

# The essayistic style of Walter Benjamin

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*This paper examines the peculiar essayistic style of Walter Benjamin. All of the various genres of his writing have an allegorical and surrealist quality, with hidden and private (and essayistic) meanings, but also with a prophetic, hallucinatory tension.*

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The genre of the essay has a long tradition in German literature and German literary criticism (see Lukács, Bense, Adorno, Rohner, Haas, Chadbourne, Benassi-Pullea, Chevalier). I will not, here, relate all the discussions on the subject. I will limit myself to some quotes from the classical essay by the philosopher and aesthetician György Lukács, the pioneering article by Max Bense and Adorno's celebrated essay on the essay, which had clear connections with Walter Benjamin's practice of the genre.

Lukács had underscored the strong relationship between the essay and other forms of writings with aesthetic quality, but also its independence:

The essay form has not yet, today, traveled the road to independence, which its sister, poetry, covered long ago: the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art. (Lukács, *Soul* 79)

Max Bense has praised the essay as a form of writing that is critical in its intellectual attitude, experimental in its methodology, flexible in its configuration:

The essay is rooted in the critical nature of our spirit, whose aspiration to make experiments is ingrained in its way of being, in its way of functioning. [...] Those who criticize, they must experiment with this aspiration, they must create the conditions by which that object can be seen in a new perspective. [...]

The most sophisticated type of essay, born out of efforts to describe in an axiomatic manner any object, belonging to any field of science, have an indispensable dependence on logic; they reveal the style of clear reason, which they never abandon; they analyze, make elemental, crumb the substance, as it remains unchanged

in all the experimental variations. It is to be seen whether one should distinguish a special class of polemical essays, which usually tackle the object not so much critically, rather with the poignancy of a destructive aggression. It is not necessary. The essay will of course, with every means, bring the object in a position, where its fragility, its adventurousness, its weakness will amount to a suicidal drive. [...] Its very existence depends on an 'ars combinatoria' typical of literature. The writer of essays is a 'combinatorial writer', a tireless creator of configurations around a given object. (Bense 420–422).<sup>1</sup>

Adorno has set out to enumerate those that, according to him, are the peculiar features of the genre, which resembles art, having a certain aesthetic autonomy, but is differentiated from art "by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance" (Adorno, *Notes* 5). Let me list what are those features, according to Adorno:

– The spontaneity and subjectivity of the presentation: "The subject's efforts [typical of the essay] to penetrate what hides behind the façade under the name of objectivity are branded [by the watchdogs of academic respectability] as irrelevant" (4).

– The rejection of a purely deductive logic: "[The essay's] concepts are not derived from a first principle, nor do they fill out to become ultimate principles" (4); "The essay incorporates the anti-systematic impulse into its own way of proceeding and introduces concepts unceremoniously, 'immediately', just as it receives them. They are made more precise only through their relationship to one another" (12); the essay [...] shakes off the illusion of a simple and fundamentally logical world, an illusion well suited to the defense of the status quo" (15).

– The eschewal of heavy-handed profundity: "Thought's depth depends on how deeply it penetrates its object, not on the extent to which it reduces it to something else" (11).

– The antipathy toward systematic dogmatism: "The essay does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal" (11); "Even in the manner of its presentation, the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object and there was nothing left to say about it. Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break-off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over" (16).

– The exaltation of the incomplete: "The romantic conception of the fragment as a construction that is not complete but rather progresses onward into the infinite through self-reflection champions this anti-idealist motive in the midst of Idealism" (16)

– The discourse presented as a meandering, exploratory journey.

– The concentration on the object: “The essay quietly puts an end to the illusion that thought could break out of the sphere of *thesis*, culture, and move into that of *physis*, nature. Spellbound by what is fixed and acknowledged to be derivative, by artifacts, it honors nature by confirming that it no longer exists for human beings” (11).

– The treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter: “With the objectification of the world in the course of progressive demythologization, art and science have separated. A consciousness for which intuition and concept, image and sign would be one and the same – if such a conscience ever existed – cannot be magically restored, and its restitution would constitute a regression to chaos” (6).

– The emphasis on rhetorical sophistication: “Its alexandrinism is a response to the fact that by their very existence, lilacs and nightingales – where the universal net has permitted them to survive – make us believe that life is still alive” (11); “In the essay the satisfactions that rhetoric tries to provide for the listener are sublimated into the idea of a happiness in freedom vis à vis the object, a freedom that gives the object more of what belongs to it than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas” (21).

