

Antoni Mora

The language of the essay:

an assay

The language of the essay, you say?

If I am to think that the essay must have a language, what I would come up with, off the top of my head or, one might say, spontaneously, would be the hunch that it would have to be the language of babbling, of whispering, of stammering:

of the interruption;
of the whimper, too;
of dismay and uproar;
perhaps of the shriek and often –for sure– the broadside;
of the interjection, the imprecation, of great unease,
 of rebuff, of let's-say-no –of *I would prefer not*, as well:
of being the language of lament, of impotence –*I want to and I can't*–;
of maybe yes, maybe no;
of misspent talent, when there is talent;
of repetition, of surrogate will;
of degradation of what has been said: of the opposite of creation, of let us say de-creation;
of outpouring, of the difficulty of choosing –I don't know if I've already said it, of interruption;
of the fragment, of fragmentation, the fragmentability of the thousand bits that
 perhaps we can still stick together and reconstitute into a whole –or so it would seem–
 a bunch of slivers that in no way make up a whole because they don't belong to any
 whole: not going there and not coming from there;
of revolt and resignation, both written in one single stroke;
and of interruption, in case I haven't just said so.

All of this is saying a lot, however. Saying a lot about what is seen, which is precisely going back to saying too much, apart from the evident fact that not every essay is like that, and neither are the majority as there is also a very orderly, quiet and balanced kind of essay. However, the quest for a law of the essay, of any essay, can only lead to vacuous generalisation of evanescent content. Aware of this, the more prudent theoreticians do not speak of “genre” but of “essay genres”. Nevertheless, a proper theory of literary genres must uphold the idea that “every genre has its place” (as asserted by Pedro Aullón de Haro, a theorist who has persisted in applying the law of genre to the essay). A philosopher like Eduard Nicol has gone still further and, in order to define the limits of the genre, has insistently —not to say revealingly— resorted to terms from the juridico-political domain, using words like “legitimate” and “sovereignty”, referring in the next breath to “rules” and even talking of “prohibitions”.

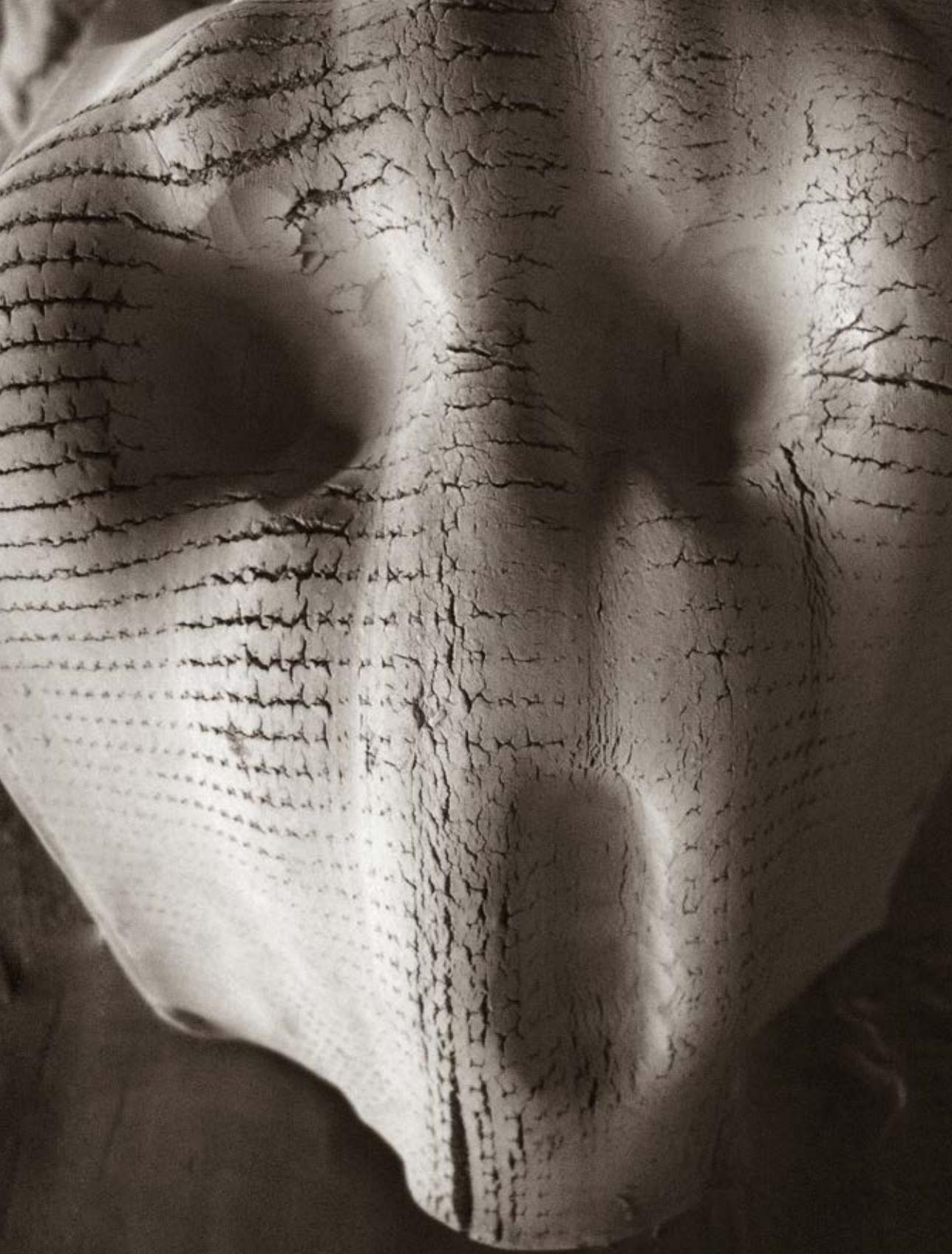
1 If I am to think of a kind of essay with which I might have some relation, or feel close to out of some sort of affinity, it will be that which does not end up fitting into any kind of generic “legislation”. Maybe this is why I intuitively seek the essay that has a babbling, whispering language, that laments... and that interrupts itself. And if I go back to the list with which I have begun, someone might think that, with this, I am referring to many features characteristic of the invention that was so distinctive of Eugeni d’Ors: what he called the “living word”. I say Ors, because he was precisely an extreme and persistent case of the essayist, like few others in this language I am now employing —and in the other¹— to be sure. What was all this about, then, Ors’ “living word”? This is what he had to say:

