

Introduction: The Essay as Knowledge in Progress

Preparing a collection of selected essays is not a mechanical procedure but an exercise in self-interpretation—an accretive repetition that helps to expand one's awareness of self and of the world. It is also bound to be a quest to discover some unity of conception and purpose that may have guided one through a number of years. This concern, however, will have no more than private significance so long as it is not viewed in the perspective of a broader question: is unity in fact desirable? We are, after all, dealing with essays, a rather peculiar literary form. Do essays call for unity, coherence, and even consistency? The matter should definitely be considered on the threshold of a volume such as this. That consideration will itself be essayistic: this is not the place for exhaustive histories or all-embracing systems. Yet the inquiry will have both a systematic and a historical dimension, since it will properly start with the example of Montaigne, the originator of the essay genre, who can be fruitfully set up as a provisional (though not a definitive) normative gauge.¹

1. The account of Montaigne that follows is of course primarily derived from my own reading but also owes much to Sam Dresden, *Montaigne: De spelende wijsgeer* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1952).

Now both the practice and the avowed purpose of Montaigne seem to establish the essay as the very quintessence of dispersion and inconsistency. Indeed the essay is less a genre than quite deliberately an antigenre, designed to flaunt the prescriptiveness in literary matters which had been inherited from a rationalistic rhetorical tradition. With hindsight, Montaigne's essays appear as a highly significant interlude in the history of literature, for generic rationalism was soon to be intensified into an absolutist neoclassicism, in reaction against a spreading uncertainty of which Montaigne himself was one of the harbingers and prime instigators. An apparently unguided play of digressions and associations, his essays defy all formal rules. They also lack thematic discipline and even logic, for they seem to jump from theme to theme, and refuse to recognize any hierarchy of importance among subjects; as a result, it is often impossible to relate any one essay to a particular subject at all. The essay as a literary form is apparently nothing but the expression of an essayistic state of mind that could be characterized as "dilettantism" (taking the term in a value-free sense). "Essayer" evokes trying, experimenting: what seems to be primary is less the subject matter than the activity of the inquiring mind. If, therefore, there is after all one privileged subject, it is less a central focus than a pervasive presence in which all disquisitions are embedded: the writing "subject" itself, the individuality of Michel de Montaigne. "I am myself the material of my book," he tells us in his well-known preface "To the Reader," reminding us that this is not traditionally a worthy theme for literary treatment: "There is no reason for you to waste your free time on so frivolous and unrewarding a subject."² Surely this individuality cannot give unity to Montaigne's essays, since difference rather than identity, infinite variation and not consistency, is the earmark of that confusing ego. Montaigne's considerations are refracted

2. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, "Au lecteur," in *Essais*, ed. Jean Plattard, 6 vol. (Paris: Société les belles lettres, 1946-60), 1:2. Translation here and elsewhere mine.

through unrelated moods and states of mind. Accordingly, the "time" projected by his *Essays* is a succession of discontinuous moments: "When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep."³

Clearly the essay is in its very essence the form of the problematical, and it is easy to be struck by the modernity of its creator. But rather than make a contemporary out of Montaigne, let us try to see him in his historical context. For there is in him an element of polemical overstatement that cannot be viewed in isolation from his time. I have already pointed to the antigeneric aspect of his motivation. Montaigne is engaged in an *Abbau* of his tradition (the term has lately been translated as "deconstruction"). It is an active deconstruction in the genuine sense: a clearing away of rubbish, of reified sedimentations, so that issues may once again be laid bare in their concreteness. His radical presentation of discontinuity is very much a reaction against uncritically accepted accumulations of continuity; his insistence on the uniquely diverse and particular is directed against too exclusive a concern with universals. Prior to Montaigne, the self in its infinite modalities had certainly never become visible to this degree. It is therefore not surprising that the somewhat one-sided account of Montaigne furnished in the preceding paragraph needs to be fleshed out and modified. There are other tendencies, often seemingly irreconcilable. His dilettantism, for one, is not quite the exercise in self-adulatory vacuity that the term tends to denote for a later age. It has an important element of stringent effort. For all his fulminations against pedantry, his *bête noire*, Montaigne is very learned, and his determined freedom from authority does not exclude a remarkable amount of citation; if there is egocentricity, it surprisingly does not entail a striving for originality at all. Nor does it ever lead to solipsism, theoretical or existential. Montaigne never loses his sense of proportion, remains grounded in experience and open to reality at all times, and has only mockery for