– The insistence on human fallibility, error being an essential element of the truly new: “This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death” (13).

– The central importance of play: “Luck and play are essential to it” (4).

– The invocation of intellectual freedom: “[The essay] thinks conjointly and in freedom about things that meet in its freely chosen object” (11).

In order to put Adorno’s essay in perspective, let me quote some of the severe critical objections (with many of which I do not personally agree) that have been moved against Adorno by a brilliant doctoral student from Princeton, Sarah Pourciau, who has been working with one of the utmost specialists of Benjamin studies in America, Michael Jennings. These are the shortcomings of Adorno’s thoughts, according to Sarah Pourciau (2007), who reads Adorno’s text as an attack to Heidegger’s ontological theory:

– Adorno’s essay on the essay is not as original as it appears: “To the earlier investigations of the essay form on which his text both builds and plays, Adorno appears to add little that could be considered truly new” (623).

– [He shows a] “peculiar combination of superficial sophistication and philosophical banality” (624).

– Adorno's text “dwells insistently on the essayistic relation to a negative truth, a relation established for him by way of the essay's anti-systematic form” (625).

– For Adorno “alone among nonfiction forms, the essayistic mode emphatically engages the alien, unknowable character of the aconceptual object to which the concept, as concept, necessarily relates. Enlightened reason, which would subjugate the heterogeneous world of experience to its own hierarchical laws and categories, attempts to purge the concept of its troublesome relation to an aconceptual remainder by consigning all resistant elements to the nebulous non-space of philosophical fantasy, a false utopia reserved for dilettantes and poets” (625-26).

– Adorno accepts the allegation of logical error as the necessary consequence of thinking ‘otherwise’: “In refusing to succumb to the tautology of false adequation, in attempting to thrust itself beyond a system it helped to institute and cannot, henceforth, avoid, thought leaves behind the firm ground of dogma and ideology and takes up, instead, a nomadic, wandering existence in the no man's land of the undefined, where all truth remains provisional and partial” (626).

– “By insisting on a historical link between rhetoric and the essayistic ‘dishonesty’, Adorno plays with a philosophical and theological tradition that sees in rhetoric a morally slippery set of seductive techniques. In the context of the essayistic project, the gymnastic freedom of this dissimulative mode, whose task is to persuade (if necessary, at the expense of truth) submits itself to the rigor of self-reflection, incorporating into its fictional structure the acknowledgement of its own untruth” (634).

– Adorno's version of the essay seems simultaneously to remain within conventional categories and to leave them entirely behind: “His treatment transforms the facile equations of cultural stereotypes – in this case, notions of the essay as a decadent, elitist form appropriate to a cultivated leisure class and defined primarily by an Olympian disdain for heavy-handed profundity – into the historical condition of possibility for the philosophical production of transcendence. The importance of this transformation explains his insistence on seemingly marginal and historically contingent elements of the form, including its lack of popularity in German academic circles and its appeal for Jewish ‘outsiders’ like Benjamin and Simmel; it explains, too, his concluding claim that “die Aktualität des Essays ist die des Anachronistischen” [“The contemporary relevance of the essay is that of anachronism”]” (644).

– Against the Heideggerian prioritization of rootedness, Adorno's text rehabilitates for rigorous thought the hackneyed and traditionally poisonous trope of the Wandering Jew: “[He] aligns the essay, together with the foreign words that help it perform its essayistic function, with the disruptive

force of the outsider, and specifically with the disruptive force of the twentieth century outsiders who preferred and perfected it – namely, the Jews. [For Adorno] the essay is the Jew of forms, as foreign words are the Jews of language, and the precarious power of both words and form derive from their uncomfortable relation to the (German) culture in which they dwell without belonging” (645).

It is certainly true, I must admit, that many of the features attributed to the essay by Adorno (and, with a negative dialectical stance and a scathing critical approach – possibly colored by a shade of anti-semitism, by Sarah Pourciau) can easily apply to Benjamin’s writings. For instance:

- The unorthodox, almost perverse, transformation of such well established models as the academic dissertation or the philosophical or scientific treatise into a very personal and subjective treatment of the theme.

