Chapter 1

THE ESSAY AS PHENOMENOLOGY

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As the title of this volume suggests, the essay invites, even demands, a questioning of limits: between 'science' and 'art'; subjectivity and objectivity; 'life' and 'living'. While the conceptual pairing of essay and limit tends to centre on a discussion of the essay's transgression of familiar generic or disciplinary boundaries, I read this overspilling of critical limits as a consequence of the essay's more fundamentally expansive character. Theodor W. Adorno describes the essay as an expression of 'intellectual freedom', an 'arena of intellectual experience' (*Schauplatz geistiger Erfahrung*) in which all 'objects are equally near the centre'.[1] What then is the basis of this intellectual freedom? What does the essay recover that is lost in other ways of thinking and writing?

Reading both within and outside the bounds of Adorno's thinking on this subject, I would like to develop the idea that the intellectual freedom of the essay issues from a rootedness in experience, an interest in describing as well as interrogating our mode of being in the world. It is lived experience that is, in the first instance, expansive, that transgresses the boundaries of subject and object, and that refuses to be resolved into a system. Adorno sets up a polemical framework in which the essay is contrasted with positivism, the scientific method, idealism, systematic philosophy and abstract speculation. I would like to suggest that in each of these approaches what is obscured, and what the essay is able to recover, is the structure of experience itself. Kierkegaard asks, in his aptly named *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Crumbs*: 'From what does pure thinking abstract? From existence, consequently from what it is supposed to explain.'[2] So the essay, in its 'methodically unmethodical' way, pushes back against 'pure thinking', against 'the system' – in order to recover and re-evaluate what eludes their grasp, or counts as mere 'crumbs'.

1. *Form as philosophy*

Umberto Eco has made the case for reading textual form as an 'epistemological metaphor', representing ways of thinking about the world.[3] In *The Open Work*, he

contends that: 'In every century the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality.'[4] Beryl Lang has formulated readings of philosophical textual forms as indicative of epistemological and ethical commitments.[5] John Hollander has suggested, more generally, that textual forms may offer us metaphors for what our life is like[6]: Describing the works of Stanley Cavell, Hollander writes that 'the activities of philosophizing become synecdochic, metonymic, and generally parabolic for the activities of the rest of life itself.'[7] What these ideas have in common is a notion that forms of writing are indicative of ways of seeing and thinking, of inhabiting a world. To the extent that forms can be read in this way, they have a philosophical import, since they contribute to the investigation of what it is to be in a world, how truth is sought and decided upon, how writing can obscure or illuminate these considerations, and other matters of philosophical concern.

While it is not contentious within literary studies and critical theory to 'read' form as significant in its own right, it is rare to find such arguments within contemporary analytic philosophy, and philosophers have much to gain from a literary approach to texts. As Jonathan Lavery notes, 'opening up questions about genres of philosophy leads inexorably to questions about what philosophy *is*', about philosophy's understanding of itself.[8]

If forms of writing can be considered constructions of epistemological or metaphysical positions, they of necessity have something to say about what it is to experience a world, about how thought and world relate. This is especially true of the essay, since to follow Adorno (following Kierkegaard), it is the *how* of existence that is of interest to the essay and that the essay lays bare. How does the world open itself to human being in phenomenal experience? How does the presentation of the essayist relate to the way in which the world is experienced? These are what I take to be some of the central philosophical concerns of the essay as a form.[9]

The particular way in which the essay 'tells the truth about things' means that essayistic writing offers certain philosophical advantages over other forms, particularly in relation to the questions posed above.[10] In what follows, I will offer a reading of the essay as an interrogation of experience, first considering a sceptical reading of the essay, and ultimately combining Adorno's insights with a broadly phenomenological framework.

