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ON THE ESSAY AND ITS PROSE

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It should not surprise anyone if a logician proceeds to make a few remarks on the more subtle aspects of prose, its form and style, aspects on which generally only critics or masters of literary creations tend to comment. I think it is time to evaluate the elements of beauty and perfection of literary and poetic taste with regard to the *esprit géométrique* as well as the *esprit de finesse*. Pascal's ethos returns to us now and then, and when this happens, we tend to differentiate in this manner. I think it would be prudent for poets and writers to comment from time to time on their experiences with objects of their trade, such as prose, fragments, verse, and sentences. From this, I think a rather respectable theory could emerge, a theory with the added advantage of having an empirical origin.

Thus the question that concerns me greatly is how to know whether I am confronted with a piece of genuine prose or a poetic piece, because I know that it cannot be the verse itself, as Sulzer has previously proclaimed, that draws a clear boundary. Nonetheless, in spite of this considerable clarity, I can follow only with great effort the subtle trace of a continued transition from poetry to prose in literary expressions. Hence, I merely want to articulate briefly that I can recognize inner perfection of that which we call prose only in some cases, then again poetry in other instances, as a meaningful measurement if I am concurrently permitted to regard prose as a generalized form of poetry. In this case, rhythm and meter, which are characteristics of all poetry, turn in soft continuity into

clear periods and distinct style, Lessing's so beautifully interpreted "ideal sensual speech" [*vollkommene sinnliche Rede*]¹ transforms itself into representative sentence sequences of a kind of prose that attains its highest degree of transparency in Pascal's fragments or Stendhal's epic. From this I deduce that the poet can finally be understood only from within poetry and the writer from within prose, and I have to make a few comments on this as well before I can proceed to my actual topic.

To this I have to add an explanation. An intellectual is either a creator or a teacher. He has either a creation or a persuasion [*Tendenz*].² To us, the significant difference between a poet and a writer seems to be that the poet is creative and expands the essence of being [*das Sein*], whereas the writer expresses the education, persuasion, and intellect that one represents. In poetry, creation is possible; in prose, basically only persuasion. More precisely, poetry is the medium of creation, whereas prose is the medium of persuasion.

I don't want to leave unmentioned that I am of the opinion that creation is an aesthetic category, whereas persuasion is inherently situated in ethics. From this, I conclude that art is interesting only from the perspective of its production and that any aesthetic state produced by art is an approximation of creation, whereas the ethical state has nothing to do with production but instead persists in education [*Bildung*], upbringing [*Erziehung*], transformation, and revolution. I am aware of what I am saying: that perfect poetry means expression of an aesthetic state, whereas mastery in prose reveals the ethicist. The subtle difference between an aesthetic and an ethical style is a qualitative difference, even if there are visible crossovers between works, between poetry and prose.

For this reason, the space into which the writer gazes is stiller and tighter, but this gaze is not more intimate and lingering. On the contrary, this gaze is more discriminating, cultivating [*züchterisch*], and sorrowful. Only as a writer with a persuasion, with a stance to which one is committed, can one be a poet, scientist, philosopher, a religious or political critic. And maybe one has to have overcome the deep desire for creating if one wants to replace the song by the will, the glow of purpose, of upbringing. And this desire will wane of its own volition when one pursues a purpose and not a creation. Thinking about potential readers distracts from the poetics, as does thinking about the use value impair the course of science. Unfettered passion, from which creation springs,

does not without difficulty complement free will, the one that propels the mind which has an opinion.

One can learn from the history of ideas that the intellectual with a certain persuasion always gains influence and makes it known that he is irreplaceable when epochal difficulties appear. This is all but a superfluous addendum. The poet is not understandable from the perspective of a turbulent era, but the writer is. In this way, Lessing, Herder, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche were persuasive writers of great style. They not only influenced the nineteenth century, but still constitute effective forces today. Gide in France, and Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset in Spain also fall into that category.