- The choice of very original, often marginal subjects, that slowly tend to concentrate on three areas of interest: the critical theory of Romanticism, the literature of the Baroque age, the culture of Modernity.

- The keen attention to unconventional aspects of the cultural life of the past: technology, urban setting and life, fashion, photography, commodities.

- The mixture of different genres of writing: from the autobiographical memory, to the description of cities and places, to the journalistic review and moral comment, to the aphoristic observation (following the models of Nietzsche and Krauss).

- The rhetorical sophistication of the style, to the limit of obscurity (with a special kind of profundity, due to the numerous allusions and sudden illuminations).

- The tendency to leave his works incomplete (and the large use of fragmentary notations, marginal observations and comments, with different versions of the same essay, often left in very personal manuscripts).

I will, in the remaining part of this paper, concentrated on some peculiarities of Walter Benjamin’s essayistic style. On this subject there is a large bibliography (see, for instance: Menninghaus, Jakobs, Schöttker, A. Benjamin). I will start by quoting a brilliant, pioneering essay by Susan Sonntag, in which the style of Benjamin’s writing is connected with his bold set of ideas, his melancholic character, his interest in images and photography:

His characteristic form remained the essay. The melancholic's intensity and exhaustiveness of attention set natural limits to the length at which Benjamin could develop his ideas. His major essays seem to end just in time, before they self-destruct.

His sentences do not seem to be generated in the usual way; they do not entail. Each sentence is written as if it were the first, or the last. (“A writer must stop and restart with every new sentence”, he says in the Prologue to *The Origin of German*

*Trauerspiel*.) His style of thinking and writing, incorrectly called aphoristic, might better be called freeze-frame baroque. This style was torture to execute. It was as if each sentence had to say everything, before the inward gaze of total concentration dissolved the subject before his eyes. Benjamin was probably not exaggerating when he told Adorno that each idea in his book on Baudelaire and nineteenth-century Paris “had to be wrested away from a realm in which madness lies”.

Something like the dread of being stopped prematurely lies behind these sentences as saturated with ideas as the surface of a baroque painting is jammed with movement. (Sontag 129)

Sontag’s idea that the style of Benjamin’s writing gives at time the impression of a freeze-frame sounds like an allusion to the photographic device of the snapshot, or to the expression “the frozen time”, used by William Faulkner to represent both his poetics of narration and his interpretation of the historical moment in the South of the United States, where history, after the Civil war, had stopped to evolve and was almost suspended. It can also remind us of Benjamin’s conception of memory, allegory, and history. According to Benjamin both the allegorical mode and the photographic snapshot tend to give a frozen picture of the movements of history and life. Adorno, speaking of Benjamin’s childhood recollections that go under the name of *Berliner Kindheit* and, in another occasion, describing Benjamin’s personal character, has some interesting comments on his essayistic style:

The fabulous photographs of *Berliner Kindheit* are not only the wreckage of a life by a long time lost and viewed from the height of a bird-view, but also snapshots of the ethereal country that the aeronaut has taken, inducing his models to pose in a friendly manner. (Adorno, “Nachwort”179)

The essay as form consists in the ability to regard historical moments, manifestations of the objective spirit, ‘culture’, as though they were natural. Benjamin could do this as no one else. The totality of his thought is characterized by what may be called ‘natural history’. He was drawn to the petrified, frozen or obsolete elements of civilization, to everything in it devoid of domestic vitality no less irresistibly than is the collector to fossiles or to the plants in a herbarium. Small glass balls containing a landscape upon which snow fell when shook were among his favourite objects. The French word for still life, *nature morte*, could be written above the portals of his philosophical dungeons. The Hegelian concept of ‘second nature’, as the reification of self-estranged human relations, and also the Marxian category of ‘commodity-fetishism’ occupy key positions in Benjamin’s work. He is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects – as in allegory – but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, ‘ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance. Philosophy appropriates the fetishization of commodities for itself: everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break catastrophic spell of things. Benjamin’s thought is so saturated

with culture as its natural object that it swears loyalty to reification, instead of flatly rejecting it. This is the origin of Benjamin's tendency to cede his intellectual power to objects diametrically opposed to it, the most extreme example of which was his study on "The Work of Art in the Era of its Mechanical Reproduction". The glance of his philosophy is Medusan. (Adorno, "A portrait" 233)

