only discovery, but interpretation, commentary, synthesis. The dual function of criticism is not helped, however, by pretending that art and criticism are one. That art involves critical thinking, and that criticism may also create, as Wilde observed, does not justify abolishing the distinction. Criticism becomes uncritical when it thinks of itself as art, among other reasons because it thereby invites itself to be consumed as art, instead of as argument. Literary analysis of critical texts should attempt to illuminate the cognitive claims of the essay, not (necessarily) to undermine them—as though arguments could be answered merely by pointing accusingly to their rhetorical construction.

Precisely how paradigms of knowledge and their forms of presentation will change in response to cybernetic technology is an open question. Lyotard sees the essay as a form which will follow the pragmatics of postmodern science, practicing *avant-garde* experimentation in its search for new rules, new statements, and

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creative instabilities (1984:81).<sup>8</sup> But he also notes that computerization is a double-edged phenomenon, with the risk of becoming an instrument of social regulation, as well as the potential for making everyone a player in the social games of knowledge and information (67). Gregory L. Ulmer's "applied grammatology" tries to harness the new technology's progressive potential by codifying and adapting the method of Derrida's critical essays to electronic media, thus making it more accessible as a model both to academic essayists and to students in the classroom (Ulmer 1985). But Derrida's method contains an unmethodical moment, the moment of imagination, which refuses to be programmed; attempts to program it anyway would generate more nonsense and dogma than insight. Ulmer's project not only downplays the friction between the epistemological dynamics of postmodern science and its current socio-economic organization; it also assumes that a liberating force inheres in technical procedures rather than in their application in specific contexts, whether critical or artistic. No *esprit de finesse* attaches automatically to the essay, as any reader knows, and as one sees in the instrumentalization of the form since Montaigne. The moment of freedom, of rebellion against *l'esprit géométrique*, is not a given of the genre; it must be reinvented each time an essayist sits down to write. Whether the form manifests a subtle mind or a square one depends very much on the essayist.

## VI. THE ESSAY: AN EXTRADISCIPLINARY GENRE

The career of the essay is not merely a matter of local interest for literary theory and criticism. Embodying as it does the long-standing dialectic between the individual thinker and established thought systems, reflection on the genre pertains to philosophical anthropology as well. Like other cultural forms, the essay responds not only to changing external conditions, but also to the stratum of the specifically human. This stratum does not evolve in isomorphic relation to society or technology. If it did,

<sup>8</sup> "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms..." (Lyotard 1984: 81).

one could hardly begin to account for the chronic feelings of nostalgia, lost innocence, and crisis which have marked modern consciousness, motivating the major critiques of modernity at least since Rousseau. Insofar as artistic and critical form answer to this stratum, they continue to express residual needs which remain unfulfilled or repressed by civilization in its technical and societal modalities. As long as instrumental reason reigns, and its injunctions prevail in society, the essay's aim will be to redress the imbalance through the critical interpretation of culture, as culture both registers and resists those injunctions. This does not mean that the essay clings to outdated models of individuality, such as Montaigne's *honnête homme*; but neither does it discard the ideal of autonomy as an obsolete ideology. Nor does one promote the essay's aims by naively opposing the spontaneous, unmethodical moment of essaying to its critical or methodical moment. Only a commitment to maintain the tension between the two moments can keep the essay from getting mired in either faddism or dogmatism. The choice now is not, if it ever was, between unbridled subjectivity and the absolute system; these are only ideal types, theoretical constructs. The situation of the modern essayist is better captured by Friedrich Schlegel's aphorism: "To have a system or not to have one—both are equally deadly for the mind. One has little choice but somehow to combine the two" (1964:31). In the current critical landscape, there are powerful temptations both in systems and in anti-systems. Both are pre-emptive, colonizing modes of thought: wherever one finds oneself, the terrain has been mapped, the roads and lanes well laid out in advance. The contemporary situation calls for a less programmed, more venturesome mode of response; a kind of thought at once fragmentary and holistic, not governed exclusively by either systematic or unsystematic principles, positive or negative hermeneutics. Perhaps the faculty most required of the modern critics is what Keats, admittedly to different purpose, once termed "Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 1975:350). For Keats, this faculty in a "great poet" meant that "the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration." Possession of this faculty would bring the essayist to a less extreme result, an equipoise, restoring "all consideration" without



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eliminating the “sense of Beauty”. It would lead, epistemologically speaking, to a qualified skepticism, allowing the essayist to entertain systems, to glean their energies and insights, without entirely succumbing to them. At the same time, it would enable him to resist the siren call of anti-systems, with their reverse absolutism and methodological velleities. (Who, if not the essayist, will deconstruct the deconstructors?).

Toward the end of his career, Roland Barthes acknowledged that he had produced “only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing” (1979:3). With its avowed antinomian character—its mosaic form, its unmethodical method—is the essay not inherently a pluralistic and interdisciplinary genre? At once “writing” and “analysis”, literature and philosophy, creation and criticism, it remains the most propitious form for interdisciplinary writing and research in the human sciences. Essaying begins wherever one finds oneself. No matter how familiar the surroundings, the essayist regards them as *terra incognita*—especially when the “places” in question are the commonplaces of received knowledge. His task is not to stay within the well-charted boundaries of the academic disciplines, nor to shuttle back and forth across those boundaries, but to reflect on them and challenge them. To accept the prevailing divisions and to stay dutifully within them would betray the essay’s mission of disciplined digression. The essay’s irregular path (“method” comes from the Greek *meta* and *hodos*: “along the way or path”) registers the element of contingency which is common to all forms of genuine query. “Methodic groping is a kind of comradeship with chance—a conditional alliance,” Justus Buchler has observed; “far from being, as some philosophers believe, the sign of weakness in a man or a method, [it] is the price that the finite creature is naturally obliged to pay in the process of search” (1961:84-86). So perhaps it is truer to say that essaying is an *extra* disciplinary mode of thought. Entering the road laid down by tradition, the essayist is not content to pursue faithfully the prescribed itinerary. Instinctively, he (or she) swerves to explore the surrounding terrain, to track a stray detail or anomaly, even at the risk of wrong turns, dead ends, and charges of trespassing. From the standpoint of more “responsible” travellers, the resultant path will look skewed, arbitrary. But if the essayist keeps faith with chance, moving with unmethodical method through the thicket of

contemporary experience, some will find the path worth following awhile.

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