We observe a rather odd correlation between persuasion and creation with these writers. Where there is creation, there is poetry—this cannot be denied—but at the same time the expression, the form in which the creation emerges, is emphasized. This happens not through pathos, not with an indication, but simply by way of the calm manner of tireless repetition. Thus here exists a type of prose that, in particular ascertainable moments, always acts in the same manner. It is significant that this process creeps into even the literal phrase. Not the writer's thought has persuasion, but the expression of the thought. It progresses emblematically; prose appears every now and then in calculating form; it possesses symbols for phrases, for specific phrases, that are supposed to express a particular connection in an objective manner. This curious calculative prose naturally contains the specter of strongly expressed precision; it is crypto-rational. It hides its reason. Why? Because this prose is not pure persuasion, but coinciding persuasion. It is still poetry. It performs for the sake of creation, not for persuasion. This is how it has to be when one pursues a purpose with regard to form and not thought, when it is not insight but its expression that motivates the will. Actually, this will is controlled by reason, but reason has to be hidden on behalf of form, which remains an aesthetic category. Otherwise, the ethicist would come too much to the foreground, which, in theory, is not a desirable outcome. In other words, in order to instruct through form, repetition is required, consideration of aesthetic space, but the unintended impression of reason, which emerges from this, only feigns the ethicist. In reality, he stays veiled. All this brings up a fundamental question: Can a persuasion which develops from bare form persist in the long run? In this case, is persuasion not

concurrently thought and content? The problem with form is a problem of abstraction, and there is always the point at which abstraction turns into a highly concrete act. Because the nature of persuasion is such that it represents a will propelled by a thought, it is an existential phenomenon; in no way can it suppress the existential moment if it is genuine persuasion. That is why there comes a point in every aesthetic persuasion when the ethicist emerges.

Therefore, I arrive at the conclusion that there is a strange border area [*Confinium*] that develops between poetry and prose, between the aesthetic stage of creation and the ethical stage of persuasion. It always remains somewhat enigmatic, but it captures a well-known literary position. This is because the “essay” is the unmediated literary expression of this strange border area between poetry and prose, between creation and persuasion, between an aesthetic and an ethical stage.

Thus we have arrived at our main topic. The essay is a type of prose, but it is not a fragment in the sense of Pascal-esque fragments, and it is not an epic piece in the sense of Stendhal-esque epic. The essay reveals a gap, a completely autonomous representational reality, and therefore is itself a literary reality.

“Essay” means “attempt” or “experiment” [*Versuch*] in German. This raises the question whether this expression means that a literary-leaning person “attempts” to write about something, or whether the writing about an explicit or a partly explicit topic has the character of an attempt, an experiment with that topic. I am convinced that the essay is an expression of an experimental method; the essay is experimental writing, and one needs to address it in the same manner as one addresses experimental physics, a type of physics that is clearly distinguished from theoretical physics. In experimental physics, so as to stay true to our example, one asks nature a question, expects an answer, scrutinizes the answer, and quantifies it; theoretical physics describes nature by demonstrating analytically, axiomatically, and deductively its principles stemming from mathematical necessity. Thus the essay distinguishes itself from a treatise. He who writes essayistically; who composes something experimentally; who turns his subject this way and that, questions, touches, inspects, and reflects upon it thoroughly; who approaches it from different angles, and collects what he sees in his mind’s eye, and formulates in words what his topic reveals under the conditions established by writing.

Hence, “attempting” something within the essay does not signify true writing subjectivity. Instead, it produces conditions under which a topic is moved closer into the context of a literary configuration. There is no attempt to write or to recognize. There is an attempt to see how a topic behaves in a literary manner. Hence, a question is posed, an experiment conducted on a topic. This allows us to see that the character of the essay is not defined by the literary form in which it is composed, but rather the content, the topic that is treated, appears “essayistic” because it appears under conditions. Thus every essay inherently contains the potential for a perspective in the tradition of Leibniz, Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Ortega y Gasset. They represent a type of philosophical perspectivism in the sense that they apply a specific viewpoint in thinking and perception to their observations. Even those who have read only a small portion of these men’s writings cannot mistake their mastery of essay writing. Whereas in Leibniz, this mastery may be concealed in the epistolary format, with Dilthey it is evident. Whereas it masquerades in Nietzsche as the ability to compose aphorisms, with Ortega the essay itself is the intended form.

