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The glance of the essay

Adorno and Benjamin on essayistic writing and natural-historical thinking

Abstract

For Adorno, the conditions of possibility of philosophical thought strongly hang together with its modes of expression (Ausdruck), or put differently, its aesthetic forms. The form of the essay was, for him, the medium of philosophical critique par excellence. Not only did he write many essays himself, but he also reflected and commented on the essay form throughout his oeuvre. This paper looks at how Adorno developed his ideas on philosophical essayistic writing in dialogue with and in response to Walter Benjamin, his friend and mentor. First of all, I look at Adorno's A portrait of Walter Benjamin, which contains some of Adorno's earliest reflections on the essay as form. Next, I explore how several of Adorno's characterizations of Benjamin return in The essay as form, which can be considered as his most programmatic text, and the theory of essayism he sets out there. In the final section, the "actuality" (another key term in Adorno's writings) of the essay is considered in our own time, by relating it to issues of climate change and by exploring the possibility of the "planetary essay". This notion, inspired by Adorno and Benjamin and complemented by authors like Spivak and Ghosh, entails that a more reciprocal relation to nature requires different modes of thought, and therefore, different expressions of thought.

Keywords

Essay, Natural history, Planetary

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Introduction

The essay, as a form that mixes science and art and that mediates between these two realms, is, according to Adorno, the medium of critique *par excellence*. The larger part of Adorno's oeuvre consists of essays, with notable collections like *Prisms*, *Notes to literature*, and *Critical models*, and even of his main philosophical books like *Negative dialectics* and *Aesthetic theory* it could be argued that they are, in their form, elaborate essays. Furthermore, if we consider 'the essayistic' not primarily as a literary genre but rather as a mode or 'spirit' of thought, we can recognize that such a spirit permeates the entirety of Adorno's critical theory¹. "Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle" (Adorno 1984: 152). This line, taken from his seminal *The essay as form*, characterizes not only the essay but Adorno's philosophical project as a whole, his lifelong suspicion against systematic thinking (or 'identity thinking' as he sometimes called it) and his emphasis on the impossibility of a *prima philosophia*, a foundationalist metaphysics of first principles.

The influence of Walter Benjamin on Adorno (to whom Benjamin referred as "his only disciple") has often been noted and explored (Buck-Morss 1977, Weber NicholSEN 1999), although it is often suggested that this influence is most strongly present in the earlier works, up until *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, after which Hegel (and, to lesser extent, Kant) became the more central interlocutor (O'Connor 2005). Elsewhere I have emphasized the continued presence of Benjamin's philosophy in Adorno's oeuvre up until the posthumous *Aesthetic theory* (Lijster 2017); in this article, I want to focus specifically on how Adorno's thoughts on the essay as form have been shaped by Benjamin's thought.

For neither Benjamin nor Adorno, philosophical writing was simply a matter of casting ideas into an existing mold, nor was language a frictionless conduit for the smooth transport of thoughts from one mind to another. Both considered language, as well as the precise structuring of philosophical texts as constitutive of thinking itself – recalling Karl Kraus's aphorism that language is not the handmaiden but the mother of thought. Benjamin often emphasized the importance of "construction"

¹ As Mario Aquilina writes, referring to Adorno: "In this context, the 'essayistic' would refer to what is often called the 'spirit' (if not the form of the essay): what Hall calls the 'spirit of exploration' and the 'exploration of received opinion'; or what Adorno terms the heretic impulse" (Aquilina 2021: 11).

(*Konstruktion*) or “expression” (*Ausdruck*) for philosophy, while Adorno, who studied music with Alban Berg, often compared philosophical writing with composition, and described his ideal text as one in which all sentences were, as the tones in Schönberg’s compositions, “equally near the center” (Adorno 1981)². His own thinking has been characterized as “atonal philosophy”: different, sometimes contradictory thoughts are given equal weight, creating a permanent tension that is not to be resolved.

Such stylistic principles did not always work in their favor. Benjamin’s academic ambitions were thwarted at least in part as a result of the idiosyncratic nature of his writings. Adorno, though having a more successful ‘professional career’ (an expression he himself would undoubtedly object to), was often criticized by his contemporaries for his style of writing. Adorno himself recalls that he once received a manuscript back from an American publisher with the comment that the text was “badly organized”. One of the most unsympathetic of those contemporaries, Leszek Kolakowski, writes in his *Main currents of Marxism* (1978), referring to *Negative dialectics*: “The pretentious obscurity of style and the contempt that it shows for the reader might be endurable if the book were not also totally devoid of literary form”, and goes on to say that summarizing Adorno’s works is as impossible as describing “the plot of an ‘anti-novel’ or the theme of an action-painting” (Kolakowski 2005: 1073) (the latter comparisons Adorno might not even disagree with).