2. Scepticism

It is worthwhile to begin with a brief sketch of one of the primary ways in which the essay as a way of thinking the world has been understood. The most common philosophical reading of essays is that they engage in scepticism of a certain kind, that the stylistic features which mark essayistic writing – heterogeneity, discontinuity, circularity, reflexivity, open-endedness, a focus on particular experience – can be read as an outgrowth of sceptical enquiry into the grounds of knowledge claims or, more generally, as a metaphor for our necessarily provisional and uncertain relationship to what is.[11] While scepticism has many varieties, they

are united by the notion that there is a disconnect between our thinking of the world and what the world is like in itself. The essay can therefore be read as an attempt to inscribe that essential difference and uncertainty into a form of writing. This sceptical reading of the essay has two main sources. The first is the historical fact of Michel de Montaigne's engagement with ancient Greek scepticism – specifically Pyrrhonism. The second is the more linguistically oriented post-structuralist critiques of knowledge that dominate theory in the latter third of the twentieth century.

Two of the most influential essay writers within the philosophical tradition, Montaigne and David Hume, are explicitly engaged with the Pyrrhonian tradition of Greek scepticism, and it makes sense to view their choice of essay writing through this lens. One can plausibly read the openness of the essay form, the rejection of closure, as a manifestation of the *aporia* and resulting suspension of judgement that the Pyrrhonian method was devised to generate.

But perhaps the more important aspect of Pyrrhonism for our purposes is not its aporetic nature but its response to aporia. Pyrrhonism has a pragmatic or therapeutic bent: absent the means to rigorously justify our beliefs about the world, we are left to turn our attention from the question of *knowing* to the task of living a good life. Sextus Empiricus, in his second-century tract *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, presents the case that withholding judgement or refraining from positive beliefs issues in a state of *ataraxia*, or tranquillity.[12] The Pyrrhonian understanding of aporia does not result in nihilism or in the search for some more certain ground for knowledge, as is the case with most other varieties of scepticism. It instead involves coming to terms with a lack of certainty, orienting away from ungrounded speculation and towards existential realities.[13] For this reason, ancient scepticism has been deemed 'therapeutic': it releases us from the false idea that knowledge (of some kind) is what leads to human flourishing.[14]

Reading through the lens of Pyrrhonian scepticism, one can link the essay to a kind of epistemological modesty that is therapeutic in aim – both a limiting of the scope of knowledge and a limiting of the relevance of knowing as an approach to the world. In essayistic writings, the drive to *know* is put into a wider context of our possibilities of relating to the world, which include but are not limited to knowing. In this way, what it is to know is redefined. And the value of *knowing*, in relation to other ways in which the world is opened up to us, is also reassessed. The backdrop for this reassessment is a return to the experiential grounds out of which things can be known at all.

I have elsewhere characterized this turning using Stanley Cavell's phrase, 'from knowledge to acknowledgement', suggesting that the promise of the essay form, as influenced by the sceptical tradition, would be an acknowledgement of the conditions under which our relation to the world takes place.[15] Following Adorno, the form is an attempt to find a mode of communication that remains within the bounds of experience and brings to light the structure of our experience – rather than altering experience to make it fit the structure of conceptual thought. For Cavell, this is important because the tendency to ignore or actively reject our mode of being for a 'fantasy', philosophical or otherwise, is ever present.[16]

Whether one follows the sceptical line or not, essayistic writings can be read as bringing to light – through a variety of formal techniques – what Cavell calls 'the human conditions of knowledge and action'.[17] In giving our attention to these conditions, we at the same time are led to re-contextualize and re-evaluate our conception of what it is to 'know' or of what truth looks like. For all its critique of *knowledge*, the essay still aims to 'speak "the truth" about things'.[18]

Cavell himself does not elaborate on the 'human conditions of knowledge and action', though it's clear that for him our being-in-language is such a condition. 'Human conditions' denote something like our existential or phenomenological situation, our being in the world. In my own work, temporality, subjectivity and language are the conditions that I give the most attention to, though of course other conditions are important here, such as embodiment and social-historical environment (Adorno stresses the importance of the latter to experience).[19] Essayistic writing brings our attention to these conditions as relevant to whatever we want to call knowledge or understanding. Our particular mode of being becomes both frame and subject.

