



# NOTES TO LITERATURE

*Volume One*

European Perspectives  
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*THEODOR W. ADORNO*

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## *The Essay as Form*

Destined to see what is illuminated, not the light.

Goethe, *Pandora*

That in Germany the essay is condemned as a hybrid, that the form has no compelling tradition, that its emphatic demands are met only intermittently—all this has been said, and censured, often enough. “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 discomfort with this situation nor discomfort with the mentality that reacts to it by fencing off art as a preserve for irrationality, equating knowledge with organized science, and excluding anything that does not fit that antithesis as impure, has changed anything in the prejudice customary here in Germany. Even today, to praise someone as an *écrivain* is enough to keep him out of academia. Despite the telling insights that Simmel and the young Lukács, Kassner and Benjamin entrusted to the essay as speculation on specific, culturally pre-formed objects,<sup>2</sup> the academic guild accepts as philosophy only what is clothed in the dignity of the universal and the enduring—and today perhaps the originary. It gets involved with particular cultural artifacts only to the extent to which they can be used to exemplify universal categories, or to the extent to which the particular becomes transparent when seen in terms of them. The stubbornness with which this schema survives would be as puzzling as the emotions attached to it if it were not fed by motives stronger than the painful memory of the lack of cultivation in a culture in which the *homme de lettres* is practically unknown. In Germany the essay arouses resistance because it evokes intellectual freedom. Since the failure of an Enlightenment that has been lukewarm since Leibniz, even under present-day

conditions of formal freedom, that intellectual freedom has never quite developed but has always been ready to proclaim its subordination to external authorities as its real concern. The essay, however, does not let its domain be prescribed for it. Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him. The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say. Hence it is classified a trivial endeavor. Its concepts are not derived from a first principle, nor do they fill out to become ultimate principles. Its interpretations are not philologically definitive and conscientious; in principle they are over-interpretations—according to the mechanized verdict of the vigilant intellect that hires out to stupidity as a watchdog against the mind. Out of fear of negativity, the subject's efforts to penetrate what hides behind the facade under the name of objectivity are branded as irrelevant. It's much simpler than that, we are told. The person who interprets instead of accepting what is given and classifying it is marked with the yellow star of one who squanders his intelligence in impotent speculation, reading things in where there is nothing to interpret. A man with his feet on the ground or a man with his head in the clouds—those are the alternatives. But letting oneself be terrorized by the prohibition against saying more than was meant right then and there means complying with the false conceptions that people and things harbor concerning themselves. Interpretation then becomes nothing but removing an outer shell to find what the author wanted to say, or possibly the individual psychological impulses to which the phenomenon points. But since it is scarcely possible to determine what someone may have thought or felt at any particular point, nothing essential is to be gained through such insights. The author's impulses are extinguished in the objective substance they seize hold of. In order to be disclosed, however, the objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline. Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time. The criteria for such interpretation are its compatibility with the text and with itself, and its power to give

voice to the elements of the object in conjunction with one another. In this, the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance. Lukács failed to recognize this when he called the essay an art form in the letter to Leo Popper that introduces *Soul and Form*.<sup>3</sup> But the positivist maxim according to which what is written about art may in no way lay claim to artistic presentation, that is, autonomy of form, is no better. Here as elsewhere, the general positivist tendency to set every possible object, as an object of research, in stark opposition to the subject, does not go beyond the mere separation of form and content—for one can hardly speak of aesthetic matters unaesthetically, devoid of resemblance to the subject matter, without falling into philistinism and losing touch with the object a priori. In positivist practice, the content, once fixed on the model of the protocol sentence, is supposed to be neutral with respect to its presentation, which is supposed to be conventional and not determined by the subject. To the instinct of scientific purism, every expressive impulse in the presentation jeopardizes an objectivity that supposedly leaps forth when the subject has been removed. It thereby jeopardizes the authenticity of the object, which is all the better established the less it relies on support from the form, despite the fact that the criterion of form is whether it delivers the object pure and without admixture. In its allergy to forms as mere accidental attributes, the spirit of science and scholarship [*Wissenschaft*] comes to resemble that of rigid dogmatism. Positivism's irresponsibly sloppy language fancies that it documents responsibility in its object, and reflection on intellectual matters becomes the privilege of the mindless.