At this point, I have to emphasize that every essay contains beautiful sentences that are like seeds of the entire essay, out of which the essay can continue to grow. I am referring to those charming prose sentences which illustrate that there is no perfect boundary that distinguishes the essay from prose. These are at the same time elementary sentences of the essay that belong to poetry as well as prose. They are fragments of “perfect sensual speech”—that is, fragments of a linguistic body that touches us like a part of nature—and they are fragments of a pointed thought, hence fragments of perfect deduction, that affects us like a piece of Platonic idea. One has to take it upon oneself to read in both languages if one wants to enjoy the full pleasure of the essay . . . or one transforms the essay, before one is aware, into a succession of aphorisms, each of which represents a pointed thought, as can be observed with Lichtenberg, Novalis, and Goethe, or perhaps into a series of highly compressed images that, in the manner of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, represent the torn pieces of nearly perfect endless lyric poetry.

This brings us to another point of definition in our observations. Is it not peculiar that all great essayists are critics? Is it not noteworthy that all eras that are distinguished by the essay are significant periods marked by criticism? What does that mean?

To deconstruct this thought: In France, the essay developed in connection with the placid, critical works of Montaigne. His instructions for living and dying, for thinking and working, for enjoying and lamenting, originate from a critical spirit. The element within which these reflections operate is the element of the great French moralists and skeptics. He is a gadfly of his time, the beginning of a protesting critical zeitgeist that continues to dominate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There exists a lineage spanning from Montaigne to Gide, Valéry, and Camus. Bacon developed the essay in England. Bacon wrote his essays in every respect with an astute moralistic, skeptical, enlightened—in short, critical—hidden agenda. Essentially, he gave rise to Swift, Defoe, Hume, W. G. Hamilton, De Quincey, and Poe, but also, in more recent times, to Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Strachey, and others. In Germany, we see Lessing, Möser, and Herder—the last especially in his unfailing *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* [*Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*], simply the most important collection of German essays—initiating this form of experimental literature and at the same time mastering it. Everyone knows of the depth of criticism that is contained in their works. Friedrich Schlegel, himself a master of criticism and the essay, describes Herder as a pure critic and recognizes in him a protester in the broadest sense. Adam Müller, as well, calls “Lessing in his lecture concerning the development of German criticism one of the central figures.” Furthermore, I have already mentioned Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Ortega y Gasset. More recently, Gottfried Benn, emerging from the Expressionist movement; Hofmiller, one of the first literary critics; Karl Hillebrand and Ernst Robert Curtius, who have managed to apply a penetrating analytic’s vision of the world to the contemporary moment. Ernst Jünger, whose essays experiment with issues in a relaxed, half-cynical, half-skeptical manner recalling Montaigne; Rudolf Kassner, tirelessly wanting to sublimate [*aufheben*] again and again the world’s historical conditions of analytical intellect; Thomas Mann, who pours the breath of the epic into prolonged remarks—indeed, with a thematic diversity that encompasses art, historiography, psychology, history, and politics. Finally, the Austrian essayists von Kürenberger and Speidel, as well as Karl Kraus, Hofmannsthal, and Stoessl, who even dedicated to this literary form a theory, remarking that “libido and consciousness” [*Triebhaftes und Bewußtes*] are “equally at work” in the essay.

This much is obvious: the essay originates from our intellect's critical essence, whose delight for experimentation simply constitutes a necessity of its manner of being, its method. I shall expand on this by saying that the essay is the form of the critical category of our mind per se. For he who criticizes must also necessarily experiment; he must create conditions under which a topic becomes visible anew, differently from an author. Most important, the invalidity of a topic must be put to the test, tried out, and that is exactly the point of the small variation that the topic gains through a critic. One could prompt the literary critic to set up laws and regulations, as this has happened in old poetic treatises for other categories; he would have to declare that every good criticism contains a law for retaining minimal variations of a topic. However, this variation will lead to a place where either the full magnitude or the full calamity of the author's topic in question becomes visible. In any case, and this I want to emphasize, the law of minimal variation, of displacement [*Verrückung*], is also the law under which the critical essayist works; it is the method of his experiment. In this way, it contains everything that falls into the category of critical spirit: satire, irony, cynicism, skepticism, reasoning, leveling, caricature, and the like. Thus, due to the critic's preference for the essay, it also becomes apparent that he is at home in the border area [*Confinium*] between the creative and aesthetic state, on the one hand, and the ethical state of persuasion, on the other hand. He does not fully belong to either state, but resides in a border area, and sociologically speaking this expresses itself in that, as a type between categories and a contemporary between eras, he finds his companions where open or secret revolutions, acts of resistance, and regroupings are taking place or are being planned.

I have stated what the essay can accomplish. But what becomes visible? I would like to say that the contour of something becomes visible in the essayistic method, the contour of inner and outer being, the contour of being what it is [*So seins*], if you will. There is no substantive limit to making a contour visible, at least not in principle. The essayistic experiment is, in principle, even independent from substance, from the subject matter. It can even bear a degree of heterogeneity of substance. One need not fundamentally, systematically, deductively "stick to the point," pursuant to a number of aphorisms. That does not, however, indicate that there is a kinship with aphorisms. Both forms are completely different with regard to plenitude, density, style, and intention; in one, the pointedly

illustrated reigns and in the other, the epic. Only this can be the meaning of Hofmiller's statement that the essay is not scientific: where science is defined as a sum, as a system of axiomatic-deductive statements about clearly defined subject matter, treatise, not essays, are possible. But insofar as every science determines subject matters and these become the subject of critical reflection, a scientific essay may exist. In Germany, France, and England, there are ample examples of scientific essay writing. Goethe's essay "On Granite" is a fitting example. Max Weber, one of the last scientific types who wrote in great style, provided in his two last lectures, "Politics as a Vocation" [Politik als Beruf] and "Science as a Vocation" [Wissenschaft als Beruf], fitting examples of such essays of scientific nature. I also remember the splendid essay by Heinrich Scholz about the theologian and scientific organizer Adolf von Harnack, as a response to the great Harnack biography by Zahn-Harnack. Heisenberg's lectures "The Development of Quantum Mechanics" and "Transformations in the Foundations of Natural Science" are exemplary essays of scientific prose in German. However, Strachey's historical essays all contain Anglo-Saxon traits of genuine experimental literary art implemented within the boundaries of science. It should become apparent from this list why I do not really differentiate between scientific and literary essays, but denote the difference by using the concepts aesthetic [*schöngeistig*] and sophisticated [*feingeistig*]. Aesthetic essay writing develops a topic beyond scientific domains, reflection, often rambling, intuitive, and irrational; does not dispense with clarity, but this clarity is not one of conceptual definition, but rather one of perusal through the poetic or intellectual space that one has entered. Sophisticated essay writing, emerging from efforts to define, make self-evident, a rather definitive object belonging to a science, contains an indestructible inclination for logic; it reveals a style of lucid reason, from which it never departs. It analyzes, makes elementary, and granulates the substance, which it retains in complete experimental variation. It begs the question whether one should add a special class for polemical essays, those that are not critical but vary the object with the fierceness of a destructive attack. There is nothing standing in the way. Naturally, it will bring the object with all available measures to a position in which its fragility, its sense of adventure, its infirmity, will rather seem suicidal. All means are necessary for this to happen, aesthetic contemplation as well as sophisticated dissection. Lessing was one of its masters, and

nearly all great polemicists of world literature have successfully engaged in the experimental art of the polemic essay.

At this point, it is no longer difficult to express what literarily should be said about the essay and its substance. It is the result of a literary “ars combinatoria.” The essayist is a combiner, a tireless creator of configurations around a specific object. Everything that is even somewhat in the vicinity of this object, defining the subject of the essay, giving it the possibility of existence, enters into the combination and causes a new configuration. The transformation of a configuration, in which the object is located, is the point of the experiment, and the goal of the essay is less the revelation of the object’s definition than is the sum of factors, the sum of configurations, in which it becomes possible. That is also of scientific value, because the circumstance, the atmosphere, in which something flourishes wants to be recognized and, after all, reveals something. Therefore, configuration is an epistemological category that cannot be achieved through axiomatic deduction, but rather through a literary “ars combinatoria,” in which imagination has replaced pure knowledge. Because new objects are not created in the imagination, but configurations for objects are, and the configurations do not appear with deduced but with experimental necessity. All great essayists have been combiners and possessed extraordinary imagination.