3. Montaigne, essay 13, bk. 3, *Essais*, 6:243.

those "funny *causeurs*" (both "prattlers" and "cause seekers") who ignore concrete things (*les choses*) and find pleasure in discoursing on their abstract causes.⁴ On the other hand, Montaigne never seems in danger of actually losing that ego whose radical discontinuity he does not cease to demonstrate. Unaccountably, through all its variations, it still remains something like a unifying force. And finally, its supposedly total particularity does not make it the isolated self (the "I alone") of Rousseau. Paradoxically, it seems to go with universality, for "each man bears in himself the entire form of the human condition."⁵ In the very midst of chaos and centrifugality, there appear to be a hidden order and an attainable measure.

It seems strange to a modern mind that such differing characteristics can go together with no apparent sense of paradox. Even polemical overstatements cannot fully account for them, and references to Montaigne's "contradictoriness" would be a facile evasion of the issue. Such peculiarities are historically grounded; as Leo Spitzer has reminded us apropos of Cervantes, the baroque is not modernity after all.⁶ Let us note that Montaigne wrote prior to that neatly extreme subject-object division that was soon, in one form or another, increasingly to pervade our intellectual climate. Descartes formulated the duality of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* on the basis of radical otherness. His pure subject, however rational and formal, is nevertheless the ancestor of the more sentimental, more emotional, qualitatively distinctive self of Rousseau. In our conception of knowledge, the Cartesian schism is the origin of modern epistemology, which has the task of bringing the two irreconcilable substances of self and world together; it is also the source of our sharp methodologi-

4. Montaigne, essay 11, bk. 3, *Essais*, 6:123.

5. Montaigne, essay 2, bk. 3, *Essais*, 5:29.

6. See Leo Spitzer, "Linguistic Perspectivism in the *Don Quixote*," in *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 72-73.

cal distinctions between "subjectivism" and "objectivism," two poles mutually exclusive yet mutually implicative. In fact the method that should lead to certain (that is, objective) knowledge is essentially an operation to which an object is *subjected* by an imperative and extraneous subject; it is by no means a willingness to let the object speak to us. Naturally not: an "object" cannot speak, for it is a diminished thing, a contraction of *la chose* (*res*, *die Sache*, the issue) into an abstract and passively static *res extensa*, a mere "being-in-itself" (in Sartre's terminology). And the subject is pure not only in its manipulatory detachment from the object but also in its distance from the realm of togetherness with other subjects, which (bereft of an epistemological status of its own) has itself become "objectified." The rational subject of the Enlightenment views tradition as reified convention, undermining and debunking it as "prejudice." The more sentimental Romantic ego feels estranged from present convention, an outsider among the others. True, the Romantic will on the other hand gravitate toward tradition as an expression of the past; but that attitude is a mere reversal, a mirror image of the stance of the Enlightenment: the past remains a chunk of otherness that is (in revolt against the present) embraced rather than hated for its difference.

It is little wonder that Montaigne must appear contradictory to minds that have been formed in such a tradition of sharp dualism. Are we to conclude that he was an amiable muddlehead, as yet bereft of our superior latter-day capacity to think matters through with the proper radicalism? That would be altogether too condescending a conclusion. It would also be unhistorical, as the myth of progress usually is. Let us not forget that it was a rush for shelter, a desperate quest for firm foundations, that inspired Descartes to posit his pure conceptual entities. His was an attempt to intercept and to counter doubts that (let us repeat) were partly created by Montaigne. Descartes's painfully acquired and methodologically bolstered certainties, then, did not continue Montaigne's

endeavor but tried to check it; Montaigne's road (perhaps one that only few can tread) led to an acceptance of the risk of uncertainty. From a historically informed perspective, his lack of familiarity with either the supreme rationalistic or the supreme Romantic ego can hardly be viewed as a cultural lag. But such a perspective will also prevent us from adhering too closely to his particular conception of the essay and from imitating it in an external way. Matters appear differently in different periods, and the essence of a thought or literary practice has to find varying expressions in various contexts. If we are to be faithful to the questioning spirit of Montaigne and of the genre he invented, our own efforts will have to embody that spirit in a form that it can fruitfully take in our time.