An individual in this state of relative isolation, known by the name of wild life, cannot be anything other than an anthropoid, an animal. He does not yet have, in the highest sense of the word, *either reason or word*. His intellectuality, deprived of discursive *articulation*, is reduced to intuition; his language, deprived of phonetic *articulation*, is reduced to the *living word*, which is to say, essentially, to *interjection* (*Glossa* [Gloss], 26th May 1906).

This is the Ors inventor, I stress, of the living word, or at least of a certain concept of it. Coming one month after the one I have just cited, the “Gloss” referring, this time, to Joan Maragall, the *living word* of whom, on close scrutiny, bears little relation with the above, is very well known. Of the latter’s book *Enllà* (Beyond), Ors says “It disturbs and —literally— appals me”. And he continues to expound on the living word:

Enllà is the shrillest, most strident note of Latin romanticism and perhaps of romanticism anywhere in the world. (It would seem to me that saying that of a book is really saying something.) I do not know of any literature wherein the Word has retreated from articulation in such a magnificently horrendous way, which is to say along the opposite path of Interjection (29th June 1906).

■ ¹ Spanish [translator].



In short, *the language of the essay* by which I feel claimed has a great deal to do with the living word, but more with that of Ors than that of Maragall.

2 What does philosophy have to say of this living word, the babbling, whispering language? First of all, and there is no doubt about it, it must make it very clear that this is not its language. Nevertheless, the relations between philosophy and the essay are either promiscuous or they are not. Otherwise there is no philosophy and no essay, in the clear understanding that the two things are very different and yet relatively interdependent: the relationship is there because they have become, are becoming, different and interdependent.

Fifty years ago now, two philosophers discussed the philosophy/essay relationship in very divergent terms. One was German —at the time it was some years after having returned from his American exile— and he made a point of the disrepute into which the essay had fallen in the philosophy in his own tongue, denigrated by the prevailing academicism and because of having a somewhat insubstantial tradition. He laboured for *the essay as a philosophical form*. The other was a philosopher of Catalan origins, also exiled, although he would remain in the Americas to the end of his days so that, to all intents and purposes, he was Mexican. Curiously, in sharp contrast to the German, he was pained by the excessive credit given to the essay and its too-solid tradition in philosophy, but he was focusing on an entirely different context, which is to say the Hispanic one. In his view, *El problema de la filosofía hispánica* (The Problem of Hispanic Philosophy, 1961), as a controversial book of his was titled, consisted in the belief that it was only possible to do philosophy, at least in this Hispanic context, by means of the genre of the essay. Naturally, these two philosophers were Theodor W. Adorno and Eduard Nicol, and the two of them solemnly ignored one another —after all they were philosophers! There is one thing that calls attention to their peculiar non-relating relationship and this is the fact that, almost at the same time, they were producing diagnoses of the same question

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—a relationship, then— which became complementary as a result of each sustaining the opposite position to the other's. They started out from two positions that were not easy to reconcile, not just in their essays on the essay but in their very philosophies, and this is no trivial datum. Adorno held that "reality is fragmented" while, for Nicol, "reality is

system". I shall not enter into the contents of the two texts as I think they are quite well known. Curiously enough, Adorno's has been translated into Catalan (and, nowadays, saying that a philosophical text has been translated into this language means entering into the terrain of exceptional happenings), while Nicol's has just been reissued in Spain (and, among the exceptionalities of Catalan philosophy is the fact that not as much as a single book of this son of Barcelona has been published in the city).

