Ambiguity Intervenes: The Strategy of Equivocation in Adorno's "Der Essay als Form"

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“Beziehung ist alles. Und willst du sie 
näher bei Namen nennen, so ist ihr Name 
‘Zweideutigkeit.’”

Thomas Mann, Doktor Faustus

I

Adorno’s study of the essay form, published in 1958 as the opening 
piece of the volume Noten zur Literatur, has long been considered one of 
the classic discussions of the genre. Yet 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. His characterization 
of the essayistic endeavor borrows heavily and self-consciously from an 
established tradition of genre exploration that reaches back—despite

1 Thomas Mann, Doktor Faustus: das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, 
Mann acknowledges the enormous debt his novel owes to Adorno’s philosophy of music in 
Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus; Roman eines Romans (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1949). Passages 
stricken by Mann from the published version of the Entstehung are even more 
explicit on this subject. These passages were later published together with his diaries. 
See Thomas Mann, Tagebücher 1946–1948, ed. Inge Jens, Große Kommentierte Frankfurter 
2 See, for instance, Bruno Berger, Der Essay. Form und Geschichte (Bern: Francke, 1964) 
13; Gerhard Haas, Essay (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1969) 39–42; Wolfgang Adam, “Der 
Essay,” Formen der Literatur in Einzeldarstellungen, ed. Otto Knörrich (Stuttgart: Alfred 
Kröner, 1981) 88–98, esp. 89; Dieter Goltschnigg, “Essay,” Moderne Literatur in Grund- 

the prevalence of quotations from more immediate predecessors like Georg Lukács and Max Bense—to Montaigne’s sixteenth-century reflections on method, and thus to the origins of the form itself. Nearly all the familiar topoi are here: the apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey. Bordering as Adorno’s text therefore does on the peculiar combination of superficial sophistication and philosophical banality he explicitly attributes only to the “schlechten Essay” (13), his apparent refusal to say anything new requires an explanation.\(^3\) Where, here, is “das Neue als Neues, nicht ins Alte der bestehenden Formen Zurückübersetzbares” (30), celebrated by his text as the only true object of the essay? Where is the insight he claims can emerge from an essayistic reorganization of traditional platitudes?\(^4\) It is tempting to avoid this quandary entirely by locating

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\(^3\) Theodor W. Adorno, “Der Essay als Form,” _Gesammelte Schriften_ XI (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003) 9–33. All further citations of Adorno’s works refer to this edition, henceforth abbreviated as _GS_. Parenthetical references in the text are to “Der Essay als Form.”

\(^4\) Karl Heinz Bohrer raises this question—without, it would seem, any real attempt to interrogate the text for an answer—in an effort to consign Adorno’s conception of the essay form (together with those of Lukács and Bense) to the dustbin of cultural conservatism: “Wenn [der Essay] so sehr rückgekoppelt ist an schon sprachlich Artikuliertes, dann müßte er eine rückwärtsgewandte, traditionalistische Form intellektueller Perzeption sein . . . Adorno selbst bezieht sich ausschließlich auf die von der tradierten Kultur geschaffenen Normen. Seine Urbanität kennt nicht jene Pein, den Haß, der sprachlich oder gar psychotisch etwas Neues entwerfen würde.” See Bohrer, “Ausfälle gegen die kulturelle Norm. Erkenntnis und Subjektivität—Formen des Essays,” _Literaturmagazin 6: die Literatur und die Wissenschaften_, eds. Nicolas Born and Heinz Schlaffer (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1976) 15–29, here 20. Both Barbara Neymeyr and Dietmar Golschnigg have criticized Bohrer, on the grounds that his own notion of a dynamic, essayistic violence owes as much to the Adornian conception he dismisses as it does to the Romantic approach he rather arbitrarily privileges. Neymeyr, “Utopie und Experiment. Zur Konzeption des Essays bei Musil und Adorno,” _Euphorion_ 94 (2000): 79–111, here 108–11; Golschnigg 121 (see note 2 above). This critique, while justified, does not address the true source of Bohrer’s discomfort, which would seem to have less to do with the essay Adorno describes than with the essay he fails to perform. As I hope to demonstrate, however, Bohrer’s dismissal is overly hasty on this count as well. A more nuanced interpretation of the same, peculiar phenomenon—one has a sense of having heard it before, even if it is being read for the first time—can be found in Bob Hullot-Kentor’s conclusion that “the boutique moments in Adorno’s work are points where society will not allow itself to be seen.” See Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay,” _New German Critique_ 32 (1984): 141–50, here 150.
the relevance of Adorno’s text beyond the realm of the essay as literary form—by assuming that Adorno is really speaking about “something else,” like the theory of negative dialectics. This approach, however, is a dangerous one. In the attempt to “decode” a description that refers almost exclusively to an entity labeled “the essay as form,” the reader risks losing sight of the actual text. Deprived of any necessary relation to the title that binds its elements together, “Der Essay als Form” would disappear completely beneath a profusion of generalizable, translatable claims about Adornian philosophy. The apparent disjunction between title and text thus requires the reader to steer a precarious middle path between a treatment that would transform the study into a universally applicable “meta-text” and a facile understanding of the title that would measure the text parsimoniously against the genre of the “genre study,” demanding of it an innovative recipe for essay production. The act of reading resolves itself into the interrogation of a form—the form of “Der Essay als Form”—within whose confines the essay as Adornian object must ultimately emerge.

II

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. The concern for such truth, to which the essay as form ostensibly provides limited but unique access, drives his analysis from the Lukács citation on the very first page—“Und weil [der Essay] [die Dinge] nur aufs neue ordnet, nicht aus dem Formlosen etwas Neues formt, ist er auch an sie gebunden, muß er immer ‘die Wahrheit’ über sie aussprechen. Ausdruck für ihr Wesen finden” (9, n. 2)—to the image of negative revelatory power with which the text closes. In a discussion that aims to uncover the cognitive stakes of Adorno’s investigation of the essay form, it seems sensible to begin with an analysis of this posited, cognitive potential, the source of which could be said to lie in a peculiarly subversive approach to the norms of conceptual thought. Alone among nonfiction forms, the essayistic mode emphatically engages the alien, unknowable character of the conceptual 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

5”An der Sache wird durch Verstoß gegen die Orthodoxie des Gedankens sichtbar, was unsichtbar zu halten insgeheim deren objektiven Zweck ausmacht” (33).
of its troublesome relation to an aconceptual remainder by consign-
ing all resistant elements to the nebulous non-space of philosophical
fantasy, a false utopia reserved for dilettantes and poets. The essay
embraces the freedom implied by this exile, but stubbornly refuses
to renounce the claim to truth inherent in its non-fictional form, a
truth that for Adorno is (as always) first and foremost the truth of
the system’s untruth: “[Der Essay] möchte mit Begriffen aufsprengen,
was in Begriffe nicht eingehrt oder was durch die Widersprüche, in
welche diese sich verwickeln, verrät, das Netz ihrer Objektivität sei
bloß subjektive Veranstaltung” (32). The essay mobilizes the con-
ceptual tools of a positivist, rationalist, de-mythologized status quo
against the system that generates them, in the hope that the object
under investigation can be brought to “speak” the inadequacy of its
own conceptual contours.