None of these offspring of resentment are pure falsehood. If the essay declines to begin by deriving cultural works from something underlying them, it embroils itself all too eagerly in the cultural enterprise promoting the prominence, success, and prestige of marketable products. Fictionalized biographies and all the related commercial writing that depend on them are not mere products of degeneration; they are a permanent temptation for a form whose suspiciousness of false profundity does not protect it from turning into slick superficiality. This can be seen even in Sainte-Beuve, from whom the genre of the modern essay derives. In products like Herbert Eulenberg's biographical silhouettes, the German prototype of a flood of cultural trash, and down to films about Rembrandt, Toulouse-Lautrec and the Bible, this involvement has promoted

the neutralization of cultural works to commodities, a process that in recent intellectual history has irresistibly taken hold of what the Eastern bloc ignominiously calls "the heritage." The process is perhaps most obvious in Stefan Zweig, who produced several sophisticated essays in his youth and ended up descending to the psychology of the creative individual in his book on Balzac. This kind of writing does not criticize abstract fundamental concepts, aconceptual data, or habituated clichés; instead, it presupposes them, implicitly but by the same token with all the more complicity. The refuse of interpretive psychology is fused with current categories from the *Weltanschauung* of the cultural philistine, categories like "personality" or "the irrational." Such essays confuse themselves with the same feuilleton with which the enemies of the essay form confuse it. Forcibly separated from the discipline of academic unfreedom, intellectual freedom itself becomes unfree and serves the socially preformed needs of its clientele. Irresponsibility, itself an aspect of all truth that does not exhaust itself in responsibility to the status quo, then justifies itself to the needs of established consciousness; bad essays are just as conformist as bad dissertations. Responsibility, however, respects not only authorities and committees, but also the object itself.

The essay form, however, bears some responsibility for the fact that the bad essay tells stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand. The separation of science and scholarship from art is irreversible. Only the naiveté of the manufacturer of literature takes no notice of it; he considers himself at least an organizational genius and grinds good works of art down into bad ones. With the objectification of the world in the course of progressive demythologization, art and science have separated. A consciousness for which intuition and concept, image and sign would be one and the same—if such a consciousness ever existed—cannot be magically restored, and its restitution would constitute a regression to chaos. Such a consciousness is conceivable only as the completion of the process of mediation, as utopia, conceived by the idealist philosophers since Kant under the name of *intellektuelle Anschauung*, intellectual intuition, something that broke down whenever actual knowledge appealed to it. Wherever philosophy imagines that by borrowing from literature it can abolish objectified thought and its history—what is commonly termed the antithesis of subject and object—and even hopes that Being itself will speak, in a *poésie* concocted of Parmenides and Jungnickel, it starts to turn into a washed-out cultural babble. With a peasant cunning that justifies itself as primordiality, it refuses to honor

the obligations of conceptual thought, to which, however, it had subscribed when it used concepts in its propositions and judgments. At the same time, its aesthetic element consists merely of watered-down, second-hand reminiscences of Hölderlin or Expressionism, or perhaps *Jugendstil*, because no thought can entrust itself as absolutely and blindly to language as the notion of a primordial utterance would lead us to believe. From the violence that image and concept thereby do to one another springs the jargon of authenticity, in which words vibrate with emotion while keeping quiet about what has moved them. Language's ambitious transcendence of meaning ends up in a meaninglessness which can be easily seized upon by a positivism to which one feels superior; one plays into the hands of positivism through the very meaninglessness it criticizes, a meaninglessness which one shares by adopting its tokens. Under the spell of such developments, language comes, where it still dares to stir in scholarship and science, to resemble the handicrafts, and the researcher who resists language altogether and, instead of degrading language to a mere paraphrase of his numbers uses tables that unqualifiedly acknowledge the reification of consciousness, is the one who demonstrates, negatively, faithfulness to the aesthetic. In his charts he finds something like a form for that reification without apologetic borrowing from art. To be sure, art has always been so intertwined with the dominant tendencies of enlightenment that it has made use of scientific and scholarly findings in its techniques since classical antiquity. But quantity becomes quality. If technique is made absolute in the work of art; if construction becomes total and eradicates expression, its opposite and its motivating force; if art thus claims to be direct scientific knowledge and correct by scientific standards, it is sanctioning a preartistic manipulation of materials as devoid of meaning as only the "Seyn" [Being] of the philosophy departments can be. It is fraternizing with reification—against which it has been and still is the function of what is functionless, of art, to protest, however mute and reified that protest itself may be.

But although art and science became separate in the course of history, the opposition between them should not be hypostatized. Aversion to an anachronistic conflation of the two does not render a compartmentalized culture sacrosanct. For all their necessity, those compartments represent institutional confirmation of the renunciation of the whole truth. The ideals of purity and tidiness that are common to the enterprises of a veritable philosophy versed in eternal values, an airtight and thoroughly

