

The obscure object of transdisciplinarity

Adorno on the essay form

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Any attempt to conceptualize transdisciplinarity is bound to experiment with disciplinary boundaries. And such experimentation cannot simply be held to the criteria of academic study. It must in fact problematize the boundaries between academic study and forms or instances of thinking which take place outside of such scholarship. However, these disruptive practices have become more and more difficult because of the ongoing institutional integration of their impulses. Their irregular *modus operandi* is reduced through the perpetual ‘formatting’ and ‘rebranding’ of innovative practices within academia into new ‘disciplines’, such as Gender Studies, Media Studies and Visual Studies. Thus the institution sustains itself precisely by preying upon transdisciplinary practices and turning them into inflated disciplinary items.

This predatory logic operates by conflating their evaluation and their commodification. Of course, these two moments were never separate in previous aggregations of social and academic practices of knowledge. But they now constantly mesh within certain dynamic formalizations: academia markets itself through worldwide ratings that customize their fluidity and professionally adapt all exterior elements of thought. Any subversive processes of awareness taking place outside the university are immediately reconciled with academic reflection. No longer does the ‘rigidity’ of the university oppose the ‘life world’. Quite the contrary, the rapidity with which all objects and procedures are included within its synthetic,

homogenizing operations is simply astounding. This continuity between the academic configuration of knowledge and its regulatory, controlling function in capital is all the more powerful in the English-speaking world, where large parts of the ‘knowledge economy’ are directly private.

In a quite different historical sequence, that of postwar Germany, Theodor W. Adorno took up the problem of form as being crucial for the practice of philosophy. In ‘The Essay as Form’ he showed how form can subvert the institutional compartmentalization of knowledge. The following inquiry envisions the specific conceptualization developed in that essay, trying to reclaim some of its insights into the ‘newness of the new’ that disappear from Adorno’s later considerations. Hopefully, it may bring out a few features we can make use of in the quite different situation of philosophy today. However, they can only be relevant in their anachronistic twist.

That in Germany the essay is condemned as a hybrid, that the form has no compelling tradition, that its emphatic demands are met only intermittently – all this has been said, and censured, often enough.¹

That the subject of the verb of the first sentence of ‘The Essay as Form’ is a subordinate phrase indicates a kind of conceptual commotion. This essay, which takes the essay in its form as its object of reflection, has been described as Adorno’s ‘discourse on method’. Written between 1954 and 1958, its reflection contains

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numerous thoughts that will reappear later, in *Negative Dialectics*. In a certain sense, it is a quasi-draft of the book. However, there is a different tone in this essay, a tone on which I will insist. In 1966, the year his 'great book of the concept' was published, Adorno seems to have concluded that the only possibility left for philosophy is to practise the unknown, in reverse of the identificatory logic of the concept, to highlight its non-identical aspects. The construction of an intelligibility that carries the non-identical beyond the principle of identity – an intelligibility related to the new – is no longer possible for philosophy. The new has in a certain sense become a preserve for art.

It is salient that in 'The Essay as Form' Adorno fully grants philosophy the capacity of relating to the new in its 'newness', precisely through the detour of form. The text is a confident one. Giving full credence to this stance, I will state anew the problem of philosophical language expounded by Adorno. First, I will pay attention to the form of the essay in its exteriority – as the writing whereby philosophy exists. Second, I will turn to the conceptual, and, astonishingly for Adorno, to its transdisciplinary meshing with 'communicational' procedures. Together, rhetorical and conceptual processes construct the immanence of the objects to the form.

The close ties of this essay with Descartes's discourse is suggested by the text itself, which interprets the essay as a 'gentle challenge' of the ideal of the *clara* and *distincta perceptio*. This challenge gains in momentum and intensity. Without making much noise, without an alternative programme, this small, encapsulated essay, little by little, derails the ordered logics of discursive rationality. Shifting away from philosophical positions determined in priority by argumentative, ontological, metaphysical structures, it takes another road. This road emphatically associates conceptualization with the problem of constructing a form to elucidate an object. This object is not to be founded in thought, nor to be deduced from reason. It's a 'found object', already preformed, existing in the artificial field of culture.