It will not do, of course, simply to decree that the abstractly pointed subject-object dichotomy is forthwith abolished. Philosophers have been questioning it for several decades, but its problems and pseudoproblems are still very much with us. For all its one-sided exaggerations, it has become a habit of mind, a veritable datum of consciousness. In his latest book, for example, T. K. Seung shows how the American literary criticism of the last two generations has been caught in the eternal pendulum swing between objectivism and subjectivism.⁷ Essentially it is a replay of the familiar movement between scientism and romanticism that dominated nineteenth-century thinking and feeling—taking “romanticism” in the broad sense, as a form of the modern sensibility and view of life. For it would be erroneous to assume that we have left romanticism behind us. More than ever we are exposed to the siren song of the solipsistic ego and prone to indulge in “freeplays” from which all substantive reality has been drained. Nor is oscillation the only way we deal with the complementary poles of the subject and the object: impressionism is often paradoxically allied with holism; sub-

7. See T. K. Seung, *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), esp. chap. 1.

jectivity seeks to order, and ultimately to devour, the entire universe of objects. Already the earlier Romanticists sought fragmentary wholes and essayistic totalities.⁸ “The will to create systems is a want of honesty,” wrote Nietzsche, who knew that the search for knowledge is an ethical impulsion and that ethics requires us to acknowledge and grapple with reality.⁹ But in the system, reality is dissolved in the thought processes of the romantic ego; it is a pseudoobjectivization of the subjective, a private myth. It is neither ethical nor cognitive but aesthetic, in the sense diagnosed and impugned by Kierkegaard. Knowledge itself, fragmentary or systemic, must become a mere tool for the poetic self-expression of the creative “genius” when there is nothing left to know.

This confusion between poetry and knowledge needs closer examination, since it bears on the problem of the essay and has lately rebounded with particular virulence. Montaigne complained bitterly about the profusion of commentaries that were being written: “There is more interest in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting things [*les choses*], and there are more books on books than on any other subject: we do nothing but write glosses about one another. Everything is teeming with commentaries; as for authors, they are very scarce.”¹⁰ The contemporary reader of such a statement may be unable to repress a wistfully understanding smile. But let us state it clearly: Montaigne is by no means making a case for creative originality against mere intellectual understanding. Such romantic criteria were not his. His standard of judgment is squarely cognitive, and what he deplors is precisely the degeneration of knowledge—a degeneration that results from a diminishing concern with reality, *les choses*. And it is along those lines that a “romanticization” of intellectual-

8. See chap. 8 in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Sprüche und Pfeile,” in *Götzen-Dämmerung*, aphorism 26. In *Werke in drei Bänden* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1955), 2:946. Translation mine.

10. Montaigne, essay 13, bk. 3, 6:185.

ity has come about. The stages of this process can be traced schematically. First the "subject" is pitted against the "object," the genius cult of poetic originality and creative self-expression is exalted over the derivativeness of knowledge and criticism. Then the cult of genius gradually shifts from the creator to the critic¹¹—a development that is accompanied by an ongoing appropriation of reality by an increasingly solipsistic ego. In the end, no substantial "object" could be a hindrance for the freely constitutive activities of the critic's mind. Cognition will then have become indistinguishable from poetic self-expression, and the critic—liberated from the lowly task of merely expanding and refining knowledge—can hope to emulate the free creator at last.

That syndrome, clearly recognizable on the contemporary intellectual scene, is one to which the essay genre is particularly exposed. It is discursive in form and looks like a truly cognitive investigation of specific texts and issues. On the other hand, it has a strong tradition of formal freedom and epistemological agnosticism. No other genre seems better suited to turn a cognitive into a poetic enterprise. Is the essay a form of art or one of knowledge? This is a natural question, and Georg Lukács posed it squarely in one of his essays, written over seventy years ago. He concluded that the essayist is not a prisoner of the subject, the "occasion," but adheres to it only with ironic modesty, ultimately dealing with matters much more fundamental. Symptomatically, Lukács's contention has recently been cited but modified: irony is altogether too modest a quality for the essayist, whose inspiration actually is (or should be) a "daemonic" one.¹² The leap from Montaigne to the ideal of the Romantic poet is palpable here. For we cannot revive the daemonic ambiguity of the cult plays.

11. This development has been signaled by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 83–85.

12. See Georg von Lukács, "Über Wesen und Form des Essays," in *Die Seele und die Formen* (Berlin: Egon Fleischel, 1911), p. 21. The romantic leap is executed in Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, p. 199.