Revisiting the two texts fifty years on, it is odd to confirm that the roles have well nigh been inverted. On the one hand, it cannot be said that the essay —and not necessarily in Germany in particular— is going through an hour that is “more unfavourable to it than ever”, as Adorno had understood it, but rather the exact opposite. We might say that essayism, of all kinds, now occupies the place abandoned by philosophy, or at least the philosophy against which Adorno positioned himself. On the other hand, “Hispanic philosophy” (I retain the expression in inverted commas so as to signal a certain reserve regarding the label) seems to have striven over the last decades to be less essayistic than it was to such a great extent in the past, and thus it is less Ortega, less Unamuno and less Ors. I shall mention something odd in passing. Some years ago, a rather well-known Spanish professor of philosophy was working on a meeting of German and Spanish philosophy teachers. With the first exchange of drafts of the programme, the German coordinator seemed a little disenchanted: are you sure you want to tell us about present-day German philosophy? Do you think we can always consult Habermas personally if we need to clarify something? The thing is that those German philosophers would have liked the Spanish philosophy of the day to give them one more demonstration of the essay type of philosophy (post-Ortega, post-Unamuno) rather than an account of the theorisation of communicative action in which they were already very well versed.

3 I imagine that from the aforesaid it's clear enough that I'm not interested in a theory of the essay and neither am I seeking a general global definition for it. Rather, I keep my distance from the genre of the essay and am concerned with a specific kind.

In any case, in the terrain of defining this type of essay I can easily point to the person who has most persistently worked with it in this language with which I am now assaying the task of writing and hence thinking. I refer to Joan Fuster —there is no one quite like him— who left in written terms whenever he could, in more than one prologue and in interviews, the fact of understanding the essay in the literal sense of assay, attempt, trial. I hope to be able to speak of Fuster at greater length some other day. For the moment I'll stick with this sense of essay as assay, which is not far removed from the approach of the young Lukács —who Adorno kept obliquely in his sights in his essay on the essay— but with a particular connotation that puts him at some remove. Fuster always attempted —was trying out— a type of essay that was not just *non-philosophical* but openly, declaredly leery of philosophy and in a very unequivocal, emphatic way. I know that there is a whole well-intentioned reading that seems to believe that making a philosopher of Fuster is recognising him as heaven-knows-what. To my mind, it means turning him on his head and contradicting him in his most obvious expression. It is trying to submit the essay to the law of philosophy.

All this does not mean that one must deny the existence of a philosophising genre of the essay, which would be the case of the young Lukács and Adorno. But this is no reason for denying the other kind of essay that is not amenable to being submitted to legislation, one situated beyond the pale of the law (genre) and for which both men, Lukács and Adorno, showed such highly accentuated sympathy. I shall try now to pinpoint a number of features that are characteristic of this specific way of assaying, which I would hesitate to describe as an essay strictly speaking —so as not to fall into the trap of the *legislative* attitude that I have criticised— and that, I suggest, might be called assay-essay.

A first feature is that this is a *way of thinking*: Nicol has decreed exactly that, even though he is referring to every kind of essay (“For the pure essayist, the essay is a way of thinking”). It is a way of thinking, of writing while thinking. The essayist in this regard is the person who sets about writing to see what he or she thinks and not the reverse. This is not, then, the road that leads to thinking, or some sort of method, and it tends to be not remotely methodical. The (literary) genre prevails so little here that one might say it is prior to genre and this is why there are people who assay with narrative, or in verse, for example, so that there is a form of narrative or of poetry that is intrinsically essayistic. On closer scrutiny, rather than being a way of thinking, which sounds a little too categorical, it is a way of setting about thinking.

It sets about thinking *without knowing where it is heading*. This might be a second characteristic feature of the assay-essay I speak of. If one knew where one was going one would not be assaying but would simply be guided by this pre-established knowledge. In this not knowing, one runs a risk, indeed a constant risk, of not going anywhere or, more likely, not managing to arrive. It is irresolute by definition and hence is fragmentary, but it is not fragmentary because it is necessarily written in fragments. This is very well pointed out by Maurice Blanchot in *Le pas au-delà*:

The fragmentary expresses itself best, perhaps, in a language that does not recognize it. Fragmentary: meaning neither the fragment, part of a whole, nor the fragmentary in itself. The aphorism, the proverb, maxim, citation, thoughts, themes –verbal cells in being further removed than the infinitely continuous discourse whose content is “its own continuity” [...] (*The Step Not Beyond*, p. 43).

I believe it is pertinent to highlight in this text of Blanchot the idea that perhaps “the fragmentary” (which I take to be the equivalent of the essay in the sense of what I am saying here) expresses itself best in a language that does not recognise it. In other words, the essay —the fragment— seeks to deceive language, the very language that it uses. Or to turn again to Adorno’s words from *Der Essay als Form* (The Essay as Form), which I have already cited but shall now elaborate upon: The essay “thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over”.