Though their writings are thus clearly difficult to combine with the straitjacket of conventional academic prose, they do align themselves with the tradition of the essay, which is, since Montaigne coined the term, more open to experiments, idiosyncrasies, digressions, particularities, and (individual) experience³. Whereas Benjamin made a virtue out of necessity by developing his particular, experimental style outside of academia (for instance in his brilliant book *One-way street*), it was Adorno’s ambition to reinstate the value of essayism within ‘official’ philosophy. As

² Tellingly, Adorno uses this spatial metaphor three times in three different essays in *Prisms*, namely the one on cultural criticism (30), the one on Schönberg’s music (160), and the one on Benjamin’s writing (231).

³ As again Aquilina states: “The essay, then, gathers. It echoes. It falls back, recollects and organises. But it also reflects, inflects, deflects and dwells in doubt. It swerves, veers, gains insight or fails to do so. It questions, probes from different perspectives, shifts in tone, and it remains open to the future of thought, even when it is revisiting the past” (Aquilina 2021: 8).

he already proclaimed in his inaugural lecture *Actuality of philosophy* (1931):

I gladly put up with the reproach of essayism. The English empiricists called their philosophical writings essays, as did Leibniz, because the power of freshly disclosed reality, upon which their thinking struck, continuously forced upon them the risk of experimentation. Not until the post-Kantian century was the risk of experimentation lost, along with the power of reality. Thus from a form of great philosophy the essay became an insignificant form of aesthetics, in which a concretion of interpretation nonetheless takes refuge as appearance, over which authentic philosophy, in the grand dimensions of its problems, has lost since lost disposal. (Adorno 1977: 132-3)

In this article, I want to look at how Adorno developed his ideas on philosophical essayistic writing in dialogue with and in response to Walter Benjamin. As a starting point, I will look at Adorno's *A portrait of Walter Benjamin*, which contains some of his earliest reflections on the essay as form. I will particularly look at the Benjaminian concept of "natural history", a central concept to Adorno's philosophy as well, which he there connects to the essay. Following from that, I will explore how several of these thoughts return in the programmatic essay *The essay as form* and the theory of the essay he sets out there. In a final section, I want to reflect on the "actuality" (another key term in Adorno's writings) of the essay in our own time, by exploring the possibility of the "planetary essay".

1. *Natural-historical*

Adorno's essay *A portrait of Walter Benjamin* was first published in "Die neue Rundschau" in 1950 and was later included in the collection *Prisms* (1955). Detlev Claussen, in his biography on Adorno, characterized *Prisms* as the attempt of the exiled intellectual to find a new place for himself in the postwar German public and intellectual sphere (Claussen 2003: 255). In several of the essays in this collection, Adorno critically positions himself in relation to influential scholars and artists, such as Spengler, Huxley, Valéry, and Schönberg, most of whom his readers would be familiar with. Benjamin, however, was at that time largely unknown to the German public; nothing of him had been published, save a collection of his essays edited by Adorno himself together with Benjamin's friend Gershom Scholem (and also published in 1955).

Adorno's *Portrait* presents Benjamin as an anti-systematic thinker, one resistant to abstract ontological question, and a thinker of the "concrete". This, Adorno writes, "brought him the reputation of an essayist" (Adorno 1981: 230). Though this formulation raises the suspicion that this is a bad thing, Adorno makes clear that being an essayist makes him no less of a philosopher. In fact, the "concrete" in Benjamin is the gateway to the most urgent questions and the most grandiose of philosophical thoughts, and actually a more fruitful path than the ontological approaches of his contemporaries. Referring to Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades project* (while at the same throwing a swipe at Heidegger), Adorno writes:

The provocative assertion that an essay on the Paris Arcades is of greater interest philosophically than are ponderous observations on the Being of beings is more attuned to the meaning of his work than the quest for that unchanging, self-identical conceptual skeleton which he relegated to the dustbin. (1981: 231)

Benjamin, much like the essay form itself (as we will see later), did not respect "the boundary between the man of letters and the philosopher", and for this he paid the price of having to give up his dreams of having an academic career. Adorno refers to the infamous rejection of the *Habilitation*, after which Benjamin had to make a living by writing short pieces, reviews and essays for newspapers and journals, read by the wider public. This gives his oeuvre its fragmentary nature (as Fredric Jameson recently noted, Benjamin never wrote a book, except for *One-way street*, which is itself a collection of fragments) (Jameson 2022: 17).

The aforementioned capacity, to take some concrete historical phenomenon (such as the Paris arcades) and raise it to the level of a philosophical idea, is not something particularly Benjaminian (though Adorno considers his work as exemplary), but rather a characteristic of the essay as form (and the 'essayistic mode') as Adorno understands it and was to theorize it later. This is argued in the following, crucial lines from the *Portrait*:

The essay as form consists in the ability to regard historical moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, 'culture', as though they were natural. Benjamin could do this as no one else. The totality of his thought is characterized by what may be called 'natural history' [*naturngeschichte*]. He was drawn to the petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization, to everything in it devoid of domestic vitality no less irresistibly than is the collector to fossils or to the plant in the herbarium. (Adorno 1981: 232)

The term “natural history” (or “natural-historical”, since he is using the adjective form in German), almost casually dropped here, has a rich meaning in Benjamin’s oeuvre, as well as in Adorno’s own (to not say that the term is overdetermined). Though in this quote it is connected to fossils and plants, it does not primarily refer to the familiar way we use it, for instance when speaking of a museum of natural history. Rather, natural history (or rather nature-history, it being one single word in German) is a neologism that connects, in one concept, two dialectical counterparts, much like Adorno would later do, together with Horkheimer, when coining the term “culture industry” (*Kulturindustrie*).