On this aspect of Benjamin's work an American scholar, Eduardo Cadava, who teaches at Princeton, has written, with reference to Benjamin's *Theses on History*:

If Benjamin suggests that there is no history without the capacity to arrest historical movement, he also requires a mode of writing that can remain faithful to this movement of interruption or suspension. Like the gaze of the camera that momentarily fixes history in an image, the thesis condenses a network of relations into a frame whose borders remain permeable. A photograph in prose, the thesis names a force of arrest. It signals in writing the interruption of writing. As Benjamin explains, it is because historical thinking involves "not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well" that photography can become a model for the understanding of history, a model for its performance. Like the stage setting that in Benjamin's *Traverspiel* book names a process that, seizing and tearing an image from its context, works to immobilize the flow of history. This is why, following the exigency of the fragment or thesis, photography can be said to be another name for the arrest that Benjamin identifies with the moment of revolution. Although Marx identifies revolutions as the "locomotives of world history", Benjamin suggests that "perhaps it is completely otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are, in this train of traveling generations, the reach of the emergency brake". This moment of arrest is linked in Benjamin's thinking with what he sees in his essay on Goethe as the sudden emergence of the expressionless, in his "Critique of Violence" as the interruptive character of the general strike, in his writings on Baudelaire as the petrified restlessness of the image, in his writings on the mimetic faculty as the flashlike perception of similarity, and in his "Theses" as the messianic intervention into history. In each instance, Benjamin traces the effects of what he calls "the caesura in the movement of thought". This caesura – whose force of immobilization not only gives way to the appearance of an image but also intervenes in the linearity of history and politics – can be understood in relation to what we might call the photograph's Medusa effect. (Cadava xx)

It is, at this point, clear to me: Benjamin's interest in photography, as witnessed in his writings on the subject,<sup>2</sup> was not an occasional, extrinsic one. It was closely linked with his way of thinking and also with his way of writing. All the different genres that he practiced, from the academic dissertation to the newspaper article, from the philosophical aphorism to the book review, from the description of visited cities and countries to the personal memoirs, from the collection of leftovers from the past to the utopian projections of a new political and social future, they all took an

allegorical and surrealistic quality, with hidden and private (and essayistic) meanings, but also with a prophetic, hallucinatory tension.

A question comes up in this regard: why the pages on the photograph of young Benjamin and his brother and on the famous one of Kafka as a child, present in the first version of *Berliner Kindheit* have been omitted in later versions? (Benjamin, *Gesammelte* II, 69–268; VI, 465–519; IV/I, 235–304). I would venture a possible answer: Because Benjamin's attention was not on single photographs or remembered episodes of having posed for a photographer, but on photography as a general metaphor for his conception of life and history, of writing, of the "dialectical image".

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> When not otherwise indicated, the translations from the original texts are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The main writings on the subject are *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* (*Short history of photography*, 1931), *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (*The Work of Art in the Era of its Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935), the *Pariser Brief* (Letter from Paris) on painting and photography (1936), the review of Gisela Freund's book on photography (1938), numerous pages in the posthumous *Passagen Werk* (*Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*).

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## Esejistični slog Walterja Benjamina

Ključne besede: literatura in filozofija / esej / Benjamin, Walter / literarni stil

Prispevek se ukvarja s posebnim esejističnim slogom Walterja Benjamina, pri čemer se najprej zaustavi pri opredelitvah eseja, kot so jih podali György Lukács, Max Bense in Theodor Adorno, v nadaljevanju pa razvije primerjavo med Benjaminovim slogom in fotografijo. Interes, ki ga je Benjamin pokazal s pisanjem o fotografiji, ni bil slučajen in postranski. Prepričan je bil, da obstaja podobnost med alegorijo in fotografskim posnetkom, kajti oba sta nagnjena k podajanju zamrznjenih slik o trenutkih iz zgodovine in življenja. Različni žanri pisanja, ki jih je uporabljal – od akademske disertacije do časopisnega članka, od filozofskega aforizma do knjižne ocene, od opisa mest in dežel, ki jih je obiskal, do osebnih spominov, od zbirke preostankov preteklosti do utopičnih projekcij nove politične in družbene prihodnosti –, imajo na sebi nekaj alegoričnega in nadrealističnega, kar nosi v sebi skrivne in zasebne (ter esejistične) pomene, obenem pa vsebuje pre-roško, halucinacijsko napetost.

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