

An Essay on the Essay

EVEN that isn't quite right: an essay really ought not to be on anything, to deal with anything, to define anything. An essay is a walk, an excursion, not a business trip. So if the title says 'on' that can only mean that this essay passes over a certain field – but with no intention of surveying it. This field will not be ploughed or cultivated. It will remain a meadow, wild. One walker is interested in wild flowers, another in the view, a third collects insects. Hunting butterflies is permitted. Everything is permitted – everything except the intentions of surveyors, farmers, speculators. And each walker is allowed to report whatever he happens to have observed about the field – even if that was no more than the birds that flew over it, the clouds that have still less to do with it, or only the transmutations of birds or clouds in his own head. But the person who drove there, sat there inside his car and then says he was there is no essayist. That's why the essay is an outmoded genre. ('Form' is what I almost wrote, but the essay is not a form, has no form; it is a game that creates its own rules.)

The essay is just as outmoded as the art of letter-writing, the art of conversation, the art of walking for pleasure. Ever since Montaigne the essay has been highly individualistic, but at the same time it presupposes a society that not only tolerates individualism but enjoys it – a society leisured and cultivated enough to do without information. The whole spirit of essay-writing is contained in the first sentence of the first great collection of English essays – Francis Bacon's of 1597: 'What is *Truth*; said jesting *Pilate*; And would not stay for an Answer.' A jesting *Pilate* who asks questions but doesn't wait for answers is the archetypal personification of the essay, of essay-writing and essayists. The English essay flourished for three centuries, even when the earnestness of the Victorian age had begun to question its peculiar relation to truth. Only the totalitarian systems of this century turned walking without a purpose into a crime. Since the time of G. K. Chesterton and Virginia Woolf the essay has been

a dead genre. Needless to say, people continued – and still continue – to write prose pieces which they call essays; but already George Orwell was too ‘committed’, too puritanical, too much aware of a crisis to take walks without a bad conscience.

The essay is not a form, but a style above all. Its individualism distinguishes it from pure, absolute or autonomous art. The point of an essay, like its justification and its style, always lies in the author’s personality and always leads back to it. The essayist is as little concerned with pure, impersonal art as with his subject. Since the vast majority of so-called critical essays attaches primary importance to subjects, that is, to answers and judgements, the perpetuation of that genre does not prove that the essay has survived. Most critical essays are short treatises. With a genuine essay it makes no difference whether its title refers to a literary theme, whether to the origin of tragedy or the origin of roast pig.

But since the essay is not a form the spirit of essay-writing can assert itself outside the genre. Where confidence in his readership was lacking, for instance, the essayist often changed into an aphorist. Lichtenberg, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Nietzsche were laconic, partly repressed essayists. Essay-writing insinuated itself even into poetry: a pseudo-epic like Byron’s *Don Juan* or Heine’s *Atta Troll*, whose wit always points back to the personalities of their authors, whose plots are interrupted again and again by their narrators’ peripatetic arbitrariness. Story-telling and essay-writing were inseparable in the prose pieces of Robert Walser, and it was no accident that one of them, an outstanding one, was called ‘The Walk’. It was the spirit of essay-writing that drove Walser the storyteller into self-destructive parody: ‘In Thuringia, at Eisenach if you like, there lived a so-called beetleologist, who once again had a niece. When shall I have done with nieces and the like? Perhaps never. In that case, woe is me! Grievously the girl in the house next door suffered under learned surveillance . . .’

Some of the digressions in Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*, too, are genuinely essayistic, because Musil was a seeker, a man without designs who asked questions that he couldn’t answer. So are the *Ficciones* of Jorge Luis Borges. So are many of the shorter writings of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Th. W. Adorno – however weighty their themes.

The spirit of essay-writing walks on irresistibly, even over the corpse of the essay, and is glimpsed now here, now there, in novels,

stories, poems or articles, from time to time in the very parkland of philosophy, formidably walled and strictly guarded though it may seem, the parkland from which it escaped centuries ago to wander about in the wild meadow. But it is never glimpsed where that wild meadow has been banned from human consciousness even as a memory or possibility, where walls have become absolute and walking itself has become a round of compulsion and routine. It has come to terms with the overcrowded streets of large cities, but hardly with factories, barracks, offices, not at all with prison yards and extermination camps. Anyone who can never get these out of his mind cannot tolerate the aimlessness and evasiveness of essay-writing, but calls it shameless, egotistic and insolent. But somewhere or other the spirit of essay-writing is walking on; and no one knows where it will turn up. Perhaps in the essay again, one day?