Our version of the "daemonic" is more likely to be a matter of simplification, an heir to the vitalistic antirationalism of the pre-Romantic Storm and Stress movement. *Mania*, with us, is ever ready to turn into an egomania in which the realm of questions and issues is dissolved into nought. Montaigne's irony is an attitude of intellectual distance, of measure and proportion. It is also a complex stance of mediation that remains attached to the very contents it transcends. The romanticization of Lukács's study is based on an obvious misreading. Lukács makes it quite clear that he refers to the essay as a form of art in only a provisional and polemical sense. Writing in a period when narrow positivistic criteria of "science" were still dominant, he felt it necessary to remind us that the specific should always remain open to the general, that knowledge cannot remain a mere exposure of limited factualities and technicalities but should regain the wider horizon of the *Lebensfragen*, the "questions of life."¹³ When he calls for an ironic transcendence of the occasion, he does it in the name of a broader and deeper cognitive ideal, not in the name of subjective self-expression at all.

All of this means, however, that we cannot imitate Montaigne's essayistic procedures in an external way. Such an imitation would risk looking like an exercise in subjective self-indulgence, punctuated with predictable formulas of problematicity—Rousseau at his worst refracted through clichés of postmodern crisology. To us they come all too easily, and not at all in Montaigne's spirit of intellectual curiosity. Montaigne, like all genuine intellectuals a Socratic gadfly, was engaged in breaking down clichés and fashions, the sedimented thought processes of his time. If we truly wish to emulate his endeavor, we will have to try to rescue concrete thought from a fashionable chaos that has become as abstract and stereotyped as rational unity had once been. This

13. See Lukács, "Wesen und Form," pp. 5, 7–8. Symptomatically, Hartman's sympathetic account of Lukács's essay does not once refer to the central concept of *Lebensfragen*.

is our particular task, our own *Abbau*. Life is not sheer dispersion; it is an ongoing though ever-unfinished unification of the discrete. Time is not a juxtaposition of present instants. When I sleep, I sometimes dream about dancing, and when I am dancing, my other activities (past and future) remain on the horizon. Existence is not pure variation but duration in change—not a given but a lived duration, reconquered ever anew by an open-ended yet directed intentionality. And it is this process of unification that is the substance of the essay. It would be a mistake to relapse into the illusion of timeless unity, total objectivity, taxonomic totality, or systematic coherence. Treated as absolute alternatives, objectivism and subjectivism are mirror images of each other. The poles should be activated into a dialectic, a spiraling movement of mutual approximation—and this activation is the privileged task of the essay, the peculiar form which its problematic takes today.

The essay, then, is still the expression of an essayistic state of mind. We can no longer describe that state of mind as "dilettantism," because of the change in historical situation and the concomitant shift in the meaning of that term. In Montaigne's time, a period of passionate learning that sometimes degenerated into pedantry, it was no doubt appropriate to emphasize the element of pleasure (*diletto*) in the quest for knowledge; what we now need is a term that brings out the element of cognitive effort. Lukács's coinage *Lebensfragen* is a singularly fortunate one for our purpose. It stresses that the essay is grounded in *Leben*, in existence; it also points to its genuinely intellectual character, as well as to the nondogmatic nature (questions, not answers) of that cognitive interest. Finally, the noun *Fragen* is identical with the substantivized verb, indicating that the "objective" and the "subjective" aspects of the process ("questions" and "questioning") go hand in hand. And indeed the essayistic project executes a to-and-fro movement between subject and object, that overstated polarity from which we cannot quite escape. The

movement presents itself, among other things, as a dialectic between developing idea and elucidated occasion. For occasionality remains an earmark of the genre; one writes essays because a specific problem, often a particular solicitation, comes one's way. In this way, understanding comes about, is tested, and progresses. The essay is occasional because it is grounded in existence and does not try to disguise the fact. This occasionality, of course, lends it an element of fortuity to which one cannot give as dominant a position as Montaigne did—often with ironic ostentation and not quite fortuitously. There is always some purely episodic excess baggage that should be shed or replaced, if necessary upon revision. What remains fundamental to the essay is an *essentialized* occasionality that is appropriate to the elucidation of both the material and the substantive evolution of one's thought. Note that essentiality is not "objectivity": in fact its dual impetus is well suited to demonstrate the narrowness of the customary dichotomy. On the level of appropriateness to the elucidation of the material, the subject-object polarity is progressively transcended by a process of mutual approximation in which subjectivity will gradually recapture the expanse of its horizons, while the demand for "objectivity" will be supplanted by an attitude of *Sachlichkeit*, respecting what things (no longer "objects" but living issues) have to tell us: "No investigation is truly living and scientific if it does not induce things to talk."¹⁴ On the level of intellectual evolution, essayistic occasionality demonstrates the act of knowing *in flagranti*—cognition as "getting to know." Far from being a game of solipsistic self-will, such knowledge reflects our universal condition as finite beings that live in time, that endure only in and through change. The essayistic project respects and enacts nothing less than the perspectivistic character of