If there is thus for Adorno a method of the non-methodical constructed by form, then it is because the method never exists separately from the object, because it is reflected through contact with that object. The essay takes Hegelian logic at its word, even against the regular determination of dialectics as a method. Intrinsically already a repetition – a second, third, fourth take – each essay considers a mediated object anew. It is held to reinvent its method within the process of understanding itself.

What form can philosophy take today, asks Adorno, and not in all eternity, when it is decidedly no longer the 'queen of sciences' and when it differentiates itself from art by its appeal to conceptuality, unwilling to wallow in the make-believe of a commodified 'artist-philosophy', serving the 'socially preformed need of a clientele'? In this respect, the essay is not so much what Adorno proposes, as it is the form which first awakens his curiosity because of its disqualification by different dominant discourses. The first part of the text retraces the reasons for these multiple exclusions. It questions the existence of the essay between the *feuilleton* – the German name for the newspaper section reserved for reflective articles – and the 'scientific' academism of the university. His diagnosis restricts itself to the specific landscape of discursive production in Germany, as is underlined empathically in the first sentence. Adorno does what he says: he outlines the precise and conjectural coordinates of a singular practice of philosophy, indebted to questions of 'when?', 'where?' and 'who?'

The first depiction of the essay is borrowed from those who invalidate it. Judged as a 'hybrid' by its opponents, the essay is nowhere at its proper place; it conforms neither to the category of science nor to that of art. This is the essay as it already exists, the essay as preformed. The term 'hybrid' will be transformed in Adorno's reflection, and requalified by the end of the text as heretical. The essay becomes an assumed heresy, of critical nature.

Its heterogeneity implies a dimension ignored by what Adorno calls traditional philosophy. Through its ephemeral character, its exposure to failure, the essay relocates its relation to truth within historicity, and not against it. As stated by Adorno, its only *a priori* is constituted by its *a posteriori*. 'The essay, however, does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distil it out; it tries to render the transient eternal.'²² This inversion is further heightened if one recalls that in 'The Essay as Form' the essay is both the object in question and the form that elucidates. What is true of the object must also be so of the form. Thus the historical index of its relevance does not rest upon the tradition of the essay, even if Adorno evokes it by quoting Montaigne. In Adorno's outlook, the form of the essay is intimately linked to the object. This adamant attachment is deemed capable of constructing a decentred intelligibility, a universal lucidity intrinsically in conflict with the regular and verifiable logics of dominant rationality.

What of this critical disposition of the form? In the text, the essay with all its qualities almost seems

to have the status of a person. Adorno talks about it as one talks about a treasured friend. This peculiar twist – which I reproduce here – is motivated from beginning to end by an impulse that is rarely asserted in such a direct manner by Adorno: the mimetic, or somatic, impulse of happiness, which refuses to integrate the ‘reality principle’ as principle of thought.

Scientific consciousness, which opposes all anthropomorphic conceptions, was always allied with the reality principle and, like the latter, antagonistic to happiness. While happiness is always supposed to be the aim of all domination of nature, it is always envisioned as a regression to mere nature. This is evident all the way up to the highest philosophies, even those of Kant and Hegel. These philosophies have their pathos in the absolute idea of reason, but at the same time they always denigrate it as insolent and disrespectful when it relativizes accepted values. In opposition to this tendency, the essay salvages a moment of sophistry. The hostility to happiness in official critical thought is especially marked in Kant’s transcendental dialectic, which wants to immortalize the line between understanding and speculation and prevent thought from ‘wandering off into intelligible worlds’, as the characteristic metaphor expresses it. Whereas a self-critical reason should, according to Kant, have both feet firmly on the ground, should ground itself, it tends inherently to seal itself off from everything new and also from curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought, something existential ontology vilifies as well. What Kant saw, in terms of content, as the goal of reason, the creation of humankind, utopia, is hindered by the form of his thought, epistemology. It does not permit reason to go beyond the realm of experience, which, in the mechanism of mere material and invariant categories, shrinks to what has always already existed. The essay’s object, however, is the new in its newness, not as something that can be translated back into the old existing forms. By reflecting the object without violence, as it were, the essay mutely laments the fact that truth has betrayed happiness and itself along with it, and this lament provokes the rage directed against the essay.³