While sceptical philosophy inevitably involves some discussion of the grounds of knowledge, essayistic thinking is clear that these grounds are experiential, rather than rational or logical, and that attention must be called to these grounds as part of the process of understanding and orienting oneself in the world. In this emphasis on how it is to be in the world and on the manifestation of the world in experience, essaying as mode of philosophizing turns out to have more in common with phenomenology than scepticism proper, whether we think of scepticism as a kind of global doubt, as in postmodernism, or whether it takes the more Pyrrhonian form of epistemological modesty.

3.   *Subject and object in the essay*

So how does the essay, in György Lukács's words, 'speak "the truth" about' things?[20] I will attempt to describe in greater detail the essay's relationship to *things* and to subjectivity in order to understand the particular truth of the essay and its philosophical advantages over other modes of writing. The first thing to clarify is that the reflection on experience in the essay is not a reflection on something that is first immediate and later skewed and distorted by concepts. Adorno sketches the contours of a form – a form of thinking as much as a form of writing – that is 'without scaffolding or edifice', that stands against either first principles or final principles, that rejects any species of totalizing thought – be it scientific or philosophical.[21] This may at first glance suggest that the particular mode of being that the essay tries to capture is itself immediate and intuitively given, not subject to any structuring principles. Experience understood in this sense would be something like the reception of pure sensory data, prior to the application of conceptual categories. But a chaos of undifferentiated sensation is precisely what experience cannot be since experience as such is never devoid of conceptual activity. Adorno[22] echoes Kant's famous dictum to this effect: 'thoughts without

content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'.[23] Having an experience at all requires the organizing and unifying activities of consciousness, just as consciousness is only given content by its application to experience. This perhaps makes some sense of the way in which the essay is both resolutely subjective and object-oriented. The essay is poised between what Lukács calls the 'soul content of things', and the way in which soul itself is constituted by things 'out there'.[24]

If the essay begins with concepts already in play, already given meaning in concrete, mediated historical and cultural contexts, it is because experience is always already mediated by such concepts. The point is not to turn away from speculation in order to grasp the a-conceptual, the intuitive, the immediately given, but to plunge into the complexity of the given world and of 'intellectual experience, without simplifying it'.[25] The essay for this reason occupies itself with that which, in Lukács's words,

> has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive.[26]

The concern with what is there, what has been there, sometimes manifests as a concern with a particular artwork, artefact or object, sometimes as a reflection on words written by others. The philosophical significance of this aspect of essayistic writing is that the essay is always already *in* a world, within historically and linguistically mediated experience.

This grounding in experience makes sense of another of Adorno's claims about the essay, that it constitutes a rejection of the scientific-positivistic conception of objectivity as neutrality, as 'an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject'.[27] The essay's relationship to the real relies on a more profound understanding of objectivity that includes the lived experience of subjects in relation to objects. 'The measure of such objectivity is not the verification of asserted theses', for this would be to take for granted that every kind of truth can and should be converted into a scientific truth; it is rather 'individual experience [*einzelmenschliche Erfahrung*], unified in hope and disillusion'.[28] Objects are made sense of through a particular here and now, and they reveal their truths, their different 'soul content' to use Lukács's terminology, through our multiple possible relations to them. These relations arise in the first place from our orientations within lived experience. Objects and their relationships to one another come into view through our own actions and aims – whether primitive aims such as eating and shelter or more sophisticated projects such as aesthetic contemplation or the forming of scientific hypotheses. A consequence of this is that the determination of objects remains open-ended. A precise definition or scientific description alone does not exhaust what an object is, and there is always more to an object than what is revealed through a particular aspect or project.