A third characteristic of the assay-essay could be the fact that it is *not a work*, does not end up being one and does not produce a work. Fuster says “it never ends”. Thomas Mann presented his most famous essay as “residue, a leftover and sediment and also a footprint”. Hence he said that he was at special pains not to call it a “book or a work”.

A fourth feature: *it is not at all “original” but has a derivative, surrogate condition*. I myself feel tempted to assay and what comes to my attention is the considerable number of names I have mentioned in order to speak of this peculiar form of essay —and only thus far: Ors, Fuster, Adorno, Blanchot, Mann... I have been so cordially invited to speak in first person that I’ve gone scuttling off to hide behind the skirts of all these essayists. This is all of a piece with the kind of essay I’m talking about. It is not a question of the erudition of names and bibliographical references but, perhaps, precisely the opposite: the intrinsic condition of the delegate, second-instance thought, pure ersatz. Mann himself deplores —always in relation with his famous, sadly famous, essay— as a “lack of independence” this business of mentioning so many names, or “seeking authorities” as he would have it,

and using so many quotes. However, he also describes it as art: “the fact of quoting is an art, similar to inserting dialogue into a story”. It is that conception of Walter Benjamin’s on the art of quoting, and mentioning him is a way of doing what he does, incorporating him by citing him, to strip the reader of his or her convictions, as he has put it.

Adorno gives it another dimension: this secondary condition of the essay, which “[...] always directed towards artefacts, does not present itself as a creation; nor does it long for something all-embracing, the totality of which would resemble creation”.

It is an essay that has no beginning and no end: it begins *in media res* and ends just when it ends, without concluding, without conclusions, of course, and interrupting itself.

Directly linking up with this feature of second-instance thought, one can add the condition of being an *intermediate thought*, of being always in the midst of other things without really being wholly of them. It does

this so graciously, if one might put it thus, that it convinces the inattentive observer that it, the essay, is located somewhere between literature and philosophy (as a totally convinced Nicol sees it), between opinion and logical judgement (as some others have it), between science and art. In the most diverting of cases, I have seen that there are people who show that they are so completely sure that the essay is so smack in the middle of two things, whatever they might be, that they end up pronouncing that its theme *par excellence* is the nature/culture relationship. In brief, I am talking about the essay that is in such an intermediate space that it has lost sight of the points of reference (and I shall not deny that there must be some). However, this nature/culture story, this kind of essay I mention, has me at a loss. Part of the shrewdness of the essay is distracting attention with remote topographies to cover up the fact that, at the end of the day, it is not really located anywhere, which is why it can be situated amongst so many things.

Dimension six: *it is written in first, tremendously first, person singular, path and redoubt of singularisation*, certainly, but at the same time it is uncomfortable with this “I” which there is no way of shedding. The essay has an “I” that big but does not know what to do with it. Very often the essayist says what Elia Kazan —I mean Kirk Douglas— blurted out in front of the mirror: he didn’t like the person he was (in *The Arrangement*, 1969). Kazan, who had very weighty personal reasons for not liking himself at all, has his character reacting to a suicidal impulse that turns out to be an attack of lucidity. He has assembled his life on the basis of seeking and achieving facile success only to find himself all at once with this conviction of not liking himself.

To conclude, a final feature —so that I shall stop somewhere— that is implicit in all the foregoing ones, which is *intrinsic negativity*. There is no way of being constructive with this essay, of constructing and still less being constructed, unless it is very wilfully betrayed. There is no way of being admiring with the essay-essay I am talking about, or of admiring it, or engaging in exercises of admiration, setting up altars, bowings and scrapings, genuflections, winning university chairs and making a career. It is

Joan Fuster left in written terms the fact of understanding the essay in the literal sense of assay, attempt, trial

not given to flattery and neither does it tend to uphold relations of courtesy with the readers to whom it does not say what they want to listen to. It is not friendly. It does not countenance this very strange thing that used to be called *self help* a few years ago. Even more than that, I am talking about an essay that is somewhat hapless. I am not saying sad but I am saying tetchy, grim-looking even, and, above all, unfortunate. I am speaking of an essay that is gnawed at inside by intractable unease. Without necessarily being unhappy, it is not happy. It is difficult for it to say yes, just as it would not be easy for it to be useful or to *work at* what I have spoken of as being a work.

It is worth recalling here the reference to Nietzsche with which Adorno closes his essay on the essay, when he cites this idea of, “If we affirm one single moment [...]”. Adorno replies:

[...] the essay mistrusts such justification and affirmation. For the happiness that Nietzsche found holy, the essay has no other name than the negative. Even the highest manifestations of the intellect that express happiness are always at the same time caught in the guilt of thwarting happiness as long as they remain mere intellect. Therefore the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy’s secret purpose to keep invisible.