In what follows, I want to discuss a number of different contexts in which the term natural history appears, first in Benjamin’s writings and subsequently in Adorno’s, in order to then reconnect it to the essay as form. The first important context where we encounter this term, is Benjamin’s book on the German play of mourning. In his already mentioned *Habilitation*, Benjamin discusses a neglected moment in German literary history as exemplary of the melancholic spirit of the age. Contrasting it to Greek tragedy, he argues that the passage of time in the German mourning play is devoid of meaning: in the Lutheran worldview of the German Baroque poets, the earthly realm was without grace and beyond salvation. This also means that history as it is presented in the mourning plays, for instance through the rise and fall of the tyrant, is not determined by any meaningful human action and decision; rather, it is a mere natural process of growth and decay, similar to the passing of the tides or seasons⁴. Benjamin writes: “For the decisive factor in the escapism of the Baroque is not the antithesis of history and nature but the comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of creation” (Benjamin 1977: 92). He traces the expression of this idea of natural history in the use of allegory, in which anything can become a stand-in from something else, and in which meaning becomes arbitrary. Familiar Baroque emblems, such as the ruin and the skull, are not only themselves markers of natural decay, but also act as allegories of the fleetingness of earthly meaning.

The second context in which natural history appears is that of the *Arcades project*. The Paris arcades, themselves ruins of the earliest stage of consumer capitalism, are also a next phase in the staging of the dialectical

⁴ As Jameson puts it: “Tragedy brings history into being by emerging from legend by overcoming myth; *Trauerspiel* is condemned to a history without transcendence, which it can only think by means of natural categories, cycles, organisms, the seasons, the eternal return” (Jameson 2022: 68).

interplay between nature and history. Benjamin is fascinated by the way historical (cultural) objects are 'disguised' as nature, for instance in the first cast iron constructions that were made to look like trees and plants, in the *Jugendstil* that dressed everything – from doorknobs to ashtrays – in natural shapes, or in the caricatures of Grandville who turned fashion items into flowers or coral reefs. For Benjamin, however, this was not merely a matter of style: rather, it was the expression of the "dream sleep" of capitalism, that, after the failed revolutions of 1848, transformed the historical process itself into something natural, that is, into something beyond the control of human interference. Turning the products of the human being into something natural (meaning inevitable, immutable, self-evident, or unquestionable) is, as Marx already saw, the cardinal principle of ideology, or, as Benjamin himself calls it, of "phantasmagoria". Benjamin recognized a strong parallel with his own time, in which both the bourgeoisie and the social-democratic left had considered themselves as being on a seemingly inevitable trajectory of historical progress, thus taken off-guard by the Nazi takeover. This is the notion of the "empty, homogenous time" that he later so forcefully rejects in the theses *On the concept of history* (1940), the seemingly steady progress which from his perspective (and that of the "Angel of history") is actually "one single catastrophe" (Benjamin 2003: 392).

It is this notion of natural history that is more explicitly (dare I say more systematically) discussed in Adorno's 1932 lecture *The idea of natural history*, which was heavily inspired by Benjamin. The intention of his exercise is, as he formulates it, "to dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history" (Adorno 2006: 252). The implicit target is here, once more, Heidegger, who in *Being and time* had conceptualized "historicity" (*Geschichtlichkeit*) as one of the modes of existence of human *Dasein*. According to Adorno, however, this concept is itself paradoxically ahistorical, reducing history to some idea of human "nature". Heidegger, in his view, thus fails to see that mankind's historical consciousness is itself thoroughly historically (socio-culturally) situated in (capitalist) modernity.

Though Adorno, in his lecture, refuses to immediately define the dialectical counterparts of nature and history, he writes that nature, as he understands it, "is closest to the concept of myth", by which he means "what has always been, what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history"; while history is "that mode of conduct established by tradition that is characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new" (Adorno 2006: 253). This juxtaposition is at least as old as

Giambattista Vico, who in his *Scienza nuova* (1725) had argued (against Descartes) that history, unlike nature, is shaped by human beings, and can therefore be better known to us than nature. According to Adorno, however (and this is the point of the neologism “natural history”), the current historical moment challenges us “to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being”, and to comprehend “nature as a historical being where it seems most deeply in itself as nature” (Adorno 2006: 260).

To understand what he means by this, we can take each side of the dialectical movement separately. By historical being comprehended as natural, Adorno is referring to the Lukácsian notion of “second nature”; in other words, the ideological transformation of social structures, institutions, and norms into something transhistorical, and therefore rigid and fixed. The early Marx (whose 1844 manuscripts had just been discovered and by this time probably not well-known to Adorno) calls this “alienation”, while Lukács in his *History and class consciousness* names this “reification” (cf. Lijster 2016). To use a contemporary example, one can think of the way markets are today considered as “natural”, namely as aligned with, and emerging from, the natural competitiveness of human individuals, engaged in some Darwinian survival of the fittest, even though the kinds of markets we know today have been created (and are stimulated) under specific historical and political circumstances.