This inadequacy, gesturing as it does toward a constitutive non-
identity at the origin of all identity, violates the principle of the
excluded middle that grounds the self-identical system of enlighten-
ment reason. Within this system, A is either B or not B, never both at
once, and the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between concept
and object therefore assumes the form of a logical contradiction,
a falsehood at odds with the foundations of all rational thought.
Adorno willingly accepts the allegation of (logical) error as the
necessary consequence of thinking “otherwise.” He rejects, however,
the accompanying charge of untruth. Error, for him, is an essential
element of the truly new, an index of the resistant tendency inherent
in all thought that would do more than merely echo the truisms of a
static status quo: “Sobald [der Geist] mehr will als bloß die administra-
tive Wiederholung und Aufbereitung des je schon Seienden, hat er
etwas Ungedecktes; die vom Spiel verlassene Wahrheit wäre nur noch
Tautologie” (29). In refusing to succumb to the tautology of false
adequation, in attempting to thrust itself beyond a system it helped
to institute and can not, 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.

Nicht sowohl vernachlässigt der Essay die zweifelsfreie Gewißheit, als daß
er ihr Ideal kündigt. Wahr wird er in seinem Fortgang, der ihn über sich

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It seems appropriate to hear in the words “etwas Ungedecktes” not only a refer-
ence to the perilously exposed (literally “uncovered”) condition of non-tautological
thought, but also a playful negation of *Sich-Decken*, Adorno’s favorite expression for
the “act” of adequation.
hinaustreibt, nicht in schatzgräberischer Obsession mit Fundamenten. Seine Begriffe empfangen ihr Licht von einem ihm selbst verborgenen terminus ad quem, nicht von einem offenbaren terminus a quo, und darin drückt seine Methode selber die utopische Intention aus. (21)

The truth to which the essay has access emerges only at the point where thinking, in an effort to remedy the insufficiency of existing categories, drives thought beyond its own boundaries (“über sich hinaustreibt”). This gesture, the act of pointing beyond the nightmare of the ever-same toward the as-yet ungraspable nebula of what could be, is for Adorno the “utopische Intention,” and the relation to this unnamable and therefore non-reifiable utopian possibility constitutes the transcendence of the essayistic truth. Adorno figures the structure of transcendence—where transcendence is to be understood, in accordance with the essence of the utopian gesture, in the literal sense of a “crossing over” or a “passing beyond”—as an excess, or Überschuß. He thereby captures in a single concept both the transgressive boundary-crossing of the Über-Sich-Hinausweisen, and the risk of error to which such “overshooting” remains always exposed. A first indication as to how, precisely, this theory of an essayistic transcendence might begin to play out at the level of actual, essayistic praxis can be found in the eminently excessive and thus potentially transcendent structure of language itself. For though “Der Essay als Form” refers exclusively to Begriffe, or concepts, and never directly to “words,” it nonetheless goes on to define the constitutive Nichtidentität as a phenomenon that resists definition. The essayistic approach must eschew the strict, definitional procedure practiced by medieval scholastics and modern positivists, since the semblance of equivalence manufactured by such artificial boundary-drawing ignores the inherent untranslatability of linguistic terms.

In Wahrheit sind alle Begriffe implizit schon konkretisiert durch die Sprache, in der sie stehen . . . [Der Essay] durchschaut, daß das Verlangen nach

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7 “Seine Schwäche zeugt von der Nichtidentität selber, die er auszudrücken hat; vom Überschuß der Intention über die Sache und damit jener Utopie, welche in der Gliederung der Welt nach Ewigen und Vergänglichem abgewehrt ist. Im emphatischen Essay entledigt sich der Gedanke der traditionellen Idee von der Wahrheit” (18, emphasis mine).

8 Adorno plays with the intimate connection between Überschuß and its literal connotations, between transcendence and the error of overshooting, when he turns to the traditional understanding of essai as attempt: “Das Wort Versuch, in dem die Utopie des Gedankens, ins Schwarze zu treffen, mit dem Bewußtsein der eigenen Fehlbarkeit und Vorläufigkeit sich vermählt, erteilt, wie meist geschichtlich überdauernde Terminologien, einen Bescheid über die Form” (25).
The non-identity of concepts with themselves exists only as a special case of a universal, linguistic condition, which dictates that words be neither self-identical (through history they acquire multiple meanings) nor self-contained (those meanings shift with context)—and that language be therefore incapable of setting limits to its own mobility. Like the transcendental structure generally, the signifying surplus pays for its escape from definitional tautology with error and uncertainty, and Adorno refers to this relation when he compares the essayistic deployment of concepts to the erratic process of dictionary-free language acquisition (21). Such exposure to error strikes terror to the hearts of Adorno’s positivist antagonists, for whom equivocation and ambiguity represent roadblocks thrown irresponsibly across the highway of scientific truth. Adorno, however, responds to the charge of irresponsibility by hurling it back at his hypothetical accusers: their fear, which would gladly reduce all language to the status of mathematical symbols in order to avoid its messy, uncontainable concreteness, transforms thought into the champion of reified Geist.

