# Essays beyond the borders of Groningen

Essays written by Graduate students between November 2024 and January 2025 during a course organized by Thijs Lijster and Mathijs Sanders.

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# Prologue

The essay as a literary and philosophical genre has a long and rich tradition. Coined by the philosopher Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century, the term ‘essay’ refers to an ‘attempt’ to express one’s thought on a certain subject, ranging in the case of Montaigne from subjects as elevated as friendship and conscience to ones as mundane as thumbs, sleep and smells. But the term also refers to ‘tasting’, ‘testing’ and ‘trying’, that is, experiencing something oneself and considering it from different angles. In that sense, the essay form is a predominantly modern form of writing, hostile to dogmatism and traditionalism, and demanding an open attitude towards the world both from the author and the reader. More than just a genre, the ‘essayistic’ is also an attitude, and a mode of thinking.

The essays in this collection were written for a course that was organized by Thijs Lijster and Mathijs Sanders in the fall of 2024 at the University of Groningen, as part of the Research Master program Arts, Media and Literary Studies. In this course we considered the essay in various ways. In the first place, students learned about the history and theory of the essay: what is the historical and cultural background of the essay form, what distinguishes it from other forms of (literary or philosophical) writing? We read classic authors like Montaigne, Woolf, Adorno and Sontag, and contemporary ones like Teju Cole, Mark Greif, and Zadie Smith. Secondly, and more importantly, students practiced in essayism, as a way of reflecting on their own life and culture, and as a way to relate their own experiences to societal issues and to the ‘big questions’ in life: questions concerning love, friendship, beauty, loss, or death. For the students, who were well trained in academic writing, this was in many ways an exercise of ‘unlearning’. Compared to the rigorous and, at times, rigid structure of the academic article, the essay form allows for more freedom, but therewith also demands more creativity.

The students in the course were given two separate assignments: a ‘free’ exercise in which they were allowed to write about anything. This was generally considered as the toughest assignment. The second exercise was to write a ‘meta-essay’, in other words an essayistic reflection *about* the essay. In practice, however, we saw that these assignments could not always be neatly distinguished, since (as Montaigne knew all too well) writing and living are closely connected.

Thijs Lijster

# Free Assignments

## Mother I'm Home

Shaymaa T. M. A. Badr

She shelters us. She nourishes us. She is our source of life. Through her we come to learn the world and through us she celebrates hope. She gives and she gives and she nests us in her body.

Without her we have no home. Without her we lose ourselves. To us, she is a birthright.

There is a common consensus that Egypt is the mother of the world. Or at least, the standard reply to the statement "I'm Egyptian" is "مصر ام الدنيا" (Mother of the World).

Upon arrival, travellers are treated as returning sons and daughters. These same travellers claim to have seen Egypt. In their butchered pronunciation, they proclaim their visits to the beaches of شرم الشيخ (Sharm el Sheikh) and الغردقة (Hurghada) with which they mean to say they stayed at an all inclusive resort, annexing what is left of her untarnished soil. They visited the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo only to inform you that the French or the British have a more realistic installation. "I don't know, something about their organization speaks more to the authenticity of the artifacts." They take a boat trip down the tamed Nile, drinking from its waters — oblivious to a tale passed down through generations which states that once exposed to the water of the Nile, travellers are destined to return again and again. And of course, you cannot forget the Pyramids of Giza or what they see as the prized glory of what was once a great civilization.

"What a shame!" This is the Egypt the world knows. What a shame indeed. In their rush to visit the wonders of the ancient world, they miss its current core. How could they? How could they when one of their own, branded the greatest, laid claim to her with his name. Because all Egyptians know that to properly experience مصر (Misr) you should take your stay to the shore of اسكندريه (Alexandria) —the coastal city, the city of sound and culture, the romantic city of honeymooners.

To know her is to respect her.
Like every Alexandrian, I carry her as a badge of honour.
On me they smell her beach, my Arabic flaunting the heavy accent of my hometown, rising and falling like the waves of her sea.

I cannot utter a single sentence before they announce “Ah! You're from Alexandria!”

They know because I speak her code; she instills in us an eternal instinct of community.

With that I mean to say that the first person singular, ‘I’, is banned from our grammar. To refer to me, I refer to us. Alexandria is woven into the fabric of our being.

Any musician that has seen Misr has praised the shore of Alexandria.

Her mention still continues to haunt all music ever produced.

Her image lives on in the reruns of plays and movies, still in black and white.

All major broadcasting networks have a ‘classics’ channel dedicated to her.

And in turn she cheers us on, even after a failed revolution, you can hear her زغروطة (ululuing) reverberate in the rocks decorating her.

She expends herself raising generations loyal to her, who speak of her vastness.

Safe haven to the exiled, refuge to musicians and artists.

Remember how the Syrian royal family fled to her? How they sang of her glory?

How she welcomed them.

The true city of life!

No matter where you reside in Alex, you are never severed from her sea.

It runs along her length connecting each and every neighbourhood.

A people eclipsed into a four hour walk.

The sea constitutes the one salient experience of the Alexandrian condition that brings together the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the farmer, the doctor, the engineer.

The little boy chasing after stray dogs, rummaging through spilt containers of leftover bones placed there by local butchers.

The old man traversing the street with a portable oven containing baked sweet potatoes, of which none are sweeter.

The trash-collector digging for cardboard he can take back to the factories for food stamps or some kind of reimbursement, and his impatient donkey urging him on.

The group of شباب (youth) hair gelled back, cigarettes in hand, on their way to drink sweetened black tea at the nearest قهوة (coffee shop).

The never-ending line of ashy-faced families of all configurations selling grilled corn for a couple guineas a piece.

Couples, couples, and more couples, on leisurely romantic walks.

The songs of the 1960s:

Umm Kalthoum and Abdel Haleem Hafiz ring from the nearest كشك (stand) occasionally assaulted by a passerby مكد،باس (minibus) competing with مهرجانات (street wedding music).

The old vegetable lady selling mint and dates at the side of the street shooing away the pregnant stray cat, yelling "Biss! There is nothing for you here!"

Her daughter sits lazily next to her with a display of tissues and prayer beads, between them a radio that I can only find in the dusty corner underneath my grandmother's bed.

It plays a recitation of the Quran by the Minshawi, a graduate sheikh of our islamic schools.

Schools that used to churn out islamic scholars back in the day… otherwise known as the country's true loss, a remnant of our pre-colonial past.

His voice is echoed in many black and yellow taxis speeding by.

Silenced only by the booming أَذَان (Athan) signalling it is time to pray.

You never truly wean off her air.

The addictive scent of salt in her breeze almost manages to restore your damaged lungs.

In winter you witness the strength of her wind, or her violence.

A mother's love takes on either shape.

You never truly forget the blue or green shade of her ocean. Uncapturable. All photos fail to compare to the real thing. Never blinking twice for fear of missing out on her for even just a second.

She becomes us. We consume her every day when we salt our food.

When we drink her water. You never truly get tired of her fish, especially at عم خميس(Amm Khamis') of which there is no replica on this planet.

I will fight anyone on this. That goes for her fruit and her vegetables as well, for they are all watered with the same substance.

We make a harbour of her.

We use her views as attractions.

"A table on the beach side, please."

To which the waiter replies "من العين دي اي العين دي." (from this eye to the next)

Alexandria, known as forever young, is only aged by intruding concrete blocks placed to slow down the effects of water corrosion. Why should we stop her? Like my grandmother, her anger is malicious.

A mother's wrath is the means of her children's misfortune. So said the Prophet, صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم (Peace be upon him), we claim to believe in. So say all parents to their children. "ربنا يبعتلك عيل يتعبك زاي متعبتني" (If you displease me, Allah will make it so you yourself with birth a child that displeases you back.) That is the circle of life. A mother to whom you can never speak back. A child who is unable to detach from her, forever grateful for her miracle. An ethics of care in which what you put out is what you get back.

Every year, I return to her only to witness her withdrawing, her colour duller, her shores littered with pepsi cans and the plastic bag of lays chips. A graveyard of seeds bury the pearls of her sand. She is getting sick. She has the right to retaliate, everyone knows that. Everyone knows too, that when she does, we should bow our heads and obey.

The sand every child felt between their feet, becomes accessible at the price of 500 guineas or the military pass of the uncle who served to protect this nation. Unless you wish to fade into the endless mass of people crowded at her penniless beach. Water tired and brown from cleansing our sins.

Encroaching upon the rest of her are kilometers and kilometers of metal used to cage her. To separate us from her. We refuse to believe we did this to ourselves, that we sat by and let them take her.

Our silence pulsates louder than the fear in her heart. We deny being complicit in chaining her up. In her misuse. If we can do this to our life source, who is to say we will not do this to our people.

We lay blame on the politicians, the American corporations, the 'MAN', the government, the military men in purple camo patrolling the streets… our ignorance. Etched into her body is a history of extraction traced by a slow decay, all under the guise of "sustainability" banners.

They wish to save her only so she can keep giving. Like the generations of men and women on whose backs this nation was built, we provide palliatives so they keep on giving. So they keep producing… descendants to witness her blessing only to grow cold once released into the clasps of globalization.

A mother waving as her now grown son embarks a ship headed for the promised land. To fight for freedom. An oxymoron if there ever was one.

"الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام" (The people want to drop the current order.) Those words are stuck in our throats, choking us, suffocating our imaginations. Who is to say it cannot happen again?