This brings us to the dialectical counterpart, namely nature considered as historical. Here Adorno turns to Benjamin’s book on the Baroque, and points to the fact that, from the perspective of the allegorist, nature is not seen as static but rather as ever-changing, as “transient”, the latter being for Adorno “the deepest point where history and nature converge” (Adorno 2006: 262). Interestingly, Adorno finds an emancipatory, ideology-critical moment in this alternative view on nature, in that it precisely questions the immutability of the existing social order. Referring to the mourning play, he writes: “In the language of the Baroque, the fall of the tyrant is equivalent to the setting of the sun” (Adorno 2006: 264). The transience of nature, in other words, opens up the possibility for change, and for the qualitatively new to emerge out of the wreckage of the old⁵. As Adorno sums it up:

⁵ As Susan Buck-Morss formulates it: “Benjamin perceived historical nature as an expression of truth’s essential transitoriness in its contradictory extremes – as extinction and death on the one hand, and as creative potential and the possibility for change on the other” (Buck-Morss 1989: 66).

The starting point here is that history, as it lies before us, presents itself as thoroughly discontinuous [...]. Now this discontinuity [...] presents itself in the first place as one between the mythical archaic, natural material of history, of what has been, and that which surfaces as dialectically and emphatically new. The problematic character of these categories is clear to me. The differential procedure required to arrive at natural-history, without anticipating it as a unity, consists, first, in accepting these two problematic and indeterminate structures in their contradictoriness, as they occur in the language of philosophy. (Adorno 2006: 266)

The term natural history, then, refers *both* to the transformation of history into nature (i.e. the reification of historical phenomena into seemingly inevitable objects, structures, or laws) *and* to the transformation of nature into history (i.e. the realization that all social structures and historical developments are contingent).

Even though laid out in an early text, this idea of natural history would continue to play a crucial part in Adorno's works, most visibly in those dealing with the philosophy of history: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the later essay titled *Progress*, or *Negative dialectics* (where he even quotes from his early lecture). Our concern here is, however, not with the philosophy of history, but rather what one might call "historical philosophy"; in other words, the way in which philosophy itself is determined by, and is an expression of, history⁶. For both Benjamin and Adorno, the idea of natural history marks both a historical movement and a mode of thinking and critiquing, and, importantly, the dialectical relation between both. What I mean by this, is that a specific historical moment calls for a natural-historical (*naturgeschichtlich*) mode of thought: it is the ideological conception of history-as-nature that demands, from the critical theorist, an alternative conception of nature-as-history, in order to critique it. The exemplary form of this critique, according to Adorno, is the essay.

2. *The aesthetics of philosophical writing*

A portrait of Walter Benjamin can in more than one respect be considered as a preliminary study of *The essay as form*, which was published three years later, as the opening essay of *Notes to Literature* (1958). First of all,

⁶ Buck-Morss discusses this dual meaning of the German term *Geschichtsphilosophie* (Buck-Morss 1989: 59).

and as Robert Hullot-Kentor argues, *The essay as form* takes up some important thoughts from Benjamin's study of the Baroque, most of all the way it presents philosophical "ideas" not as eternal and transcendent (as in the Platonic sense) but rather as thoroughly historical (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 126). Philosophy, if it is to have any relevance, not only needs to think historically, but also needs to think *itself* historically. Thought is expressed, moreover, in particular aesthetic forms, that are themselves determined by the historical circumstances. Benjamin had found and analyzed in allegory an expression and a response to a world devoid of meaning; first in the German Baroque the mourning play, as the melancholic response to the waning of Medieval cosmology, then later in Baudelaire's poetry which responded to the increasing dominance of commodity fetishism.

Adorno's concern in *The essay as form* is a slightly different one: he is not primarily looking at literature (in the strict sense), but rather at what one could call the aesthetics of philosophical writing, or, with reference to the later unfinished *magnum opus*, the aesthetics of theory. In a letter to Horkheimer from 1941, Adorno remarked that it was the task of critical theory to make "gestures from concepts" (*Gesten aus Begriffen*), implying that philosophy is not merely directed towards the rational understanding, but also to the imagination. In that regard the place of this essay, as the prologue of *Notes to literature*, is an interesting one: if literary writing is historically situated, and contains the traces of socio-historical circumstances (as he goes on to demonstrate in the essays on, amongst other things, Heine, Eichendorff, or the position of the narrator in the contemporary novel), this must also be true for philosophical writing and philosophical language itself, which too must contain the scars of "damaged life"⁷. The essay thereby becomes a kind of meta-reflection, or meta-analysis, in relation to the literary analyses that follow.