organized science, and an aconceptual intuitive art, bear the marks of a repressive order. A certificate of competency is required of the mind so that it will not transgress upon official culture by crossing culturally confirmed boundary lines. Presupposed in this is the notion that all knowledge can potentially be converted to science. The epistemologies that distinguish prescientific from scientific consciousness have one and all conceived the distinction solely as one of degree. The fact that it has gone no farther than the mere assurance of this convertibility, without living consciousness ever in actuality having been transformed into scientific consciousness, points up the precariousness of the transition, a qualitative difference. The simplest reflection on the life of consciousness would teach us to what a slight extent insights, which are by no means arbitrary hunches, can be fully captured within the net of science. The work of Marcel Proust, which is no more lacking in a scientific-positivist element than Bergson's, is an attempt to express necessary and compelling insights into human beings and social relations that are not readily accommodated within science and scholarship, despite the fact that their claim to objectivity is neither diminished nor abandoned to a vague plausibility. The measure of such objectivity is not the verification of assertions through repeated testing but rather individual human experience, maintained through hope and disillusionment. Such experience throws its observations into relief through confirmation or refutation in the process of recollection. But its individually synthesized unity, in which the whole nevertheless appears, cannot be distributed and recategorized under the separate persons and apparatuses of psychology and sociology. Under the pressure of the scientific spirit and its desiderata, which are ubiquitous, in latent form, even in the artist, Proust tried, through a technique itself modeled on the sciences, a kind of experimental method, to salvage, or perhaps restore, what used to be thought of—in the days of bourgeois individualism, when individual consciousness still had confidence in itself and was not intimidated by organizational censorship—as the knowledge of a man of experience like the now extinct *homme de lettres*, whom Proust conjures up as the highest form of the dilettante. It would not have occurred to anyone to dismiss what such a man of experience had to say as insignificant, arbitrary, and irrational on the grounds that it was only his own and could not simply be generalized in scientific fashion. Those of his findings that slip through the meshes of science most certainly elude science itself. As *Geisteswissenschaft*, literally the science of mind, scientific scholarship fails to deliver

what it promises the mind: to illuminate its works from the inside. The young writer who wants\* to learn what a work of art is, what linguistic form, aesthetic quality, and even aesthetic technique are at college will usually learn about them only haphazardly, or at best receive information taken readymade from whatever philosophy is in vogue and more or less arbitrarily applied to the content of the works in question. But if he turns to philosophical aesthetics he is besieged with abstract propositions that are not related to the works he wants to understand and do not in fact represent the content he is groping toward. The division of labor in the *kosmos noetikos*, the intellectual world, between art on the one hand and science and scholarship on the other, however, is not solely responsible for all that; its lines of demarcation cannot be set aside through good will and comprehensive planning. Rather, an intellect irrevocably modeled on the domination of nature and material production abandons the recollection of the stage it has overcome, a stage that promises a future one, the transcendence of rigidified relations of production; and this cripples its specialist's approach precisely when it comes to its specific objects.

In its relationship to scientific procedure and its philosophical grounding as method, the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest conclusions from the critique of system. Even empiricist theories, which give priority to experience that is open-ended and cannot be anticipated, as opposed to fixed conceptual ordering, remain systematic in that they deal with preconditions for knowledge that are conceived as more or less constant and develop them in as homogeneous a context as possible. Since Bacon—himself an essayist—empiricism has been as much a "method" as rationalism. In the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method. The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character.

Perhaps the great *Sieur de Montaigne* felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of "Essay." 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 modesty.<sup>4</sup>

The essay does not play by the rules of organized science and theory, according to which, in Spinoza's formulation, the order of things is the same as the order of ideas. Because the unbroken order of concepts is not equivalent to what exists, the essay does not aim at a closed deductive or inductive structure. In particular, it rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy—that old injustice done to the transitory, whereby it is condemned again in the concept. The essay recoils from the violence in the dogma according to which the result of the process of abstraction, the concept, which, in contrast to the individual it grasps, is temporally invariant, should be granted ontological dignity. The fallacy that the *ordo idearum*, the order of ideas, is the *ordo rerum*, the order of things, is founded on the imputation of immediacy to something mediated. Just as something that is merely factual cannot be conceived without a concept, because to think it is always already to conceive it, so too the purest concept cannot be thought except in relation to facticity.<sup>5</sup> Even the constructs of fantasy, presumably free of time and space, refer, if derivatively, to individual existence. This is why the essay refuses to be intimidated by the depraved profundity according to which truth and history are incompatible and opposed to one another. If truth has in fact a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in it; the *a posteriori* becomes the *a priori* concretely and not merely in general, as Fichte and his followers claimed. The relationship to experience—and the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories—is the relationship to all of history. Merely individual experience, which consciousness takes as its point of departure, since it is what is closest to it, is itself mediated by the overarching experience of historical humankind. The notion that the latter is mediated and one's own experience unmediated is mere self-deception on the part of an individualistic society and ideology. Hence the essay challenges the notion that what has been produced historically is not a fit object of theory. The distinction between a *prima philosophia*, a first philosophy, and a mere philosophy of culture that would presuppose that first philosophy and build upon it—the distinction used as a theoretical rationalization for the taboo on the essay—cannot be salvaged. An intellectual *modus operandi* that honors the division between the

temporal and the atemporal as though it were canonical loses its authority. Higher levels of abstraction invest thought with neither greater sanctity nor metaphysical substance; on the contrary, the latter tends to evaporate with the advance of abstraction, and the essay tries to compensate for some of that. The customary objection that the essay is fragmentary and contingent itself postulates that totality is given, and with it the identity of subject and object, and acts as though one were in possession of the whole. The essay, however, does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal. Its weakness bears witness to the very nonidentity it had to express. It also testifies to an excess of intention over object and thereby to the utopia which is blocked by the partition of the world into the eternal and the transient. In the emphatic essay thought divests itself of the traditional idea of truth.