Someday they will pay, we will hold them up to their mistakes, or at least that is what we keep telling ourselves.

I now realize that so will we.

When we look into the mirror of her waters and see reflected in her our condition.

Even then, she will not complain.

She takes me by the hand, like my grandmother, whispers stories about a legendary past, as she oils my hair.

"عشان يكبرو يتغذة" (This helps it grow) she says. She recounts the history of our ancestors — a warm people.

"Patience, my love, we have lost our way, but we will find it again and we will be triumphant!"

A tear falls down my face as I wonder whether she will live to see this future she envisions.

# Feminist Awakenings

Aarya Bhavsar

My introduction to the word ‘feminism’ was through the Princess Diaries book series when I was 11 years old. That same year India was experiencing a social turning point in its conversations about women’s safety in India. The brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh in 2012 shook the nation, and fundamentally changed how people spoke about sexual violence in my generation. In the media, the case was dubbed ‘Nirbhaya’ meaning fearless in Hindi. Jyoti Singh’s story and her symbolization as Nirbhaya made me realize that the world is not safe for women. As I grew older it became clear to me that gender imbalance did not just pertain largely to women’s safety but in fact to every facet of my life on a physical, social and emotional level out in the world and at home especially coming from a conservative Gujarati community.

Gujarati families are sprawling ever-expanding units that inter-mingle and orbit around each other constantly. Joint families in Gujarati households are the norm, with multiple families living under the same roof. My mother grew up in a large bungalow, not just with a sister but an entire of army of cousins. My grandmother would spend her days running the household in arms with her sisters-in-law, cooking and cleaning in shifts. While my grandfather, along with his brothers would work in the family owned steel factories.

By the time I was born, like the newly liberalized Indian economy, my family seemed to have moved with the times. Selling the factories, the joint family’s assets were distributed and the brothers now had access to their own money, to make their own financial decisions. My grandfather, like the rest of his brothers, inherited an apartment and a storefront. My grandmother no longer had to work with her sisters-in-law, her kitchen now her own forte.

While these new changes did take hold, my grandparents did foray into the arranged marriage market, actively looking for husbands for their two daughters as soon as they entered their twenties. My mother and my aunt got married and had kids all before they turned 24. My mother would describe her wedding as a mix of traditional and modern. It had elements of the popular Bollywood weddings of the 90s, while still being understated and elegant like how most Gujarati weddings usually are. By the time she was 28 she had moved back home, this time divorced and with a toddler in tow.

When I first learnt of the idiom of the ‘black sheep’, I knew I immediately identified with it. I was awkward, dense and a little weird, many things used to single me out as a child. Such as attending boarding school [because boarding schools were for bad kids who didn’t listen to their parents], Questioning authority [I received multiple lectures from family for stating that *The*

*Ramayana* is just a story] and last but not the least because I was raised by a single working mother.

In my late teens, I realized that, in their own way, my entire family was a bunch of black sheep. My grandparents encouraged my mom to get a divorce and limit contact with my abusive father and his family. They did not try for a son after having two daughters. They did not treat their grandson [my cousin] and granddaughter differently. They did not dictate what their grandchildren or children should study, or determine acceptable careers for them and most importantly they did not feel ashamed when we inadvertently strayed from the path set for 'respectable' Gujarati families.

Being in the social periphery was freeing, my mother carved a world for us that, even though featured understated forms of control, was free of the obvious ones. Freedom was the norm for me. I had the right to disagree with my mother, the right to be outspoken, and the big one – the right to be queer. I always knew my mother would be accepting of all my life choices, in fact while writing this essay I could not think of a time I had seen my mom be prejudiced, or patronizing towards anybody.

When I started elementary school, my mother recognized that I needed to be nurtured in a space that would foster independent thinking and my innate curiosity with abandon. When I turned eight, she sent me to a beautiful boarding school amidst the luscious *Western Ghats*. Sahyadri School was a progressive space that centered politics in classes and other public forums. Through books and news media curated by the school library, and films and documentaries screened by the faculty, I was aided to critically think about topics of class, religion, and gender from a young age. But the word 'feminism' was introduced in my vocabulary from books I sought myself.

I realize now that for most of my adolescence, the rhetoric and practice of feminism were distinct from one another. My seventh grade history teacher, Leela *Akka*, was the instigator of this disparity. She spent classes discussing gendered double standard and misogyny, telling us her experiences on the field as a historian. She was one of the first to point out sexist practices within the realm of my school as well; which otherwise was regarded as very liberal. The gender pay gap – that even though miniscule compared to other educational institutions – was prevalent amongst the faculty and the gendered differences in rule enforcement towards the senior student body. One day I asked her, "*Akka* would you say you are a feminist?" She chuckled before denying the label, stating, "She wasn't a bra burner". This particular interaction confused me profoundly. Here was a woman in her 70s still working, and had worked for most of her life. She was liberated and openly spoke of gendered difference. So when she implied that feminism was not gender equality I believed her. It was not until five years later, in the eleventh grade, that I

understood the two were the same. I had reaped the benefits of feminist movements and ideologies and here I was afraid to say the word.

Through high school and university, I jumped into the deep end of feminist theory and slowly unraveled the web of structural inequalities. Many of the university courses that were foundational to my understanding of oppressive power structures took place online because of the pandemic. I used to attend classes sitting in my living room; the irony was not lost on me that if my extended family had to listen in on my class discussions my class and I will be branded as 'anti-national', 'anti-Indian' and various other anti- labels. After class, I would then meticulously recreate the arguments presented in the lecture to my mother.

My mother would diligently listen to me for hours when I spoke about inequality. Our conversations would often meander towards her experiences with my father and his family, the ingrained sexism in 90s Bollywood, questioning if the Kardashians represented modern womanhood and so much more. But my mother would always pushback against the idea that the root cause of gender imbalance was the patriarchy. This pattern would repeat very often. One time I stated how my father felt like the human embodiment of the patriarchy, unassuming yet dangerous. My mother did not quite like that. We very openly spoke about the negative impact my father has had on our lives. He was entitled, a cheater, and manipulative, and he was absent as a father. My mother had even admitted to me during one of the aforementioned conversations that she would have not fought for my custody, if I had been born a boy. She also stated that my being a girl, and the restrictive future that she could foresee as my life, was a thought she could not bear. She simply could not raise a daughter in that house knowing what she was going through and she decided to leave. I thank her for that decision every day of my life.

Through these discussions with my mother and listening to the stories of the other women in my family. I came to realize the complex duality between rhetoric and practice is something I have come to accept in my recent foray into gender studies. Soon I gave up my unspoken mission to get my mother to use the nomenclature that I was using. I realized that it was not important that she needed to acknowledge this big elephant in the room because at least she was aware of it. For me she had broken the cycle of gendered, colonial, and capitalist trauma my family suffered from. Her choice to leave my father, her choice to run my grandfather's business differently, her choice to accept my identity all of them emancipated me from various structures that dictated our lives.

It has been five years since we began these conversations. Even after I moved to a different country, they have continued daily. She told me about a book she had started reading called *Sati Savitri* by Devdutt Pattnaik. The phrase 'Sati Savitri' refers to the image of pure Indian women in reference to hallmark mythological figures. It's a term meant to evoke demureness, and traditional Indian values that should be upheld by Indian women. Sati Savitri's are the epitome of

Indian womanhood, obedient, submissive and they keystone of the Hindu patriarchal complex. The book according to my mother's description aims to deconstruct this image and critically analyze the patriarchal structures that uphold it.

During our phone calls, she would also tell me about how my uncle was exerting control over my aunt, about her best friend and the toll it was taking on her to have a full-time job and run the household by herself. She would tell me how reading the book had provided her a new perspective on the way the patriarchy played a role in the situations her sister and friend were sharing with her.  I dubbed this my mother's "feminist awakening" as she finally put the puzzle pieces of structural inequalities together. But I still ask myself – wasn't she a feminist all along?

# Translation [from the Latin *trans-latio* meaning–among other things– "carrying across"]

Arwen Erlijn Sanders

I am sitting behind my desk surrounded by text. Right in front of me is a text in a dead language. This language used to be Latin, but changed to Middle English and Anglo-Saxon after highschool. To my left is a dictionary. To my right is my notebook in which I am attempting to write down a translation of the dead text. Somewhere in the far corners of my desk–or sometimes plainly thrown somewhere on the ground–is a grammar book. This very particular setting has permeated throughout both my childhood and current adult life. For someone who has spent an ungraspable amount of hours in this position, I often wonder whether there is any use to translating these languages at all. To be clear, I certainly know *why* I do it; the vibrancy and appeal of the past is so strong I simply cannot look away from it. There is a certain intrigue in deciphering texts and cultures that are so old they almost feel like secret worlds. Additionally, the importance of remembering one's past is proven over and over again by (ironically) history. The question that remains, however, is whether translation–true translation–is even possible, or if I am simply wasting my time trying to do the impossible. Maybe the thing I dedicated so much of my life to is actually completely pointless. After all, the fact that I know the vocabulary and grammar of these languages well does not take away from the fact that I am a mere spectator of these cultures that will never truly reveal themselves to me.