To be sure, this question of philosophical form (or expression, *Ausdruck*) had concerned Benjamin as well, who had been struggling to find the right form to write his *Arcades project* (the answer to this question, he once admitted to Adorno, would be like finding the "philosopher's stone" for him; Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 118). More broadly speaking, the question of philosophical form had been part of philosophy, particularly social and political philosophy, since the enlightenment, especially

⁷ Adorno had already explored this problem earlier, around the same time as the lecture *The idea of natural history*, namely in a text called *Theses on the language of the philosopher* (for a discussion of these texts see Gandesha 2015).

for those thinkers like Rousseau, Nietzsche and Marx who wanted their writings to have a certain performative power.

Benjamin himself had speculated about a form of philosophical writing consisting exclusively of quotations, in line with his remark (in the notes of the *Arcades*): “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show” (Benjamin 1999a: 860). Though one can debate how seriously this plan actually was, Adorno was highly skeptical of such a Surrealist-inspired philosophical montage. As he writes in the *Portrait*: “His philosophy of fragmentation remained itself fragmentary, the victim, perhaps, of a method, the feasibility of which in the medium of thought must remain an open question” (Adorno 1981: 238). To refer once more to the formula from the letter to Horkheimer: philosophical form might be about “gesturing”, but for Adorno it was still crucial that these gestures were made up of conceptual material.

One could roughly distinguish between two perspectives on philosophical language that were dominant around the time that Adorno published his essay. The one was that of the Vienna circle, who, following the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, considered language as a neutral medium of states of affairs. It was the task of philosophy to provide a solid basis for science through a “purification” of language, clearly distinguishing between propositions that represent facts and those that do not (and can therefore be relegated to the domain of poetry, metaphysics, or nonsense, the latter two being more or less synonymous). Next to that, you had the existentialist and phenomenological tradition, which, in the wake of Heidegger, developed their own language to capture forms of human experience that lay outside or beyond the sphere of (rational) knowledge.

Adorno was dissatisfied with, and critically positions himself in relation to, both of these perspectives. The positivists, in his view, neglect the constitutive power of language, to not only represent but also create realities. Moreover, they fail to see that their demarcations of what, to use Wittgenstein’s phrase, one can and cannot speak of, are historically situated. But he thinks it is equally problematic to simply cast aside the philosophical concepts handed over through tradition and develop an entirely new jargon to describe human experiences outside the realm of rational science (the “jargon of authenticity”, as he would later call it in a fierce polemic against Heidegger). Rather, philosophical thinking is to work with as well as work through (what Adorno later calls *Aufarbeiten*) the problems and concepts of the past, by setting them into a new “constellation” (another Benjaminian concept), thus making us aware of the limits they impose on our experience and consciousness. The metaphor

of the constellation points to the idea of a non-hierarchical, and non-determinative, relationship between concepts and objects (or phenomena), and amongst concepts themselves. Rather than the concept being, in the Kantian sense, “determinative” (meaning the object is subsumed under the concept), different concepts are placed alongside each other, and in relation to one another, in such a way that each is showing the limitations of the other, as well as providing the other with new meaning. As in a celestial constellation, from the arrangement of concepts arises an image of the truth.

The literary expression of such a thinking in constellations is the essay as form. One could argue, therefore, that Adorno’s essay on the essay is the most programmatic of his texts. Nowhere else in his oeuvre does he write more elaborately about his own ‘method’ of philosophical writing and thinking, and about the close connection between writing and thinking (the very possibility of a method is called into question by this mode of thought, which, as Adorno puts it, proceeds “methodically unmethodically”, Adorno 1984: 161).

So, what does Adorno’s theory of the essay entail? He starts out by positioning the essay (as we already mentioned in the introduction of this article) between the domains of art and science, thus diverging from Georg Lukács, who had argued that the essay is an art form. The essay, as Robert Hullot-Kentor puts it, “is distinguished from art in that the medium of its attempt to be the full experience of its object is conceptual and it is distinguished from science in that it produces knowledge that is more than subjective definition” (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 129). Even though the essay cannot magically undo the division between art and science, which is historically grown, it establishes a dialectical relation between the two, drawing as heavily from personal experience (an idea shared by Montaigne and Benjamin) as from conceptual, theoretical knowledge. Experience, moreover, is for Adorno never a purely individual matter, but itself mediated through historical and social reality, as he emphasizes in the following lines:

The relation to experience – and from it the essay takes as much substance as does traditional theory from its categories – is a relation to all of history; merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what is nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity[.] (Adorno 1984: 158)

Again, Benjamin, whose appreciation of the category of experience was as great as the suspicion of the value of personal confession, is not far away here. In *Berlin chronicles* the latter shares the following secret regarding his writing: "If I write better German than most writers of my generation, it is thanks largely to twenty years' observance of one little rule: never use the word 'I' except in letters" (Benjamin 1999b: 603) (a rule ironically transgressed in this very sentence).