In doing so it also suspends the traditional concept of method. Thought's depth depends on how deeply it penetrates its object, not on the extent to which it reduces it to something else. The essay gives this a polemical turn by dealing with objects that would be considered derivative, without itself pursuing their ultimate derivation. It thinks conjointly and in freedom about things that meet in its freely chosen object. It does not insist on something beyond mediations—and those are the historical mediations in which the whole society is sedimented—but seeks the truth content in its objects, itself inherently historical. It does not seek any primordial given, thus spiting a societalized [*vergesellschaftete*] society that, because it does not tolerate anything that does not bear its stamp, tolerates least of all anything that reminds it of its own ubiquity, and inevitably cites as its ideological complement the very nature its praxis has completely eliminated. The essay quietly puts an end to the illusion that thought could break out of the sphere of *thesis*, culture, and move into that of *physis*, nature. Spellbound by what is fixed and acknowledged to be derivative, by artifacts, it honors nature by confirming that it no longer exists for human beings. Its alexandrinism is a response to the fact that by their very existence, lilacs and nightingales—where the universal net has permitted them to survive—make us believe that life is still alive. The essay abandons the royal road to the origins, which leads only to what is most derivative—Being, the ideology that duplicates what already exists, but the idea of immediacy, an idea posited in the meaning of mediation itself, does not disappear completely. For the essay all levels of mediation are immediate until it begins to reflect.

Just as the essay rejects primordial givens, so it rejects definition of its concepts. Philosophy has arrived at a thoroughgoing critique of definitions from the most divergent perspectives—in Kant, in Hegel, in Nietzsche. But science has never adopted this critique. Whereas the movement that begins with Kant, a movement against the scholastic residues in modern thought, replaces verbal definitions with an understanding of concepts in terms of the process through which they are produced, the individual sciences, in order to prevent the security of their operations from being disturbed, still insist on the pre-critical obligation to define. In this the neopositivists, who call the scientific method philosophy, are in agreement with scholasticism. The essay, on the other hand, incorporates the antisystematic impulse into its own way of proceeding and introduces concepts unceremoniously, “immediately,” just as it receives them. They are made more precise only through their relationship to one another. In this, however, the essay finds support in the concepts themselves. For it is mere superstition on the part of a science that operates by processing raw materials to think that concepts as such are unspecified and become determinate only when defined. Science needs the notion of the concept as a *tabula rasa* to consolidate its claim to authority, its claim to be the sole power to occupy the head of the table. In actuality, all concepts are already implicitly concretized through the language in which they stand. The essay starts with these meanings, and, being essentially language itself, takes them farther; it wants to help language in its relation to concepts, to take them in reflection as they have been named unreflectingly in language. The phenomenological method of interpretive analysis embodies a sense of this, but it fetishizes the relationship of concepts to language. The essay is as skeptical about this as it is about the definition of concepts. Unapologetically it lays itself open to the objection that one does not know for sure how one is to understand its concepts. For it understands that the demand for strict definition has long served to eliminate—through stipulative manipulations of the meanings of concepts—the irritating and dangerous aspects of the things that live in the concepts. But the essay does not make do without general concepts—even language that does not fetishize concepts cannot do without them—nor does it deal with them arbitrarily. Hence it takes presentation more seriously than do modes of proceeding that separate method and object and are indifferent to the presentation of their objectified contents. The manner of expression is to salvage the precision sacrificed when definition is omitted, without betraying the subject matter to the arbitrariness of conceptual meanings decreed once and for all. In

this, Benjamin was the unsurpassed master. This kind of precision, however, cannot remain atomistic. Not less but more than a definitional procedure, the essay presses for the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In such experience, concepts do not form a continuum of operations. Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unraveling it. While even traditional thought is fed by impulses from such experience, it eliminates the memory of the process by virtue of its form. The essay, however, takes this experience as its model without, as reflected form, simply imitating it. The experience is mediated through the essay's own conceptual organization; the essay proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically.

The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behavior of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules learned in school. Such a person will read without a dictionary. If he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed, which are usually too narrow in relation to the changes that occur with changing contexts and too vague in relation to the unmistakable nuances that the context gives rise to in every individual case. This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death. It is not so much that the essay neglects indubitable certainty as that it abrogates it as an ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, not in a treasure-hunting obsession with foundations. Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem* hidden from the essay itself, not from any obvious *terminus a quo*, and in this the method itself expresses its utopian intention. All its concepts are to be presented in such a way that they support one another, that each becomes articulated through its configuration with the others. In the essay discrete elements set off against one another come together to form a readable context; the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze.