The essayistic mode, then, with its concern for transcending the boundaries of the status quo, derives its particular character from the originary structure of its language; the task of essayistic rhetoric is to drive the linguistic tension to a critical, self-reflective extreme. Such a task, however, is more complicated than it currently appears. Taken alone, the avoidance of reductive, definitional procedures remains insufficient, for the anti-positivist prioritization of the semantic surplus provides no protection against its uncritical instrumentalization—against a notion of equivocation which, abandoning or dissimulating its equivocal character, metamorphoses into a new form of adequation and becomes hypostasized as the locus of a timeless truth.9 The transcendence of non-adequation describes a movement of negation that must first be performed, not a previously existing entity to be passively protected; the maintenance of the linguistic tension

9 Adorno himself explicitly rejects the practice of intentional obfuscation. See, for instance, the introduction to Negative Dialektik, where he speaks of the necessity for a self-critical, self-reflective rhetoric, or Minima Moralia, where he describes unclear textual formation (Gestaltung) as “dilettantisch.” Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialektik, GS VI (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003) 63–66 and Minima Moralia, GS IV (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003) 162. Despite such clear indications of his position, many readers of “Der Essay als Form” have understood Adorno to be privileging confusion for its own
requires nothing less than its relentless (re)actualization. “[D]as zählreibig Archaische in der Sprache [wird] fruchtbar nur, wo sie kritisch daran sich reibt; zum tödlichen Trugbild, wo sie es von sich aus bestätigt und verstärkt.”¹⁰

The critique of such hypostatization forms the foundation for Adorno’s polemic against Heideggerian ontology and the kind of language he terms the “Jargon der Eigentlichkeit,” a polemic to which he devotes fully a third of the Negative Dialektik, the entirety of a book entitled Jargon der Eigentlichkeit, and a substantial portion of “Der Essay als Form”:

Die Transzendenz der Wahrheit über die Bedeutung der einzelnen Worte und Urteile wird von [dem Jargon] den Worten als ihr unwandelbarer Besitz zugeschlagen, während jenes Mehr allein in der Konstellation, vermittelt sich bildet. Philosophische Sprache geht, ihrem Ideal nach, hinaus über das, was sie sagt, vermöge dessen, was sie sagt, im Zug des Gedankens. Sie transzendiert dialektisch, indem in ihr der Widerspruch von Wahrheit und Gedanken sich seiner selbst bewußt und damit seiner mächtig wird. Zerstörend beschlagnahmt der Jargon solche Transzendenz, überantwortet sie seinem Klappern. Was die Worte mehr sagen als sie sagen, wird ihnen ein für allemal als Ausdruck zugeschanzt, Dialektik abgebrochen; die von Wort und Sache ebenso wie die innersprachliche zwischen den Einzelwörtern und ihrer Relation.¹¹

In the attempt to give oneself over wholly to the transcendence of language, so the critique runs, the rhetorical rigor that could potentially allow for the productive actualization of the Überschuß structure loses all its form-giving force. Thus fetishized, language comes to simulate a pre-critical, mystical murmur arising out of the formless depths of primordial Being, a degradation reflected in the anti-transcendent

¹¹Adorno, Jargon der Eigentlichkeit 420. See also Adorno, “Der Essay als Form” 14. The relevant section of Negative Dialektik is the first part, entitled “Verhältnis zur Ontologie.” Jargon der Eigentlichkeit, as Adorno explains in an appended note, was originally intended as a component of the former work, but eventually took on a life of its own and was published independently in 1964. I will make no attempt to assess the legitimacy of Adorno’s Heidegger critique here. For two in-depth attempts to tackle this and other questions pertaining to the Heidegger-Adorno relationship, see Fred Dallmayr, Between Freiburg and Frankfurt: Toward a Critical Ontology (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1991) and Hermann Mörchen, Adorno und Heidegger: Untersuchung einer philosophischen Kommunikationsverweigerung (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981).
character of the philosophy it expresses.12 History discovers its true essence in a timeless historicity, and salvation consists in achieving harmony with what one in truth always already is beneath the illusion of flux: “was man ohnehin ist [wird] sich noch einmal zum Zweck.”13

The essayistic approach to language must protect itself against a Heideggerian hypostatization of the transcendence it attempts to perform. The “error” of non-positivist language is not a reservoir but a task—the task of straying without cease, of diverging forever anew, in persistent opposition to a position that would obliterate its disruptive potential by bestowing on it the illusion of an objective presence. Such continual erring has an aura of impotence that points us in the direction of its philosophical underpinnings. In Negative Dialektik, one year after publishing “Der Essay als Form,” Adorno defines philosophy as the necessity, “gegen Wittgenstein zu sagen, was nicht sich sagen läßt. Der einfache Widerspruch dieses Verlangens ist der von Philosophie selbst: er qualifiziert sie als Dialektik, ehe sie nur in ihre einzelnen Widersprüche sich verwickelt. Die Arbeit philosophischer Selbstreflexion besteht darin, jene Paradoxie auseinanderzulegen.”14

The language of paradoxical opposition is here so characteristically Adornian, the oscillations of the syntax so familiar, that the radical import of these sentences may not immediately spring to light: by locating the essence of philosophy in the “simple contradiction” of what must but cannot be said, Adorno quite matter-of-factly announces the fundamental impossibility of the philosophical project.

A self-reflective philosopher must take seriously the paradoxical character that his philosophical activities thereby assume. Adorno himself goes on to do just that by asserting that without faith in the

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12 Though Heidegger recognizes the untruth of the alienated, reified status quo, he nevertheless seeks to derive from the deformations of a “vergesellschaftete Gesellschaft” the undistorted conditions of possibility for being-as-such—a process that, according to Adorno, grounds the potentially transient malformations of the modern era in the timeless, unpolluted essence they supposedly both conceal and express, thereby rendering them unsusceptible to radical change. For a characteristically Adornian complaint in this vein, see the following passage from Jargon der Eigentlichkeit 480: “Aber Heidegger bürdet den kritischen Befund einer negativen ontologischen Befindlichkeit, dem ‘alltäglichen Sein des Da,’ auf, das in Wahrheit geschichtlichen Wesens ist. . . . Dies Unwesen ist entsprungen und abzuschaffen, nicht als Wesen des Daseins zu beklagen und zu belassen.” Or again, on page 441: “Die Frage nach Sinn als nach dem, was etwas eigentlich ist und was darin sich versteckt, schafft jedoch die nach dem Recht jenes Etwas vielfach unvermerkt, und deshalb um so prompter, fort.”