4 I must insist that I do not understand all these features I am presenting as characteristics of the essay, of any essay, but only that they coincide in repeating themselves and in entwining themselves in this kind of essay-essay I refer to. One might consider that all these features taken together, plus a few others that one could keep adding, refer to one kind of essay by dint of shedding others. It is evident not only that most of the aspects I have listed would not characterise, for example, what the gentleman who goes by the name of José Antonio Marina does. Not a single one of them would. Yet this does not mean stripping him of the title of essayist. All the same, he does exactly the opposite of what I am trying to pinpoint in seeking to please the reader because he moves, he swings with the apotheosis of received ideas.

It is clear that you can be “positive” (don’t be so negative, man, I quite often hear uttered at the back of my ear), “constructive”, accommodating, flattering of the person who reads you, and yet without ceasing to write an essay. In this regard, Adorno is especially honest because, even as he is engaging in an impassioned defence of the essay in rather unpropitious times, he still recognises that this *form* also includes the most cheapjack possibilities of assaying. He mentions a maximally exemplary case of a time that was still recent for him, and that can be summed up in one name: Stefan Zweig. Incidentally, the present resurrection of Stefan Zweig as a *great writer* —novelist and essayist— says a lot about this epoch of today, especially when he has been resuscitated by prestigious publishers, and not only here in Barcelona, in Catalan, but in Spain and part of what they call the Americas, for this is a European publishing phenomenon. And speaking of the essay, the truth is that it is dreadful to confirm how one of the most serious Spanish-language editions of Adorno’s essays, in the purest sense of the word, should have appeared under the same hallmark and in the same format as the trifles of poor Zweig. I say “poor” with reverence and nostalgic sadness. As a youth, I devoured the Zweigs that generously thronged in the modest family libraries that were within my reach. It was later that I found in a magazine the photos taken by the Brazilian judicial police

of the bodies of Zweig and his second wife, who had fled from Nazism, lying on the bed after the double suicide. Zweig's body seemed to express an infinite sense of liberation. After all, it is not his fault that he is opportunistically overrated, passed off for what he is not and what it seemed he never wanted to be in his lifetime. He was a modest writer who wrote for a large readership that responded positively to him.

In any case, with Zweig's essays one finds the same as what happens with those of Marina. They are still essays, so it is worth distinguishing between the enormous variety of things that legitimately (by law!) are given the name essay, starting with the type that is so far from what I am now concerned with and that, strictly speaking, is about divulgation, which includes good scientific, historical and literary popularising. There is also the specialist essay that, coming from some academic field (history, law or political science) is relatively free of erudition, or that takes the essay form in order to achieve a more agile text that is more accessible for a generalist reader. There is also the journalistic or political or current affairs essay. It is evident that all these sorts have little to do with the essay-essay I am concerned with. Perhaps one can identify a kind of essay that is closer and another one that coincides. In sum, all popularising literature—at a high or low level of reportage—clearly forms part of a kind of writing that rests on an achievement, on what is already achieved, which is then made available to a wider public. A long way from this, it is possible to pinpoint a type of essay that seeks without finding, without any hope of finding and even, at times, with the manifest hope of not finding. Hence, a certain breed of critical and combative essay is viewed askance by the essay-essay, which deems it too self-assured in its quest, too much on the side of the world already achieved, and too locked into its marmoreal truths.

It may be that the fifth essence of the essay I am talking about is what I myself am looking for. The fifth essence of that which, in fact, has no essence. Nicol, always so perspicacious in marking out the defining features of the rival camp—even though he himself kept working with the essay genre, but specified thus, *as a genre*—uses a theatrical parallel to bring out a trait of the essay, which applies above all to the essay-essay: it is a writing of ideas that is so peculiar that it presents

Fuster always attempted a type of essay that was not just non-philosophical but openly leery of philosophy

at one and the same time rehearsal and staging, in the sense that a play is rehearsed and staged. In other domains, "ideas are rehearsed in private before being staged in public".

This brings me back to Eugeni d'Ors and to his very singular case of someone who simultaneously rehearsed and staged because that was what his *Glosari* was about. The illustrious Orsian, Mircea Eliade, who not only closely shared a political ideology with Ors, was able to see this very clearly. Eliade wrote a book of texts titled—and this was no accident—*Oceanografia* (Oceanography, 1934), apart from embarking on his *Fragmentarium* (1939) with an express reference to Ors. It was the same Eliade who much later (in a book of interviews dated 1979) recalled Ors' *Glosari*, describing it in the sense I refer to: it was "the diary of his intellectual findings: every day he

The essay-essay is a specific way of assaying that sets about thinking without knowing where it is heading

wrote a page in which he said exactly what he had discovered or thought that same day or, let's say, the eve of that day, and he was publishing it at the same time".

Nonetheless, Ors' research —like that of Eliade too— is only essay-essayistic up to a certain point: he always knows where he's going and, in particular, he goes there. This is a systematic *oeuvre* like few others, and it is this in such a peculiar way because it entails a system that is happening —and this is readily confirmed— day after day. This selfsame fragmentation ends up being deceptive or, in any case, these are always fragments that form part of a whole and, this too, is the sense of Eliade's book *Fragmentarium*, which I just mentioned. One therefore needs to bear in mind that Ors, in fact, belongs to the breed of essayist —dubbed intellectual— that no longer exists today.

