

MAX BENSE (1910–1990), a German philosopher of science and aesthetics, spent most of his teaching career as a professor of the philosophy of technology at the University of Stuttgart. In his teaching and in numerous books, Bense sought to promote a rational, scientific, even mathematical approach to the analysis of art and literature, as in *Mathematics and Beauty* (1960). Bense was particularly interested in using such an approach to explain the communicative nature of signs and symbols, images and texts—an approach that he set forth in *An Introduction to Information Theoretical Aesthetics* (1969). Bense’s scientific orientation to writing is reflected in the following excerpt from his piece “On the Essay and Experimentation,” in which he asserts that “the essay is an experimental method; it is about writing experimentally, and one needs write about it in the same sense that one speaks of experimental physics, which distinguishes itself from theoretical physics rather cleanly.”

From “On the Essay and Its Prose”

“Essay” means in German: *Versuch*—attempt and experiment. This poses the question of whether the expression means that an enlightened literary person is “attempting” to write about something, or whether writing about a defined or half-defined subject has the character of an experiment, an experiment on that subject. We are convinced that the essay is an experimental method; it is about writing experimentally, and one needs write about it in the same sense that one speaks of experimental physics, which distinguishes itself from theoretical physics rather cleanly. In experimental physics, to stay with our metaphor, one poses a question to nature, expects an answer, examines it and quantifies; theoretical physics describes nature by demonstrating analytically, axiomatically, and deductively its adherence to its laws due to mathematic necessity. This is the difference between an essay and a treatise. Composing experimentally,

pushing an object of study here and there, interrogating, prodding, examining, thoroughly reflecting on it, tackling subject matter from different sides and gathering what is seen in mental purview and giving name to what the subject matter makes visible under the conditions produced by writing: That is essay writing. The writing subject at work in the essay is not “attempting” anything; rather, he produces the conditions under which subject matter is brought into the context of a literary configuration. There is no attempt at writing, there is no attempt at knowing; the attempt is at how subject matter behaves literarily; thus a question is posed, subject matter is experimented with. We can see that the character of essay writing does not simply reside in the literary form in which something is composed. The content, the subject matter treated, appears “essayistic” because it appears under conditions. In this respect a capacity for perspective as in Leibniz, Dilthey, Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset is inherent to every essay. They advance a philosophical perspectivalism to the extent that in their meditations they exert a certain thinking and knowing which are based on point of view. Even those who have read only a small portion of the writings of these men will not fail to recognize the mastery of their abilities in the essay. If this mastery is concealed in Leibniz’s epistolary form, it is obvious in Dilthey; if, as with Nietzsche, it dresses up in the ability to write aphorisms, in Ortega’s case the essay is the intended form.

At this point I must emphasize that in every essay those wonderful sentences show up which are like the seeds of the whole thing, from which the essay can replenish itself again and again. I mean those enticing prose sentences, in which one can see that there is no perfect border to poetry here. These are, so to speak, the elementary sentences of an essay, which belong to prose and poetry alike. They are fragments of a “perfected speech of sense,” that is, fragments of a linguistic body which touch us like part of nature, and they are fragments of a bluntly expressed thought, that is, fragments of a completed deduction, which touch us like a part of a Platonic idea. One must take it upon himself to read in both languages if one wants to partake in the full satisfaction of an essay . . . or one transforms the essay before realizing it into a series of aphorisms which all pointedly express a thought, as can be seen in Lichtenberg, Novalis, and Goethe, or perhaps into a series of very compressed images, something like Rimbaud’s “Illuminations,” whose torn parts present an almost perfect unending lyric.

And with that we confront a further point of definition in our meditation. Is it not striking that all great essayists are critics? Is it not striking that all historical periods, which are distinguished by the essay, are ultimately periods of criticism? What does that imply?

To dissect the thought: In France the essay developed in relation to the sober, critical works of Montaigne. His advice for living and dying, thinking and working, enjoyment and lamentation are the fruits of a critical spirit. The element within which these reflections operate is the element of the grand French moralists and doubters. He is a spiritual source of his time, the beginning of a protesting critical context of spirit, which goes on to influence in full the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A lineage runs from Montaigne to Gide, Valéry and Camus. Bacon developed the essay in England. Bacon—who in every respect wrote his essays with cunningly moral, skeptical, enlightened, and succinctly critical ulterior motives. At bottom he was the great precursor of Swift, Defoe, Hume, W. G. Hamilton, De Quincey and Poe, as well as the others who came later: Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Strachey, et cetera. In Germany Lessing, Möser and Herder—whose inexhaustible “Letters for the Advancement of Humanity” stand out as the most significant collection of German essays—initiate and at the same time master our form of experimental literature. Everyone knows the critical depths their works contain. Friedrich Schlegel, himself a master critic and essayist, describes Herder as a pure manifestation of the critic and identifies in him the man of protest in the fullest sense, while Adam Müller calls the Lessing of his lecture on the origin of German criticism and the essay “one of the most influential spiritual sources.” And we have furthermore already mentioned Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Ortega y Gasset. More recent authors follow them: Gottfried Benn, who came out of expressionism; Hofmiller, one of our first literary critics; Karl Hillebrand and Ernst Robert Curtius, who succeeded in making an analyst’s penetrating take on the world sparkle out of moments from the present day. Ernst Jünger, whose essays experiment with things in Montaigne’s calm, half cynical, half skeptical manner; Rudolf Kassner, who tirelessly seeks to preserve the world-historical conditions for analytical understanding; Thomas Mann, who pours the breath of the epic into prolonged expressions, doing so with a diversity of theme that encompasses art, historiography, psychology, history, and politics; finally the Austrian essayists from Kürenberger and Speidel to Karl Kraus, Hofmannsthal and Stoessl, who even honored this literary form with a

theory stating that “the instinctual and the known” are “equally” at work in the essay.

This much is clear: the essay originates from the critical essence of our intellect, whose desire for experimentation is simply a necessity of its manner of being, its method.

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