The essay gently challenges the ideal of *clara et distincta perceptio* and indubitable certainty. Altogether, it might be interpreted as a protest against the four rules established by Descartes' *Discourse on Method* at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory. The second of those rules, the division of the object into "as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution,"<sup>5</sup> outlines the analysis of elements under whose sign traditional theory equates conceptual schemata of classification with the structure of being. Artifacts, however, which are the subject matter of the essay, do not yield to an analysis of elements and can be constructed only from their specific idea. Kant had good reasons for treating works of art and organisms as analogous in this respect, although at the same time, in unerring opposition to Romantic obscurantism, he took pains to distinguish them. The totality can no more be hypostatized as something primary than can elements, the product of analysis. In contrast to both, the essay orients itself to the idea of a reciprocal interaction that is as rigorously intolerant of the quest for elements as of that for the elementary. The specific moments are not to be simply derived from the whole, nor vice versa. The whole is a monad, and yet it is not; its moments, which as moments are conceptual in nature, point beyond the specific object in which they are assembled. But the essay does not pursue them to the point where they would legitimate themselves outside the specific object; if it did so, it would end up in an infinity of the wrong kind. Instead, it moves in so close to the *hic et nunc* of the object that the object becomes dissociated into the moments in which it has its life instead of being a mere object.

The third Cartesian rule, "to conduct my thoughts in such an order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex," is in glaring contradiction to the essay form, in that the latter starts from the most complex, not from what is simplest and already familiar. The essay form maintains the attitude of someone who is beginning to study philosophy and somehow already has its idea in his mind. He will hardly begin by reading the most simple-minded writers, whose common sense for the most part simply babbles on past the points where one should linger; instead, he reaches for those who are allegedly the most difficult and who then cast their light backwards onto the simple things and illuminate them as an "attitude of thought toward objectivity." The naiveté of the student who finds difficult and formidable things good enough for him has more wisdom in it than a grown-up pedantry that shakes its finger at thought, warning it

that it should understand the simple things before it tackles the complex ones, which, however, are the only ones that tempt it. Postponing knowledge in this way only obstructs it. In opposition to the cliché of "comprehensibility," the notion of truth as a casual relationship, the essay requires that one's thought about the matter be from the outset as complex as the object itself; it serves as a corrective to the stubborn primitiveness that always accompanies the prevailing form of reason. If science and scholarship, falsifying as is their custom, reduce what is difficult and complex in a reality that is antagonistic and split into monads to simplified models and then differentiate the models in terms of their ostensible material, the essay, in contrast, shakes off the illusion of a simple and fundamentally logical world, an illusion well suited to the defense of the status quo. The essay's differentiatedness is not something added to it but its medium. Established thought is quick to ascribe that differentiatedness to the mere psychology of the cognitive subjects and thinks that by doing so it has eliminated what is compelling in it. In reality, science and scholarship's self-righteous denunciations of oversophistication are aimed not at a precocious and unreliable method but at the upsetting aspects of the object that method makes manifest.

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," the true principle of systematic thought, recurs unchanged in Kant's polemic against Aristotle's "rhapsodic" thought. This rule corresponds to the charge that the essay is, as the schoolmaster would put it, not exhaustive, while in fact every object, and certainly an intellectual one, encompasses an infinite number of aspects, and only the intention of the cognitive subject decides among them. A "general overview" would be possible only if it were established in advance that the object to be dealt with was fully grasped by the concepts used to treat it, that nothing would be left over that could not be anticipated from the concepts. The rule about the exhaustive enumeration of the individual parts claims, as a consequence of that first assumption, that the object can be presented in a seamless deductive system, a supposition of the philosophies of identity. As in the requirement of definition, the Cartesian rule has survived the rationalist theorem it was based on, in the form of a guide to practical thought: the comprehensive overview and continuity of presentation are demanded even of empirically open science. What in Descartes was to be an intellectual conscience monitoring the necessity of knowledge is thereby transformed into arbitrariness, the arbitrariness of a "frame of reference," an axiomatics to be established at the outset to



satisfy a methodological need and for the sake of the plausibility of the whole, but no longer able to demonstrate its own validity or self-evidence. In the German version, this is the arbitrariness of an *Entwurf*, a project, that merely hides its subjective determinants under a pathos-laden quest for Being. The demand for continuity in one's train of thought tends to prejudge the inner coherence of the object, its own harmony. A presentation characterized by continuity would contradict an antagonistic subject matter unless it defined continuity as discontinuity at the same time. In the essay as a form, the need makes itself felt, unconsciously and atheoretically, to annul theoretically outdated claims to completeness and continuity in the concrete *modus operandi* of the mind as well. If the essay opposes, aesthetically, the mean-spirited method whose sole concern is not to leave anything out, it is following an epistemological impulse. The romantic conception of the fragment as a construction that is not complete but rather progresses onward into the infinite through self-reflection champions this anti-idealist motive in the midst of Idealism. Even in the manner of its presentation, the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object and there was nothing left to say about it. Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over. An unequivocal logical order deceives us about the antagonistic nature of what that order is imposed upon. Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a standstill. While the essay coordinates concepts with one another by means of their function in the parallelogram of forces in its objects, it shrinks from any overarching concept to which they could all be subordinated. What such concepts give the illusion of achieving, their method knows to be impossible and yet tries to accomplish. The word *Versuch*, attempt or essay, in which thought's utopian vision of hitting the bullseye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character, indicates, as do most historically surviving terminologies, something about the form, something to be taken all the more seriously in that it takes place not systematically but rather as a characteristic of an intention groping its way. The essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality. It corrects what is contingent and isolated in its insights in that they multiply, confirm, and qualify themselves, whether

