

THE THING OF THE ESSAY

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The essay is bound to ‘speak “the truth”’ about things, György Lukács declares.¹ Expanding on this claim in his own essay on the essay, Theodor W. Adorno contrasts the essay’s truth with scientific or positivistic truth, which, he argues, relies on purging the ‘irritating and dangerous elements of things that live within concepts’.² Clarity and simplicity – the Cartesian hallmarks of sound philosophical thought and writing – did not disappear as philosophical virtues with the waning of logical positivism.³ On the contrary, they appear so naturally aligned with truth (telling ‘the plain truth’) that one feels rather sheepish about suggesting otherwise. Yet there is reason to question, as Adorno does and Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard did before him, whether truth is properly at home in the clear and simple – especially when these terms are used to endorse or exclude specific ways of writing.⁴ Henry David Thoreau famously complains of the ‘ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you. Neither man nor toadstools grow so.’⁵ The American poet John Hollander asks of philosophical writing ‘more compelling models of what our moral – and even what our epistemologically and metaphysically wondrous – life is like’.⁶ Precision may be correct, without touching on the true.⁷

How can an essay’s truth be understood? When Adorno writes of the ‘dangerous elements of things’, he points to the refusal of objects to be resolved into a system or definition, their refusal to conform neatly to our thinking of them. The recalcitrance of a thing or a phenomenon, a threeness that stubbornly asserts itself, is a feature to which the essay bears witness in its mode of presentation. I would like to suggest in what follows a reading of the essay’s attitude toward things as a commitment to both receptivity and renewal. Essayistic writing attempts to meet and to hold the stubborn complexity of things; in lingering with things as they are found, the essayist is able to draw out of them compelling models of world and self, demonstrating the philosophical value of such writing. Understanding the essay as an experiment in dwelling with things gives body to Lukács’s claim that the essay speaks the truth and perhaps helps to motivate the contemporary relevance of the form. Dwelling with things has a visionary potential to see beyond the narrow horizon afforded by the habitual or orthodox. In times of social, economic, and especially environmental crisis, the need to renew the possibility in things becomes urgent.

An Objection

A potential objection is too obvious not to mention at the outset: why talk about ‘things’ at all? The essay is the form of writing most bound up with subjectivity. Surely the essay’s ‘truth’, if truth can even be used in such a context, is ultimately a subjective one? There is no doubt that modern essay writing has been deeply connected with the project of investigating and writing the self and subjectivity. When Simone de Beauvoir relates in her autobiography that she wishes to give ‘a taste of her own life’,⁸ she points to one of the chief pleasures of the essay form: the sense of voice, the taste of someone’s life and thought. American essayist Sara Levine delights in the sense that ‘you leave the essay feeling as if you have met somebody’.⁹ But as much as the taste of one’s life comes from experiences and turns of thought personal to oneself, it also is shaped by common features of experience. In the latter sense, subjectivity is a shared structure, albeit with internal variations, rather than something unique to the individual. ‘The essay’s presentation of personal idiosyncrasy is simultaneously concerned with what is common’, writes Kathryn Murphy, and this double existence of the essay – both particular and general, idiosyncratic and common – is one that has been scrutinized by many scholars of the essay.¹⁰ In addition to speaking with a particular voice, the essay also reveals the common conditions of life and thinking: perspective, temporality, being-in-language and embeddedness within a particular historical-social matrix.

This capacity to expose and preserve, in its mode of procedure, universal features of experience, is what made the essay attractive to so many eighteenth-century philosophers, who turned their attention to experience and attempted to describe it without the scaffolding of previous philosophical systems. In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard embraced essayistic writing in order to sketch out a philosophy of existence rather than being, while Emerson and Thoreau exploited the essayistic ideals of experience and experiment. In the twentieth century, these same features of the essay were admired by Hannah Arendt, who proposed ‘thinking without a banister’.¹¹ The essay does not take for granted the Cartesian split between subject and object; rather, it places both subject and object under the more immediate rubric of phenomenal experience.¹² In experience, subjectivity and objectivity function as poles rather than spatial conceptions of inner and outer. My choice to focus on one of these poles is not an attempt to diminish the importance of the other, much less to exclude it. The essay is not ‘objective’ in the sense of ‘subtracting’ subjectivity and occupying a neutral view from nowhere; that no such view exists is one of the lessons the essay has to teach. In focusing on

the objective pole of experience, I follow the advice of G. K. Chesterton: to see something clearly, one has to isolate it.¹³