Adorno writes of this: "Actually, the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it" (Adorno 1984: 160-1). Indeed, the essayist in Adorno's (as well as Benjamin's) texts, is hardly ever a visible "I", and yet there is a clearly present voice, as from a choreographer who is directing, behind the scenes, what is happening on the stage (the German original of this quotation says *Schauplatz*, which is closer to a "theatrical scene" than "arena", a term associated rather with sports). This presence is felt precisely in the language and the construction of the essay (the montage, as Benjamin would put it), which does not follow the fixed formulas and steps of a logical syllogism, but moves in a way that might at first seem arbitrary but still feels compelling. Through the way subjects (or concepts, or theories) follow from one another, or are placed next or opposite to one another, the "thinker" is obviously very strongly present; yet even in this respect he is, according to Adorno, not the sole lord and master of the concepts and subjects he is using (as little as the stage director is of his actors or dancers). They are not mere materials at his disposition, because they already had a historical meaning before the thinker ran away with them, meanings he must account for. The subjects evoke each other, as image associations, and influence one another's meaning in ways that always lie beyond the thinker's control.

The reference, in the quotation above, to the "categories" of "traditional theory", is revelatory, since it shows that the seemingly modest form of the essay (as a mere "attempt") is, according to Adorno, in fact no less ambitious than Kant's *Critique of pure reason* in exploring the conditions of possibility of experience, while at the same time differing from the latter's endeavor in emphasizing the historical nature of such conditions. The essay, true to its original meaning of "attempt" or "experiment", always retains something provisional, but it is precisely from this that it draws its critical power. For unlike, for example, the idealistic system or the scientific treatise, the essay, by virtue of its form, always holds on to the possibility that things can be different, that thinking can break open the hardened "facts" and spontaneously arrive at new insights.

However, such new insights come about in the essay not through some kind of *creatio ex nihilo* ("It does not begin with Adam and Eve", as Adorno remarks about the essay), nor through building on some kind of first principle. In *The essay as form*, Adorno critically opposes the essay to Descartes' four rules of scientific method, from the *Discourse on method*. The first of these, the ideal of absolute certainty (*clara et distincta perceptio*), is opposed by the essay's "affinity with open intellectual experience", for which it pays with a "lack of security, a lack which the norm of established thought fears like death" (Adorno 1984: 161). The second Cartesian rule, the decomposition of the object matter into discrete parts, is resisted through the material of the essay, the artifact or artwork as "monad", which for Adorno implies not so much that whole and parts are integrated in a harmonious whole (as in idealist aesthetics), but rather that the singular always also points beyond itself to the (social) whole ("its elements, as such of a conceptual kind, point beyond the specific object in which they gather themselves", Adorno 1984: 162). Contrasting the third rule of always working from the simplest to the complex, the essay, according to Adorno, "insists that a matter be considered, from the very first, in its whole complexity" (Adorno 1984: 162). Finally, breaking the rule that the investigation should be exhaustive, the essay "must let the totality light up in one of its chosen or haphazard features but without asserting that the whole is present. It corrects the isolated and accidental aspects of its insights by allowing them to multiply, confirm, and restrict themselves" (Adorno 1984: 164).

Because the essay breaks with these rules and resists these demands, it is deemed unscientific, and incapable of providing knowledge. It reaches no definite conclusions, neither does it start from scratch. By connecting itself to particular cultural phenomenon (be it a text, author, or concept), it acknowledges its own historicity. It is exactly at this point that Adorno again connects the essay to the idea of natural history, in a passage that deserves to be quoted in some length:

But the more energetically the essay suspends the concept of some first principle, the more it refuses to spin culture out of nature, the more fundamentally it recognizes the unremittingly natural essence of culture itself. Up to the present day, a blind natural interconnectedness, myth, perpetuates itself in culture. It is precisely this upon which the essay reflects: its proper theme is the interrelation of nature and culture. It is not by coincidence that, rather than "reducing" the artifact, the essay immerses itself in cultural phenomena as in a second nature, a second immediacy, in order through persistence to remove the illusion of immediacy. (Adorno 1984: 167)

If we attempt to unpack this passage, we can say that the “unremittingly natural essence of culture itself” refers to the blind, ongoing *Naturbeherrschung* that is so central to the way Horkheimer and Adorno present history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as to the way Benjamin presents “progress as catastrophe” in his theses on the philosophy of history. It might also refer to a more fundamental, philosophical-anthropological thought that Adorno adopts from Freud and (via Horkheimer) Schopenhauer, namely that human culture (and human reason in particular) is an extension of the animal instinctual drive for survival and reproduction. Adorno, however, does not share the fatalism of Freud and Schopenhauer, as this passage also shows, since it is precisely through “reflection” (a reflection offered by the essay) that we can become aware of ourselves (and our culture) as nature, and *thereby* open up the possibility to break the cycle of perpetual (natural) violence. This is the “remembrance of nature within the subject” through which “enlightenment is opposed in principle to power”, as Horkheimer and Adorno formulated it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 32). As Adorno continues in *The essay as form*:

The essay’s impulse [...] is critical: through confrontation of texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each text intends even in spite of itself, to shatter the claim of culture and move it to remember its untruth – the untruth of that ideological facade which reveals culture’s bondage to nature. Under the glance of the essay second nature becomes conscious of itself as first nature. (Adorno 1984: 167-8)