*"Translation means doing violence upon the original, means warping and distorting it to unintended eyes,"* R. F. Kuang writes in her 2022 book *Babel*. I read this book over the summer and have repeated a distorted version of this quote to myself often since then, *translation is always an act of violence.* The idea that something that I have been doing for years and dedicated much of my life to is a violent act should probably have made me upset. Instead, I completely agreed with the assessment. Translation, especially the translation of languages that are no longer 'alive', is the act of severing language from its time and context in an attempt to grasp for a meaning that could very well be lost (or maybe even worse; simply not meant for you.) This removal definitely feels at least a little bit violent. Bilinguals get this point proven to themselves over and over again, the universal bilingual experience is the frustration of directly translating a word and the inability that follows to satisfyingly explain that the translation is correct but also is not. Sometimes there simply isn't a direct translation to a word, but more often it is the case that the connotations held by the word are slightly different because the culture and history behind the word are different. I myself have often experienced this frustration, but have always felt some comfort at the ability to turn to the potential other Dutch person in the room that knows exactly

what I mean and what I cannot express. The fact that there is no Anglo-Saxon person in the room to express this frustration that comes from truly understanding and living a language haunts me a little bit while me and my classmates bend over our grammar books and read the stories in and of this language to each other.

*"Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel."* A famous line from the earliest English epic saga *Beowulf.* But how to translate the line? It seems rather simple; "fate goes ever as she must." However, as you might be able to guess, it is a bit more complicated than that. The word "wyrd" is especially troublesome to me. It is regularly and most accurately translated to "fate," but does not share roots with the Latin "fatum." However, the meaning of the Modern English "weird" has also diverted too much from the original meaning to translate it as such. Additionally, "wyrd" does not just refer to the unavoidable and impersonal motion of predetermination, it also implies personification and motion in its own right. Wyrd is the cause for not just the end but also the start of a story, it actively sets a narrative into motion and is often described as having a will of its own. Additionally, due to the intertwining of Pagan and Christian elements in the saga, "wyrd" interchangeably refers to the personified pagan divinity Fortuna, or to the decisions made by God himself. Translating all of this context to the simple "fate" feels like betraying this history and language. The imaginary Anglo-Saxon looks at me from across the room. They might disagree with me and this entire scholarly analysis of "wyrd." Maybe the translation is right but also is not, like infamously translating "gezellig" to cozy. But I do not and will not know it either way. And anyway, "the motion of (sometimes self-actualised) predetermination that may or may not be determined by a Christian or pagan divinity goes ever/always as she/it must/will" does not roll off the tongue the same way as "fate goes ever as she must." I write down the insufficiently sufficient wyrd translation.

*"How will the audience ever be able to understand this old English?"* I am at a callback audition for Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and the actress next to me is trying to understand the lines given to us. Deciding to be slightly pretentious and protective over my treasured history I make the annoying point that *well actually* this is not Old English, this is Early Modern English and much closer to what we are currently speaking. "Still," she responds, "how will the audience ever be able to understand this?" Touché. Feeling slightly but rightfully put in my place, I decide to actually be helpful and explain the confusing line to her. The lines in question are a dialogue between the main romantic interests Rosalind and Orlando, in which Rosalind proclaims she would rather be courted by a snail because he brings his destiny—horns—with him. To this Orlando responds that "virtue is no hornmaker." I explain to the actress that in early modern times it was a common saying that if a wife put horns on her husband it meant that she was cheating on him. The actress responds "oh okay, thank you." We both know but do not say that the humour is lost. Nothing is less funny than a joke once it has been explained, and the slightly

sexist tone of the joke also corrupts the humour. Does it really matter that I know this was a common saying in Early Modern England? Does it matter that I know what it means? The joke is not funny anymore and the meaning of it is lost to a lot of people in the theatre, including some of the other actors. It is almost funny to me that I experience the same frustration of futility when translating a saga that is over a thousand years old as I do explaining Shakespearean English. Still, I wonder, if the meaning of Early Modern English is already lost, how much worse is this loss in languages that are well and truly dead?

*"And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech" (Genesis 11:6-7).* This passage from the story of babel is one of the most appealing biblical stories to me. The idea that if everyone just speaks one language we will become so powerful that we can build a tower high enough to reach the heavens is very intriguing. I especially find this biblical idea that differing languages are the only reason we cannot communicate with one another a very romantic and generous one. But being skeptical by nature, I also find the idea that there is or ever was such an Adamic language impossible to imagine or accept. How could there ever be just one language when language is the natural result of decades of culture, change, relationships and history, infinitely separating and intertwining with one another in an attempt to express the world around us? No, just one of them simply would not do. Despite my skepticism I do agree with God's desired result that we will not understand one another's speech. I wonder if God's intention was not just to make communication between the people impossible, but if He also meant to hinder our understanding and communicating of the past. If it was, He did a pretty good job.

So where does this leave translation as a practice? It could be necessary, or completely futile, or even an act of betrayal. In the spirit of translation, there is an answer that feels correct but also does not. We need to understand our past to learn from it. The fact that we can recognize our own emotions in stories written thousands of years ago teaches us empathy outside our own context. Being able to know your history when you have been removed from your culture or your culture has been violently violated through colonisation can give comfort. Knowing the pattern of mistakes we have made in the past might hopefully one day teach us not to make those mistakes again. Translation, however futile and imperfect, is a necessity to creating this understanding. But typing this answer out I already know there is so much more to it than this, but I just do not have the words to express (translate) this feeling. I do know I will keep futilely and necessarily translating dead languages either way, so maybe the answer is not that important.

# The blue chairs we share

Twan Tromp

Blue chairs as far as your eyes can see. I smell everything and nothing in particular. I smell coffee as it's getting cold. I smell the sweat of the guy sitting in front of me, and the perfume of the lady behind me. Yet, I can not place it at all. They exist, sure, but not really. I am in my own world and so are they.

I sit down and dart my eyes to the outside. But there is no outside. It is far too dark for that. The only light is in the compartment. Only after a couple of seconds of complete darkness, do I see a far away strip of streetlights, but moments later it vanishes again, leaving me staring at my own baggy eyes reflected in the window. My cheap black earbuds sit snugly in my ears, blasting Radiohead, drowning out every other sound in the train compartment. I look away from the window and adjust my feet.

Suddenly, I feel my right foot bumping into something. What was that? I lean forward and look down. Oh shit. What looks like a liter of Coca Cola is now flowing out of a small, bright-red can. In a rush, I quickly grab the can, but it's too late. There's maybe one sip left in the can and thirty sips on the floor.

With five molecules of $H_20$, you won't really have a substance that acts like water. Only when you add that sixth molecule does it suddenly cling together, become fluid. The cola on the dirty train floor had far exceeded its critical size and was slowly but steadily flowing further and further from my feet and underneath the chair in front of me, fastly approaching a bag just two seats over.

It was at this point that I could do no other. I had to take my earbuds out, escape the comfortable alone-ness of my private world. I stood up, and with an awkward smile that could easily be mistaken for a smirk, I warned the sweaty guy to lift his bag.

Other fellow travelers woke up from their private worlds. A hooded fellow confusedly lowered his cap. Another woman took one of the earpieces of her headset and placed it on her temple. I felt sorry and apologized, but wasn't quite sure what I was apologizing for. It wasn't my fault some stranger that had sat on my seat before me had forgotten their cola. They did not just forget to put the empty can in the trash, they forgot to drink it. And now I was faced with the consequences.

As the cola-river kept flooding new territory, more people exchanged glances, quipped dad-jokes, and warned others to lift their bag. Eyes gaze at the mouth of the river, make their way upstream, until they meet mine. I quickly divert my eyes, but not before I am reminded of one of my favorite Pink Floyd lines.

*Strangers passing in the street*
*By chance, two separate glances meet*
*And I am you and what I see is me*

They tried to warn us. In a world increasingly connected, we are more alone than ever. We can contact friends from Finland in a second and watch live as events unfold in the bedroom of a streamer. But by choosing to do this, we ignore those around us. We turn to our phones. We turn inwards. Only in those brief moments where your eyes meet those of a stranger does it all dissolve.

There's no such thing as a private language and there's no such thing as a private world, especially not when you're on a train. Yet, we act like it. Almost all of us do. Just look around on a Dutch train. I can almost guarantee you'll see a couple of opened laptops, phones, maybe books. And if people aren't lost in one of these things, they are likely trying to sleep, staring out of a window, or they didn't get on the train alone and are chatting endlessly, disrupting the other people's peace.

It appears we have lost the ability to talk to strangers. And that is tragic. By talking and, more importantly, listening to people from different walks of life, we connect. At its best, it forces us to notice similarities in the ways in which we all suffer, and we learn how others manage to keep going regardless. It confronts us with the inaccuracies of our prejudices. We, like the Pink Floyd line says, see ourselves in the other.

I only know a couple of people that go out of their way to talk to strangers, and who have no need for cola-rivers, delays, extreme weather, or practically any sort of input, to start talking. Unfortunately, they tend to be the people least capable of listening. Their 'train conversations' aren't conversations. They are monologues with occasional nods and strained smiles from a bored-to-death audience. It's truly a pity.

In my years of travelling by train, I can only recount one real conversation with a stranger that went past the phase of 'yes, thank you' or 'exactly, annoying right?'. It was about two years ago, on a trip from Groningen to Gouda. As so often, it was very crowded and there was no hope in keeping your two-seater yours. A young man — I think he was about 25, maybe 30 — sat down

on my left. He had curly messy dark hair and a large brown coat. I had been re-reading *Franny and Zooey* by J.D. Salinger. I paused for a second, noted something on my phone, and before I could pick the book back up, was interrupted by a questioning voice.