13 Adorno, Jargon der Eigentlichkeit 439.

possibility of the philosophical project, even the simplest thoughts would be unthinkable:

Ein wie immer fragwürdiges Vertrauen darauf, daß es der Philosophie doch möglich sei; daß der Begriff den Begriff, das Zurüstende und Abschnei-
dende übersteigen und dadurch ans Begrifflose heranreichen könne, ist
der Philosophie unabdingbar und damit etwas von der Naivität, an der sie
krankt. Sonst muß sie kapitulieren und mit ihr aller Geist. Nicht die
einfachste Operation ließe sich denken, keine Wahrheit wäre, emphatisch
wäre alles nur nichts.\(^{15}\)

A hasty logician would conclude from this line of reasoning that, since
simple operations can indeed be thought, the philosophical project
must also be feasible—despite the assertion of the previous lines. But
Adorno is never hasty and he is not, or not only, a logician. He does
not shy away from logical contradictions as long as he believes them
to be grounded in the object of his investigation rather than his own
thought process (“Der einfache Widerspruch dieses Verlangens ist
der von Philosophie selbst”). A careful reading of this part of the pas-
sage demonstrates that Adorno nowhere makes the claim accepted
as premise by the hypothetical logician. What he says, rather, is that
simple thoughts would become unthinkable if philosophers could no
longer believe in the possibility of their project—the possibility itself
receives a consistently subjunctive treatment perfectly in keeping with
the notion of its actual nonexistence. The philosopher must believe
in the possibility of a project whose impossibility he must nevertheless
unceasingly reflect.\(^{16}\)

The significance of this paradox for the Adornian method cannot
be overestimated. Philosophy, according to Adorno, has always aimed
at a truth that would go beyond the mere reproduction of existence.
But the technique of turning the endpoint into an already established
essence, thereby presupposing the reality of what must first be created

\(^{15}\) Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 21.
\(^{16}\) Wolfgang Müller-Funk understands the impossibility of Adorno’s project in terms
of an ethical aporia expressed by the question: “Wie läßt es sich in der Hölle leben?”
According to this reading, it is Adorno’s awareness that one can not, in fact, *live* in hell,
that generates the endlessly acrobatic activity of the negative dialectic. See Müller-Funk,
und Geschichte des Essayismus* (Berlin: Akademie, 1995) 241–67, here 240. For an interesting
attempt to address the consequences of Adorno’s position for the practice of critical
theory—an attempt that studiously avoids condemning him for his refusal to functionalize
theory by subordinating it to a particular, revolutionary practice—see Michael Sullivan
and John T. Lysaker, “Between Impotence and Illusion: Adorno’s Art of Theory and
through the concrete process of thought, annihilates the *project-ness* of the philosophical project; the urgent desire for a truth that transcends what *is* degenerates into an indirect affirmation of the world behind which such truth supposedly hides. This technique is a perversion of philosophy and the root of all ideology since Plato: “[Die Ideologie] steckt in der Substruktion eines Ersten selbst, gleichgültig fast welchen Inhalts, in der impliziten Identität von Begriff und Sache, welche die Welt auch dann rechtfertigt, wenn summarisch die Abhängigkeit des Bewußtseins vom Sein gelehrt wird.”17 The notion of impossibility must therefore be understood as Adorno’s rigorous attempt to render philosophical transcendence impervious to this fundamentally affirmative structure of thought, this “Gesetztes, das als Ansichsein auftritt.”18 Whereas Heidegger makes the idea of the project into a constitutive moment in the essence of *Dasein*, Adorno transforms the *Ansichsein* of essence back into a philosophical project. Instead of a ground to be revealed or an origin to be recuperated, truth here becomes a utopian goal, normative precisely insofar as it remains non-existent and non-actualizable. The structure of forging ahead in spite of the impossibility of actualization—the structure of *doing it anyway* proposed by the *Negative Dialektik*—is thus importantly misleading, for it obscures beneath its display of defiance a crucial relation of dependence. The philosophical project occurs not in spite of its impossibility, but because of it, and the hope that Adorno describes as “die einzige Gestalt, in der Wahrheit erscheint”19 draws both its power and its desperate

17 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 50.
18 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 32. On the inescapability of this movement, see Adorno, “Der Essay als Form” 27: “Unheil droht der geistigen Erfahrung, je angestrengter sie zu Theorie sich verfestigt und gebärdet, als habe sie den Stein der Weisen in Händen. Gleichwohl strebt geistige Erfahrung selbst dem eigenen Sinn nach solcher Objektivierung zu. Diese Antinomie wird vom Essay gespiegelt.” See also Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 17: “Der Schein von Identität wohnt jedoch dem Denken selber seiner puren Form nach inne. Denken heißt identifizieren.” The battle against the affirmative character of thought reappears in the final lines of “Der Essay als Form” as the defining criterion and “innerste[s] Formgesetz” of the genre. According to Adorno’s concluding words, the essay measures the legitimacy of its (negative) relation to the status quo with reference not to some eternally valid ideal, but to the sentiment expressed in a late Nietzsche fragment, which celebrates the affirmation of a single existing detail as a microcosmic affirmation of the whole. Adorno glosses his citation of the fragment with a qualification that turns it inside out: “Nur daß der Essay noch solcher Rechtfertigung und Bejahung mißtraut. Für das Glück, das Nietzsche heilig war, weiß er keinen anderen Namen als den negativen” (33). The essay form succeeds only to the extent that it manages to avoid even the most infinitesimal gesture of the existential affirmation Nietzsche so enthusiastically celebrates.
urgency from the hopeless status quo against which it defines itself: “Philosophie, die einmal überholt schien, erhält sich am Leben, weil der Augenblick ihrer Verwirklichung versäumt ward.”

Under such paradoxical circumstances, both the philosophical project and its essayistic counterpart necessarily take on the self-consciously whimsical character of the “as if” logic that shapes them. Adorno’s text on the essay implicitly acknowledges the pervasiveness of this logic by repeatedly describing its object as a form that dwells in the subjunctive: “er muß so sich fügen, als ob er immer und stets abbrechen könnte” (25); “listig macht [er] sich fest in die Texte, als wären sie schlechterdings da und hätten Autorität” (29); “[u]nwahres liegt gewiß auch in seiner bloßen Form, der Beziehung auf kulturell Vorgeformtes, Abgeleitetes, als wäre es an sich” (28). The use of the adjective “listig” leaves no room for the possibility of self-deception—thought must be capable of reflecting on its own constitutive unreality if it is to avoid a reversion to ideology:

A task undertaken in full cognizance of its impossibility demands a kind of candid disingenuousness, a self-reflexive urbanity that bespeaks both an unusual degree of mental flexibility—Adorno refers to “Gehirnakrobatik”—and a playful appreciation for the power of irony. These distinctly unscientific, anti-ontological virtues find appropriate expression in the essayistic approach to language, an approach named explicitly toward the conclusion of “Der Essay als Form”:

Bewegt sich die Wahrheit des Essays durch seine Unwahrheit, so ist sie nicht im bloßen Gegensatz zu seinem Unehrlichen und Verfemten aufzusuchen sondern in diesem selber, seiner Mobilität, seinem Mangel an jenem Soliden, dessen Forderung die Wissenschaft von Eigentumsverhältnissen

21 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 45.
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.\textsuperscript{23} Redeemed rhetoric, metaphorically speaking, speaks in the subjunctive, for only by exposing its own fundamental deformity can it transcend the principle of verbal domination in which it originates. As a fictional distortion of what “really is,” the rhetoric of the essay resists translation into the known, tautological terms of the status quo. As a reflected, undissimulated distortion, however, it also maintains its claim to a “Wahrheit bar des ästhetischen Scheins,” thereby foiling all positivist attempts to consign it to the defanged, “non-cognitive” space of literature.