The “unmasking” of what appears as “natural” (i.e. necessary, inevitable) as historical, and of what appears as “cultural” (i.e. civilized, sophisticated) as natural (namely the perpetuation of a blind cycle of control and the struggle for survival) is, then, the ideology-critical moment in the essay. Alluding to Benjamin’s concept of the “dialectical image” (without however explicitly mentioning him here), Adorno writes that the essay, in bringing this cycle to a halt, has an “affinity to the visual image [...] except that the essay’s static quality is itself composed of tensions which, as it were, have been brought to a standstill” (Adorno 1984: 170). As in Benjamin, though, the standstill is not the last word, since it is only by, as it were, pulling the brakes on this natural history that the truly new (the truly historical) can emerge. The new that, according to Adorno, is the actual object of the essay: “the new as something genuinely new, as something not translatable back into the staleness of already existing forms” (Adorno 1984: 169). Paradoxically, then, it is precisely through its

denial of the possibility of new beginnings (the cartesian *cogito*, the Lockean *tabula rasa*, the Kantian transcendental subject), that the essay creates the conditions of possibility for the new.

The essay does so, precisely through its attention to the particular, a thought Adorno would later further carve out in his reflections on natural beauty in *Aesthetic theory*. The experience of natural beauty is relevant to Adorno, since it offers a glimpse on nature that is alternative to and beyond the purely cognitive and conceptual one (in line with Kant's statement in the *Critique of Judgment* that aesthetic judgment is "without a concept"), which for Adorno also opens up the possibility of going beyond the instinctual urge to dominate. Through beauty, things show themselves as having a meaning of their own, beyond what they can mean to us as subjects (beyond their "purpose", to again refer to Kant). They thus appear as being more than what they literally are, and more than what the subject can conceptually know about them: "Without receptivity there would be no such objective expression, but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience" (Adorno 1997a: 92). This receptivity, which in *Aesthetic theory* is connected to art and the aesthetic experience, Adorno also wanted to express in philosophical writing.

In *The essay as form* this idea comes most strongly to the fore where Adorno praises the essay for being attentive and commemorative of the transitory and ephemeral, traditionally held in low esteem by philosophy. "The desire of the essay", he writes, "is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal" (Adorno 1984: 159). The "transitory", as we earlier saw, was the point where, according to Adorno, nature and history converge. The essay, then, is the primary natural-historical form, since it has attached itself to the fleeting, to a particular phenomenon, places it into a constellation, and thus makes it appear to us as new.

3. *The essay as planetary form*

In the final paragraphs of *The essay as form* Adorno addresses the issue of the contemporary relevance (*Aktualität*) of the essay, writing: "The relevance of the essay is that of anachronism". Referring to the aforementioned academic climate and its demands on philosophical writing, he states that "The hour is more unfavorable to it than ever" (Adorno 1984: 170). However, relevance or "actuality" for him does not mean that

something is fashionable or *en-vogue* (which he after all explicitly denies in the case of the essay), and not even refers to the continuing influence of the past in the present. Rather, actuality for him implies a critical potential, similarly to when he writes about Gustav Mahler that “his true actuality [...] is not to be sought in what he prepared for or anticipated of others. Rather, Mahler is actual as a corrective of the contemporary situation of music” (Adorno 1997b: 241).

What could the actuality of the essay, understood in this way, be for us, almost seventy years after the publication of Adorno’s *The essay as form*? In my view, the key to answering that question lies in the connection of the essay to natural-historical thinking. The concept of natural history itself has gained a new urgency for us today. On the one hand, we are witnessing transformations of our natural environments of an unprecedented scale, and to such an extent that geologists have suggested that we are entering a new geological era, the Anthropocene, in which human beings have a determinate and long-lasting impact on the Earth’s biosphere. Within our own lifetime, we have experienced the unhinging of the cycles of seasons, that we have grown up with and that have determined the rhythms of our lives (“the new normal”, a euphemism if there ever was one). Deforestation, desertification, ocean acidification, and ozone depletion, all the direct result of capital-driven resource extraction, now jeopardize the lives of millions of species in what has already been called the Sixth Extinction. This includes the human species, since our own habitats, too, are altered if not destroyed by forest fires, floodings, draughts, erosion, which force us to rethink and change our ways of life. If we do not, we will soon live on an “uninhabitable earth”, something that is already a reality for millions of people living in the Global South, since the consequences of environmental collapse are as unevenly distributed over the globe as the accumulated capital that is the cause of it.

While nature is thus the subject of dramatic historical changes, history itself is once more petrifying into a ‘second nature’. Not only does capitalism remain the only game in town (staying true to Jameson’s famous dictum that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism), but it is now hooking up, all around the globe, with a neofascist politics and a social-Darwinist (or neo-Hobbesian) ideology that sees society, as well as the global political system, in terms of a constant struggle over domination, conquest, and individual survival; and that likes to divide that world into winners and losers. Benjamin’s insight, that the catastrophe lies not on the horizon, but is the fact that things go on like this, is as true today as when he wrote down these lines.