'What's the book?' he asked. At first, I was taken by surprise. However, I was not gonna turn down a chance to share the sheer brilliance of this little book. I began talking about the Glass family and Franny's existential crisis, and *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Quickly, I found myself struggling not to spoil the entire book — as I am struggling not to do now. I stopped myself and asked him where he was heading. A conversation unfolded and for about ten minutes we proceeded to chat about religion, books, and our families. Despite our differences, for he was studying to be a vicar, while I had deconstructed and wasn't quite out of my angrier atheistic phase, we found common ground.

This conversation was the one exception to the rule. I mean rule in two senses. It's not just a rule in the sense of the common way of doing something. It was also the one true exception to the regime of isolation in travel. I suspect this regime has strong ties to the highly individualized and goal-oriented culture in which it thrives. We are interested in the process or journey, only as far as it helps us reach our goal or destination. I am not surprised that dreams of teleportation and of holograms run so rampant. If they were realized, no physical journey would be needed.

Back when my mother was young, she and her parents would take car trips on Sundays. Not to visit some zoo or church. They would take a car trip together to talk and to enjoy the sights. Just for that sake. There was no ulterior motive or some secret destination. It was just a car trip *together*.

Today, we don't take car trips together. We sit in buses, trams, and trains and sit next to each other. We can smell each other's sweat and perfume, but we don't. We can see each other sitting in those blue chairs, but we don't. We could talk to each other but we don't. We accept each other's existence, but are fixated on our destination.

It wasn't until a cola-river began to flood the compartment, that we disarmed ourselves. It might have felt like a frustratingly clumsy accident at first, but perhaps it was, as Bob Ross used to say, a happy little accident.

Perhaps cola-rivers are good for something. Perhaps, next time I take the train, I will bring a can of coke and open it. I won't drink it. Instead, I'll put it on the floor. I'll take out my earbuds and talk with my neighbor. And maybe, just maybe, once I leave the compartment for my stop, and

the train continues its journey through nothingness, another person will sit down on my seat and slightly adjust their feet.

# Meta-essays:

## Essay$^{\infty}$: Reflections on what forms the essay

Shaymaa T. M. A. Badr

I.

Do you ever wonder how everything came to be? How the stars find their alignment? How birds build their nests? How ants form their colonies? Have you ever looked closely at the structure of atoms or the arrangement of cells in a leaf to notice the inscription of something greater?

Sometimes it seems to me that the world is complete with hidden codes, all of which are built like the roads leading to Rome. Every search for meaning results in finding yourself again with the same repeated, puzzling pattern. Sometimes I think about how the planets forming our solar system are in a delicate balance to which any small change could prove catastrophic. Likewise, the composition of our bodies have their own network of integrated systems to which an imbalance is called disease. Perhaps it is only our perception which constellates these objects, perhaps they are connected indefinitely.

Even language attempts to encapsulate this divine hopscotch. Take the verb “to flow”, it is endlessly applicable to water in rivers, blood in veins, electricity in cables. If you are really creative, you talk about the flow of fish in streams, the flow of a sentence, perhaps even the flow of roots in soil. Or think about the process of “crystallization”. Think how tears evaporated leave salts crystals. Think how the structure of frozen water, ice, is crystalline. Think how formerly flowy honey left too long crystalizes.

II.

Throughout the history of time, we have made sense of these patterns in writing. We write essays, pulling the strings of every conceivable object together into a web of meaning we cannot decipher, but which we recognize in everything. Our condition makes it so that we spend eternity attempting to verbalize something, provoking more thoughts than providing answers.

The essay assembles unconventional vignettes unified through a shared pattern. In this manner, the essay shapes a vision of the world, written in a manner that is accessible to all — a makeshift marionette through which we voice the indecipherable. Let me give you an example. What do a rock, an oak tree, and a human face have in common? You can read in their composition the vast accumulation of time. The more arbitrary the selection of items, the more idiosyncratic an essayist makes their links, the more depth their connection breeds. Through this process, an essayist weaves items, memories, people, and places into a fabric known as the essay.

III.

To quote the famous Oscar Wilde, "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation." An age-old sentiment regurgitated throughout time, culminating in Chuck Palahniuk's declaration that "Nothing of me is original. I am the combined effort of everyone I've ever known." Isn't this existential cry to be original, to prove your worth, to not be derivative, simply missing the point? Do they not recognize that their genetic makeup is forever unique, their thumb print irreplicable, their style a reflection of their embodied experience. Every individual belongs to a vast human genome, forms part of the endless code yet each individual is likewise a configuration that has never existed before. Is that not, in and of itself, original enough?

That is precisely what makes up the essay as a form. The essay provides space for a unique expression of self, your own configuration of thoughts, your curated version. Through the "T" or "eye" of the essay, one expresses a personality that does not claim to be all-encompassing. It is this trait, to express oneself, which marks the excellent essayist from the mediocre. To name a lineage of authors whose essays encompass this eclectic and unapologetic sense of self, one has to go back to the great Montaigne, father of the essay. An essay titled "Use Makes Perfect" in his book, *Essais*, reveals the purpose of the essay in relation to the self: "I chiefly paint my thoughts, as subject void of form and incapable of operative production … I expose myself entire … I do not write my own acts, but myself and my essence." These sentences depict a sense of curiosity and experimentation, sparking a history of writers in search of their imprint in the world. One finds this dynamic when passing over Borges' *Borges and I,* to which the essay becomes an arena, battling oneself as person and author, ending enigmatically in "I do not know which one of us has written this page." After finding his voice as a writer, Borges loses it once more to the essay. It speaks to the sheer magnitude of the form. One witnesses the endlessness of the essay in the blue tint of Maggie Nelson's goggles. It culminates in Franzen's *The Essay in Dark Times,* where birdwarding, the U.S. elections, climate crisis and smoking are somehow interlaced. What all these authors exemplify is a vulnerable, yet bold, inscription of self into the world through the

essay form. A demand to lay themselves bare and to rediscover the world through their eyes afresh. Even in this selection of authors you see filtered my experience.

IV.

The essay form, to me, is an expression of free association written so well it comes across orderly. Like Woolf describes, the make or break of an essay is the ability to immerse your reader in an experience through good writing. To grasp them in your frame of reference. She explains that the "learning" radiating from an essay "must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture." This seamlessness of good writing is what bridges the disjuncture of the individual topics discussed in an essay.

Simultaneously, the essay form is synesthesia. Reading an essay, like Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son,* means breaking yourself down to percolate into another world. You do things that seem contradictory. You hear colors and taste sounds. Baldwin has the incredible ability of dancing with antithesis to the point where his reader holds his pain. After reading:

> I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.

You cannot help but realize that you both are one. You are him and he is you. He conflates beauty and violence so elegantly, you have no choice but to feel the overwhelming pressure of his world in your heart.

V.

In short, the essay form derives the world in one work. In experiencing the essay it becomes you. It builds part of your framework and reconfigures that which is around you in order to evolve with you. In *The Modern Essay*, Woolf states to this manner that "[the good essayists] have blown more knowledge into us in the course of one essay than the innumerable chapters of a hundred text-books." If the essay can be read, digested, and forgotten in one sitting then it cannot be called an essay. The words of an essay must become animated as they take a form of their own. Painted into black ink on white paper is an overwhelmingly complex world. If you close your eyes, you can envision a realm previously unnoticed. Like peering under a microscope, you realize that you have been missing a whole array of things this entire time.

Though it always seems unsettling how you can never precisely tell what the truth is. It is the pattern and the way things form bonds, networks, and constellations, that is essayic. The more you try to define the essay itself the further you remove yourself from its transformative experience. Like Adorno describes in his *The Essay as Form*, if you define the essay by its parts, it falls apart; you can only characterize it through its general phenomena of careful eclecticism. A perspective reaffirmed through Mario Acquilina's extensive surveying of the essay forms to which one finds no end.

It is thus that you read the essay into your experience of the world. It informs your thinking but also all your phenomenological track through the world, whilst itself remaining a humble catalyst.

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# On Essays and Language and few other things

Aarya Bhavsar

I was twelve years old when I realized I wanted to become a writer. Anjali Akka, my English teacher had assigned the best essay prompt I had been given until then: to personify a colour. I chose blue because it was my favourite (and still is). When I sat down to write the assignment the words just flew out to the page and it was the first time I recognized myself creating a vivid picture for all to see, hear, and feel. It wasn't until the eleventh grade I found myself writing on a similar assignment prompt, but this time it was just one word: blue.

This time, Mallika Akka, my elective English literature teacher, made each of us share our essays and guess who wrote which essay. It was easy to guess, as our class had known each other for years, we did also cheated by recognizing each other's handwriting. Apart from being a fun assignment, it also taught me how versatile people are. Even though the prompt was just one word, my eight person elective English class weaved a complex and nuanced interpretation of blue. The colour was interpreted as sadness, as loneliness, the rain, I had interpreted it as joy and one person had written a poetic essay about the 2016 US general election, and criticizing the structure of the American elections (to no one's surprise he is a journalist now).

I loved essay writing in my English classes, but not so much in Hindi classes. Essay writing was a big part of my Hindi board examinations and I remember tackling heavy topics such as broken homes, life with a single mother, and even rape culture. I never really interacted with written Hindi outside the classroom. For Indians like me, city born, taught in English medium schools, and upper middle class. Hindi is a language to be spoken, and sadly, after my $10^{th}$ grade Hindi board exam, I lost the ability to read and write Hindi fast enough unlike my English.