in the further course of the essay itself or in a mosaiclike relationship to other essays, but not by a process of abstraction that ends in characteristic features derived from them. "This, then, is how the essay is distinguished from a treatise. The person who writes essayistically is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, reflects on it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind's eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing."<sup>6</sup> There is both truth and untruth in the discomfort this procedure arouses, the feeling that it could continue on arbitrarily. Truth, because the essay does not in fact come to a conclusion and displays its own inability to do so as a parody of its own a priori. The essay is then saddled with the blame for something for which forms that erase all trace of arbitrariness are actually responsible. That discomfort also has its untruth, however, because the essay's constellation is not arbitrary in the way a philosophical subjectivism that displaces the constraint emanating from the object onto the conceptual order imagines it to be. What determines the essay is the unity of its object along with that of the theory and experience that have migrated into the object. The essay's openness is not the vague openness of feeling and mood; it is given contour by its substance. It resists the idea of a masterpiece, an idea which itself reflects the idea of creation and totality. Its form complies with the critical idea that the human being is not a creator and that nothing human is a creation. The essay, which is always directed toward something already created, does not present itself as creation, nor does it covet something all-encompassing whose totality would resemble that of creation. Its totality, the unity of a form developed immanently, is that of something not total, a totality that does not maintain as form the thesis of the identity of thought and its object that it rejects as content. At times, emancipation from the compulsion of identity gives the essay something that eludes official thought—a moment of something inextinguishable, of indelible color. Certain foreign words in Georg Simmel's work—*cachet*, *attitude*—reveal this intention, although it is not discussed in theoretical terms.

The essay is both more open and more closed than traditional thought would like. It is more open in that its structure negates system, and it satisfies its inherent requirements better the more rigorously it holds to that negation; residues of system in essays, through which they hope to make themselves respectable, as for instance the infiltration of literary

studies by ready-made popular philosophical ideas, are as worthless as psychological trivalities. But the essay is also more closed, because it works emphatically at the form of its presentation. Consciousness of the non-identity of presentation and subject matter forces presentation to unremitting efforts. In this alone the essay resembles art. In other respects it is necessarily related to theory by virtue of the concepts that appear in it, bringing with them not only their meanings but also their theoretical contexts. To be sure, the essay behaves as cautiously toward theory as it does toward concepts. It does not deduce itself rigorously from theory—the chief flaw in all Lukács' later essayistic works—nor is it a down payment on future syntheses. The more it strives to consolidate itself as theory and to act as though it held the philosopher's stone in its hands, the more intellectual experience courts disaster. At the same time, by its very nature intellectual experience strives for such objectification. This antinomy is reflected in the essay. Just as it absorbs concepts and experiences from the outside, so too it absorbs theories. Its relationship to them, however, is not that of a "perspective." If in the essay the lack of a standpoint is no longer naive and in bondage to the prominence of its objects, if instead the essay uses its relationship to its objects as an antidote to the spell cast by the notion of a beginning, then the essay carries out, in the form of parody, thought's otherwise impotent polemic against a philosophy of mere "perspectives." The essay devours the theories that are close to it; its tendency is always to liquidate opinion, including the opinion it takes as its point of departure. The essay is what it was from the beginning, the critical form par excellence; as immanent critique of intellectual constructions, as a confrontation of what they are with their concept, it is critique of ideology.

The essay is the form of the critical category of the mind. For the person who criticizes must necessarily experiment, he must create conditions under which an object becomes visible anew, and do so still differently than an author does; above all, the object's frailties must be tried and tested, and this is the meaning of the slight variation the object experiences at the hands of its critic.<sup>7</sup>

When the essay is charged with having no point of view of its own and accused of relativism because it does not acknowledge any standpoint outside itself, the notion of truth as something "fixed," a hierarchy of concepts, has come into play, the very notion that Hegel, who did not like points of view, had destroyed. Here the essay is in accord with its

polar opposite, the philosophy of absolute knowledge. It wants to heal thought of its arbitrary character by incorporating arbitrariness reflectively into its own approach rather than disguising it as immediacy.