\textbf{III}

We have now arrived at a point where it once again makes sense to frame that simplest and most compelling of questions, namely: what does all this actually mean? An understanding of essayistic transcendence and its conceptual link to language is certainly useful and perhaps even necessary for a reading of “Der Essay als Form,” but as a reading, it does not venture far enough, for the structures remain abstract. Toward that height so recently absented by God and \textit{Geist}, Adorno thrusts the self-reflexive negativity of the “as if.” But self-reflexivity alone cannot guarantee the transcendence of philosophical

\textsuperscript{22}Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{23}On the necessity of a self-reflexive rhetoric, see the following passage: “Die leise Nachgiebigkeit der Gedankenführung des Essayisten zwingt ihn zu größerer Intensität als der des diskursiven Gedankens, weil der Essay nicht gleich diesem blind, automatisiert verfährt, sondern in jedem Augenblick auf sich selber reflektieren muß. Diese Reflexion freilich erstreckt sich nicht nur auf sein Verhältnis zum etablierten Denken sondern ebenso auch auf das zu Rhetorik und Kommunikation. Sonst wird, was überwissenschaftlich sich dünkt, etel vorwissenschaftlich” (32). The last sentence is a clear reference to practitioners of a Heideggerian-style ontology. In failing to reflect on their relation to rhetoric, they fall prey, in Adorno’s terms, to the hypostatization of a false linguistic transcendence and an anachronistic (\textit{vorwissenschaftlich}) variety of mystical obfuscation.
rhetoric; nor can negation ever fully determine the relation between
the present-tense of existence, which by definition encompasses
all that can be known, and the radical futurity of the normative,
philosophical goal. The no man’s land of negation must take posi-
tive shape or risk degenerating into the abyss of the arbitrary. What
would an essay look like, for Adorno? What would it mean concretely
to write from the rhetorical perspective of the “as if”? What do all these
Adornian concepts—transcendence, philosophy, dialectic, rhetoric,
essay, truth—have to do with the more conventionally defined terms
whose spelling they share?

I believe that the answer to all three questions can be coaxed out
of a passage from the final pages of “Der Essay als Form,” in which
Adorno elaborates on the essayistic relation to rhetoric. Since the
order of the sentences plays as important a role in my reading as their
substance, I will cite it here in full:

Die anstößigen Übergänge der Rhetorik aber, in denen Assoziation,
Mehrdeutigkeit der Worte, Nachlassen der logischen Synthesis es dem
Hörer leicht machten und den Geschwächten dem Willen des Redners
unterjochten, werden im Essay mit dem Wahrheitsgehalt verschmolzen.
Seine Übergänge desavouieren die bündige Ableitung zugunsten von Quer-
verbindungen der Elemente, für welche die diskursive Logik keinen Raum
hat. Er benutzt Äquivocationen nicht aus Schlamperei, nicht in Unkenntnis
ihres scientifischen Verbots, sondern um heimzubringen, wozu die Äqui-
vokationskritik, die bloße Trennung der Bedeutungen selten gelangt: daß
überall, wo ein Wort Verschiedenes deckt, das Verschiedene nicht ganz
verschieden sei, sondern daß die Einheit des Worts an eine wie sehr auch
verborgene in der Sache mahnt, ohne daß freilich diese, nach dem Brauch
gegenwärtiger restaurativer Philosophien, mit Sprachverwandtschaften
verwechselt werden dürfte. Auch darin streift der Essay die musikalische
Logik, die stringente und doch begriffslose Kunst des Übergangs, um der
redenden Sprache etwas zuzueignen, was sie unter der Herrschaft der
diskursiven Logik einbüßte, die sich doch nicht überspringen, bloß in
ihren eigenen Formen überlisten läßt kraft des eindringenden subjektiven
Ausdrucks. (31)

The difficulty of the passage derives from Adorno’s decision to insert a
lengthy remark about equivocation (“Er benutzt Äquivocationen . . .”) between
sentences exclusively concerned with the essayistic mode of
transition. These sentences share a lexicon (“diskursive Logik,” “Über-
gang”) and seem perfectly suited to follow one another immediately so
that Adorno’s transitional observations about the power of polysemy
have the effect of an interruptive digression despite the fact that he
includes multiple meanings in his list of “anstößigen Übergänge.” A reading of the passage must account for this apparent stylistic breakdown, which intentionally undermines a potentially smooth transition at precisely the point where the textual content revolves around the problem of stylistic transition.

A possible solution lies hidden in the reference to a musical logic that serves to redeem a fallen, instrumentalized language—a logic the essay approaches, according to Adorno’s connective syntax (“auch darin streift der Essay die musikalische Logik”), precisely by way of its attitude toward equivocation. The logic of music is a logic of transition in a double sense: not only does music generate its own structure and “vocabulary” through the rigorous process of its temporal unfolding, it also, in its most progressive form, effects a partial transition from the everyday language of intention to a transcendent language of revelation. As Adorno writes in his “Fragment über Musik und Sprache”: “Musik zielt auf eine intentionslose Sprache . . . Sie verweist auf die wahre Sprache als auf eine, in der der Gehalt selber offenbar wird . . .”