For the longest times I thought of essays as assignments or exam questions for language classes. They were the corner stone of my education in the humanities, and still are. I must have written at least a thousand essays by now, and this essay is also being written for a class to be graded to see how I present my thoughts. So its not a surprise to me that I associate the essay with classrooms and examinations. Even though I always saw the essay as a means of evaluation, be it for language skills or constructing an argument, the essays that have stuck with or played a role in my journey as writer were the ones that had no semblance of evaluation to them. The essay on blue was for Mallika Akka to see how we engaged with each other's writing.

The Essay held important space in my English classes, it was through the essay that I flexed my creative and analytical muscles. It was in Elective English that I learnt to write arguments and used references to back them up. It was in Elective English that I branched out to explore

personal stories, and thoughts by exploring themes of family, marriage, joy, and sorrow. I did those very things in my previous Hindi classes as well, but somehow it still wasn't the same. I don't think I can write in Hindi anymore, at least not the way I do in English. The irony is I could never dream to write in my mother tongue Gujarati, simply because I can't read or write in it.

I always saw The Essay as a piece of sophisticated writing, it was posh, proper, it was an import of the West. But when I mulled over the essay as a form in University I began to realize how my dismissal of essays in other languages, especially those of the Indian vernacular, was a post-colonial construct. Language being as political as it is in the Indian subcontinent, it makes sense that I only knew how to write in English and Hindi because that is what was expected of someone from my socio-economic and caste background.

In University, one of my literature professors launched an online journal with a friend by the name of *On Eating*. *On Eating* blurred the borders between The Essay and poetry. The journal featured pieces that were lyrical, prosaic, and yet deeply political and of course they were, being a journal on Indian culinary cultures it had to be! The journal included pieces that touched upon the patriarchy, casteism, religious intolerance, climate change and food insecurity but most importantly it explored the diversity of India through the food of its various communities.

Apart from blurring the borders of literary formats, *On Eating* achieves blurred linguistic borders publishing its essays in minimum of three languages. English, Hindi and the mother tongue of the author. I found this decision to be exhilarating, as it included the two most widely spoken languages in the country making it accessible to many people. But by including the author's mother tongues as a third language was a statement in and of itself. It made me think, which language did the author initially write in? Was it English? Was it their mother tongue? Do people still write in their mother tongues? I thought of how awesome it would be if someone like me, taught in an English medium school, actually wrote in another language. Would the essay be any different?

While I mulled on these questions, it also made sense to me why I had tethered The Essay to the classroom because when I stepped out of that definition I discovered a world of diversity and dissent. When I was confronted to expand my idea of The Essay outside of the academic norm, I realized just how many things I enjoyed consuming on the daily were essays.

I realized that *...Like A Savarna* series published by *The Swaddle* were essays. Shows like *Monstrum* and *Fate and Fabled* on Youtube were essays (albiet in a visual format). The ponderings of Ranjit Lal in *The Eye* magazine every Sunday published by *The Indian Express* or the rambling works of J. Krishnamurthi were essays as well! I realized how I had imbibed so much information about the world through essays from politics, gender, and sexuality to topics

that seated me in the position of power such as casteism and religion. By reading Baby Kamble's *The Prison's We Broke* or Dr. Ambedkar's *Anhilation of Caste.*

It is this exact fluidity and versatility of the essay that it helps me explore and expand in a multicultural space and imbibe all facets of myself when I write. A character I write in a novel is a separate entity from me, it is inspired by the world I see. But in the Essay I find my voice for what I have to say. When I personified blue at twelve, I was actually imagining my ideal life and made blue live it. When I wrote on blue again this time she was a feeling, a state of mind. The Essay helped me structure my thoughts and at times transcend them. And most importantly it helped me fortify my voice when I set out to write my own essays.

Being in a multicultural space such as India, or living the experience of being an international student in Europe, over the past six months. I came to realize how writing and specifically essays are akin to open doors to introduce broader viewpoints. I knew that in theory being a student of 'English Literature' in India, but seeing it in practice in a global multicultural multilingual space was a unique experience to say the least.

The Essay may cross literary borders, but it also crosses cultural ones seamlessly.

# The Essay & Everyday Transcendence

Nikita Chistov

Let me begin with an image. In 1975, Russian artist Viktor Pivovarov created the work you can see below. As is common for Pivovarov's art, the piece uses image and text in tandem to stage the artist's inner dilemma. The opening statement "*Я могу изобразить:"* ("*I am able to depict:";* the very top of the canvas) is followed by a table which doubles as a display of the things that the artist is able to depict *and* a direct proof of this ability ((*"яблоко, дом, кошку, стул…" - "an apple, a house, a cat, a chair…"*). As the sentence concludes with *"и даже человека с собакой."* (*"and even a human with a dog.";* bottom right corner), iconic representation reaches its critical point, and so does the visible, *depictable* realm "out there". Having arrived at the bottom of the canvas, the viewer returns to the starting point of internal reflection. However, no longer is it a place of (st)ability. The painting "ends" with *"Но как изобразить жизнь души?"* ("*But how to depict the life of a soul?")*, and no answer is offered to the viewer. The question lives its own life of paradox, a distant star on the horizon of the artist's consciousness.

Figure 1. Viktor Pivovarov, *But how to depict the life of a soul?,* 1975.

Although I am no painter, my creative, intellectual, and – what is most important in the context of the current essay – *essayistic* impulses often come from the place of inquiry foregrounded by Pivovarov in *But how…* (as well as numerous other works). My first in-person encounter with his art in Prague in 2021 felt like a homecoming. In Pivovarov's oil paintings of painstaking detail – always full of diagrams, labels, tables, and geometric shapes – I recognized our common tendency to subject the things in the world around us to thorough analysis. Yet at the same, this "will to order" in Pivovarov's work always had a certain softness and levity to it. His pieces effused humor that challenged their own seriousness (in Pivovarov's world, even Suprematist abstraction acquired human and animal traits). Mimicking the Soviet poster style of Pivovarov's youth, they revived the ethos of the time only to transcend it immediately. While *But how to depict the life of a soul?* revealed more general paradoxes of representation, his later works staged the intimate paradoxes of Soviet life. That is, a life of extreme limitations *but also* a life that strove to *transcend* its fixed material bounds, "extend [its] body and spirit", and become phenomenologically elastic ("VIKTOR PIVOVAROV / Documentary series «The Artist Speaks»").

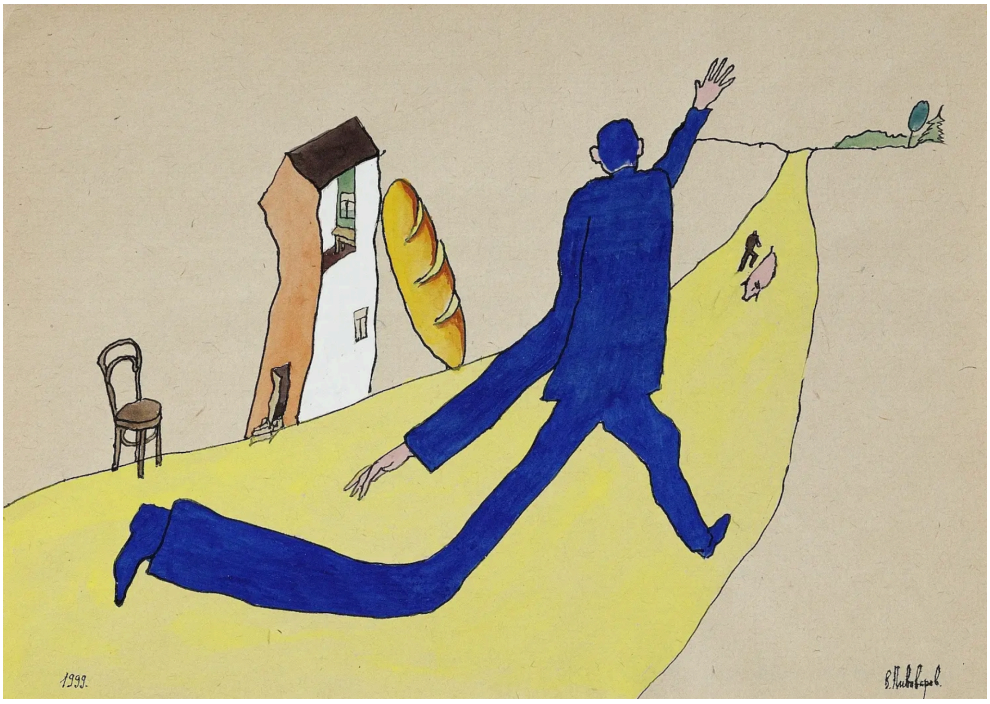


Figure 2. Viktor Pivovarov, *Greetings, my second I!,* 1999.

Despite having only second-hand knowledge of Soviet life, I felt drawn to the artist's paradoxical sensibility. Perhaps, I had already been primed to appreciate it. Like Brian Dillon, "I grew up, as people say, in a house of books" (Dillon). Reared on a diet of Milan Kundera and Milorad Pavić,

I "loved artifice and self-reference above all" (Dillon), as well as all things post- and meta-, but what I also came to enjoy (and what I suspect to be a characteristically Slavic or Eastern-European cultural trait) is *playfulness* – a mobility between different states, registers, and points of view. Pivovarov's art had a similar quality to it. It offered me the space to be several things at once and not *just one* self, to be existentially mobile. It welcomed my analytical side, approved of the comfort I found in my Cartesian bubble of the self, while simultaneously welcoming my equally strong impulse to subvert my own structures of thought. Interestingly – and paradoxically, – this seeming complexity in Pivovarov's work was disarmingly simple. Despite its distinct Soviet "frame", it appeared universal and very relatable in the smallness of its scale. Pivovarov's transcendence was always of the most personal and human kind. The medium of his transcendence was always the things you could find at home or in your backyard. His art rekindled my interest in my own immediate environment; my life turned out to have its own apples and dogs, houses and chairs, spoons and buttons that lent themselves well to depiction and Pivovarian transcendence. I was curious to see what kind of "sensuous particularity" (Bernstein qtd. in Lijster 414) could emerge through contact with these everyday things but also what sense of selfhood they could afford me.