5 When speaking of Thomas Mann's best-known essay I was referring, of course, to *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man), the five-hundred-page pamphlet that was published in 1918 and partially re-edited, partially expurgated, a few years later in 1922, by which time he had, one might say, considerably shifted away from his apolitical position. The prologue of the revised edition turns out to be a goldmine of acute and challenging reflections grappling with what an essay is, especially in terms of the direction I am exploring —and, of which, by the way, Mann would only be a very partial exponent in the same sense that I have just mentioned in the case of Ors, since both were essayists who strove to be *classic*, almost *classicist*. Hence, re-reading this book and especially the later prologue I have mentioned, I have become aware of an intuition I find most revealing. Mann proposes that today's readers should read the book —on the understanding of today being 1922, or today as of 1922— as if it were a personal diary. Let us forget about the composition in the form of chapters of a book, he says, and consider that the early parts date from the beginning of the war, while the latter sections are invisibly dated from the end of 1917 to the beginning of 1918. If, re-read thus, the *Reflections* are better understood, they become more tolerable than if the book is swallowed with all the indigestible nationalist and bellicose rigmarole, as it was inevitably —and uniquely— read in its day.

On closer consideration, many books of essays are read like the writer's diaries, because they have this complexion. It is the consideration I have pointed out regarding Eliade, about his seeing Ors' *Glosari* as "a diary". Yet some books of fragments are better read like this, with this small temporal, periodising assistance. Who has not read Blanchot's most recent books as if they were undated diaries? I refer in particular to *The Step Not Beyond* and *The Writing of the Disaster*. However, I am not concerned to follow up the intuition about Mann in its literalness, which is to say to read essays like diaries, but rather to do the opposite, to ascertain whether the literary diary is an extreme form of the type of essay I am pursuing. This is because it might be said that all the traits

I have tried to extract as characteristics of this essay of which I speak can be said to *make* a diary, at least a certain class of writer's diary: a way of writing always with the tone of testing, which is already a way of thinking; of heading who knows where; a kind of writing that is inevitably ensnared in the fragment; work that does not produce a work, only residues, remains, sediments, traces; a continuous talking of other things, a hybrid of facts, situations, people, dreams and nightmares, readings, music... all brought out by the fortuity of the day; an extreme singularisation but often, if not always, uncomfortable with itself; a persistent, vehement negativity; an interruption, even if it is only of time, day after day...

Many examples of a sort of diary essay that is an essay-essay might coincide. Curiously, the diaries of the writer who has just oriented me don't go in this direction towards an extreme form of essay, since Thomas Mann's diaries tend not to be very essayistic in this sense (although it is clear that his real diary, strictly speaking, is *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* and not literary diaries like *Meerfahrt mit Don Quijote* [Voyage with Don Quixote], part of *Doctor Faustus*, or his private diaries, which came to light well after his death). It seems apparent to me that a greater example of this diary essay is Kafka, though I would add others such as Cesare Pavese (and this is often considered the best part of his work), or John Cheever's journals. In few places does a writer set about assaying in such a clear, stubborn way. And in few places is the misfortune of the essayist so patent. An enormously fruitful misfortune, needless to say.

I am thinking about a certain note in *The Journals of John Cheever*: "Oh, I think, if I could only taste a little success", wondering if he'll get closer to success by going deeper into the pit he is in (entry from 1952). The reader of the *Journals* who is familiar with Cheever's career will be able to respond affirmatively to his question, knowing that his writing will only come out —and how it will come out— of the pit he is in, and not in order to come out of it, but by dint of not moving out of it even, if this means digging in deeper and deeper.

At this point one aspect of Cheever's journals appears and it turns out to be a major feature of the diary essay, which is that of the ill-connected existence. I stress that I do not refer to every writer's diary but to this specific form of writer's diary that has found the place wherein to assay, to put itself to the test, to get underway with its attempts. The expression *ill-connected existence* I take directly from Pavese's diary through which it runs from start to finish or, I would say, structures it if it weren't for the fact that it destructures (un-works, un-creates) it. I shall stay with Cheever, now pinpointing an entry from his journal in 1959, in which he says that he has the feeling that his whole life is false, badly-constructed, and of an ill-designed structure situated in the wrong place.

Writers like Cheever or Pavese move in and write —more than describe— their ill-connected lives and insist on continuing to unfasten them, continually assaying them, writing, living, un-connecting. Here there is a nucleus of what is called "literature", beyond any self-flattering and smug perceptions.