Music, of course, can not claim to reach this “true,” utopian language any more than the essay can hope to arrive at the normative goal of philosophical thought; its capacity for transcendence lies rather in the dialectical gesture of a transition in progress. The pertinent point, for a reading of “Der Essay als Form,” is that in comparing the essayistic logic to the musical one, Adorno carefully leaves room for the inference that this text, too, might be operating with a dual notion of transition. If we make such an assumption, the role of the oddly placed remark on essayistic equivocation becomes suddenly comprehensible, for the interruption turns out to mark a transition between kinds of transition—between the stylistic notion treated in the previous sentence as a matter of technique, and the “stringente und doch begiffslose Kunst des Übergangs” that rescues language from the straitjacket of discursive logic in the sentence that follows. An equivocation in the term “transition” provides the pivot point of the passage (a transition in the stylistic sense), thereby performatively demonstrating that the category of multiple meanings indeed deserves its position in Adorno’s list of transitional techniques.

In “Fragment über Musik und Sprache,” Adorno writes that the transition from a meaning-oriented, intentionalist language to a revelatory, utopian one occurs only “um den Preis der Eindeutigkeit, die

überging an die meinenden Sprachen.” In “Der Essay als Form,” he offers a slightly different perspective on the relation between equivocation and linguistic transcendence, one that, like the essay form itself, attempts to wedge itself into the non-space between the positivist rejection and the ontologists’ hypostatization. Here, the phenomenon of multiple meanings is no longer a regrettable penalty to be paid, but the condition of possibility for the philosophical project, since only the correct approach to linguistic equivocation can give “back” to language some part of what was “lost” in its instrumentalization at the hands of discursive logic—an instrumentalization that was almost certainly in effect from the very beginning despite the nostalgia for an undefiled origin seemingly implied by these lines.

The grandeur of this claim makes sense, I would argue, only if we assume that beneath the apparently prosaic notion of linguistic equivocation, Adorno has buried something like a negative theology of names.

Adapting the structure of the medieval theological dilemma regarding the (im)possibility of a relation between the divine...
attributes, or names of God, and their linguistically identical earthly counterparts, he introduces into philosophical terminology—into the names of the concepts—the notion of a radical semantic difference corresponding to the disjuncture between present-tense tautology and impossible future utopia. According to this understanding, each term possesses both a conventional meaning (or meanings), whose function is primarily descriptive and referential, and an essentially normative, “true” meaning, whose actual, referential capacity remains infinitely postponed. These normative names have access to the transcendence of truth precisely because what they name does not yet exist—to speak them properly means, as Adorno suggests elsewhere regarding foreign words, to draw them backward into the false regime of the present as representatives of the redeemed and redemptive linguistic future to which they “actually” belong.28

Writing essayistically thus becomes a question of transforming the copula in order to make room for this fundamental equivocation. The positivist obsession with clarity eliminates the normative character of philosophical terminology, and with it, any possibility of escape from the deductive tautology of the system. Heidegger’s claim to a phenomenological description of an essence beyond and beneath existence collapses the difference between the two categories of meaning; the result is a normative injunction thatpretends to be purely descriptive, thereby presupposing obedience as an established fact and abolishing the temporal delay required for the exercise of will: “Die grammatische Übersetzung des Imperativs in die Prädikation macht ihn kategorisch; er duldet keine Weigerung, weil er . . . möglichen Widerstand noch der bloßen logischen Form nach ausmerzt.”29

For Adorno, both

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28 For Adorno’s perspective on the use of foreign words, see the two short pieces, “Wörter aus der Fremde,” and “Über den Gebrauch von Fremdwörtern” in Noten zur Literatur, GS XI (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003) 216–32 and 640–46 respectively. In “Wörter aus der Fremde,” Adorno offers the following remarks on the relationship of foreign words to an as yet nonexistent utopian language: “Fremdwörter, richtig und verantwortlich gebraucht, müßten . . . [den Menschen] vorhalten, was allen einmal möglich wäre, wenn es kein Bildungsprivileg mehr gäbe . . . Damit könnten die Fremdwörter etwas von jener Utopie der Sprache, einer Sprache ohne Erde, ohne Gebundenheit an den Bann des geschichtlichen Daseienden bewahren, die bewußlos in ihrem kindlichen Gebrauch lebt. Hoffnungslos wie Totenköpfe warten die Fremdwörter darauf, in einer besseren Ordnung erweckt zu werden” (224). In the same essay, he refers to philosophical terminology as the “Inbegriff der Fremdwörter” (221).
alternatives are equally dangerous, insofar as their understanding of the copula falls prey to the desire for adequation: the duty of philosophical predication is not to simulate remainderless identity but to imply the subjunctive even where it remains grammatically absent, a task Adorno’s own writing fulfills through the frequent appearance of verbs like mahnen and müssen. Transcendence, literally a kind of displacement of thought, occurs linguistically only as a rhetorical distortion, as an ironic inversion of the logician’s beloved propositional statement, skewing all descriptive accuracy in the direction of the non-existent normative.

This normative deformation, however, acquires relevance only if it can be assumed to have some legitimate relation to the reality on which it makes its claims. Adorno’s single remark on the subject of equivocation serves primarily to stipulate such a relationship: the essay justifies its use of equivocation only insofar as it manages to demonstrate that “überall, wo ein Wort Verschiedenes deckt, das Verschiedene nicht ganz verschieden sei, sondern daß die Einheit des Worts an eine wie sehr auch verborgene in der Sache mahnt. . . .” The unity of the word, however, has no more objective reality than the linguistic surplus it regulates—the point of the passage lies in the fact that the essay must first perform the principle in order to accomplish what the eminently unperformative Äquivokationskritik could not. The notion of such a performative link forms, for all its lack of fanfare, one of the indispensable building blocks of the Adornian method, for it accomplishes the seemingly impossible task of establishing a substantial, non-arbitrary relation between the present-tense and the philosophical goal. The presence of a positive relation in this sense does not negate the all-important negation carried out under the sign of an infinite postponement. Radical divergence, unlike simple opposition, maintains itself in the formal tension produced by the perpetual consciousness of its own impossibility—a tension that need not be doubled at the level of content. Counter-intuitive as the notion might be, it is therefore possible to imagine a descriptive present-tense and a normative future that would be bound up in each other substantially, while formally preserving their infinite distance.