Though the essay form is not properly an art form, its pathos can nonetheless be confronted with Adorno’s reflection on the relation between form and content in art. Indeed, form in art is not a determination that imposes itself on a ‘determinable’ matter, since what is formed – the content – is never an object outside of the form. Form refers back to the mimetic impulses that enter into it, that are vectors of its construction. This conception is epitomized in Adorno’s famous phrase: ‘form that befalls content is itself sedimented content; this, and not regression to

any particular artistic emphasis on content, secures the primacy of the object in art.⁴

In the essay, form connects the pleasure principle with the historical object it explores. Its features are portrayed through an immobilized ‘image’ of the force field inherent to its configuration. The essay draws its critical impetus from its refusal of the prejudice of the seriousness of knowledge. More radically, the pleasure principle underpins all the procedures of the essay. Ironically derived from the Freudian ‘pleasure principle’, pleasure as the logical motor of thought is introduced as the play-drive which informs all its efforts:

Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him. The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say. Hence it is classified a trivial endeavor.⁵

Don’t these remarks lend arguments to those who condemn the essay as a purely subjectivist enterprise, displaying an arbitrary interest for an arbitrarily chosen object? Such an attitude could at the very most be suitable for a narrative practice, but it seems contrary to all of the concept’s requirements. These objections can be dispelled if one proceeds through an analogy with Adorno’s understanding of the mediation of extremes in art: construction and expression. Here, in the essay form, expression would be relative to the impulse of happiness, whilst construction would be relative to the conceptual deciphering of the historicity of the object, its second nature.

For Adorno, expression is precisely not, even in art, the supposed free creativity of a subject as opposed to objectivity. This binary approach only reflects bourgeois theory, for which there is a sovereign artist subject, like the monotheist God in bad catechism. Far from being identified with this falsely spiritual figure, expressive or playful mimesis points to a rationality engaged with a somatic impulse, a body in excess that breaks away from itself, becomes a detached, fragmentary object. The logical and chronological anteriorities of this somatic impulse never coincide. In art it is always the detached object, the work itself, which crystallizes expression.

The experience thus depicted, both in the artwork and in the essay as form, is polarized between the extremes of expression and construction. And expression expresses not an interior subjectivity identical with itself, but a cluster of tensions, a conflictual relation between the somatic impulse of play and what has already been 'played out', what has gone over to form. It expresses the tension between the wish for happiness and its repression within the object. Even though it has broken away from the body, migrated into the object, the impulse continues to adhere to that object. In the same way, silence adheres to the essay form, whose concepts are incapable of explicating the impulse that drives and contrives them. Thus all expressivity is always constituted outside of itself; its subjective genesis occurs in the objective field of society. However, this 'played-out' objectified aspect is precisely what can be played over, or replayed.

This is what attracts Adorno to the leisure of child's play. The child repeats, but he or she does not repeat like an adult, who unburdens him- or herself of experiences by recounting them. The child repeats by replaying, by starting over from the beginning, once more, a hundreds times more. Moreover, a child at play does not know the difference between the epistemological urgency of experimentation and the reasoned progress of his or her capacities.

Adorno always underlined the paradoxical inversion of expression and construction in art. The most expressive artworks are those that radicalize asceticism to the extreme. He does the same for the form of the essay.

The relationship to experience – and the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories – is the relationship to all of history. Merely individual experience, which consciousness takes as its point of departure, since it is what is closest to it, is itself mediated by the overarching experience of historical humankind. The notion that the latter is mediated and one's own experience unmediated is mere self-deception on the part of an individualistic society and ideology. Hence the essay challenges the notion that what has been produced historically is not a fit object for theory. The distinction between a *prima philosophia*, a first philosophy, and a mere philosophy of culture that would presuppose a first philosophy and build on it – the distinction used as a theoretical rationalization for the taboo of the essay – cannot be salvaged.⁶

The more the essay entrusts itself to the immediately historical character of the object, the more it treats second nature as being first. In brief, the more

it ventures into the reified dimension of the object, the more it has a chance of disclosing its utopian excess, an excess which ignores the partition between the ephemeral and the eternal.