There is one modality of the (literary) diary that unfastens, interrupts (*bourgeois*, no other term occurs to me, however antiquated this may seem) life. It is no accident that unease, if not the idea of suicide and, not infrequently, its practice, the ultimate interruption, recurs here so frequently. So much suicide work is to be found in essay diaries! Pavese is an exemplary case that must not be an example for anyone —his diary is a track leading to suicide, which he puts into effect— although there are many other cases too. Henri de Montherlant, so neglected today, comes to mind. In his personal notebooks the idea of

suicide is no stranger and from very early on but, as of a certain point, he is possessed by it until he does the deed. The reader of his notebooks of his final years (especially those from 1965 to 1972) cannot be surprised by a denouement that is intrinsic, for it is well elaborated in these writings. There is no doubt that, *outside writing*, anyone who dealt with Montherlant could also notice—or not notice—it, but it is striking that it

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should have been another writer who noted it *from his own diary*: Gabriel Matzneff, his young friend and future executor, took note of the concern aroused in him by Montherlant's suicidal bent. One might say that the matter went from diary to diary. In his, Montherlant notes down the written road to suicide. Matzneff divines it and takes note of it in his own diary. The diary, such a reclusive place of the writer—the man of reclusion *par excellence*— sometimes

acquiesces in these strange flashes of coincidence. Kafka said it in a diary note dated 29th September 1911, at a point when he was reading Goethe: the only person who understands what it is to keep a diary is the person who writes one.

Another glaring coincidence with regard to the work tidied up and sorted out by Montherlant in the final years of his diary is what can be read in the work of another long-distance diarist, Sandor Marai, who is no less explicit and monothematic in the diary of his advanced old age. At a certain point he notes with concern that his sight is fading and there is almost no vision left in one eye—a problem he shares with Montherlant—and writes, “Will I be able to find the pistol in the drawer?” (entry of 25th March 1986). It is highly probable that the reader also feels this concern but perhaps with the worry that he will end up finding it. The fact is that, groping around, Marai finds it and, some months later, gets ready to use it. The final entry in the diary is made up of words that become part of the immediately following action, since he is out of it by then (like Montherlant; and, also like him, Marai shoots himself with the pistol).

6 The person who discovers ill-connected existence—to stay with Pavese's formulation—is heading for making an essay of his or her existence. If it takes the form of writing a diary, it will not be to construct himself or herself, as the most doltish vulgarism on writing diaries would have it, because this is precisely more about awareness of the impotence of the constructive act than of the possibility of constructing. It would seem clear enough to me: if the essayist who is trying out the terrain is doing anything it is not exactly constructing. This person is doing something else. Assaying. I find a remark made by Jean-Marie Straub on the Pavese case very interesting. This is the fact that the film-maker refers to the suicide of the Italian writer in political terms alone. And it is no accident that he does so in a film by Pedro Costa that sets out to uphold

a story, in this case a filmed one, that expressly refutes the *raccord*, the cinematographic continuity, and “verisimilitude”, which are elements of a life that is *very, too* well-connected. Indeed, if there is cinema that can be contemplated along the lines of the essay-essay, that made by Straub and his partner Danièle Huillet is a significant case. It is the case of Pedro Costa too. It is not surprising that the old couple of combative and incorruptible film-makers should meet up with Costa —in the latter’s film where Straub makes his spot-on comment about Pavese’s suicide: *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?* (2001).

7 That the diary is a specifically essayistic crossroads was experienced with subtle lucidity by Mihail Sebastian. And in quite a lot of senses. First, he suddenly sees that he can put together a book on literary creation by employing different essays and some passages from his diary, having understood the use of the latter on confirming that this is a true working diary (which is written, of course, in his diary, in an entry dated 11th June 1936). Second, at another point, he is assailed by the insecurity of his art (the diaries of the good writers of the time are brimming with it) and he states, “I am not a novelist”, and that he merely has the ability to write, “little stories of two hundred pages with touches of the intimate diary” (entry of 8th January 1937).

However, the first of these two intuitions —that the diary is a privileged place for a certain form of essay, precisely for assaying it— was also harboured and developed by a close friend of Sebastian to whom I have already referred, Mircea Eliade (and let it be said in parenthesis, from diary to diary: the process of the irrevocable breaking of that friendship is contained, step by step, in the diary of the former, while the latter, who apparently came to have that diary in his hands at some point, went so far as to say that it could be Sebastian’s best work). Eliade, who kept a diary all his life, had a very clear idea of the possibilities of a literary diary, to the point of asserting that a certain ilk of diary (he was thinking of Jünger’s, about which he was writing at the time, in 1965), owing to some very specific characteristics, among which the most outstanding are asymmetry, fragmentation and personal meditation, came to occupy a place that had been left in the wake of the novel (after Joyce) and theatrical language (after Beckett and Ionesco) and after the artistic avant-gardes. Then he added that philosophical treatises will continue to be written so long as there are teachers in the discipline

A writer’s diary can be considered an essay-essay. In few places does a writer set about assaying in such a clear, stubborn way

but philosophy itself has, for some time now, been drifting elsewhere, after Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. I would not be so emphatic in making this point (and still less in relation with Jünger), yet there is something of the essay-essay lurking here. However, let it be made clear, Eliade (like Jünger and like Ors) tries to *over-legislate* this kind of different essay that he glimpses. In his own assaying, especially in his personal diaries, he is too self-extolling and, in the end, of course, too systematising of the fragmenting, which is to say, his own fragmented world always comes from and, in particular, always goes

back to one unity, to the one and only, to his passion. Hence, the essay-essay is always disavowed from the stance of the one, the unity, the unity-ness. In addition, there is the danger of the essay that is not only existential but also political. And here one should see distinctions. Mihail Sebastian, for example, when the political situation of his country becomes seriously complicated, realises that he has begun to write his diary timidly.

Indeed, for some time, he has been aware that his house might be subjected to a police search and, he reflects, there is no *corpus delicti* more evident —he writes “scandalous” in inverted commas —than an intimate diary (entry of 1st January 1938). And this, without a strictly political *corpus delicti*. It is known that Mann suffered greatly because he had to leave his diaries behind when he precipitously

Some books of Gérard Genette, J. M. Coetzee and, especially, Jean Améry, are greater examples of the essay-essay

left Germany since he was aware of the use the Nazis could make of them if they learned of some very personal aspects of his private life. In turn, Eliade’s diary, written at the end of the Second World War (and posthumously published in English as *The Portugal Journal*) reveals the depth of the author’s political commitment.

With a view to bringing this to a close, I believe I could be somewhat more specific about the gist of all this by noting some greater examples of this kind of essay. I thought I might refer to the final adventure of Gérard Genette, in his last two books, *Bardadrac* (2006) and *Codicile* (2009), where, without ceasing to engage in his linguistic labours, he sets out to invent an essay-labyrinth that, in the form of a false dictionary, assays a whole set of ins and outs that open up the way to all kinds of deviations (linguistic but also novelistic, autobiographical and critical, of every kind). I’ve also been thinking of the last work of J. M. Coetzee, who writes novels that are no longer grafted on to the essay but are made up of essays that structure and de-structure fiction, for example *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and, of course, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), not to mention his works that, strictly speaking, come under the heading of essays, although they do not exactly belong to the category of essay I am writing about.

Nevertheless, I am of a mind to point towards a lucid essayist of the kind I mean and who, more than any other of the writers I have mentioned, could be said to have spent his life writing texts that are almost invariably intended to be expressly presented as essays and, as I see it, they are always fully-fledged members of this variety of essay-essay. Inflexibly and tenaciously suicidal, needless to say, he deemed and named essay almost everything he produced, no matter what. I refer to Jean Améry. He presents his autobiographical book as an essay and, indeed, it turns out to be a cluster of essays, six essays, to be precise, these constituting different attempts at dealing with the various mainstays of his existence (*Unmeisterliche Wanderjahre* [Lean Journeyman Years], 1971). His novel *Lefeu oder der Abbruch* (Lefeu, or the Demolition, 1974) has as its subtitle in the Catalan edition *Novel·la assaig* (novel essay). And if the whole novel is essayistic through and through —always in the sense of essay, test, trial—

the book, to boot, concludes with a text that is strictly —generically— an essay in which Améry adopts the first person and offers a reflection about the book itself.

In this text (titled “Why and How”) that closes the novel, Améry says that one should understand the book as the third part of a trilogy, also consisting of his autobiographical book and that about the fact of aging, *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation*. In other words an autobiographical book, a novel and an essay, in the strict sense of the word, form an essayistic trilogy.

In this epilogue to the novel essay, he says he has expressly shied away from composing a philosophical tract. “I do not have the gift of systematic thinking and, for me, it is probably not worthy of great respect either. As I have observed very often in the history of ideas, it is possible to erect structures and fit reality into them. This is how majestic conceptual edifices appear, but they are also despotic”.

It is also worth stressing that Améry understands the novel as essay, at least as its forebear. He goes back to Proust and *In Search of...*, Gide’s *The Counterfeiters*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*. Really, and especially today, few readers do not read these books as essays or, in other words, they have turned them into essays —the essay goes over to the reader’s side.

Yet, he also introduces an interesting nuance; “these novels were read in their day as the last word in novelty and the unheard-of”. And it is precisely this that cannot be for Améry today, and that at the time —in 1974— conditions and gives sense to the writing of *Lefeu*, a novel essay: “[...] not for one moment have I succumbed to the temptation to construct something, to elaborate a theory compulsorily, to do an experiment, to offer, at any price, something that is formally new [...]. On the contrary, my desire was to present myself as untimely without, naturally, trying to found all of that in a theory: protest against the times was one of the most important driving forces that propelled the work from the very first draft”.

What lies behind, underneath all this? The main issue for Améry, in all his essay-essay-trial-attempt, was what is lived, *le vécu*, as they tend to say in French. And what he so meticulously describes in his book on the fact of aging, which can also be read as a diary, when he says therein, “it was revealed to me as I kept writing”. Pure essay-essay. Language of essay II