Of course, it is difficult to assess whether there is an experiment with an idea or a form, and thus it is not easy to ascertain whether we are confronted with a genuine essay and to what degree the author has surpassed a simple report. Therefore, I want to declare that the essay is the literary form that is most difficult to master and to assess. Take any one thing—for example, the Green Woodpecker. An analytic description leads to nothing more than a piece by Brehm.³ But if one has an idea while looking at the Green Woodpecker, let’s say concerning the concept of rhythm, and reflects this idea in the Green Woodpecker and comments that at the moment of creation it is positioned at the location at which “rhythm and Melos” divide, the experimental enters into the report that elevates the Brehm-like report. That thought is now put to the test. Everywhere, the bird’s cycle of activity is examined, and if one suddenly finds the line in which this type of combination is described as “little models of a different manner in which to view things,” one has found the persuasion and, behind it, the spirit divided by pure reason. We shall say that this is

“a real disciple,” purposefully seeming to ramble on and on. Nonetheless, we are confronted by a thought, spic and span, and a man’s true opinion. Accordingly, this is how it always happens: the man who has dedicated an essay to this combinational conclusion proves himself to be a splendid master of this method, which is part of the foundation of the essay. And this method makes it possible for the subjectivity of writing, the literary agent in the better sense of this word, to be suddenly integrated into the combination, and to such a degree, that, openly or discreetly, persuasion is transformed into existence.

Persuasion expresses itself wonderfully in the essay. Having a persuasion means experimenting. This completes this line of thought. At first, the object is isolated through experimentation in the luster of combining concepts and ideas, and images and comparisons. Then, slowly, persuasion shines through the web of literary essay writing. Finally, there is an appeal from the stance of persuasion, and the real writer emerges, the real man of letters in the spirit of Lessing, the mind and the heart, which try to possess something. In this way, it becomes understandable that a mere literary form, the essay, penetrates the aesthetic shell and becomes ethical, existential; it becomes intelligible that an existential category, that of the experiment, becomes, metaphorically and methodologically, a literary form.

The intellectual who does not have creation but persuasion on his mind wants to create the existential being. His concern is concrete. We have seen, finally, that all persuasion is existential. Therefore, it is able to produce the existential. It has Socratic intentions. Socrates brought forth what he wanted to say, hence said experimentally, in conversation, in dialogue, quasi in a prototype of the dramatic act. On the other hand, the intellectual, who represents a view, nowadays favors the essay, the experiment or attempt, because creating the existential bears in itself the character of the experiment. The essay replaces simultaneously the dramatic dialogue. It is a type of contemplative monologue and therefore itself a dramatic form. The dialectic lies in the experimental. The essay’s essence in form and content consists of nothing but to achieve, through the Socratic method, an intent by experimental means or to bring forth an object experimentally. What is intended to be said is not uttered right away as a finite verdict, as a law; it is, rather, produced before the reader’s mind’s eye in an act of untiring variation on the starting product. This happens in a way that corresponds, on the one hand, with an experimental

demonstration of a physical effects and, on the other hand, with the production of a well-defined configuration in a kaleidoscope.

I have said that the essay—as its name suggests—experiments, in concrete terms represents nothing but the execution of an experiment. I have also added that this is not simply an experiment with ideas. Lichtenberg once commented that that which has been experimented must be performed. In a genuine essay, this aesthetic act is far exceeded. No essay remains in the realm of the aesthetic, even though, as I admit, it initially signifies a problem of the artistic form of prose. The essayist distances himself from all theory. He neither represents theory nor develops a theory. He moves in the realm of the concrete in accordance with Kierkegaard's demand, made in opposition to Hegel, for "space and time and flesh and blood." So what does he do? Which concrete entity is completely separate from theory? The concrete case. The essay consciously generates the concrete case of an idea, reflected in the essayist himself.

I have reached the conclusion of this examination, which did not want to point out merely in passing the necessity and the seriousness of a literary genre. The essay cannot be conjured by the short-windedness of a rapid, in many aspects cursory, as a whole bellicose time. Due to the critical situation as a whole, due to the crisis in which mind and existence thrive, the essay has become a characteristic of our literary era. The essay serves the crisis and its conquest by provoking the mind to experiment, to configure things differently, but it is not simply an accent, a mere expression of the crisis. The essay inherently contains the possibility of perfection and completion [*Vollendung*], because it is a unique literary form. Those who see the essay as an art of popularization have thoroughly misunderstood its meaning. That which is a creature of critique is beyond the dichotomy of the popular and the not popular.

Translated by Margit Grieb

NOTES

1. In the original: "ein Gedicht ist eine vollkommene sinnliche Rede."
2. All subsequent uses of *Tendenz* will be translated as "persuasion."
3. Alfred Edmund Brehm (1829–1884) was a German zoologist and scientific author who wrote the popular zoological encyclopedia *Brehms Tierleben* (*Brehm's Life of Animals*).