This interplay between subjective perspective and objective determination appears both in the 'occasional' nature of the essay – starting from what is already

there – and in the characteristic use of multiple perspectives within a singular essay. Indeed, an essayist introduces multiple perspectives in the very act of taking up how others have thought about some object or idea. Montaigne most often begins his reflections in the form of a gloss on another writer, prompting his oft-quoted comment: '*on ne fait que nous entregloser*' (We do nothing but gloss one another).[29] Setting different points of view side by side in order to show the limited nature of any single view is a technique that can be seen in both Montaigne and Hume, and Montaigne reflects on this explicitly in his own writings. He writes in the *Apology for Raimond Sebond*: '*Les subjects ont divers lustres et diverses considerations*' (Any object can be seen in various lights from various points of view), and these '*subjects*' include the writer as the subject of the *Essais*.[30] Montaigne's writing technique is an attempt to present himself from as many angles or aspects as possible: '*Je me presente debout, et couché; le devant et le derriere; à droitte et à gauche; et en touts mes naturels plis*' (I describe myself standing up and lying down, from front and back, from right and left and with all my inborn complexities).[31] The *Essais* develop their texture by way of a treatment of multiple and sometimes incongruous perspectives. He writes: '*Tant y a que je me contredis bien à l'advanture, mais la verité, comme disoit Demades, je ne la contredy point*' (I may happen to contradict myself, but the truth, as Demades said, I never contradict).[32] It is apparent from this statement and from the *Essais* considered as a whole that Montaigne includes contradictions in his work precisely *for the sake of* truth – a truth which departs from a logical model and embraces a more experimental approach, even embracing error as a part of the mode of disclosure of the world.[33]

Hume uses contrasting perspectives to great effect in his empirical philosophy. His 1742 essay, 'Of the Standard of Taste', opens with a remark about the great variety of taste among individuals, which is 'too obvious not to have fallen under everyone's observation'.[34] But later in the essay, he offers the contrary and equally evident claim that there is in fact great unanimity of taste, within a specific cultural environment, regarding what works are worthy of continued praise and attention. Both statements are endorsed by common sense, and by treating the two as equally worthy, Hume offers a philosophical interrogation of and refinement of the mechanism of 'common sense', of how consensus works. Oscillating between the ways in which the same words are used in different senses is a significant feature of Hume's essay writing – one which shows his interest in the ambiguity that characterizes experience and ordinary language in contrast to the precise definitions or systematic general principles that characterize many contemporaneous philosophical accounts.

The heterogeneous or plural character of Montaigne and Hume's essays is in fact a recognizable feature of essayistic writing. While essays are undoubtedly tied to subjectivity, as in Montaigne's use of the first person and his reflection on his own experience, this subjectivity is problematized from the very start. Montaigne is explicit about his effort to preserve the *diversity* of his own perspectives, and he draws attention to the writing process itself as constitutive of identity, describing himself as 'consubstantial' with his essays.[35] Essays employ a range of voices or perspectives, regardless of whether the narrative voice is a singular 'I'. Crucially,

there is no attempt to decide on a single perspective within the frame of an essay; in this way the essay is an epistemologically open rather than closed form. This 'polyphonic' quality of essayistic writing is philosophically rich and can be read in a number of ways.[36] For the purposes of this enquiry, the key lesson is that presenting a plurality of perspectives without deciding on one acknowledges different and irreducible ways of seeing a single object. This is in keeping with the essay's rootedness in experience, since to be experiencing is always to be within a specific perspective, a being there which is not the same as another's there or a there that I do not yet occupy, but which does not exclude other perspectives, nor other modes of encounter with the world. On the contrary, in ordinary experience, I constantly infer perspectives other than the one I currently occupy, for example, imagining that the box I see also has a back and sides, though I cannot presently see them, or projecting my own existence and the existence of things into the future. The multiplicity of perspectives in an essay points to the world as phenomenal in character, as capable of being manifested in myriad different aspects and modes to subjects in the world. This in turn denies the existence of an objective position that could be said to stand outside of any particular perspective and to encompass all aspects of an object, resulting in the ideal objects of mathematics and the sciences. The disclosure of objects is always subjective. So the determination of an object is never absolute and always open, as the essay is open.