Idealist philosophy, to be sure, suffered from the inconsistency of criticizing an abstract overarching concept, a mere "result," in the name of process, which is inherently discontinuous, while at the same time talking about dialectical method in the manner of idealism. For this reason the essay is more dialectical than the dialectic is when the latter discourses on itself. The essay takes Hegelian logic at its word: the truth of the totality cannot be played off against individual judgments. Nor can truth be made finite in the form of an individual judgment; instead, singularity's claim to truth is taken literally, up to the point where its untruth becomes evident. The daring, anticipatory, and not fully redeemed aspect of every essayistic detail attracts other such details as its negation; the untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself is the element in which its truth resides. Certainly there is untruth in its very form as well; it relates to something culturally preformed and derivative as though it were an autonomous entity. But the more vigorously the essay suspends the notion of something primary and refuses to concoct culture out of nature, the more fundamentally it acknowledges the quasi-natural character of culture itself. Even now, the blind context of nature, myth, perpetuates itself in culture, and this is precisely what the essay reflects on: the relationship of nature and culture is its true theme. Instead of "reducing" cultural phenomena, the essay immerses itself in them as though in a second nature, a second immediacy, in order to negate and transcend the illusion of immediacy through its perseverance. It has no more illusions about the difference between culture and what lies beneath it than does the philosophy of origin. But for it culture is not an epiphenomenon that covers Being and should be destroyed; instead, what lies beneath culture is itself *thesis*, something constructed, the false society. This is why the origin has no more value for the essay than the superstructure. It owes its freedom in the choice of its objects, its sovereignty in the face of all priorities of fact or theory, to the fact that for it all objects are in a certain sense equally close to the center—equally close to the principle that casts its spell over all of them. It does not glorify concern with the original as more primordial than concern with what is mediated, because for it primordially is itself an object of reflection, something negative. This corresponds to a situation in which primordially, as a standpoint of the spirit in the midst of a societalized

world, becomes a lie. The lie extends from the elevation of historical concepts in historical languages to primal words, to academic instruction in "creative writing," and to primitiveness pursued as a handicraft, to recorders and finger painting, in which pedagogical necessity acts as though it were a metaphysical virtue. Baudelaire's revolt of literature against nature as a social preserve does not spare thought. The paradises of thought too are now only artificial ones, and the essay strolls in them. Since, in Hegel's dictum, there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not mediated, thought remains faithful to the idea of immediacy only in and through what is mediated; conversely, it falls prey to the mediated as soon as it tries to grasp the unmediated directly. The essay cunningly anchors itself in texts as though they were simply there and had authority. In this way, without the deception of a first principle, the essay gets a ground, however dubious, under its feet, comparable to theological exegeses of sacred texts in earlier times. Its tendency, however, is the opposite, a critical one: to shatter culture's claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth, of the ideological illusion in which culture reveals its bondage to nature. Under the essay's gaze second nature recognizes itself as first nature.

If the essay's truth gains its force from its untruth, that truth should be sought not in mere opposition to the dishonorable and proscribed element in the essay but rather within that element itself, in the essay's mobility, its lack of the solidity the demand for which science transferred from property relations to the mind. Those who believe that they have to defend the mind against lack of solidity are its enemies: the mind itself, once emancipated, is mobile. Once it wants more than the mere administrative duplication and processing of what has always already existed, the mind seems to have an exposed quality; abandoned by play, truth would be nothing but tautology. For historically the essay too is related to rhetoric, which the scientific mentality has wanted to get rid of since Bacon and Descartes—until, appropriately, in a scientific age it degenerated to a science *sui generis*, that of communications. Rhetoric was probably never anything but thought in its adaptation to communicative language. Such thought aimed at something unmediated: the vicarious gratification of the listeners. The essay retains, precisely in the autonomy of its presentation, which distinguishes it from scientific and scholarly information, traces of the communicative element such information dis-

penses with. In the essay the satisfactions that rhetoric tries to provide for the listener are sublimated into the idea of a happiness in freedom vis à vis the object, a freedom that gives the object more of what belongs to it than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas. Scientific consciousness, which opposes all anthropomorphic conceptions, was always allied with the reality principle and, like the latter, antagonistic to happiness. While happiness is always supposed to be the aim of all domination of nature, it is always envisioned as a regression to mere nature. This is evident all the way up to the highest philosophies, even those of Kant and Hegel. These philosophies have their pathos in the absolute idea of reason, but at the same time they always denigrate it as insolent and disrespectful when it relativizes accepted values. In opposition to this tendency, the essay salvages a moment of sophistry. The hostility to happiness in official critical thought is especially marked in Kant's transcendental dialectic, which wants to immortalize the line between understanding and speculation and prevent thought from "wandering off into intelligible worlds," as the characteristic metaphor expresses it. Whereas a self-critical reason should, according to Kant, have both feet firmly on the ground, should ground itself, it tends inherently to seal itself off from everything new and also from curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought, something existential ontology vilifies as well. What Kant saw, in terms of content, as the goal of reason, the creation of humankind, utopia, is hindered by the form of his thought, epistemology. It does not permit reason to go beyond the realm of experience, which, in the mechanism of mere material and invariant categories, shrinks to what has always already existed. The essay's object however, is the new in its newness, not as something that can be translated back into the old existing forms. By reflecting the object without violence, as it were, the essay mutely laments the fact that truth has betrayed happiness and itself along with it, and this lament provokes the rage directed against the essay. The persuasive element of communication is alienated from its original aim in the essay—just as the function of many musical features changes in autonomous music—and becomes a pure determinant of the presentation itself; it becomes the compelling element in its construction, whose aim is not to copy the object but to reconstitute it from its conceptual *membra disjecta*. The offensive transitions in rhetoric, in which association, verbal ambiguity, and a relaxation of logical synthesis made it easy for the listener and subjugated him, enfeebled, to the orator's will, are fused in the essay with the truth