The logic may be playful, but it is nevertheless highly ambitious. For Adorno, the essay as form compels an inversion of the conventional order between first philosophy and philosophy of derived objects. Today, it may seem to be customary philosophical 'good taste' to incriminate the subjectivism inherited from idealism. However, the conclusions drawn by Adorno here are more unusual than that. Only the philosophy of artefacts and the elucidation of their reification, only the deciphering involved in a variety of objects, without any particular philosophical dignity, is apt to 'explode the mass of merely existing reality'.⁷ Or, in the words of late Adorno:

The smallest intramundane traits would be of relevance to the absolute, for the micrological view cracks the shell of what, measured by the subsuming cover concept, is helplessly isolated and explodes its identity, the delusion that is but a specimen. There is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall.⁸

In nuce: the philosophy of culture, in the folds of its objects, in 'the details of what changes', spells out the enigma of a metaphysics that would not erase time from truth, that would really account for the exteriority of phenomena. This turnabout also provides the key to the importance of art in Adorno's philosophy. The philosophy of culture in this emphatic sense has nothing to do with the different empirical 'studies' which have come to substitute for it.

Up to this point I have relied on the affinity between the form of the essay and the art form. This approximation has its limits, since Adorno strongly insists on their distinction. The form of the essay differs through its medium and conceptual construction. To get at the specificity of this form, the text begins by localizing it within the divides of institutionalized discourses. In Germany, the essay does not benefit from the prestige it has in countries that have experienced *les Lumières*, countries where the *homme de lettres* is a highly respected figure. In Germany, the compliments addressed to theoretical writing of essays serve first and foremost to exclude their authors from university. In the same way, essayists who give up on conceptual rigour indulge in narrative or psychological debauchery, as do the late essays of Stefan Zweig. This attitude only confirms the criticisms voiced by academia. Mainly, however, essays

cater to the market criteria upon which rests their publication, namely to the criteria of the *feuilleton* in German newspapers. This maps a divide that no longer exists today. Essays paradoxically derived their lucidity from their inadequacy both to the criteria of 'newspaper theory' and of 'academic theory'.

The position of the essayist is highly unstable. First of all it is economically tangential, because he or she must maintain the quality of productions whilst managing at the same time to sell them. There is thus a perpetual danger of yielding to commercial opportunism. In a way, each essay that really honours its object has escaped that trap. Being a commodity in a more direct way than university discourse, the essay must dialecticize the contradiction between its existence as a commodity and its critical condition. Outside of some rare exceptions, very few essayists use this instability to their advantage. Adorno's argument is that essayists sometimes produce essays and sometimes do not. Zweig was an essayist and became a commercial writer; Lukács was an essayist who became a party ideologue. Others alternated between university and essay (for example Kracauer and Simmel). To have written one essay in no way ensures the conditions or the ability of writing the next one. The essayist is a dilettante in an emphatic sense, and few essayists are sufficiently modest or

sufficiently independent to affirm this quality in all its consequences. Consequently, the essayist is neither a creator nor a scholar, only a critic. The 'unsurpassed master' of this dilettante writing is of course Walter Benjamin.

The social matrix of the essay throws a particularly crude light on the partition of discourses between art and science. Of course, for Adorno it is impossible to simply ignore their irreversible separation. But, more to the point, he shows how the categories of 'art' and 'science' relocated between the cultural market and the seriousness of the university fall back into myth – that is, into the irrational rationality of ideology.

At the university, the concept of science has long since forfeited its rigour, which was linked to the ambition of producing a continuing, founded, rational order of the world, as a critical alternative to the dogma of divine order (in Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, and up to Hegel). When this divine order was defeated, 'pure' conceptuality claimed to order both the real and the rational. Thereby it came to justify reality as it already exists, to betray the universal liberty on which it previously relied. In this text, Adorno does not confront the Marxian concept of science.

The category of science born out of system philosophies has rigidified into academic forms that are



themselves never problematized, that only parody the old requirements of such an order. In fact they impose something quite different, a pre-critical frame of reference identical to a logic of definition. They reproduce and confirm the coincidence between social rationality and its supposedly objective character. Academism has transformed the ancient ambition to construct concepts *tabula rasa*, entirely distinct from the equivocal dimension of common, historical language, into a 'methodology' which intends to define what it looks for before finding it. Furthermore, this methodology posits a content which is taken to be indifferent to its presentation. For Adorno, positivism and analytic philosophy are the major figures of this servitude. But not only. Within this academic framework, nothing opposes a writing that 'makes-believe' with art, such as Heidegger's fundamental ontology: it fabricates poetry starting from Parmenides and Jungnickel. Or, in another vein, there are American campuses that teach 'creative writing', and other professional practices of the primitive, like finger-painting and clay-modelling.