Yet the essay speaks the truth about *things*, Lukács declares. The subjective dimension of the essay does not seem to be adequately accounted for by a sceptical frame, in which our position as subjects – determined by temporality, language, history and so on – means that we cannot know the world in a satisfactory way. Subjectivity, as our mode of being, is included not to eliminate the possibility of truth but rather to offer a more rigorous account of truth as the distinctive possibility of human being. In the essay, the truth of things is sought through careful attention to how some particular object or experience appears – which includes the subject (the writer) to whom it appears. But this description of phenomena, of what appears, is not thought separately from the essence or truth of things, as though the phenomena were *mere* appearance. While appearances can deceive – as the legacy of scepticism reveals – the phenomenal is nevertheless an opening to things. Further, it is a feature of *things* – not of subjects – that they are capable of appearing to consciousness. The world is *known* through its manifestation.

The essay's position between subjectivity and objectivity represents the phenomenal character of the world and thus suggests an alternative to the model of truth as conceptual precision, abstracted from lived experience. Truth becomes the activity of subjects in the world rather than something independent of subjectivity or history.

4. Two models of truth

The essay's interest in phenomenal experience contrasts most sharply with what Adorno, in an argument that strongly echoes Husserl's 1936 *Crisis in the European*

Sciences, calls the 'scientific' model of truth. Both Edmund Husserl and Adorno see such a model – epitomized by Cartesian 'method' – as reductive of lived experience – and Adorno makes the case that an essayistic approach to philosophy aims to recover what is lost in scientific consciousness.[37] Although the sciences presuppose that 'all knowledge can potentially be converted into science', 'the fact that this convertibility has remained a mere assertion and that living consciousness has never really been transformed into a scientific consciousness, points to […] a qualitative difference.'[38] Adorno uses Proust as an example of a literary effort to 'salvage, or perhaps restore' what the 'man of experience' knows.[39] Because of Proust's emphasis on particular experience and his reflection on the process of presentation itself, he is able 'to express necessary and compelling perceptions about men and their social relations which science simply cannot match.'[40]

While Adorno uses 'science' in an equivocal way in this essay (indeed, he is aware of this and makes a case for it[41]), the difference between a view from within lived experience and a scientific (or philosophical) conception of the world is clear in Husserl's *Crisis* text. In the scientific framework, truth is recognized by exactness and objectivity – the latter implying universal applicability and the absence of the subjective perspective that characterizes lived experience.

> What constitutes 'exactness' [*Exaktheit*]? [It is] empirical measuring with increasing precision, but under the guidance of a world of idealities, or rather a world of certain particular ideal structures that can be correlated with given scales of measurement – such a world having been objectified in advance through idealization and construction.[42]

Husserl here describes the process by which the lived world is translated into scientific knowledge. What is real becomes what can be measured, with 'ideal structures' – or concepts – viewed as more precise iterations of ambiguous, variable subjective lived experience. Husserl describes the effect of this conversion with equal clarity. 'Here the original thinking [within lived experience] that genuinely gives meaning to this technical process and truth to the correct results … is excluded.'[43]

The intimate relation of things to ourselves that is experienced in the lifeworld loses its sense of validity and significance when this experience itself comes to be viewed through idealized, conceptual structures. Husserl offers the example of a lived experience of warmth versus a physicist's atomic description of heat.[44] The various ways in which the world opens up to the embodied and culturally embedded subject lose their status as a knowledge, replaced by a model in which knowledge is something precise, measurable, and neutral – 'an objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject.'[45]