There have been several attempts to align the critical theory of Benjamin and Adorno with contemporary ecological thought (Cook 2011; Malm 2020). Indeed, their critiques of progress, of the human domination over nature, and of instrumental rationality offer important insights for climate discourse. However, in using their insights we should not forget these are part of a ‘mode of thought’, one that I have here attempted to describe as natural-historical. In other words, it is not only the content of their writing but also the form that can be made ‘actual’ for ecological thought.

In a final afterthought I want to therefore connect the essay as form to the “planetary”. The planetary, or rather “planetarity”, is a term coined by the philosopher and literary theorist Gayatri Spivak in her 2003 book *Death of a discipline*, as an alternative to the term “globe” and a critique of the discourse on “globalization”. She writes:

I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems. [...] The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. (Spivak 2003: 72)

For Spivak, in a way quite similar to Adorno and Benjamin, this entails not just a change of concepts, but an alternative attitude to our surroundings and ‘spirit’ of thought, for “if we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us” (Spivak 2003: 73). The strict distinctions between subject and object introduced with enlightenment (scientific-technological) thinking turn out to be more porous, while at the same time also not to be negated altogether (since this would eliminate the very alterity that shapes our relations with the natural world). As Spivak writes, “what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous” (Spivak 2003: 73).

Several theorists, such as A. Ghosh and T. J. Demos, have discussed the relevance of art and aesthetics for climate discourse (Ghosh 2016; Demos 2017). Ghosh, for instance, emphasizes that the climate crisis is the result not just of our political and economic systems, but also of our ways of imagining the world, for instances of our desires and images of

the ‘good life’ shaped predominantly by a western cultural matrix. Demos, moreover, argues that our way of visualizing climate breakdown itself in most instances tends to perpetuate an enlightenment logic. For instance, in the famous image of the earth as ‘Blue Marble’, which pictures the earth as a fragile and precious object surrounded by the blackness of inhabitable space, but thereby also, as in a ‘view from nowhere’ takes us, as human subjects, out of the picture, thus denying both our intertwinement with the natural environment and our political complacency with its destruction. Both of them explore alternative modes of narrative and visual representation of environmental collapse, that not only do justice to what is going on but also challenge the dominant scientific-technological discourse and give voice to the marginalized and suppressed.

I would like to argue that what Ghosh and Demos say about literature and (visual) arts, also applies to philosophical writing. The essay as form, in the way I laid it out in the above, strongly resonates with the planetary mode of thought as discussed by Spivak. This is not to say that “all essays are planetary”, in a way similar to Timothy Morton who argues that “all art is ecological” (Morton 2018), a statement that appears as hyperbolic as reductive (after all, if *all* art is ecological, or if *all* essays are planetary, what do these adjectives really add?). The notion of the “planetary essay”, however, opens up the question of how the essay as form is connected to the idea of planetarity, and the planetary mode of thinking. It helps us explore what contemporary ecological thinkers and writers do when writing about planetary issues, and it emphasizes the importance of essayistic thinking and writing, in the face of climate catastrophe.

The planetary essay, as I see it, is not just an essay that deals with ecological or climatic issues, but rather an essay that, *through its form*, is an expression of ecological consciousness. This implies, first of all, that the essay has its basis in embodied, embedded, lived experience, and moreover, that in dealing with its subject matter (whether it is a concept, a literary text, or a natural phenomenon) it does not erase itself from the equation (as in the picture of the Blue Marble). This also makes the planetary essay a *weird* form, in the meaning that Morton has attributed to this term. Weird, derived from old Norse *urth*, refers to a twisted loop. Ecological consciousness, according to Morton, must have this kind of twisted logic and looping movement, since “human interference has a loop form, because ecological and biological systems are loops”. This means that, like in noir fiction, “the narrator is implicated in the story” (Morton 2016: 6).

Finally, and again following Ghosh, we could say that the planetary essay has an “uncanny” quality, the term Freud coined to refer to the strangely familiar (or the familiarly strange). According to Ghosh, there is something profoundly uncanny about climate change itself, namely “in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors” (Ghosh 2016: 29-30). Indeed, the environmental collapse that is happening around us cannot be entirely alien, since it is a product of our own making; it is, rather, something that we have long suppressed and that we are now forced to face. But we do so hesitantly, since we know it has the power to shake us to our core. *Heimlich*, in German (as the Belgian essayist Patricia de Martelaere reminds us) has the dual meaning of “homely” and “secretly” (De Martelaere 2000). This duality, as we know, lies at the heart of Freud’s theory: the most intimate – the family, our own ego, our own nature – is at the same time the place where the dirtiest secrets are hidden. We would like them to remain hidden, but the repressed has a tendency to return.

Deborah Cook rightfully remarks that, according to Adorno, “a more complementary relation to nature is something that has yet to be achieved, rather than something we can potentially (or will eventually) recuperate” (Cook 2014: 138). Achieving such a relation, however, will involve not only changing our political and economic systems, but also our very modes of thinking, and therewith the expressions of our thoughts. Natural history, planetary, weird, uncanny – although this list is limited, preliminary, and by no means exhaustive –, these are some concepts that, placed together in a constellation, can give us an idea of the contemporary relevance of the essay as form.

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