If one mostly pays attention, as Adorno does in this essay, to the discursive surface that organizes the category of science, it appears that science cannot completely eliminate the question raised by the essay. The essay brings out a question as old as philosophy itself that Adorno localizes in a restricted sequence. For as soon as philosophy supposes a certain common power of thought, it always decides upon a certain relation between the concepts 'proper' to philosophy and the common language in which those concepts unfold.

In the modern moment, as mentioned above, this relation first takes form by challenging the rational order of the divine associated with dogma. The 'conceptual purity' thus extracted becomes complicit with a rationality identified as the necessity of the existing order. It undertakes to justify that order. For Adorno, conceptual rationality can only revive the excess of rationality over the real if it takes up contact with what disorganizes this complicity, which historically has been named 'science' or 'scientific purity'. The essay thus disputes the 'purity' of the self-sufficient conceptual order. It is driven by an anti-systematic impulse.

However, this impulse has nothing programmatic, for it already inhabits the liberty of the concept, in so far as the concept is always impure.

Science needs the notion of the concept as *tabula rasa* to consolidate its claim to authority, its claim to be the sole power to occupy the head of the

table. In actuality, all concepts are already implicitly concretized through the language in which they stand. The essay starts with meanings, and, being essentially language itself, takes them farther; it wants to help language in its relation to concepts, to take them in reflection as they have been named unreflectingly in language. The phenomenological method of interpretive analysis embodies a sense of this, but it fetishizes the relationship of concepts to language. The essay is skeptical about this as it is skeptical about the definition of concepts. Unapologetically it lays itself open to the objection that one does not know for sure how one is to understand its concepts. For it understands that the demand for strict definition has long served to eliminate – through stipulative manipulation of the meanings of concepts – the irritating and dangerous aspects of the things that live in the concepts.⁹

In the essay, to make way for truth requires a problematization of the relations between concepts and the common language in which they crystallize. These relations both put the concepts outside of themselves and reintroduce the outside of conceptuality – the different social knowledges disqualified by science, the irregular practices of language – within it. Just as it is impossible not to distinguish what is proper to the concept, it is impossible to formulate that distinction otherwise than improperly. This twist points to the differential of philosophical experience, to the necessity that there be more than one writing of it. It places the concept under the sign of its encounter with objects, rather than under the sign of its inner rational coherence.

Once it subtracts the systematic aspect, the essay disposes only of the relations it constructs through the exploration of the object. It displays and arranges the tension between language and concept required by such an exploration. This will be called the 'form' of the essay. The objects can be other theories, surrealism, a work of art (Beckett's *Endgame*), punctuation signs, affects ('Opinion, folly, society'). But how does Adorno himself practise such destabilization in this essay? By gathering in thought, in all freedom, what is united under the Cartesian rules of method, by filtering them through his own intellectual experience. In the 'gentle challenge' to the clear and the distinct, the gentleness is of great importance. The essay does not invalidate the Cartesian method. It inserts ancillary considerations that undo the order of its chain, garble its developments. Disturbing the first rule, the whole of the object comes to mind more rapidly than its decomposition into simple elements; these are not in fact elements but moments of mediation. The object

is a monad and it is not. It induces a feeling of vertigo. *Perceptio confusio* interfere, jumbling distinctions. Through the close inquiry into the object, dissociation finds itself confronted with its life, not its coherence. The third rule – to begin by simple objects and progress to more complex ones – is heckled by the attitude of the philosophy student who only wants the most difficult, and does not see why he should start from the simple, since the complexity is already there, and the moment of confrontation should not be postponed. The student is interested by what does not enter in the idea of a logical world, by the incongruous aspects of the object, by what he doesn't grasp. Finally, regarding the fourth rule – to number the series in a concern for exhaustivity – the concept in the essay much rather draws to a halt when it meets with obstacles, immobilizes a contradictory moment, blocks itself within its extremes. It advances haltingly, starts over, varies its approaches. It remains provisional rather than being definitive.