The way this relation works at the level of the individual word can be made evident in nearly every one of Adorno’s texts, and is particularly

obvious in his often extravagantly slippery usage of key philosophical terms. The structure receives its paradigmatic expression, however, in a small piece delivered to a German radio audience—entitled “Auf die Frage: Was ist deutsch?”—in which Adorno turns explicitly to a question of definition. A brief sketch of the argumentational arc will suffice to bring the structure to light. He begins by questioning the legitimacy of the question, which depends for its semantic force on the distillation of a potentially nonexistent national entity, and which therefore tends to elicit “jenen selbstgefälligen Definitionen, die als das spezifisch Deutsche unterstellen nicht, was es ist, sondern wie man es sich wünscht”:

Das Ideal muß zur Idealisierung herhalten . . . [Die Frage] verselbständigt die kollektive Wesenheit “deutsch,” von der dann ausgemacht werden soll, was sie charakterisiere. Die Bildung nationaler Kollektive jedoch . . . hält sich innerhalb jener Stereotypen, die von Denken gerade aufzulösen wären. Ungewiß, ob es etwas wie den Deutschen, oder das Deutsche, oder irgendein Ähnliches in anderen Nationen, überhaupt gibt.

A philosophical approach to the question can not, however, simply ignore such stereotypes, for they alone provide the word “deutsch” with its conventional, historically determined meaning, a meaning that must be interrogated for its historical truth content:

Erinnert sei an die berühmteste Formel des deutschen kollektiven Narzißmus, die Wagnersche: deutsch sein heißt, eine Sache um ihrer selbst willen tun. Unleugbar die Selbstgerechtigkeit des Satzes . . . Richtig jedoch bleibt, daß das Tauschverhältnis, die Ausbreitung des Warencharakters über alle Sphären, auch die des Geistes . . . im späteren achtzehnten und im neunzehnten Jahrhundert in Deutschland nicht so weit gediehen war wie in den kapitalistisch fortgeschritteneren Ländern.

By translating a supposedly timeless essence back into the contingent historical conditions from which it sprang, Adorno carefully undermines the poisonous hypostatization that would reduce such


31Thomas Levin notes that Adorno is here following a Nietzschean precedent from *Jenseits des Gut und Böse*. Nietzsche locates the specificity of Germanness in the German capacity to elude definition, and thus to constantly call forth and into question the very question of what is German. See Levin, “Nationalities of Language: Adorno’s *Fremdwörter*. An Introduction to ‘On the Question: What is German?’” *New German Critique* 36 (1985): 111–19, here 111.

32Adorno, “Auf die Frage” 691.

33Adorno, “Auf die Frage” 693.
concrete, historical experience to the hollowness of stereotype and render it illegitimate as the object of philosophical investigation. For him, the colloquial understanding of “deutsch” refers not to a national essence, but to an ongoing empirical phenomenon of economic and political “Rückständigkeit,” a phenomenon to which he attaches the greatest philosophical significance as the historical foundation for all transcendent thought:

Intentionen, die sich beim Bestehenden nicht bescheiden: ich würde sagen qualitativ moderne Intentionen, leben von Rückständigkeit im ökonomischen Verwertungsprozeß. Auch sie ist keine nationale deutsche Eigentümlichkeit, sondern bezeugt gesamtgesellschaftliche Widersprüche. Bisher kennt Geschichte keinen geradlinigen Fortschritt. Solange er einsträhnig verläuft . . . verkörpert sich, was geistig darüber hinausreicht, eher in dem mit der Haupttendenz nicht ganz Mitgekommenen als in dem, was up to date ist. Das mag noch . . . die Chance des deutschen Geistes sein.

Immediately after this passage, Adorno shifts his attention to the German language, which he names as the “objective” reason for his decision to return to Germany after the war. The particularity of German as a language—“de[r] metaphysische[ ] Überschuß der deutschen Sprache” turns out to be remarkably similar to the historical particularity of the German Geist: it, too, is the historical result of a developmental backwardness; it, too, provides access to a transcendence that remains constantly open to the degradation of hypostatization.

34 Adorno, “Auf die Frage” 699.
35 Adorno, “Auf die Frage” 701.

Adorno’s argument for the uniquely transcendent potential of the German language participates self-consciously and unapologetically in the same long tradition of linguistic chauvinism to which Heidegger’s prioritization of German as the language of thought so emphatically belongs: “Denn [die griechische] Sprache ist (auf Möglichkeit des Denkens gesehen) neben der deutschen die mächtigste und geistigste zugleich.” Martin Heidegger, Einführung in die Metaphysik, Gesamtausgabe 40 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klo-
Adorno himself draws this latter comparison and, in doing so, circles back to the more general question of Germanness in order to finish the critique of the question with which he began—a critique that now, paradoxically, becomes his answer to the question of what is German. Transcendent depth, rendered conceivable by the particularly German experience of Ruckständigkeit, lies not in a desire for essence that would celebrate the profundity of existing conditions, but in the dissatisfied rejection of all such static, definitional equations:

Ist etwas noch tief, nämlich unzufrieden mit blind eingeschliffenen Vorstellungen, dann die Aufkündigung von jeglichem verdeckenden Einverständnis mit der Unabdingbarkeit des Leidens . . . In der Treue zur Idee, daß, wie es ist, nicht das letzte sein sollte—nicht in hoffnungslosen Versuchen, festzustellen, was das Deutsche nun einmal sei, ist der Sinn zu vermuten, den dieser Begriff noch behaupten mag: im Übergang zur Menschheit.57

The true meaning of Germanness, it turns out, manifests itself only as the normative necessity to constantly transcend the simple, propositional form “Deutsch ist . . .”—in der Treue zur Idee, daß, wie es ist, nicht das letzte sein sollte—by moving in the direction of a non-existent, utopian humanity. Deutsch-sein, in order to become truly “deutsch,” must give way to Mensch-werden. German is (not yet) what it should be. The self-satisfied definitional structure ridiculed in the opening lines, according to which German is (already) what German should be, reappears here empowered by the exposure of its unreality. Adorno reverses the hypostasizing impulse through which the ideal degenerates into an impotent idealization (“das Ideal muß zur Idealisierung herhalten”38), until, no longer forced to dissimulate its normative not-yetness, the ideal reclaims the dynamic intensity of an injunction. Unreal as it must remain, this ideal is anything but ahistorical, for it takes shape only as a potential discernible among certain empirical, historical conditions—in this case the economic and cultural backwardness of the Germans—whose philosophical truth-content it then constitutes. The word “deutsch,” in referring simultaneously to both historical reality and normative potential, expresses the all-important relation that binds the two together.

