**The Craft of Suspicion: the essay in the social sciences[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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A debate, sometimes public and most often muted, has arisen in the humanities regarding writings, their differences, and their not-always-convergent designs. Claims of stylistic rigor and purification have been ever-present in our fields, as if such gestures meant staking out strong positions, theoretical worlds capable of becoming bearers of scientific and academic hegemonies. Doubly criticized by the positivist tradition and the German *Gelehrte*, the genre of the essay seemed to chose to remain confined to the periphery of serious knowledge, a hanger-on within a marginal zone shared by poets and storytellers, or, at best, the deviser of a cultural interventionism worthy of being converted into an object of study for those who approached it knowing how to signal the differences between two opposing worlds, who turn the essay into the raw material of research writing which betrays it from first to last. Marginal writers, unclassifiable thinkers, poets who plunge into realms unknown to them, old scholars who, at the end of their days, and in the calm of retirement, abandon academic language in order to “wisely” distract themselves through the registers of the essay. What’s true is that the tradition of the essay has almost never, to put it mildly, occupied an outstanding, recognized position within the university cloisters, as if it were always fraught with an unshakeable amateurism, a playing by ear that helps to spread ideas or make an intellectual impact upon the general public but which contributes little or nothing to authentic research work that deliberately pursues the arduous paths of stylistic seriousness and self-restraint, thus revealing, above all, the essential sterility of writing versus the subjectivism of form. Since Nietzsche, if not Plato, we know that form is content, that words present the world in accordance with its sensibility; that the craft of language underpins ideologies and practices, academic chores and disciplinary customs. But we also intuit that writings represent much more than a mere formal question; hardly a different set of standards, we see in them a deeper and more decisive involvement with the worlds they set out to explore, an involvement that finds in style an essential nucleus that defines the content of intellectual and academic projects.

The essay has been, and we will attempt to engage this affirmation, the genre of modern times. From Montaigne and Walter Benjamin to George Steiner and Jorge Luis Borges, it has been the form of writing that has best represented an historical journey characterized by the continuous tension between its universalist aspirations and the crisis that has relentlessly martyred it since its beginnings. The essay, in any case, took up residence in the eye of the storm, embraced the responsibility of interrogating through zones of ambiguity a culture born to displace, once and for all, the dominions of barbarism and irrationality. Escaping the great narratives that sought to give a final explanation to the march of history and the order of nature, the essay dwelt in the depth of the crisis, knowing that to be the ideal position from which to take the pulse of the age. But it also supposed, on the very cusp of the modern adventure, just as the Renaissance was turning toward the complexities of the Baroque, the opening of a tradition counterpoised to hegemonic discourses proffered by the new time of history proclaiming its dominion, constructing, to and fro, the narrative of a linear, homogenous march forward that would consolidate the grandiose edifice of modern culture. The essay, however, developed a craft of suspicion; it patiently stalked round questions like an elemental force, situating itself strategically to plan how to crack that edifice that appeared so solid and indestructible. As a modern genre, the essay has borne, from the start, the mark of critical interrogation, has claimed inquietude and suspicion for its own by trying to place its inquiry outside the established canons and beyond current grammars in use. Between suspicion and criticism, the essay opened the game of a modernity no longer in debt to a singular and exclusive world view and instead became the expression of a bottomless, open form of writing, a multi-vocal and jealous friend of metaphor, and the companion, in its best moments, of poetic intensity.

Essay writing is provisional, it probes the same territory through which it spreads, knowing that no fixed path exists, no safe road toward certainty. [[2]](#footnote-2) To write an essay, to experiment with unusual intersections, to tighten the string knowing that it can break, mixing what refuses mixing, making forays into the enemy’s camp—these are some of the essay’s modes and strategies. But its radical fragility is one too, the awareness of its limits and the always threatening presence of misinterpretation. To put it more plainly: the essay always has an opaque and ambiguous dimension which allows it to traverse conceptual worlds very often at odds with one another, drawing from that threshold experience its most interesting and vital component, its raison d’etre. “The person who writes essayistically,” points out Max Bense, “is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels, tests it, reflects on it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind’s eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Scaler of summits, the essayist knows about misdirections and slippages toward danger zones. Of course, that game with the extreme, that playing with fire, the risk of getting burned, does not mean that their writing is a sign of dilettantism, or even an irresponsible game played by one with nothing better to do than juggle incendiary elements without bearing the cost of the intrinsic danger. Since its distant beginnings, the essayist tradition has constituted a strong statement of position, a critical impulse and a profound investigation into the conditions of its own age. But that experimental search was born from the fissures of official discourse, it was the result of the obscure tension that has intersected the spirit of modernity from the beginning. Perhaps that’s why the essay is the chosen form of the modern writer, a manifestation of their extraordinary disquietudes and solitudes. Far from any form of consolation, provisional and critical language retraced its own steps, shouldering the burden of exploring deep inside its phantoms, and it prevented the expansive logic of a devastating subjectivity from unfolding throughout the free history of questioning. The essay has been shadow writing, the reverse of rational light, the fissure in the wall of Cartesian certainty, the poetics of the Hegelian “night of the world” or the attempt to pursue the fleeting tracks of the “radical evil” scarcely mentioned by Kant. A trip toward the confines of an age characterized as homogenous which, nevertheless, and by the light of certain thinkers who ponder limitations, it returns to us its opacities, its phantasmagorical forms, its strange nightmares, its fathomless caverns into which it must sink.