In a dissident response to Descartes's advice, Adorno insinuates mixed practices between the rules that are meant to unify. In the text, the four precepts are separated from each other and returned to a wider series, put into the vicinity of those objective aspects ignored by their argumentative structure. The essay resets the four precepts within a small rhapsody. It transforms their imperatives in themes that mingle with others through improvisation, outside of any previous partition. A gentle challenge, then. Adorno does not negate or abandon method; he distorts its transitions, rewrites cross-connections that include what those rules are blind to. In his own words he approaches the essay through 'the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition, in order to appropriate for verbal language something it forfeited under the domination of discursive logic'.¹⁰

'The Essay as Form'. It sounds almost like a generic syntagm, a syntagm that could be predicated in different ways. The essay as transcendental form, the essay as art form, the philosophical essay as critical form, the essay as philosophical form, and so on. The essay as transcendental form makes sense. The predicate underlines how the variability of form takes the place of fixed categories and their schematization. The essay does not schematize by temporalizing concepts; it historicizes the temporal form of schematization that Kant posited as *a priori*. Still, this doesn't suffice; it just affirms that the essay requalifies the transcendental, without really showing how. The essay as art form: this contradicts Adorno's own stand, since he stresses that the essay does not produce an artefact,

but conceptualizes a pre-given object. However, such a predicative detour may be worthwhile, given the importance of language in the essay. This detour can be called 'the essay as a form lacking in art'.

What does this mean? Such a lack can be highlighted by heeding the anti-systematic impulse of the essay, or, more precisely, its anti-Hegelian stance. Though Schelling is never named in the text, Adorno's reflection on language and concept is largely indebted to his criticism of Hegel. As is well known, the Hegelian system is living science, in which knowledge cannot be stationary, nor simply a sum of coherent propositions, since only geometry could be system in that sense. The system synthesizes all the determinations of truth through their connection. Only its totality organizes the moments. This total movement resorbs the exteriority of phenomena in the reflexivity of the concept, within which truth seizes itself. To paraphrase Althusser, 'the concept is its own scene, it is next to no one since it is the totality, since it alone possesses being'. The Hegelian concept proceeds through an integral interiorization of its outside, or through the coincidence of the outside with an inside that is self, the intimacy with itself of an absolute truth. This interiorization occurs in time, but the temporal alienation is only the immediacy of existence outside of spirit. Its negation brings about the return to itself. Temporality is always dialectically differentiated. There is thus no call for distinguishing the conceptual logical from the temporal logic, since the first one subsumes the second. To paraphrase Benjamin: for Hegel the course of time is not mother of the dialectic, but only the means through which dialectic appears to itself.

The circularity of the 'memory of self' proper to the concept only knows its exteriority as what awaits subsumption. The system's task, then, is to produce the identity of coherence and presentation, in the absolute. This means its task is to eliminate the problem of the presentation of the absolute. Its own determination absolves it of conceiving a form proper to its endeavour, since what is proper to it is precisely to reduce all exteriority by negation.

The forgetfulness inherent in this system is noted by Schelling in a most remarkable way.¹¹ It is precisely this forgetfulness that the Adornian essay struggles with and brings to the fore. The memory of the concept has a linguistic stratification, which does not unfold out of its rationality, but out of which its rationality proceeds. And in so far as the essay repeats concepts, its repetition necessarily confronts this stratum, which crops up at every turn. In the

repetition of the elements of theory that have migrated into the object, the memory of the concept displays itself as an element of language. The concept itself can then become an experience, the experience that the object produces a discrepancy between expression and concept. The repetition unearths a memory, the memory of the non-conceptual knowledge that adheres to the concept. This memory unravels the subordination of language to *ratio*. While it is both of language and of concept, memory is of language before being of concept.

This dimension is exacerbated by the fact that the essay concerns itself with a preformed artefact, that it tries to seize the universal as something that has become, rather than as existing naturally or as essentially spiritual. This orientation towards what has 'become' relates the concepts not to their reflexivity, but to the problem of the form given to their historical objectivation. The specific task of the essay can be outlined as follows. It becomes effective by uncompleting its concepts, by reconfiguring them through contact with the opacities of the object.

The essay operates with fault lines; it openly displays the gaps between the exteriority and the coherence of the object, through the leaps of its own procedures, in the non-conceptual connections on which the concepts hinge. Its form is precisely not philosophical in so far as this would mean that philosophy possesses a form of its own. Its form is philosophical exactly 'there' and 'when' it appears as lacking in synthesis. 'There' and 'when' it is not identical with an art form. What I am trying to underscore here is that the philosophical essay resorts to art only so as to depart from the interiority which is identified with the logic of the universal system. It resorts to art to reformulate and render unrecognizable conceptual universality, not to identify with the autonomy of the art work.