The essay appeared to me to be the most fitting form for this kind of investigation. I didn't know exactly what an essay was (and I wouldn't claim to have a solid grasp of it now), but its apparent looseness and explorative nature attracted me. I felt, perhaps intuitively, that the elusive phenomena I was drawn to needed a similarly ambiguous space to manifest themselves. Indeed, they needed a space in which I could attempt to give them linguistic form – rather than formulate a grand theory and fix their meanings in place. After all, my experiences had nothing conclusive or coherent enough about them to warrant a closed system or a more rigid genre of writing. Naturally, the urge to "see a world in a grain of sand", to proceed from "a seemingly trivial observation or experience only to eventually gesture towards culture, history, society, and human experience per se"(Lijster 414) was still there. But it was precisely an urge to gesture. To signal, to indicate, to point towards a potential way of thinking without burdening the grain of sand with finality. The moment the apple, the chair, and even the human walking their dog were carefully described and labeled, the question of process and impermanence, as well as of the mythical and transcendental, would inevitably reappear, revealing the futility of any system. My interest always lay in precisely this ill-defined in-between-ness of being. But also in my very human crises of meaning. I needed the space where I could articulate the very process of my fixing the meaning in place, seeing it unravel the next second, and attempting once more, time and again, to give it shape. I needed a space to stage this curious Pivovarean moment of I've cataloged, arranged, and ordered, but how about this dynamic, embodied, and affective journey of mine that links all of these moments together, the life of my soul?

In other words, I needed a space for myself – the kind of space that the essay offered me and had

offered hundreds of others before me. However, this self-centeredness of my essays – and essays in general – was not as hermetic as one might think. As Aquilina argues in his meta-essay, the I of the essay is "fluid, fragmented and marked by the inevitable trace of the other"' (21). In writing about myself, I invariably start from the point of my_self, this paradoxical I that is simultaneously a part of me and not quite, fusing as it is with the apple and the fork and the tree and the chair. Following Aquilina, the I of my essays is also collaborative (32). But whereas Aquilina's collaboration resides on the level of (inter)textuality – "'The other' modulates the 'I' through the voices of other texts and other writers, as well as through the essay's openness to future readers" (32), – mine is rather thematic and phenomenological in nature. While the essay also allows for intertextual constructions of the self, what I attempt to do is to highlight, à la Pivovarov, my work's groundedness in my real-life experiences. While my words merge with the words of others (a collaboration I also welcome), what interests me is the collaborative, dialogic acts that occur during the day and that are felt as such. I use my everyday encounters as the basis for an essay. But already before starting to put words on the page, the life experience contains the seed of the essayistic.

The day provides me with a constellation of miscellaneous material that I try to fit into the system of the self as the day unfolds. The essay that follows is a direct extension of this dialogue between the "inside" and the "out there". It is a sketch of sorts of the changing contours of my_self. The life of the soul.

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# The Essay Form as a Musical Medium

Sara Gruic

**Introduction**

While reading Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009), I was immediately captured by its structure, the way its fragmented form complements the nonlinear nature of Nelson's emotions. She explores the color blue, linking it to grief, love, and longing. Through her ambiguous representation of these ideas, she uses repetition and circles back to her themes in a poetic way, fusing poetry, philosophy, and personal storyline into a form of an essay. This approach allows her to explore the meaning of a color through personal history, highlighting the way essay circles around a central theme without resolving it. However, I realize that this exploratory style is not unique to literature but is also present in music. Particularly in the songwriting of Nick Cave, a rock musician who uses lyrics and melody to convey themes of love, death, grief, and redemption in often through-composed way, rather than a song structure with verse-chorus form. Therefore, it is valuable to reflect upon this idea of essay as a form existing in other mediums. More specifically, while exploring how Nick Cave's music and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* embody the essayistic form as discussed by Theodor W. Adorno, this essay shows that the essay can exist in other media that challenge the boundaries of conventional structure.

**Music as an Essay Form**

The essay is traditionally understood as a written form of thought or argument and has evolved into a medium of music, film, and other artistic disciplines. While comparing Nelson's essay with Nick Cave's music album *Skeleton Tree* (2016), the essayistic form seems to incorporate personal and philosophical experience with a lack of narrative linearity. While this creates ambiguity or a sense of disorientation, it ultimately presents complex themes for audiences to reflect on. For example, Nelson writes, "I am writing to you from the top of the world. I have never been so lonely, but I am writing to you" (Nelson 2009, 28). This line shows personal thoughts, while repeatedly using the "I," emphasising the isolation and introspection of her emotions. This reminds me of Jorge Luis Borges' meditation on selfhood in *Borges and I* (1962), exploring the tension between the private self and the constructed, public persona, similar to Nelson's reflections between personal experience and abstract meditation. However, unlike Borges, Nelson's "self" fluctuates between inner subjectivity and outer sentiments of longing rather than distinguishing between public and private.

This aligns with Adorno's argument that "nothing can be interpreted out of a work without at the same time being interpreted into it" (Adorno 1984, 153). In other words, Nelson's interpretation of the colour blue is not just description of this colour but also interpretation of it with new and subjective meanings. This highlights the emotional and intellectual conflict of the essay, where contradictions are embraced rather than resolved. In other words, Adorno recognises an essay as a reflection of existing ideas and emotions, rather than creating new concepts or intellectual frameworks from scratch, what he calls "creatio ex nihilo" (Adorno 1984, 152).

This relates to Cave's song "I Need You," exploring the tension between love and loss, using poetic language and diverse musical textures and timbres to convey this emotional depth. The song is about a tragic death of his son, which he uses as a theme to communicate the feelings of longing and universal meditation on grief (Sodomsky 2016). In "I Need You," Cave sings, "I need you, I need you, I need you more than I ever did before," repeating the line to emphasize the emotional weight of loss. He also uses "I" to showcase the importance of his personal experience with this topic. This repetition exhibits the cyclical nature of the essay, where themes of longing and loss are revisited and reframed in new contexts of a musical performance. For instance, ambient and simple instrumentation creates a sense of vulnerability, which allows Cave's vocals to be at the centre of narration. His voice does not follow a conventional melodic line but rather drifts unpredictably, which is similar to an essay that resists linearity in favour of exploration. The instrumentation that harmonically supports the voice includes sustained synthesizer tones, which create an atmospheric effect.

This approach is consistent with Nelson's *Bluets*, in which she continuously uses the colour blue as a metaphor for sadness and desire, resulting in a flow of feeling rather than a straight succession of ideas. Similarly, throughout *Skeleton Tree*, Cave fuses together fragmented stories of love, death, and sorrow, rejecting standard song formats in favour of a more contemplative style. This links to Adorno's view of the essay as an exploration of subjectivity and experience, rather than a means to reach a definitive conclusion (Adorno 1984, 153).

However, it is not only the emotional that Cave is conveying, but also philosophical themes that align with the traditional notions of an essay. For instance, Laura Rascaroli's "Introduction. Opening: Thinking Cinema" (2017) explores film as an essay form, calling it a video essay, emerging from creators who use platforms such as YouTube to explore topics of literature, cinema, politics, and philosophy. According to Rascaroli, these works incorporate voiceover narration, curated visuals, and soundtracks, in order to create arguments that resonate emotionally and intellectually with their audiences (Rascaroli 2017, 11). The blending of mediums allows these creators to convey ideas in ways that words alone might not fully capture, adding depth and texture to the essay form. This relates to my argument on music having the

capacity to evoke emotion, rhythm, and meaning, making it eligible to create an essay-like experience through sound. Just as Rascaroli's approach connects the visual and narrative elements, music essays communicate melodies, lyrics, and instrumentation to form an immersive exploration of ideas.

Therefore, in his lyrics, Cave explores deep questions of existence, mortality, and the human condition, positioning his music as a reflective space for philosophical inquiry. Cave struggles with contradictions and paradoxes, much like an essayist, especially in the wake of personal loss. For instance, in *Skeleton Tree*, Cave reflects on grief and mourning but also touches on the idea of transcendence and the search for meaning beyond suffering. This meditation on grief, combined with hope and the search for redemption, mirrors the essayistic tradition that seeks to explore complex and unresolved questions. Cave's lyrics do not offer neat conclusions but instead push the listener to confront existential uncertainties and engage in reflective thought. Therefore, while fusing personal experience and philosophical exploration, Cave's music exemplifies how the essay form can be expansive, fusing emotion with complex intellectual engagement in a way that challenges conventional narrative structures.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, while comparing Nick Cave's music and Maggie Nelson's essay *Bluets*, it becomes clear that the essay transcends traditional boundaries and takes shape in forms of music. Cave's lyrics, similar to Nelson's fragmented prose, do not provide definitive answers but invite the listener and reader into a space of emotional and philosophical exploration. Both artists engage with deep, unresolved questions, and through their non-linear approaches, they challenge the conventions of narrative and music structure, linking to Adorno's understanding of the essay. As Rascaroli's analysis of the essay film demonstrates, blending different media can enrich the essayistic form. This indicates that the essay is not limited to words but can be expressed through various artistic mediums. Both Nelson and Cave challenge traditional storytelling by utilising emotion, philosophy, and personal narratives together. In this way, the essay as a form is continually evolving, embracing new technologies and artistic practices, and allowing for a more expansive, immersive reflection on the complexities of the human experience. The works of Cave and Nelson provide examples of how the essay can form outside the written word, existing as a reflective notion within music and other media.