The essay patiently paused to investigate those cloudy zones of an individual now beholden not only to arrogant and unquestionable knowledge, solidified around an inexpugnable rationality, but one that emerged as an unsuspected debtor to his own obscurities. The essay found, and finds, its material in the fragmentation of modern consciousness and its attendant crisis since its emergence in the world, the excuse for an intemperate writing, one that does not renounce criticism as a vital force of the individual’s own journey. For that reason, since Montaigne, the essay has continuously pushed the outer limits, plunging into those forbidden territories strongly monitored by the police of reason and transparency. With Etienne de La Boétie, the friend of that maestro of the introduction, writing tended to become delimited by that new and surprising engine of power also born at the dawn of modernity: the State. Etienne de la Boétie did not question the intrigue of power, did not attempt to investigate its functions (as his other brilliant contemporary Machiavelli did); his investigation exposed the naked fragility of the era’s new actor: the individual, that figure who seemed to initiate an unstoppable march toward the future. Le Boétie shook his illusions and his arrogance, showing him that, from the outset, his journey also concealed the indelible frame of renunciation, the abandonment of his freedom. Montaigne, wise and scrupulous contemplator of his own life and the lives of others, went a bit further beyond, and gazed upon the impassable threshold: death, the ultimate frontier that stripped naked man’s futile arrogance. The tradition of the essay unfolds between the pitiless, desolate interrogation and renunciation of liberty that guided Etienne de la Boétie’s brilliant, crepuscular intuition, and the presence of death as a nucleus of all Montaigne’s genuine investigation of the human and its limits. Perhaps for that reason, for daring to explore uncertain regions or for not renouncing the risk of unsupported thinking, the essay found itself banished from academic “seriousness,” becoming, in the eyes of a gendarmerie of knowledge, something suspicious, an expression, only just, of a linguistic Luddism that skirted the true axis of all serious and rigorous investigation. Left to poets and intellectuals, the essay, for a very long time, took leave of the universities, revealing its searches through regions as distinct from the academic as literature can be: the journalism of ideas, public intervention, or the solitary labor of thinkers who chose to inhabit the margins, making their writings an amalgam of ideas and life, of intentions and sensibility. The strange paradox of a history that ended up feeding the social sciences on the very thing that the essay had produced in its peripheries. While for those who cultivate the essay as style, its dialogue with, and appropriation of, other stylistics (in particular those who populate academia and the specific formalities of monographs, as well as those who travel the byways of art and literature) remains necessary and indispensable, that does not seem to be the function of the dominant devices in today’s world of scientific research.

An opening of consciousness, a surpassing of ideological frontiers, a joyful manifestation of the mysterious gift of metaphor as the last redoubt from which to defend ourselves from mercantile uniformity, the essay has been, throughout its modern drift, the genre of imprudence, the manifestation of the madness of the individual where the empire of reason made it impossible by concealing his disturbing origin. Writing about and within madness, the essay knows indecency and purity as essential moments in any adventure voyage; above all it has managed, for us, to blur the fallacious frontiers that good consciences had attempted to trace as a radical separation between good and evil. A writing of contamination, the essay is deeply rooted in the pursuits of the alchemist, the one who knows that beauty can be born from putrefaction, from filth, and that, coursing the inverse path, the most disembodied, what wallows in the mud can be the offspring of the rarest beauty. It is an illumination of what’s obscure, knowing that light is the reverse of shadow, that the apparently pure search for the ideal conceals, although its devotee remains unaware of this, the horrible manifestation of suffering.