The process of such a lack, the inverted relation of the object to the concept that translates it, destabilizes both, undoes their regularity. This 'gentle challenge' to the invariants that link the object to a concept produces an excess, be it minimal, of thought over the rational discourse that purports to organize it. The essay, then, is a form of lacking in art. Because it is, by virtue of that lack, a critical form, or, as Adorno puts it, a 'heretical' one.

The rhetorical transdisciplinarity of philosophy

To conclude this reflection on the essay, I will take up Adorno's observations on the rhetorical qualities of its form. The essay takes as objects artefacts

in their dimension of 'second nature': for example, as just shown, with the Cartesian rules of method. In this respect, says Adorno, the real theme of the essay is the relation between nature and culture. The essay is indifferent towards the seemingly 'unsolvable' problem of the priority of facts over theory. It freely chooses its objects, because no object is deemed closer or further from origin. The second nature of objects need not be returned to their originary dimension, for in our socialized world the originarity of a truth located beyond history has become the lie attached to the viewpoint of the spirit. Adorno unceasingly insists on this point. Modern philosophy does not proceed out of a forgetfulness of being; it forgets, again and again, the historicity in which it is itself inscribed.

This lie clings to spirit, just as the theoretical moments that have migrated into the object constitute the environment of the essay. But how can the essay still relate to truth if even the contradiction of truth with social conformity is homogeneous with that conformity? If truth posited as being outside of society is really one of the most prized fetishes of socially dominant rationality, how can this rationality be turned against itself? Some cunning, or ruse, is called for: to enter into fetishism backwards. This moment, if it is to be taken at its word, takes Adorno beyond his own hesitations. For it implies that criticism of ideology no longer functions as the revelation of an untruth, since such a process still operates inside the realm of the identity principle, by turning against it negatively. The essay attuned to the 'blind' aspect of the object crosses that line. It touches upon its own ignorance, upon an 'element of blank' (Emily Dickinson): it reveals the non-dialectical difference that animates contradiction.

[The essay] wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subjective arrangement.¹²

The essay works by ruse. It immerses itself in the artefacts as if they were there, as if they had authority. This gives it a ground, be it dubious, without having to posit, deduce or find what is first. Conceptualization can only make out the truth of second nature by treating it as a first nature. Its immersion again summons the play drive, this time concentrating on the mimetic aspect. The most concise and enigmatic formulation of this mimetic gesture is to be found in the introduction of *Negative Dialectics*:

The un-naïve thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him. Philosophy is the most serious of things, but then again it is not all that serious. A thing that aims at what it is not a priori and is not authorized to control – such a thing, according to its own concept, is simultaneously part of a sphere beyond control, a sphere tabooed by conceptuality. To represent the mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct, without abandoning itself.¹³

In ‘The Essay as Form’, Adorno does something unusual for him: he presents this ‘clowning’ as a rhetorical mobility of the concept, which takes into account its communicative unfolding. The transdisciplinarity of philosophy implies a transformation of the persuasive logic of rhetoric that addresses opinion, and that the ‘pure’ logic of philosophical *ratio* intended to eliminate, since it obstructed the coherence required of the concept. In the essay, this persuasive function shifts towards the encounter of the concept with the object:

The essay retains, precisely in the autonomy of its presentation, which distinguishes it from scientific and scholarly information, traces of the communicative element such information dispenses with. In the essay the satisfactions that rhetoric tries to provide for the listener are sublimated into the idea of a happiness in freedom vis à vis the object, a freedom that gives the object more of what belongs to it than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas.¹⁴

It is of course well known that for Adorno the concept can only play with the object – borrow its features, explore its temporality – if it turns against its own identifying logic. But in ‘The Essay as Form’ the break-out of identity operates just as much by proliferation as by negation or renouncement. The essay borrows from the rhetorical dynamics of ambivalence, of irony and humour, even of pathos. This does not mean it simply opposes the logical, discursive element. It means that the concept resorts to all the stylistic intricacies of language. The essay resonates with all the equivocations that history has let persist in the object. It frees the object from the rigid hold of invariant categories, stresses its utopic aspect, releases the latent force in it. Concepts make themselves into tropes; the tropes are configured

by the intensity of the essay’s reflection; the object is returned to its fragmentary existence, to its discrepancy with the present. Second nature no longer points to a first one, but relocates even the first one within historicity. Conceptual clowning widens the gaps that opens the object to the unknown, thus thinking it anew, ‘against the time, in favour of a time to come’.