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# The Company of Essays

Maureen Knol

The Christmas break is the loneliest time of the year for me. My sister spends most of her days with her boyfriend or ice skating with her teammates. My brother is using his time off school to catch up with friends and earn some extra money working at the pizzeria. Meanwhile, I am sitting alone, surrounded by the grey walls of my childhood bedroom. When I was twelve, I thought the grey looked mature. Now, I just notice that they blend in with the grey skies outside to form a kind of prison cell. I'm confined to sitting with myself and I discover I don't like my current company very much. Sitting on my unmade bed and trying to find some form of distraction, I open Instagram on my phone. I see stories from a friend who is in Disneyland with her boyfriend, an old colleague who is spending the holiday with her family in Ireland, some girls from my musical theatre class who are on a trip to Bruges together and a group photo with some of my friends at a Christmas celebration I was not invited to. When I finally close the app, I feel even more miserable about myself.

On the second day of Christmas, I optimistically wear my favourite dress and take extra time and care to do my makeup for the Christmas dinner with my mother's side of the family. Once there, I talk with my cousin and his girlfriend by my aunt and uncle's Christmas tree about their adventures in London during the days leading up to Christmas. I hold friendly conversations with most of my family members between the candlelight. The food is even surprisingly good considering which part of the family is hosting the dinner this year. But despite all the Christmas cheer, one thing strikes me more than anything else. I am the second-oldest cousin and, besides my little brother, who has only just turned eighteen, I am the only one who is not in a relationship and came to the celebration alone.

Over the next few days, I try to find my escape in fiction. I read the books that would usually comfort me, but I find no solace in them. While the light-hearted adventures of *Percy Jackson* usually put me in a good mood, I mostly notice now how Percy has a tight group of friends he can rely on while I am currently alone. The wholesome love between Nick and Charlie in *Heartstopper* would usually have me kicking my feet in joy, but now I am jealous of all the meaningful connections Charlie has that I don't. When Nick helps Charlie with his mental health problems, it only becomes more clear to me that I have to nurse my wounds on my own.

Near the end of the holidays, the rich blue colour of a small hardcover book catches my eye. In the middle of a messy stack of books I have read for university and not found a place for on my overflowing bookshelves lies a book that is not a novel: Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. I read it for a class a couple of weeks ago but I couldn't really grasp what the fuss was about and why this particular book was so well-renowned. In my opinion, it contained too many needlessly explicit mentions of sex and not enough depth in its exploration of pain and the colour blue.

Nevertheless, I feel a strange pull to it now. I reread the first page. And then the next page. And then I read all the other 97 pages. And I weep. For the first time in what feels like centuries but has really only been two weeks, crying feels good. Once the tears stop streaming, I feel a little bit lighter.

There is one passage I feel a particular kinship to. In proposition 72, Maggie Nelson writes: '[l]oneliness is solitude with a problem. Can blue solve the problem, or can it at least keep me company within it?—No, not exactly. It cannot love me that way; it has no arms. But sometimes I do feel its presence to be a sort of wink—*Here you are again*, it says, *and so am I*'. In a similar way that blue is there for her, I feel like her essay is here for me. I feel the author's pain, but in feeling it, mine seems to become more bearable. I am still alone, but I feel less lonely through the knowledge that I am not alone in feeling alone. I feel an intangible connection between the author and me. As if she has written these words to meet me here right now. Despite the fact that there is a large distance between us and we will probably never meet in real life, I feel like the essay brings us together.

I realise that I want to read more and decide to follow through on some essay recommendations I have previously received. Within these essays, I find like-minded people and people who change my perspectives on things. I know that the people I encounter on the page are, at least to some degree, a construction. But right now, they feel more real and more close than anyone else. They keep me company until I can finally see people that matter to me again in real life. They speak from an 'I'. Like me, they are solitary. However, I see their 'I's on the page and their 'I's see me and together we create an us. In the act of reading, I am making sense of their words in a way that it feels like we are communicating with each other.

Unsurprising considering my pre-existing love for her novels, I particularly enjoy Virginia Woolf's essays. I love how evocative her language is and how she speaks of greater things by focusing on the small things. When she describes three pictures, I can see them in my mind's eye and through them I learn of the simple complexity of life. I feel through her exploration how life is vulnerable and fleeting but also valuable. Through her writing about small things to say something bigger, the big things seem to become more understandable and manageable.

Inspired, I write about my own moments of loneliness. Difficult as it is to find the right words to say what I mean, the act of conveying something enormous in language makes it easier to understand. The words don't necessarily capture the extent of what I feel, yet in that partial failure they help me. They suggest that my struggles aren't as big as they seem right now. The words capture some of the weight inside of me and as they're released on the page, I can let go of some of that weight. Like the essayists, the page becomes a companion. It changes as I change and gain more clarity and together we grow.

As I finish, the pain inside me is still there. The essay is not a perfect substitution for human contact. However, at least for the moment, the pain does not consume me anymore. I know that I will not remain alone forever and that days filled sharing joyous laughter with

friends are ahead. Through finding the words to share how I feel right now, this moment is no longer my solitary burden. Even if it may not completely feel like it right now, I have people in my life who care as much for me as I care for them and together we will make it through hard times. For now, I look for what further little kindness I can extend to myself to soothe my aching heart and I resolve to at least just try to ask for help.

I decide to share my words in the hope that they may one day reach the right person and help them. I hope that my use of 'I' will come across not as some form of self-aggrandisement but as the sign of a person hoping to connect with someone else. I hope that maybe one day my words may make that person feel less alone. Maybe I won't, but at least I will have tried. And I would still have helped at least one person: myself. And for now, that is also enough.

# The Essay and Death; the Authority of Uncertainty and Speculation

Arwen Erlijn Sanders

Uncertainty is at the core of the essay. The essay presents a meditation on a subject without the pretense of holding any final say on said subject. The author of the essay does not tend to shy away from proposing that you might be wrong in your perception of a certain topic, but so could they be. These meditations presented in an essay generally come from the chaotic nature of personal memory and experience, and although a reader could disagree with certain conclusions drawn, it is much more complicated to disagree with someone on their own personal experiences and memories. Uncertainty therefore lends a unique form of authority; if the author does not claim to have a final say on the subject and their discussion of it draws from personal experience, they hold just as much authority over the subject as anyone else. This becomes especially true if the author writes about a topic no one has ever *truly* experienced, such as the topic of death.

I have spent much of my academic life researching differing perceptions of death throughout time, ranging from classical antiquity, to the Middle Ages, to the Victorian era, to modern-day writing. Although some may regard it as a rather morbid topic to spend so much time on, I have always found it rather fascinating how people throughout time deal with this uncertain inevitability and the cultural significance it holds. In my reading on the topic, I have found that every genre of writing is capable of handling the topic from various different angles. Prose–especially that of a religious nature–typically attempts to make stronger claims on what death is, what it means, and what comes after it. Poetry can give more emotional musings on the topic, often steering away from strong claims and instead focussing on the emotions it evokes in people. Theatre is also able to take a unique angle, presenting more of a dialogue allowing for differing opinions. Although these are broad generalisation–poetry can also make stronger claims, just as prose can give emotional musings–it stood out to me that the essay is able to center uncertainty much more than any genre I have encountered. Thereby, due to the essay's uncertain nature and uniquely subverted authority, it is exceptionally well-suited to the topic of death.

The aforementioned uncertainty of the essay is especially clear in the collected essays of Montaigne, which initially coined the term 'essay'. Montaigne emphasises from the very first text in his collection that "myself am the matter of my book,"[1] making it clear that the collection is not about the various topics of the essays, but it is about himself and his experiences, on which he is ultimately the authority. Montaigne is also careful to note in one of the first essays–which is

[1] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays* (Ktoczyta.pl, 2019), 58.

notably on the death of a friend–that his experiences are no basis for any final say on any topic due to the chaotic nature of memory. In this essay he writes that "my memory is not only in itself very short, but in this case affected by the trouble which I have undergone, through so heavy and important a loss, that I have forgotten a number of things which I should wish to have known; but those which I recollect shall be related to you as exactly as lies in my power."[2] Montaigne thereby immediately subverts his own authority by emphasising the unreliability of his memory.

We see this uncertainty persist when he eventually writes an essay on death entitled "That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die." This essay presents speculations on philosophy, history, and death in a rather distorted manner, but what is consistent is Montaigne's opinion that we should not fear death, which he also concludes from personal experience. He writes that "I magnify those inconveniences by one-half, and apprehend them to be much more troublesome, than I find them really to be, when they lie the most heavy upon me; I hope to find death the same."[3] I find the use of the word 'hope' especially intriguing and typical to the essay as a form; he does not claim death *will* find him the same, but that he *hopes* it will. He draws from his own history to speculate and draw a tentative conclusion that feels satisfying, yet it remains just that–a speculation. This essay shows the awareness that there is no certainty regarding death, and that preliminary conclusions drawn about it can only come from personal experience and memory, which can be equally uncertain. The form he chose to write about it–the essay–is extremely well suited to such writings on an uncertain topic using similarly uncertain anecdotal 'proof'.