A Fidelity to the Occasion

The essay begins with something. It is occasional. It is about something. It ‘always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past’.¹⁴ From the beginning, the essay was concerned with the texts of others, taking others’ words as an occasion for reflection.¹⁵ At first glance, Montaigne’s frequent use of quotations in the *Essais* appears haphazard, the manifestation of either a natural or a studied carelessness. He allows himself the liberty of forgetting his precise sources. He is, as he always reminds his reader, writing for himself, and scholarly exegesis is not his primary concern.¹⁶ ‘[S]omeone might say of me that I have here only made a bunch of other people’s flowers, having furnished nothing of my own but the thread to tie them.’¹⁷ And yet the classical aphorisms carved into the ceiling beams of Montaigne’s library are physical evidence of the extent to which he lived with these words, digested them, returned to them, tested them. Self-effacing claims aside, his apparent nonchalance in fact comes from the experience of making the words of another his own, trying them to see where they fit in the web of his own life. Finding the potential for renewed life in existing words, the potential for originality in what has been inherited, is the real significance of Montaigne’s comment that ‘we do nothing but gloss one another’.¹⁸ He models a kind of reading that turns into writing, writing about what one has read, and expanding what there is to be read in it. Montaigne’s relationship to the classical texts that occasion many of his essays is illustrative of the wider dynamic in the essay between a receptivity to things and a creative renewal of them.

The occasion for an essay could be anything, so long as it is there. War photographs, some lines of Virgil, the color blue. Kierkegaard, a great thinker of the occasion, writes in *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) that because an occasion is simply that which starts one on a journey, it is a sort of nothing, and the learner need not remain faithful to it.¹⁹ The nature of an occasion, what it asks of us, is to be left behind; it is the ladder kicked away after one has climbed it.²⁰ Motivating this account is Kierkegaard’s worry that the occasion, if dwelled upon, if made authoritative, can wrongly direct the attention of the learner to it, as a kind of idolatry or spiritual laziness. If the occasion is a beginning, the beginning is not in the thing, he seems to insist, but in the person who sees the thing as an occasion. Yet the endlessly innovative

poetic effort that Kierkegaard puts into his texts, which he describes as a mere occasion for his readers, suggests that he may be protesting too much. In *Fragments*, to be an occasion, is, after all, the highest relationship one human being can have to another.²¹ The occasion may indeed become an idol, or an idle diversion. In attending to the object as idol, the essay may become insipid or superficial – fail in its poetic/aesthetic potential.²² Granting with Kierkegaard that the occasion is fulfilled in the spiritual journey of the learner – or in the imagination of the essayist – and so in a sense can be transformed into anything, it also has a brute reality that must be reckoned with. If Kierkegaard's texts have the good fortune of being an occasion for their readers, they cannot, after all, be made entirely transparent. They are marked by gestures of resistance, full of ironic interruptions, revocations and the tension of heterogeneous perspectives and voices.²³ Apart from any of these specific textual qualities, they are, like any object, simply there. The existing text or thing as occasion sets the imagination to work, but it also calls the imagination back with its continued existence. The three cows outside Lydia Davis's window keep standing there, inviting further description, reflection. The work of seeing what is there to be seen in things is never finished.

In contrast to Kierkegaard's direct pronouncements on the matter of the occasion, Lukács stresses that it is precisely because the essay is occasioned by something and is not formed from nothing that it must remain faithful to whatever it is about.

[I]t 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. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak 'the truth' about them, must find expression for their essential nature.²⁴

This could be simply a description of what good criticism does: one expects an essay on jazz to do justice to the music that occasioned it. (Adorno's 'On Jazz' (1966) famously fails this test.) And yet Lukács does not confine his remarks to cultural or literary criticism. An essay occasioned by a person (Socrates, for example, as so many of Kierkegaard's works are) must 'find expression for' that person's 'essential nature' in the manner of a good portrait. Although Lukács does not use 'essential nature' in any sharply defined sense, it is clear from his analogy of portrait painting that it can be understood neither as a reduction of complexity nor an exhaustive list of attributes; understanding essence in this way would be a kind of violence to

the living presence of a person or the life of an object.²⁵ The only measure of success at having captured the ‘essential’ is ‘the intensity of the work and its vision’.²⁶ To be faithful, then, is not a matter of correspondence, as if the truth were already out there, or creation from nothing, which would be entirely unbound, but a matter of visionary writing, a writing that sees the potential in things. This dynamic between receptivity to the occasion and ‘ordering anew’ stages the process of thinking as a thinking *about*. That the essay is not about creation *ex nihilo* but about ‘finding expression for’ brings to light the subject’s responsibility to the world of things and concepts in which they are embedded. ‘Responsibility . . . respects not only authorities and committees’, Adorno notes with some irony, ‘but the object itself’.²⁷

Things, But Not in Themselves

This insistence that faithfulness to the object is a work of aesthetic production, rather than a mirroring of what is there, might appear problematic in light of the reading of the essay I am proposing: namely, as an attempt to move away from the positivistic or scientific error of substituting experience, of what is there, with a model or method. Does the essay make the same mistake, substituting a well-crafted text for the object or phenomenon that occasions it? It is true that the essay does not reveal things ‘in themselves’. Adorno notes that ‘theory and experience’ have always already ‘migrated into the object’.²⁸ Stanley Cavell remarks: ‘Philosophy (as ascent) shows the violence that is to be refused (disobeyed), that has left everything not as it is, indifferent to me, as if there are things in themselves.’²⁹ The essay is a way of writing against the kind of objectivity that sees ‘bare things’, that locates the essential nature of things in isolation from their overlapping lines of significance in human and planetary life. Jean-Luc Godard’s narration in the film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1967) speaks about this sense of objectivity, and the skewed sense of subjectivity which necessarily attaches to it:

Since I can’t get out of the objectivity that crushes me or the subjectivity that exiles me, since I am not permitted to elevate myself to [pure] being, nor to fall into nothingness, I must listen, I must, more than ever, look at the world around me, my likeness, my brother [*mon semblable, mon frère*].³⁰

The scene of these remarks is a café; the camera moves in for a close-up of the freshly prepared coffee swirling in a cup. The intense scrutiny given to this object seems to

function as a visual synecdoche for ‘the world’ the narrator affirms. This kind of looking allows the coffee to become something strange to the viewer, not unlike a tiny universe full of worlds being born. Some new potential in the object has been opened. The essay film’s capacity for being visionary in this sense, renewing vision, is its way of resisting inherited ideologies of subject and object.

Adorno writes of the essayist’s commitment to retaining the thing as it is found: the essay ‘comes so close to the here and now of the object, up to the point where that object, instead of being simply an object, dissociates itself into those elements in which it has its life’.³¹ Of course the written essay has only words to bring these elements into view. Aware of the excess of the thing in relation to any thinking or speaking of it, the essayist must ‘make unlimited efforts’.³² The constellation of significance of which any object is a part – personal, historical, cultural, linguistic – is never such that it can be seen all at once, hence the proliferation of perspectives within an essay and the proliferation of essays. In contrast to the purported exhaustiveness of the model or method, the essay ‘becomes true in its progress’, and this progress plays out both within a single essay and as an ongoing dialogue between essays.

[T]he essay can neither do without general concepts . . . nor does it treat them arbitrarily. It therefore takes the matter of presentation more seriously than do those procedures that separate out method from material and are indifferent to the way they represent their objectified contents. The *how* of expression should rescue, in precision, what the refusal to outline sacrifices.³³

The essay’s commitment to ‘the *how* of expression’, to style, manifests in myriad ways but is most obvious in reflexive gestures such as irony, interruption and the introduction of multiple perspectives that are never resolved.³⁴ The essay’s impulse to constantly broadcast its own form and its own failure puts it at odds with a certain conception of philosophical rigor.

‘Back to the Rough Ground!’

I recently attended a talk on the sublime by a pair of analytic philosophers. Arguing against another scholar of analytic aesthetics, they proposed a novel definition and structural account of the phenomenon. They provided a wealth of examples to illustrate the soundness of this new account. No one could deny that it was indeed sound and in fact accounted for a much wider

range of sublime experiences than the familiar conceptual frameworks or the contemporary analytic model that they were critiquing. It was exhaustive, in the sense that Descartes recommends in his *Discourse on Method*: it left nothing out. It was elegantly simple and clear. And yet at the end of the talk, the questions exposed a nagging sense among the audience that this rigorous and comprehensive system did not describe the sublime at all. ‘What makes this structure “the sublime” and not something else entirely?’ someone asked. ‘Why do the experiences corresponding to this structure feel sublime and not simply frightening?’ The authors could only respond that they had, after all, defined the sublime as an instance of this structure. Who is to say that an instance of the sublime has to feel any way at all?³⁵

I cite this as an example of a possible way of relating to an existing thing or phenomenon, one that still prevails in fields like analytic aesthetics or philosophy of mind. Lukács describes this approach, perhaps rather unkindly, as philosophy’s ‘icy, final perfection’.³⁶ Such an approach can begin from the same impulse of exploration and understanding as the essay and yet end up in a very different place, one that seems far from the original object and strangely chilled.³⁷ One of Wittgenstein’s aphorisms expresses a similar insight:

We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!³⁸

In speaking of ‘ground’, Wittgenstein raises the issue of philosophy’s ground, of what ultimately grounds its claims to truth or rigor. If one is used to it, the slipperiness of ice allows for a satisfying glide, a kind of abstracted motion, even great speed. One could say the same of clear and distinct ideas: they can be mobilized. But such icy perfection also means being unable to walk. The ground, by contrast, receives the walker’s footsteps and resists them, pushing back against the foot. Because the ice offers no such resistance, ‘in a certain sense the conditions are ideal’, but only if we no longer care about walking. Wittgenstein implies that there is, after all, something of value in walking, and he recommends a return to the ground that makes it possible, the rough ground that meets and resists the foot. This ground is not ideal; it has the friction of lived experience, the ‘loose ends’³⁹ of life in time, the complexity of history, of ordinary language use.⁴⁰ When Adorno criticizes Descartes’s principle of simplicity, he identifies its principal danger – that although the conditions seem ideal, they do not get us to whatever complex phenomenon we set out to understand. Adorno writes, by contrast, of the

essay's 'texture',⁴¹ of its 'resistance' to 'the idea of a master work that reflects the idea of creation and totality'.⁴² It is a kind of writing that seems to walk, in Wittgenstein's sense.

The hallmarks of essayistic writing can be read as attempts at creating friction, resistance and texture: at maintaining the resistance and roughness it finds in things.⁴³ The essay's poetic strategies – multiple perspectives, irony, parataxis, circularity – are ways of lingering with things, preserving their capacity to frustrate and to surprise. Philosophical essays like those of David Hume, Hannah Arendt and Stanley Cavell (not to mention Lukács and Adorno) tend to circle back on themselves, drawing charges of logical deficiency. Yet it is precisely because there is resistance that things and concepts exceed the bounds of a logical treatment of them and need to be approached again and again. Wandering is a way of staying with things. Lukács compares the essay's movement to the journey of a knight-errant:

It is highly questionable whether man should want the precise things he sets out to attain, whether he has the right to walk towards his goal along straight and simple paths. Think of the chivalrous epics of the Middle Ages, think of Greek tragedies, think of Giotto and you will see what I am trying to say.⁴⁴

Walking, if it is to bring about what Wittgenstein hopes for, is not likely to take one on a journey from premises to conclusions. The essay is guided neither by *terminus ad quem* or *terminus a quo*, so its walk is prone to meandering, as in Paul Graham's 'The Age of the Essay',⁴⁵ or what Thoreau describes as 'sauntering'.⁴⁶ But this tendency to drift and circle back has everything to do with the essay's fidelity to its subject matter. Things do not yield themselves up so easily, and our habits of seeing often keep us from seeing what is there. The choice of indirection seems necessitated by the task of speaking the truth about things. Writing about himself as the subject of his *Essais*, Montaigne stumbles on a similar insight, noting that '[t]his also happens to me: that I do not find myself in the place where I look; and I find myself more by chance encounter than by searching my judgement.'⁴⁷ The oblique approach allows space for encounter and discovery, looking at things out of the corner of the eye, or leaving off looking at something in order to see more fully what is there to be seen. Montaigne's observation also suggests the extent to which we find ourselves in things.

For Lukács, the reward of an essayistic approach to things is what he calls life:

It is true that the essay strives for truth: but just as Saul went out to look for his father's she-asses and found a kingdom, so the essayist who is really capable of looking for the truth will find at the end of his road the goal he was looking for: life.⁴⁸

In the biblical story to which Lukács refers, Saul searches for the lost donkeys and is himself found by the prophet Samuel, who informs him that he will rule over the kingdom of Israel. Such unexpected swerves or meanders are characteristic of the essay. In the non-narrative essay, the closest relative of the narrative swerve in the present example is when a perspective that has been put forward in an essay is suddenly undermined or revoked by the introduction of another perspective. Another significant kind of swerve is one I have already mentioned: the essay's ability to leap between particular experience and the most sweeping movements of universal experience or of philosophical history – in the case of William H. Gass, from the feel of a piece of cake in one's mouth to the invention of generic bodies in Galileo.⁴⁹ It is in part its ability to move in these ways that allows an essay to see the life in things.

The Life in Things

What is at stake in staying with things? For Lukács, the faithful essayist is rewarded with a vision of the 'life' in things. Martin Heidegger offers an alternative conception of the life in things in his 1950 essay 'The Thing', where he develops a conception of 'thing' [*das Ding*] that distinguishes it from an object, a body in space, an artifact, or any of the other ways the term is commonly understood that hide its full potential. For him, the project of staying or dwelling with things runs counter to the prevailing tendencies of modernity. Yet the attitude of dwelling, characterized by an attentiveness and responsiveness, has the potential to break out of this orthodoxy, to disclose unglimped possibilities of human and nonhuman being.

If we think of the thing as thing, then we spare and protect the thing's presence in the region from which it presences. Thinging is the nearing of world. . . . As we preserve the thing qua thing we inhabit nearness.⁵⁰

Heidegger's concern for 'sparing and preserving' the thing as thing is set against the primary mode of thinking and of truth-seeking in modernity: the intellectual revolution initiated by Galileo and Descartes and consummated in the twenty-first century, with its constant advances

in technological means. About the legacy of this revolution, Heidegger remarks dryly: ‘Science’s knowledge, which is compelling within its own sphere, the sphere of objects, already had annihilated things as things long before the atom bomb exploded.’⁵¹ Within this scientific framework, things become generic objects or bodies in space, and space is characterized by ‘proximity’, a levelling and lack of distance.⁵² The question of why and how things become manifest or fail to do so is never raised within this framework, which relies on things already being present and available, so ‘the region [of Being] from which [the thing] presences’ likewise remains obscure. For Heidegger, *Das Gestell*, or the framing of modernity, has caused things as things – both the possibility in things and their relationship to our form of life – to recede from view.⁵³ ‘Proximity’ describes the availability of things for use, their perceived characterlessness and their potential to be mobilized as resources.⁵⁴ The ecological and moral consequences of such a view are clear to Heidegger and even clearer to contemporary readers.⁵⁵

The central question that guides Heidegger’s essay ‘The Thing’ is whether it is possible, now, to think outside of this framework. Is it possible to think the thing as thing? Could there be a way of thinking (and writing) that would allow us to stay with things as we find them, as part of the structures of meaning they inhabit within our lives and as intimate revelations of the world? Heidegger does not answer these questions, but it is clear that he imagines himself to be attempting the activity of ‘thinging’ in his own writing, or at least clearing a space for its possibility. ‘Nearness’ is his word for this different possibility of relating to things, one that shows our relationship to them without collapsing difference.⁵⁶

When and in what way do things appear as things? They do not appear by means of human making. But neither do they appear without the vigilance of mortals. The first step toward such vigilance is the step back from the thinking that merely represents – that is, explains – to the thinking that responds and recalls.⁵⁷

Heidegger rejects the view that things are only such by virtue of human subjectivity. The philosophical notion of the subject’s relationship to things as mere projection, in which mental representations ‘stand in’ for things without reaching them in their essence, is for Heidegger a flawed understanding of mind that necessarily misconstrues the nature of things as well. It is not difficult to see how the violence of such flawed views of the inner and outer leads to a lack of care for the world. For Heidegger, representational thought

already involves a substitution of the thing with an outline and misses the phenomenal field that encompasses both thing and human being (*Dasein*). He is interested in the potential – for human being and for things – that is lost in such thinking. The recovery of this potential is only available, if it is available at all, in an attitude of responsiveness, as opposed to the instrumental reason that most often marks our relationship to things. Heidegger favors metaphors of listening to describe this attitude, following on from Rilke's poems, particularly the theme of listening that runs throughout the *Sonnets to Orpheus*.⁵⁸ 'Vigilance' here implies that it is difficult to listen to things and respond to them in the way that Heidegger intends – precisely because of the dominance of representational thinking.

Given these difficulties, Heidegger is forced to make 'infinite efforts' with language, exploiting its symbolic character.⁵⁹ He continues the above passage:

The step back from the one thinking to the other is no mere shift of attitude. . . .
[A]ll attitudes, including the ways in which they shift, remain committed to the precincts of representational thinking. The step back does, indeed, depart from the sphere of mere attitudes.⁶⁰

Heidegger's responsiveness then is not a simple shift of perspective or attitude (say, the change to a 'theoretical' attitude that Edmund Husserl describes in his idea of the *epochē*). For Heidegger, such a shift remains problematic. In an essay, things appear in words insofar as they appear at all, a paradox that Kathryn Murphy notes.⁶¹ That the problem of staying with things is a problem of writing as much as of thought does not escape Heidegger, who is acutely aware of his words and how he constructs his own texts. It is to poetry, especially Rilke, Hölderlin and the Austrian poet George Trakl that Heidegger turns in order to combat the problem of representational thinking. Poetry, he argues in his essay 'Language', has the ability to speak the truth about things (as things) because it is both a listening responsiveness and a creative naming that actualizes some potential heard in things.⁶² The earlier distinction between 'human making' and 'human vigilance' is helpful here as well, since the poet in Heidegger's work is not first of all a creator but one who listens. 'And from this silence arise / New beginnings, intimations, changings.'⁶³ The poet's careful attention to language reveals something hidden within words that is conceived as a feature of the world, of being, of things, not as an arbitrary

projection of the subject. For Heidegger, the word has a theological quality, as it does for Walter Benjamin.

This approach to language suggests the degree to which style is integral to Heidegger's philosophical project. While his style has often been described as bad poetry, the essay framework is a more illuminating frame, especially for his later writings.⁶⁴ Much to the frustration of some readers, Heidegger does not define his concepts but places them within a web of significance with other concepts; sometimes concepts are aligned because of an apparent relation, often an etymological link, while at other times the association between them is more spontaneous. In 'Origin of the Work of Art' and 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', he introduces a term, offers a way of understanding it, then moves to another term, circles back, digresses through one or two more key terms, and returns to the initial term again, but only after imbuing it with the halo of the other words he has discussed.⁶⁵ He exploits the fact, expressed by the essayist and novelist Donald Barthelme, that 'words have halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes'.⁶⁶ By exploring the echoes of words in other words, Heidegger gathers together and attempts to stay with whatever phenomenon he is describing, even when it evades his view or when habitual ways of speaking and seeing make it difficult to name and to recognize. The circular motions and 'steps back' in Heidegger's essays have, for many in the anglophone philosophical tradition, disqualified him as a serious thinker, suggesting the sway that is still held by the Cartesian model. Yet these features of Heidegger's writing, especially in his later work, argue for their place within philosophical essayism, and I see Heidegger's writing of the thing as a significant conceptual and stylistic development of this tradition.

The placement of Heidegger's work within the essay tradition is contentious given his tendency toward the oracular, which stands at odds with the tentativeness that typically characterizes essayistic writing. Readers of Adorno will also be familiar with his bitter polemic against Heidegger in *Essay as Form* and elsewhere. He regards Heidegger as pushing a spurious philosophy of origins and of peddling a mystical, anti-historical view of language in which language is intimately related to Being (whatever that is!). Adorno also derides Heidegger's suggestion that the possibilities of Being (and of our own Being as *Dasein*) are inherent in Being itself and waiting to be disclosed by 'human vigilance'. For Adorno, this amounts to ideology. Yet Heidegger's characteristic web of concepts and the unhurried, circular development of these concepts in his essays is the kind of essayistic logic that Adorno praises in other contexts.

Heidegger, as Adorno charges, hears in words and things not only the accretion of subjective and cultural activity but the echo of a field of possibilities that always exceeds such activity. But Heidegger is not ahistorical in the sense that Adorno ascribes to him; even his talk of the 'primordial' or 'original' or 'true' meaning of words cannot be read as statements of chronology. Poetry is a 'source' not because it comes before the corrupting influence of culture. Heidegger's approach toward language, especially in his etymologies, seems closer to Barthelme's, who was himself a reader of Heidegger:

The prior history of words is one of the aspects of language the world uses to smuggle itself into the work. If words can be contaminated by the world, they can also carry with them into the work trace elements of world which can be used in a positive sense. We must allow ourselves the advantages of our disadvantages.⁶⁷

In Heidegger, the various ways in which a word has been understood amount to a kind of logic, a shared grammar of the world and of the human being. The intimate link between words and world, though it can be contaminated, is something that Heidegger's etymologies and linguistic innovations both affirm and aim to recover. Barthelme's depiction of this link between poetic creation and being is illuminating: 'The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they're allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven't yet encountered.'⁶⁸

If different ways of writing open up possibilities for encountering being, then the essayist's attention to language and style takes on an ethical cast: the responsibility for one's words is a responsibility – and responsiveness – to the world. Heidegger's own experiment in attending to things and words leads him to identify the thing qua thing as a 'gathering' of four dimensions: humanity and divinity, earth and sky. If this strikes Adorno as a mystical circumvention of history, it can also be heard as a call to rehabilitate the understanding of things and our relationship to them beyond the narrow horizon of proximity and utility. The stress on receptivity in Heidegger's essays suggests the (for orthodoxy, 'irritating and dangerous') presence and resistance of things. Heidegger draws near the familiar to see what remains unfamiliar or unrealized in it, and I take this as symbolic of the essayistic approach in general.

Essays in Public

The commitment to staying with things that is performed in essay writing has a particular relevance now when it is clear that present ways of seeing – and failing to see – have led to a nexus of political, social, economic and environmental crises. In her essay ‘Lying in Politics’, written after the Nixon scandal, Arendt warns of the politician’s tendency to fit reality to whatever theory they happen to hold – ‘thereby mentally getting rid of its disconcerting contingency’.⁶⁹ Arendt thus exposes the move from contingent experience to representative model as a fundamentally conservative one, not only upholding the status quo but extending it into the past and ensuring that there will be no deviations in the future. This is a move that characterizes much philosophical writing as well as the model- and algorithm-driven institutions and policies of the twenty-first century. As Arendt writes:

Reason’s aversion to contingency is very strong. . . . Much of the modern arsenal of political theory – the game theories and systems analyses, the scenarios written for imagined ‘audiences’, and the careful enumeration of, usually, three ‘options’ – A, B, C – . . . has its source in this deep-seated aversion. The fallacy of such thinking begins with forcing the choices into mutually exclusive dilemmas; reality never presents us with anything so neat as premises for logical conclusions. [Such thinking] hardly serves any other purpose than to divert the mind and blunt the judgment for the multitude of real possibilities.⁷⁰

The kind of thinking that could shake loose the aversion to contingency and allow for reality to ‘surprise’ is staged in the essay. In one of Eliot Weinberger’s thing-oriented essays, ‘The Stars’, the stars are matter interacting through gravity and electromagnetism and nuclear forces, but they are also ‘daughters of the sun’, ‘nails nailed to the sky’, ‘the souls of dead babies turned into flowers in the sky’; they ‘run errands for lovers’, they portend death and ruin, ‘they never change’ and ‘they are in constant flux’.⁷¹ The juxtapositions in Weinberger’s list-like essays keep the thing and our thinking of it in constant motion, leading to a sense of the impossibility of an exhaustive view, since an entirely different way of seeing is always crouching, waiting to spring. Jean Starobinski notes that the term “‘essay” . . . alerts the reader and makes him wait for a renewal of perspectives, or at least the statement of the fundamental principles from which a new idea will be possible’.⁷² The radical potential of this kind of writing is equal to the potential that it sees in things, their capacity to be otherwise than we see them; this potential only opens up in an attitude of receptivity. Thomas Karshan describes an

example of such a reorientation of vision in Chesterton's essay 'A Piece of Chalk' (1905), in which a young Chesterton 'finally realises that the writing implement he has been looking for – a piece of chalk – is everywhere beneath his feet on the hills of the South Downs, and – implicitly – that the virtue of experience is also everywhere beneath our feet, requiring only the essayist to take it up and make it visible'.⁷³

For Adorno, the essay's visionary potential is a matter of being able to break through the prevailing doxa: 'By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible.'⁷⁴ This perhaps helps to explain the resurgence of the essay form in recent years, with literary essayists like Zadie Smith, Marilynne Robinson and Rebecca Solnit writing public essays to address the crises and contradictions of the moment. With the capacity for visionary seeing in the essay, it is perhaps unsurprising that essayists, rather than academic philosophers, have become the public intellectuals of our time, producing more compelling models of what our life is and could be like.

¹ György Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (1910; repr., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 1–18 (10).

² Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 151–71 (160).

³ These virtues also continue to shape the generic expectations of contemporary philosophical writing, at least in the anglophone tradition.

⁴ Friedrich Schlegel already takes up this question in his *Über die Unverständlichkeit* [On incomprehensibility] (1798). See Friedrich von Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 257–72. Similar themes run across Kierkegaard's work, especially *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, 'Conclusion', in *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 352–68 (356).

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

⁷ Martin Heidegger often makes the distinction between correctness and truth, criticizing modern philosophy's obsession with the correct in much the same terms as Adorno.

⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 512, my translation.

⁹ Sara Levine, 'The Self on the Shelf', in *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time*, ed. Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 159–66 (159).

¹⁰ Kathryn Murphy, 'Of Sticks and Stones: The Essay, Experience, and Experiment', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 79–97 (86).

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018).

¹² This does not mean that the essay magically does away with the split, which very much informs the way that modernity and modern alienated selfhood thinks itself. See Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 155.

¹³ 'To appreciate anything we must always isolate it, even if the thing itself symbolise something other than isolation.' G. K. Chesterton, 'The Advantages of Having One Leg', in *On Tremendous Trifles* (London: Hesperus Press, 2009), 27–30 (28).

¹⁴ Lukács, 'Nature and Form', 10.

¹⁵ See Mario Aquilina, introduction to *Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics, and Form*, ed. Mario Aquilina (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 1–17 (7).

¹⁶ Montaigne writes in his preface to the reader that he composed the *Essais* for 'only domestic and private aims'. Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Jean Balsalmo, Michel Magnien and Catherine Magnien-Simonin (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2007), 27, my translation.

¹⁷ Michel de Montaigne, 'On Physiognomy', in *Essays*, vol. 3, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 1505–45.

¹⁸ 'on ne fait que nous entregloser'. Montaigne, *Essais*, 3:1115, my translation.

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 11–12, 24. The context here is the teacher as an 'occasion' for learning, though the notion of occasion recurs across Kierkegaard's works and is sometimes used to describe Kierkegaard's own texts. For example, see the preface to *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Bros., 1948), 27–8.

²⁰ Wittgenstein, a devoted reader of Kierkegaard, speaks of his own work in a similar vein: 'Anyone who understands me finally recognizes [my propositions] as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up it.) . . . [T]hen he sees the world rightly.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Routledge, 2001), proposition 6.54, p. 89.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 10, 24.

²² Adorno writes that in remaining too close to the surface of the cultural artefact, the essayist might simply become part of the mindless and deadening process of cultural production. See 'Essay as Form', 153–4.