In Adorno, the essay 'attempts to make reparation' for what is lost in the higher levels of abstraction represented by the scientific.[46] As I have argued above, it is not the case that lived experience is immediate and intuitive as opposed to the mediated abstractions of the sciences. Nor is it the case that such essential human abilities as abstraction or idealization are to be avoided. However, the essay

does involve a wider conception of truth than that which is formulated in the sciences, one that does not rely on measurement and objectivity, and one that is not orientated towards prediction and control ('the control of nature and material production').[47] Adorno is clear that the structure of possibility within experience itself – one that we have reflected on in discussing the infinite determination of objects – is something that slips through the net of systematic thought, whether scientific or philosophical. The possibility of a different future or of 'transcendence vis-a-vis the frozen relations of production' is actually present in the open-ended, indeterminate or overdetermined structure of lived experience but is lost in the conversion of all truth into scientific truth, which for Adorno has the ultimate aim of making the future conform to what has been.[48] So an essayistic form of thinking, which stresses the many possible modes of encounter with the world and which keeps the living subject within the frame, is not only a better metaphor for what our life is like but also houses the potential to foster better ways of relating to the environment and to others. There is a utopian element hiding within the apparent modesty of the essay.

5. *Adorno and non-identity*

I have attempted to present the essay form as disclosive of our mode of being in the world – of those features of existence that are lost in scientific or philosophical schema. This basic thesis now requires some qualification. Adorno refers at several points in his essay on the essay to the 'non-identity' of a concept with its content, that is, the difference between the structure of conceptual thought and the structure of being. Is this not, finally, a sceptical gesture, and one that undermines the notion that the essay is capable of speaking the truth about *things*? The essay, Adorno claims, establishes itself as an 'arena of intellectual experience' instead of a conceptual system, and it does this because it does not assume that the structure of thinking and the structure of things are identical. This is clear in Adorno's criticism of Cartesian method. For Adorno, Descartes' assumption that an exhaustive treatment of things is possible relies on the determining 'in advance that the object in question can be fully grasped by the concepts that treat it; that nothing is left over that could not be anticipated by these concepts'.[49] Adorno charges both idealism and positivistic science with taking for granted that the world corresponds to our concepts of it, that nothing in principle is excluded from our ability to know and that there is no difference in kind between our conceptual schema and the structure of things. Despite the wane of both idealism and logical positivism, it remains a prevalent view in both philosophy and the sciences that the world is, in principle, knowable and presents no structural but only practical barriers to total knowledge.

But is Adorno, by contrast, offering a straightforward sceptical statement about our inability to know the world? Is the essay sceptical after all? This requires a more thorough investigation. The relevant questions seem to be: how does the essay express the truth of things without committing to the erroneous view that things

conform to our conception of them? How can an essay present without distorting, while being aware that there is no neutral presentation? I will offer a reading of Adorno's answer to these questions before proposing a broader phenomenological reading.

For Adorno, the poetics of the essay – its style and its process, its means of development – turn out to be the key factor, since the 'essay becomes true in its progress'.[50] It is the essayist's reflection on language and presentation (*Darstellung*) that ends up making the essay form a suitable metaphor for what our lives are like. I have noted the essay does not abandon the conceptual, since experience is itself conceptual. Adorno adapts from Walter Benjamin the notion of a 'constellation' of concepts, as an alternative to the logic of a Hegelian dialectic of concepts.[51] In Adorno's terminology, concepts *contain* non-conceptual content – they name something that is not itself conceptual. This is what Adorno calls the 'irritating and dangerous elements of things' and what gives rise to the non-identity of concepts with what they describe.[52] Things are 'dangerous' because their determination is never definite; the fact that they always exceed any particular determination makes them unpredictable and resistant to control. The context in which Adorno's discussion of the non-identity of concepts arises is linguistic: 'All concepts are already implicitly concretized through the language in which they stand.'[53] This is perhaps more familiar territory than the corresponding ontological point.

The meaning of words or the ability to interpret what is said always outruns any fixed set of possibilities – whether an attempt to precisely define the scope of some word or an attempt to establish the criteria for a definitive reading of a text. The essay enters into this ambivalence, not in order to come to a more exact understanding of the concept, divorced from its concrete uses or possible meanings, but to 'force these meanings on further', to elaborate an understanding of the web of signification of which any concept is a part. This is what Hume attempts in his discussion of ordinary language surrounding moral and aesthetic taste. Adorno writes: 'Not less, but more than the process of defining, the essay urges the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience.'[54] In a sense, it puts forward what is already there, but hidden, 'to grasp these concepts reflectively in the way that they are already unconsciously named in language'.[55] So Adorno is clear that objects outrun any of our concepts, though they are always seen through them.

Constellations of concepts, as opposed to the refinement of concepts through abstraction or idealization (the model of philosophical definition), aim to preserve the relations between things in experience – reflected in ordinary language use. In his illuminating article on the philosophical significance of 'constellations', Stewart Martin explains that the excess of meaning (or being) that is a feature of things is preserved in the essay's use of configurations of concepts: 'The essay involves the articulation of a relation of elements that is binding, but without being exhaustive or exclusive.'[56] An essay offers a reading, or readings, of the relation of things, but in its openness includes the possibility of other readings. This works to maintain

the gap that is always present between our thinking of an object and the object itself – what Adorno calls their non-identity.

> The experience of non-identity, revealed in the failure of a concept to sufficiently identify the non-conceptual, informs a process whereby such an inadequate concept is combined with other concepts that attempt, from their different vantages, to conceptualize the nonconceptual; endeavouring to say, through their combination, what they could not say individually.[57]

Constellations thus 'negatively invoke a speculative experience of something beyond the choices that frame the present'.[58] It is precisely an essay's looseness with concepts, its tendency to multiply concepts or to use a concept ambivalently, that invokes non-conceptual content.

One might make the mistake of thinking that the indeterminacy of things is due to the very fact that they are determined *by subjects*, that their identity is nothing other than a progressive projection of meanings onto them. But the deeper point, and one the term non-identity strongly suggests, is that hiddenness is a feature of things themselves and forms a part of the way in which things are known. The manifestation of the world involves not only disclosure but an ongoing dialectic of concealment and unconcealment.[59] In other words, the essay's 'constellations' are not the projection of *any* arbitrary meaning on things, but instead enact the dialectic of experience, the way in which the world both opens up to and recedes from our efforts to know it. Writing the 'irritating' dimension of hiddenness or non-identity into the text, as the essay does, is not so much a sceptical gesture as it is a reflection of phenomenal experience.

Notes

1 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* 32 (Spring–Summer, 1984): 151–71 (167).

2 Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 328.

3 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 13.

4 Ibid.

5 Beryl Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1992). See also 'The Ethics of Style in Philosophical Discourse', in *Literary Form, Philosophical Content: Historical Studies of Philosophical Genres*, ed. Jonathan Lavery and Louis Groarke (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 219–34.

6 'The ability to produce more compelling models of what our moral – and even what our epistemologically and metaphysically wondrous – life is like has given major novelists and great poets, in the same three and a half centuries since Descartes, a

disproportionate claim to human knowledge of the human.' (John Hollander, 'Stanley Cavell and *The Claim of Reason*', *Critical Inquiry* 6, no. 4 (1980): 575–88 (582)).