In an essay of unequalled beauty and depth, Claudio Magris has managed to give voice to the urgency of literary faith, the secret persistence, in its itinerary for human life, of the indispensable fact of literature as an expression of what is open, which is, simultaneously, what is secret and essential. Without literature, says Magris, existence would be infinitely poorer, not because it moves us continually toward marvelous regions of the imagination, leaping over the limits of a trivial reality, but precisely because it manages, without abandoning our ordinariness, to make it flare out in a thousand directions, shattering univalences, the finished forms of truth, until, like in some unique and mysterious game, causing the overflowing plenitude of the world’s reality, along with the amplification of man’s own interiority, to proliferate. Perhaps the essay finds its value in its proximity to literature, in that same exercise that overflows the frontiers of the world’s and the individual’s reality, showing that what is evident slides toward zones of unexplained opacity, and that what is indiscernible can find, by means of an illuminating language, a certain measure of clarity. Just as literature pretends to eschew stock phrases and soothing formulas, the essay, in its experiments with form and content, also distances itself from trite and hackneyed language and redeeming discourses. “Literature,” Claudio Magris wisely writes, “is what can save those small stories, illuminate the existing relationship between truth and life, between mystery and the quotidian, between the particular individual and the Babel of the age.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Joyful debtor of literature and, in its best examples, literature itself, the essay, unlike the scientific treatise, crafts, from experimental investigation, disquieting poetic craft, and literary sensibility vis-a-vis “short stories,” its point of reference—the compass which orients it in the difficult voyage through the geographies of modernity. As Adorno has said so nicely, the “essay tries to render the transient eternal.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Returning to the Adornian critique of what he called the administrative jurisdiction’s demands for competence, it is essential to point out that the act of cultivating the essay within the space of the university, and even vindicating it within those zones permeated by the immutable laws of the doctoral program, constitutes a conscious politics, an indispensable defense of cultural property threatened by the academic machinery that flattens and renders everything homogenous. The productivist logic that today dominates a broad swath of the research spectrum and which usually determines those projects approved by the new administrators of knowledge, is brusquely opposed to a form of writing almost impossible to pigeonhole and synthesize, which resists its mathematization or its stultifying codification. In this sense, and I will return to this question later, the essay is not a simple aesthetic gesture— no small thing—rather, it supposes a statement of position, the insistence on defending a tradition which has generally inhabited the margins of institutions and which has refused to yield to the demands of the marketplace. I must insist on something that does not seem obvious to many inhabitants of the world of the social sciences: in writing, projects are wagered, oft-disputed perspectives are settled, legacies and traditions guarded in the memory of that very writing are evident; the form, the certainty of being the bearer of a style, is something tangible, something that penetrates entirely what we say and what we mean to say by purposefully contaminating the product of our intellectual efforts. If there is one thing that is never innocent, it is writing—in it and through it is profiled the world we desire to inhabit. I propose, next, to make a detour in order to show in what way language, and its uses, constitutes the decisive nucleus of culture, wherein much more lies at stake than a mere question of taste. Sometimes thinking to extremes allows us to clarify what is routine.

**Translation from the Spanish by Brendan Riley**

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**Bio:** Brendan Riley is a teacher, writer, and ATA Certified Translator of Spanish to English. His published translations include *The Great Latin American Novel* by Carlos Fuentes; *Hypothermia* by Álvaro Enrigue; *Caterva* by Juan Filloy, and *Recounting (Antagony: Book I)* by Luis Goytisolo.

1. Publication authorized by the author. July 22, 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In a notable reflection on “The Essay as Form,” Theodor Adorno has insisted on this profound difference between “scientific” comprehension and that of the essay: “The ideals of purity and tidiness that are common to the enterprises of a veritable philosophy versed in eternal values, an airtight and thoroughly organized science, and an aconceptual intuitive art, bear the marks of a repressive order. A certificate of competency is required of the mind so that it will not transgress upon official culture by crossing culturally confirmed boundary lines. Presupposed in this is the notion that all knowledge can be potentially converted to science.” (T.W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” trans. from the German by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, Columbia University Press, New York. 1991). N.B.: Forster cites this same passage from the following German into Spanish translation: (T.W. Adorno, “El ensayo como forma”, trad. de Manuel Sacristán, *Pensamiento de los confines*, núm. 1, segundo semestre de 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Max Bense, “Über den Essay und seine Prosa”, *Merkur*, 1947, Num. 3, 9418, Cited by T.W. Adorno, ob. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Claudio Magris, “Hay que expulsar a los poetas de la República?” en Utopía y desencanto. Historias, esperanzas e ilusiones de la modernidad, Anagram, Barcelona, 2001, trad. de J.A. Gónzalez Sainz, p. 25. English translation here mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. T.W. Adorno, ob.cit., Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)