²³ See Erin Plunkett, 'Possibility in Kierkegaard's Imaginative Discourses' in *A Philosophy of the Essay: Scepticism, Experience, and Style* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 111–40.

²⁴ Lukács, 'Nature and Form', 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 154.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁹ Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 46.

³⁰ My translation. The end of the monologue mirrors Baudelaire's poem 'Au Lecteur' from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

³¹ Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 162. Adorno speaks here of the cultural object or 'artifact', but later claims that 'it is clear that every object, above all a cultural object, encloses endlessly many aspects' (163).

³² *Ibid.*, 165.

³³ *Ibid.*, 160, emphasis in original.

³⁴ 'Style is of course how'. Donald Barthelme, 'Not Knowing', in *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, ed. Kim Herzinger (New York: Random House, 1997), 11–24 (22).

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- ³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 108.
- ³⁶ Lukács, 'Nature and Form', 2.
- ³⁷ See Marilynne Robinson's essay 'Humanism', in *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), 3–16 and William H. Gass, 'Representation and the War for Reality', in *Habitations of the Word* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 73–112. For philosophical context, see Edmund Husserl, *Crisis in the European Sciences*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970) and Jan Patočka, 'The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger According to M. Heidegger', in *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- ³⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 46e. no. 107.
- ³⁹ Edward Hoagland, 'What I Think, What I Am', in *Essayists on the Essay*, 101–3 (102).
- ⁴⁰ 'All concepts are already implicitly concretised through the language in which they stand. The essay begins with such meanings.' Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 160.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 160.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 165.
- ⁴³ 'The pompous scientific objections to over-sophistication actually do not aim at the impertinently unreliable method but at the irritating aspects of the object which the essay reveals.' *Ibid.*, 163.
- ⁴⁴ Lukács, 'Nature and Form', 12.
- ⁴⁵ Paul Graham, 'The Age of the Essay: The River', September 2004, accessed 7 January 2021, <http://www.paulgraham.com/essay.html>
- ⁴⁶ Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 5 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 205–48.
- ⁴⁷ Montaigne, *Essays*, 1:82.
- ⁴⁸ Lukács, 'Nature and Form', 12.
- ⁴⁹ The essay I have in mind is Gass, 'Representation and the War for Reality'.
- ⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 1971), 161–84 (179).
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁵² 'Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness.' *Ibid.*, 164.
- ⁵³ The problem is not unique to modernity. See *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁵⁴ See Heidegger's discussion of *Bestand* or 'standing reserve' in 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 3–35.
- ⁵⁵ Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 141–60 (148).
- ⁵⁶ Proximity relies on collapsing difference, while nearness maintains it. See Heidegger, 'The Thing', 175.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ⁵⁸ For example, see the discussion of calling/pealing and listening in Heidegger's essay 'Language', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 185–208 (especially 205–7).
- ⁵⁹ Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 156.
- ⁶⁰ Heidegger, 'The Thing', 179.
- ⁶¹ '[T]he argument, as Montaigne says in a different context, is of words, and with words it is answered: we do not feel Johnson's pain, or Zeno's servant's, or witness Diogenes walking, but read about it.' Murphy, 'Of Sticks and Stones', 82.
- ⁶² Heidegger, 'Language'.
- ⁶³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Christiane Marks (Rochester: Open Letter, 2019), poem 1:1, pp. 2–3.

⁶⁴ I have not discovered any sustained critical attention given to Heidegger as an essayist. David Wood mentions Heidegger's preference for 'occasional' formats, though he does not mention the essay explicitly. 'The provisionality of Heidegger's later philosophy – most of it is as "on the way" as *On the Way to Language* – is registered in the many occasional formats he employs – such as the lecture, the address, the dialogue, the conversation.' David Wood, 'Style and Strategy at the Limits of Philosophy: Heidegger and Derrida', *The Monist* 63, no. 4 (1980): 494–511 (501).

⁶⁵ Heidegger, 'Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 15–68, and 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 141–60.

⁶⁶ Donald Barthelme, 'Not Knowing', in *Not Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, ed. Kim Herzinger (New York: Random House, 1997), 11–24 (21). He echoes Wittgenstein's remark that 'thought is surrounded by a halo' (*Philosophical Investigations* no. 97, p. 44e).

⁶⁷ Barthelme, 'Not Knowing', 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers', *New York Review of Books*, 18 November 1971.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Eliot Weinberger, 'The Stars', in *An Elemental Thing* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 170–6.

⁷² Jean Starobinski, 'Can One Define the Essay?', trans. Lindsey Scott, in *Essayists on the Essay*, 110–15 (111).

⁷³ Thomas Karshan, 'What is an Essay? Thirteen Answers from Virginia Woolf', in *On Essays*, 32–55 (40).

⁷⁴ Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 171.