7 Hollander, 'Stanley Cavell', 586.
8 Jonathan Lavery, 'Philosophical Genres and Literary Forms: A Mildly Polemical Introduction', *Poetics Today* 28, no. 2 (2007): 171–89 (187).
9 For a rich and insightful treatment of the essay's philosophical import, see Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 99–145.
10 György Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press [1910] 1974), 1–18.
11 Dagmar Barnouw, 'Skepticism as a Literary Mode: David Hume and Robert Musil', *MLN* 93, no. 5 (1978), 852–70; Frederic Brahami, *Le Travail du scepticisme: Montaigne, Bayle, Hume* (Paris: PUF, 2001); Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (New York: Routledge, 1988); R. Lane Kauffman, 'The Skewed Path: Essaying as Unmethodical Method', in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. A. J. Butrym (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 234–5; Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
12 'As a shadow follows from a body' (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. and trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11 (1.12.29)) (the last three numbers are book, chapter, paragraph of any edition; this style is used in other notes as well).
13 Sextus suggests that, having suspended one's judgement about matters of speculation, one ought to live 'in accordance with everyday observances', including biological impulses such as thirst and hunger, cultural and societal conventions, and technical expertise or know-how (*Outlines of Scepticism*, 9. (1.11.4)).
14 'Principally, the Sceptic's view was that rather than guide us in the search for the knowledge that would enable us to live happy lives, philosophy should cure us of the disposition to believe that there is any such knowledge.' (Neil Gascoigne, *Scepticism* (Durham, NC: Acumen, 2002), 31).
15 Erin Plunkett, *A Philosophy of the Essay: Scepticism, Experience, and Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
16 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 216.
17 Ibid.
18 Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', 10.
19 'Merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what it nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity' (Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 158).
20 Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', 10.
21 Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 161.
22 Ibid., 158.
23 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan [1781] 1929), 93 (B75).
24 Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', 8.
25 Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 161.
26 Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', 10.
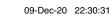27 Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 153.
28 Ibid., 156.

29 Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Jean Balsalmo, Michel Magnien and Catherine Magnien-Simonin (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2007), 1115.

30 Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 616. The source of the English translation is Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Classics, 2013), 226.

31 Montaigne, *Essais*, 989/Montaigne, *Essays*, 376.

32 Ibid., 845.

33 For more on Montaigne's essayism, see de Obaldia, 28–98; Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Sylvia Giocanti, *Penser l'irrésolution: Montaigne, Pascal, La Mothe Le Vayer* (Paris: *Honoré Champion*, 2001).

34 David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 2008), 133–54 (133).

35 '*Je n'ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m'a faict. Livre consubstantiel à son autheur*' (I no more write my book than my book writes me. A book consubstantial with its author.)' (Montaigne, *Essais*, 703).

36 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 5–46. In the context of his criticism of the novel and of Dostoevsky's novels in particular, Bakhtin proposes the term 'polyphonic', where polyphony is 'a plurality' of 'equally valid consciousnesses' (6). The term signifies not just multiple voices within a text but the absence of any overarching judgement on those voices.

37 For a treatment of Adorno's discussion of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, see de Obaldia, 115–20.

38 Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 156.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 '[The essay] uses equivocation neither out of slovenliness nor in ignorance of their proscription by science, but to clarify what usually remains obscure to the critique of equivocation and its mere discrimination of meanings: whenever a word means a variety of things, the differences are not entirely distinct, for the unity of the word points to some unity, no matter how hidden, in the thing itself' (Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 169).

42 Edmund Husserl, *Crisis in the European Sciences* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 34.

43 Ibid., 46. For an excellent gloss on the philosophical significance of this point, see Anita Williams, 'The Meaning of the Mathematical', in *Asubjective Phenomenology*, ed. Lubica Učnik, Ivan Chvatik and Anita Williams (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH, 2018), 227–52 (231ff.).

44 Husserl, *Crisis in the European Sciences*, 36.

45 Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 153.

46 Ibid., 159.

47 Ibid., 157.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 169. See also the discussion of this passage in de Obaldia, 116.

50 Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 161.

51 See Stewart Martin, 'Adorno's Conception of the Form of Philosophy', *Diacritics* 36, no. 1 (2006), 48–62.

52 Ibid., 160.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Martin, 'Adorno's Conception of the Form of Philosophy', 56.
57 Ibid., 50.
58 Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 230, quoted
    in Martin, 'Adorno's Conception of the Form of Philosophy', 54.
59 Heidegger's term for truth is *aletheia*, literally 'unconcealment' or 'unhiddenness'
    (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Staumbaugh (Albany: State University
    of New York Press, 1996). The term ἀλήθεια is taken from ancient Greek philosophy.