This rhetorical aspect of communicability between the object and the concept necessarily poses the question of the reader to whom the essay is addressed. For the reader can only discover the new encapsulated in the object, the possibility that it be other than it is, if he or she carries out the equivocations of the essay for him- or herself, if the object is displaced. This is probably what motivates the confidence of ‘The Essay as Form’ in the novelty of its object. It is also a confidence in the reader, an invitation that he or she in turn become a dilettante, experience the concepts, as if speaking a foreign language.

The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behaviour of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of



its elements according to rules learned in school. Such a person will read without a dictionary. If he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed, which are usually too narrow in relation to the changes that occur with changing contexts and too vague in relation to the case. This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death. It is not so much that the essay neglects indubitable certainty as that it abrogates it as an ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, not in a treasure-hunting obsession with foundations. Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem* hidden from the essay itself, not from any obvious *terminus a quo*, and in this the method expresses its utopian intention.¹⁵

That, in the essay, the rhetorical transdisciplinarity of philosophy finally turns into the problem of learning a foreign language in a foreign country should not astonish us. It allows for a few concluding remarks concerning today's transdisciplinary practices. The first remark may seem self-evident, but self-evident truths can sometimes be worth repeating. The heterogeneity harboured in the difference of languages is one of the hardest to integrate and normalize in a 'knowledge economy' organized by fast-changing trends. The apprenticeship of more than one language, the simple practice of translation, continues to be crucial to any conceptualization of the humanities. It is of course no coincidence that the practice of translation, in philosophy, is one of the worst-paid scholarly activities.

The second remark concerns the necessity of transdisciplinarity. In Adorno's essay, this necessity, of crossing the limits of philosophy, of distorting the historically imposed logic of conceptuality, appears within the practice of the concept itself. Transdisciplinarity proceeds out of the immanent disruptions of a discipline, at its limits, as the non-dialectic difference that drives dialectical thought. It cannot, then, be organized from outside or be identified with the institutional branding of 'disciplines' and 'turns' that almost vanish more quickly than they appear.

This does not mean, of course, that the redistribution of disciplines has no bearing on

transdisciplinarity, or that it is reducible to normalization. Sociology was born out of philosophy and became a separate discipline in a certain historical sequence, with good reason. But it does mean that the experimental character of transdisciplinary practices coincides neither with a collaboration between disciplines nor with the positing of new ones. The force of transdisciplinarity, if it is to be 'replayed', lies precisely in the impossibility of its institutional formalization. For instead of answering to a standardized procedure that can be evaluated, instead of accepting a predefined matter assigned to it, it rather does without, for the sake of the obscure lure of the object.

Notes

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1. 'The Essay as Form', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 3.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
 4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, pp. 144–5; *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften 7*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1996, p. 217.
 5. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 4.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 7. Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy' (1931), *Telos* 31, March 1977, p. 133; *Gesammelte Schriften 1*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1996, p. 344.
 8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. H.B. Ashton, Routledge, London, 1973, pp. 408; *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften 6*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1996, p. 400.
 9. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 12.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
 11. This criticism is mainly to be found in Schelling's introductory pages of the 1811 version of *The Ages of the World*, where, explicitly attacking Hegel's ambition to effectively transform philosophy into science, Schelling insists upon the narrative moment of recollection as being both irreducible to the concept and essential to dialectics. Schelling already exposed this moment of recollection in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* as the break between the 'monument' represented by the philosophy of nature, accessible only through memory, and the transcendental determination of consciousness as freedom, accessible in a self-relation. This moment has been neglected; the focus is always on Hegel's criticism of Schelling's intellectual intuition. Hegel refers to *Ages of the World* in his 1828 lectures on Aesthetics.
 12. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 23.
 13. *Negative Dialectics*, p. 14; *Negative Dialektik*, p. 26.
 14. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', pp. 20–21.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 13.