37 Adorno, “Auf die Frage” 701.
38 Adorno, “Auf die Frage” 691.
Keeping in mind the structure of linguistic equivocation, it is now finally possible to return to the questions posed at the outset of this discussion—questions regarding the novelty of Adorno’s claims for the essay form, the relation between title and text, and the status of the essay as object of investigation. At first glance, the notion of an essayistic transcendence would seem to provide sufficient proof of Adorno’s contribution to the theory of the genre—transcendence, after all, does not play an integral role in the conventional notion of the essay. As I pointed out earlier, however, there is a serious problem with this line of reasoning, for while Adorno’s delineation of an essayistic mode of truth certainly transcends the conception of the essay available from within the genre tradition, his treatment also explodes any possible conception of the essay as genre. Within the context of his epistemological claims, the essay ceases to function as a literary object, the boundaries of which would be primarily determined by a set of formal features, and comes instead to denote a suspiciously Adornian mode of externalized thought—a “konkrete[n] Verfahrenweise des Geistes” that manages, in its undogmatic, performative approach, to become “dialektischer als die Dialektik” (24). Nowhere, it is true, does Adorno go so far as to identify the essay with the dialectic of determinate negation; his implicit claim is rather that the essayistic mode of presentation bears a unique, structural affinity to the dialectical approach. Such a qualification, however, does not redeem the discussion of an essayistic truth for an exploration of genre. A definition of the essay as form grounded solely in the specificity of its cognitive mode must necessarily exclude from its provenance all examples of the genre whose contents do not conform to the presumed cognitive potential of their form—which in essence turns out to mean all examples of the genre whose approach Adorno finds insufficiently dialectical. Hence the category of the “schlechten Essay,” defined less by a lack of literary skill or an ignorance of traditional essayistic praxis than by an incompatibility of content with the ideals of the negative dialectic.39

Such reasoning results in a disturbing and ultimately unsatisfying paradox: Adorno’s version of the essay seems simultaneously to remain within conventional categories and to leave them entirely behind.

39 For Adorno, “der Kardinalfehler aller späteren essayistischen Arbeiten von Lukács” resides in an excessive and thus undialectical dependence on theory (26–27). See also the comments pertaining to the commodification of the essay form in the work of Stefan Zweig (12–13).
The confusion only occurs, however, because the reader expects “the essay”—and receives instead an equivocal term. In Adorno’s hands, the word “essay” comes to denote both the readily recognizable object, molded by a historical tradition of essay writing and genre investigation, and the non-existent, normative ideal toward which that tradition supposedly gestures. The connection between the two lies in what he sees as the form’s historical proclivity to resist the all but irresistible reductions of systematic adequation in favor of undiluted difference and unresolved asymmetry. As in “Auf die Frage: Was ist deutsch?,” 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” (32). For it is precisely in and through this quality of contingent, historical alienation, this unpopular, un-German anachronicity, that the essay as genre acquires its redemptive Rückständigkeit with respect to the status quo—the very Rückständigkeit that emerges in “Auf die Frage” as the potential reservoir of the utopian impulse.

To derive this normative, utopian potential from the historical reality of the form is, therefore, the project of the text, a project subtly but accurately named in its profoundly equivocal title: “The Essay as Form.”40 “Form,” in this context, refers not only to an existing genre, but to a posited one that has yet to be founded—one that the historically contingent tradition makes thinkable, even as it hinders its realization. The weight of the positing gesture falls here on the “as”—the abbreviation of the rhetorical “as if”—which alone separates the philosophical act of thinking the normative goal from the academic task of clarifying a literary form. The presence of this “as” makes it necessary to read in the word “form” an allusion to the essayistic ideal, not in the Platonic sense of existent, timeless essence, but in the Adornian one of perpetual possibility.

40 For a brief but illuminating discussion of performativity and polysemy in Adorno’s titles, see the opening paragraph of Hullot-Kentor, “Title Essay” 141 (see note 4 above).
The essay as form remains first and foremost an idea, a movement of thought that forfeits the possibility of its actualization by refusing to bow down before the tautological domination of existence. Adorno cares far less for the reality of Essay-sein than for the process of Essay-werden; his thoughts are devoted to the essay, “der Idee nach,” and thus to a trail they can follow only by veering off into the uncharted territory of an impossible hypothetical (16). In refusing to dissimulate his divergence from the descriptive straight and narrow, however, he simultaneously accomplishes the purification of the conventional genre study to which his title playfully alludes. By discreetly demonstrating the hypocrisy of an academic mode that routinely disguises as description its built-in normative claims, Adorno redeems the question of form for the experience of philosophical truth.

V

I will end with a question. It is a question that threatens to destabilize, in a paradigmatically Adornian manner, the Adornian categories here analyzed, and one that therefore deserves to be raised at the conclusion of my attempt to read Adorno with Adorno. “Der Essay als Form” 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. To speak once more in Adorno’s voice before leaving it (mostly) behind: the essay is the Jew of forms, as foreign words are the Jews of language,41 and the precarious power of both words and form derive from their uncomfortable relation to the (German) culture in which they dwell without belonging. Against a Heideggerian prioritization of rootedness, “Der Essay als Form” rehabilitates for rigorous thought the hackneyed and traditionally poisonous trope of the Wandering Jew in a gesture very similar to the transformative reappropriation of German backwardness performed by “Auf die Frage.”

41 Adorno, “Fremdwörter sind die Juden der Sprache,” Minima Moralia 125.
This very similarity, however, poses a problem since the two gestures have in common not only the philosophically-motivated rehabilitation of historical stereotypes, but also, as we have seen, the structure of outsider-dom itself. *Die Aktualität des Deutschen*, Adorno effectively assures his post-war German radio audience, *ist die des Anachronistischen*. By the time of “Auf die Frage,” the Germans, in essence, have become the Jews, condemned to bear witness to the utopian potential of difference through their uncomfortable but exemplary existence in an increasingly up-to-date, Americanized world, their backwardness the sign of an election that sets them apart. It is hard to imagine a transformation less justified by the real-life events of the century in which Adorno is writing or one that more egregiously obliterates “mere” material differences for the sake of a general, “philosophical” identity. The concrete, historical content Adorno tries so hard to rescue for the form of philosophical truth—by linking together the “is” and the “ought” at the level of the single word—would appear to give way, in this jarring equation of German and Jew, to a vision of transcendence as self-identical as the univocal immanence it critiques. Here, then, is my question, in the form of a perverted, and perhaps illegitimate paraphrase: after Auschwitz, is it not an undialectical and ultimately un-Adornian act of philosophical barbarism to collapse the history of German-Jewish difference onto an identical structure of non-identity—for the sake of a theory of difference?

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