14. Letter to Wilhelm Dilthey from Yorck von Wartenburg (Dec. 30, 1895). See *Briefwechsel zwischen Wilhelm Dilthey und dem Grafen Paul Yorck v. Wartenburg: 1877–1897*, ed. Sigrid v. d. Schulenburg (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1923), p. 201. Translation mine.

knowledge. Perspectivism, *nota bene*, is not "relativism" (that very term presupposes an absolute, objectivistic criterion of judgment), for "each perspective raises a thread out of a skein of being that is real and truly there."¹⁵ The essay is the hermeneutic genre par excellence.

This is the spirit in which the essays collected here came to be written and should be read. But it was only in the course of writing them that I myself gradually acquired insight into the nature of my project. I acquired it in criticism earlier than in theory, and this may have been appropriate: perhaps one should be a critic before one turns into a theorist and should not launch out into full-fledged reflectivity before one has material to reflect on. In literary theory I remained for a long time committed to the ideal of a comprehensive system. The last line of my book on André Gide in 1968 confidently announced a future universal theory of the novel.¹⁶ I proved not to be the only one with such illusions. Let this, then, be a retraction: that universal theory was never written and never will be, for my essayistic activity permitted my lagging theoretical insight to catch up with my critical understanding. The last thing we need is one more all-embracing and conclusive theory of fiction. We have too many systems, and what we need is a counterpractice that may function as a counterstatement: one that opposes experimental soundings to dogmatic reductions and puts essayistic theorizing in the place of reified theory.

It would be mistaken, however, to view this counterstatement as one on method and to consider this practice as a methodical illustration. The very notion of "method" suggests formalized preestablished rules of procedure that are more or less mechanically applied. Nothing could be further removed from an essayistic inspiration or, for that matter, from the

15. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophische Lehrjahre: Eine Rückschau* (Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), p. 235.

16. W. Wolfgang Holdheim, *Theory and Practice of the Novel: A Study on André Gide* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), p. 265.

processes of genuine understanding in our field. One confronts each issue in its own right, unprogrammatically, questioning it along the lines that it suggests. The investigation, be it critical or theoretical, will tend to start out from one particular "occasion" (problem or text, position or author—even a passage), interrogating it in depth—then moving from the intensive to the extensive, from the individual phenomenon to its broader implications. One may here be reminded of Erich Auerbach's and Leo Spitzer's practice in literary criticism, but it would be erroneous to see nothing but the deliberate (and more or less arbitrary) application and expansion of one specific procedure. What the tradition of those authors has furnished is something far better than just another procedure, one more prescriptive methodology. In its soundings of promising intellectual events, its pursuit of "fruitful occasions" set against the horizon of essential *Lebensfragen*, we can readily recognize the inherent rhythm of the essayistic project itself—and thus the enactment of the way in which understanding in human studies actually (not prescriptively) evolves.

I have described essayistic knowledge in progress as a continual unification of the discrete. It is not my task to demonstrate that the essays in this volume show a directed (although multifariously refracted) intellectual impetus. The essayistic project is characterized by an ongoing, perspectivist flow of ideas and preoccupations. Themes and concepts appear, develop, overlap, go underground, then reemerge, and are progressively sharpened and expanded; they gradually assemble into a shifting configuration that still remains open to further displacement and evolution. A linear and systematic exposition would constitute not only a tiresome duplication but a downright falsification of the process—an arbitrary closure imposed upon its temporal open-endedness. One of the things I discovered while writing these essays is that repetition, much more than linearity, is a primary category of time. Not, of course, exact and literal recurrence but *accrative repe-*

tition, the elucidatory reemergence of problems and discoveries in varied contexts and nuances. The essayistic project is temporal (we could also call it narrative) in nature. And in these particular essays, that characteristic appears itself to have become thematic. It is the modern experience of temporality that constitutes their intellectual horizon—not as a narrow and specific subject but as the overarching *Lebensfrage* to which all such subjects are related. Critical or theoretical, they gravitate around the problem of the relationship between life and literature, viewing it increasingly as a question vital beyond others: a question of time.

I Criticism