content. Its transitions repudiate conclusive deductions in favor of cross-connections between elements, something for which discursive logic has no place. The essay uses equivocations not out of sloppiness, nor in ignorance of the scientific ban on them, but to make it clear—something the critique of equivocation, which merely separates meanings, seldom succeeds in doing—that when a word covers different things they are not completely different; the unity of the word calls to mind a unity, however hidden, in the object itself. This unity, however, should not be mistaken for linguistic affinity, as is the practice of contemporary restorationist philosophies. Here too the essay approaches the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition, in order to appropriate for verbal language something it forfeited under the domination of discursive logic—although that logic cannot be set aside but only outwitted within its own forms by dint of incisive subjective expression. For the essay does not stand in simple opposition to discursive procedure. It is not unlogical; it obeys logical criteria insofar as the totality of its propositions must fit together coherently. No mere contradictions may remain unless they are established as belonging to the object itself. But the essay does not develop its ideas in accordance with discursive logic. It neither makes deductions from a principle nor draws conclusions from coherent individual observations. It coordinates elements instead of subordinating them, and only the essence of its content, not the manner in which it is presented, is commensurable with logical criteria. In comparison with forms in which a preformed content is communicated indifferently, the essay is more dynamic than traditional thought by virtue of the tension between the presentation and the matter presented. But at the same time, as a constructed juxtaposition of elements it is more static. Its affinity with the image lies solely in this, except that the staticness of the essay is one in which relationships of tension have been brought, as it were, to a standstill. The slight elasticity of the essayist's train of thought forces him to greater intensity than discursive thought, because the essay does not proceed blindly and automatically, as the latter does, but must reflect on itself at every moment. This reflection extends not only to its relationship to established thought but also to its relationship with rhetoric and communication. Otherwise the essay, which fancies itself more than science, becomes fruitlessly prescientific.

The contemporary relevance of the essay is that of anachronism. The time is less favorable to it than ever. It is ground to pieces between an organized system of science and scholarship on the one side, in which

everyone presumes to control everyone and everything and where everything not tailored to the current consensus is excluded while being praised hypocritically as "intuitive" or "stimulating," and on the other side a philosophy that has to make do with the empty and abstract remnants of what the scientific enterprise has not yet taken over and which thereby become the object of second-order operations on its part. The essay, however, is concerned with what is blind in its objects. It wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it. Its efforts are directed toward concretizing a content defined in time and space; it constructs a complex of concepts interconnected in the same way it imagines them to be interconnected in the object. It eludes the dictates of the attributes that have been ascribed to ideas since Plato's definition in the *Symposium*, "existing eternally and neither coming into being nor passing away, neither changing nor diminishing," "a being in and for itself eternally uniform," and yet it remains idea in that it does not capitulate before the burden of what exists, does not submit to what merely is. The essay, however, judges what exists not against something eternal but by an enthusiastic fragment from Nietzsche's late period:

If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things: and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string 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>8</sup>

Except that the essay distrusts even this kind of justification and affirmation. It has no name but a negative one for the happiness that was sacred to Nietzsche. Even the highest manifestations of the spirit, which express this happiness, are always also guilty of obstructing happiness as long as they remain mere spirit. Hence the essay's innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible.

## NOTES

## THE ESSAY AS FORM

1. Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, translated by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), p. 13. (First published as *Die Seele und die Formen*, Berlin, E. Fleischel, 1911).
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."
3. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 1-18.
4. Ibid., pp. 9-10.
5. René Descartes, *A Discourse On Method*, translated by John Veitch (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1951), p. 15.
6. Max Beñse, "Über den Essay und seine Prosa," *Merkur* 1:3 (1947), p. 418.
7. Ibid., p. 420.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 532-33.

## ON EPIC NAIVETÉ

1. *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), Book XXIII, 11. 233ff. Adorno quotes Voss' eighteenth-century translation.
2. Cf. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, New York: Columbia, 1925, p. 16; U. von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen*, I, p. 9.
3. *Odyssey*, Book XXIV, 11. 152ff.
4. Schröder translates: "und wahrlich Odysseus blieb zuruck" [and truly Odysseus remained behind]. The literal translation of the  $\eta$  as a particle of affirmation rather than explication does not alter the enigmatic character of the passage.
5. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Zinkernagel (Leipzig: Insel, n.d.), p. 139; *Hölderlin, his poems*, translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: Pantheon, 1952), p. 129. There are literary-historical links between Voss and Hölderlin.