Montaigne's "That to Study Philosophy is to Learn to Die" stuck with me for a while after reading it, primarily because I found the way it dealt with death so interesting. It was probably this very reason that I noticed when the exact same sentiment of hoping as opposed to knowing occurred in an essay written over four hundred years later. In this essay, Elizabeth Lopatto talks about her cat that got diagnosed with a terminal illness and the process of palliative care that followed. She noted the needed honesty of the vet in stating that her cat would die, and how this is a much more difficult matter for doctors dealing with human patients. Lopatto remarks that although decisions regarding the extending of the cat's life were difficult for her, she was happy the cat would be able to die at home without repeated unnecessary vet visits. She concludes that it is "because I've had difficult conversations with my cat's health care provider that I'm ready. I only hope that when my own time comes, my doctor is as forthcoming as Dottie's vet was."[4] And thus the sentiment of hope returns; just as Montaigne's essay did almost four hundred years ago, Lopatto's essay expresses a hope about death that is based on nothing but personal experience. Neither essays pretend to have any definitive answer or conclusion and

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[2] Montaigne, *The Essays,* 26.
[3] Montaigne, *The Essays,* 129.
[4] Elizabeth Lopatto, "Everything I Know About a Good Death I Learned from My Cat," *The Verge,* February 23, 2015, https://www.theverge.com/2015/2/23/8069825/everything-i-know-about-a-good-death-i-learned-from-my-cat.

neither pretend as though their experiences make them uniquely suited to speak on the topic. They are merely expressing the hope drawn from experiences, and admitting the unknowable. Yet the conclusion is still satisfying to me because I do not read an essay hoping to find clear answers.

Despite these similarities, there is a noticeable difference in Montaigne's essay on death compared to most modern essays dealing with the topic. Death has remained the inevitable uncertainty to life, but the process of dying has changed significantly. Death used to primarily be something sudden and unexpected. Someone that got terminally sick typically died quickly afterwards and at home. Due to modern medicine, the process has become far more drawn out with the emergence of hospice care, and an increasing amount of patients die in the hospital after years of prolonged illness. Although there will certainly still be essays dealing with death as a concept as opposed to the process of dying, the fast majority of modern essays about death I have read concern the question of the desirability of this process. Essays such as Laurie Becklund's "As I lay Dying" and Atul Gawande's "Letting Go" present the moral dilemma that we cannot simply 'give up' on the terminally ill, but the prolonging of suffering only for them to die in the hospital after a difficult period seems equally cruel. True to the style of the essay, non of these essays give a clear answer to the dilemma. Just as Montaigne uses his personal encounters with tragedy and dying friends to discuss but never answer the questions surrounding death, these essays draw from personal experiences of patients, doctors, and those that have lost loved ones to discuss but never make conclusions about the desirability of long palliative care. The complexity of the matter is precisely why the essay deals with the topic very well, as it would be hard and possibly problematic to take a strong stance on it.

In short, what has made the essay such an exceptional genre to deal with death–especially after having read a large amount of other genres on the topic–is the allowing and encouraging of uncertainty. Before becoming more familiar with the essay genre, I preferred poetry above all other genres for handling the topic of death. This was mostly the case because poetry also allows for speculation if it remains in the realm of the aesthetic, but the genre still has a certain hesitancy to simply stating *I don't know.* What has also been illustrated to me by the essay is the adaptability of uncertainty. The same speculative conclusion–I *hope* it will be this way but I do not *know*–applies just as well and satisfyingly to a 16th-century essay as it does to a 21st-century one, despite the fact that the conditions and beliefs surrounding death have changed significantly. Although, in the spirit of the essay, it would be wrong for me to conclude that the essay is therefore the best form to write about death, especially because this is also written from personal experience and preference. However, I can a bit more confidently state that the essay has shown me unique possibilities in dealing with the topic from a place of acceptance for the uncertain.

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# The certain and uncertain essay

Twan Tromp

If you read this, you will likely have taken an undergraduate course in academic writing. I certainly remember mine. The first readings I ever did in an academic setting were rather disappointing. I came to college hoping to unleash my curiosity (after a long self-imposed caging), but found myself learning that you needed to write methodically and rigidly. You need to use a particular typography, citation style, tons of signposting, and most annoyingly, a fixed structure for your papers.

In my first "academic essay", I stuck to these rules and barely passed. My paper was completely void of personality and contained more signposts on three pages than there are in a full-blown novel. Luckily, I soon discovered that not all academic papers are written like that. Though most of the harder sciences stick to the above script, readings from philosophy and cultural theory opened my eyes to a more literary style.

I came to see that this literary style of writing is under pressure. Its most common instantiation – the literary essay – has a rich history, but has been as good as banished from scientific circles.

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One way of understanding the history of science is as a continuous battle with — and often against — uncertainty. Science is, first and foremost, an epistemic project and, as such, it stands in an awkward relation to the negations of knowledge. A quick review of the history of science will point you to the countless brutal battles with *faith* and *dogma*, *fiction* and *opinion*. The scientific mindset is one that can be characterized by a "quest for certainty" as John Dewey aptly put it.

This relation to uncertainty appears to me to have shaped the forms scientific expression takes. It is not the only factor, for the institutionalization of science and the development of new technologies played their part too. Science's relation to the genre of the essay can be understood within this framework.

Coined by Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century, the essay is a genre characterized by the non-final and the uncertain. The French '*Esssaier'* quite literally means to taste or to attempt. Montaigne's essays often started from a reflection on himself, but quickly developed into reflections on more universal topics like death, friendship or cruelty.

Inspired by Montaigne, many figures from that stellar cast of ‘giants’ or ‘great men’ that so shaped modern science started writing essays too. An early example is Francis Bacon, the British empiricist. But there are many more. As the genre gained popularity, it also diversified. Essays were soon written on more technical subjects and varied greatly in length. Stylistically, differences also came in. Not all shared Montaigne’s drive to discover the world through reflection on himself. Hume’s essays, for example, are more theoretically philosophical.

Some authors, however, did follow in Montaigne’s footsteps. They adopt his personal style and embrace the uncertainty intrinsic to putting thought into writing. They use the freedom and space the essay-form offers to introduce fiction, narrative and their own literary idiosyncrasies. This classical school of essayism runs counter to the quest for certainty in science. Or, as Adorno phrased it, it “abrogates the ideal” of indisputable certainty and “does not obey the rules of the game of organized science and theory”.

So, how does science relate itself to the essay? And why are essays still taught in most academic programs? The answer seems to me to be that science has internalized this subversive genre, and twisted, turned the essay such that it no longer defies the ideal of certainty.

As a result, those academic essays elicit a negative response from the literary essay-lovers. And this is not just a literary or aesthetic issue (though these can not so simply be separated). It’s an epistemic disagreement too, because the ‘academic essay’ is not *essai*-ing. It’s not trying out, testing, or tasting. It instead argues and answers as if it can have the final say.

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In the literary essay, Adorno writes, “luck and play are essential”. Its response to the uncertainty of life is not to fight it, but to lean into it. There is no blueprint. The author is discovering what they think as they write. Montaigne is discovering how he thinks on repentance as he writes about it. Consequently, the structure that such essays take, flows from the content of the ideas.

In contrast, the argumentative essay operates on an entirely different principle. Its structure is imposed from the start. The writer begins not with discovery or reflection, but with certainty. They have a clear conclusion, thesis, or claim that they intend to prove. From this conclusion, they reverse-engineer the essay. The author is not trying something out, they present an argument and we readers are justified in believing their conclusion. We are nearly forced to accept their conclusion, because they have, after all, discussed and refuted counterarguments.

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Another key difference is that the academic essay disguises the fallibility of the author. (It comes close to concealing the entire author, were it not for the name at the top of the text). Personal pronouns are left out and the mantra ‘anecdotes aren’t evidence’ is strictly followed. When I was taught to write academically, these two principles were some of the first to be drilled into the students. The only place an anecdote can have in such an academic essay, is as an attention grabber at the start.

In literary essays, everything is personal. Most of them are written in the 1st person. They “disallow the pose of objectivity”[5] of the scientific essay. The author doesn’t hide themselves or get ellipsed. The *nec plus ultra* of this might have been when Jorge Luis Borges wrote ‘Borges and I’. In it, he reflects on his peculiar relationship to himself as Borges, the Argentinian author and poet. A literary essay doesn’t need to be this explicit in foregrounding the author, but it certainly doesn’t omit them.

This distinction reveals an essential difference between the two forms. Academic essays strive for universality, they aim to contribute to knowledge and do this by eliminating the personal. Literary essays, by contrast, embrace subjectivity, suggesting that the personal is often the most authentic path to understanding. This is not to say one is superior to the other — both serve their purpose.

Yet, as the literary essay loses its ground in academic circles, and the theoretically minded academic essay is taught to all undergraduates, some urgent questions arise. If they are taught to write in a style that only permits uncertainty to be dealt with through the occasional use of hedging, then how do they cope with the uncertainty they have about their ideas? And how are they taught to situate their ideas, to reflect on their positionality and how this might influence their ideas, if they are required to ignore themselves? These are questions you learn to deal with as you write literary essays, and questions you tend to ignore when you write academic essays.

[5] Spellmeyer, 1989; A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy