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The essay as

Essays, like poems and philosophical meditations, should elude our grasp just because their business is to approach the liminal spectrum of near-unintelligibility-immediate experience complicating what we thought we knew. (Retallack 2003: 48)

As I start to write this paper, my notes lie stretched out in a long poem of language shifts and comparisons: essay-as-wager, essay-as-puzzle, essay-as-notation, essay-as-conversation, essay-as-meditation. It is in this act of comparison, the 'as' moment, that we begin, again and again, to think about the essay form. Its 'as-ness' suggests that the essay is not a singular discursive mode but a set of modes, at once many things and many opportunities. The essay practises thinking-while-writing, a compositional process that moves knowledge forward to the limits of its language, *in* language.

I use the word 'composition' as descriptive *of* and synonymous *with* writing and the essay form. Composition refers to the act of composing, the resulting state or condition, and the object produced. The word has various relationships to painting, music, assemblage and construction - mostly describing the putting-together of material into arrangements or sets of relations. It is the ongoing adjustment of data, a kind of physics of perception/cognition. It is also a word used broadly by Gertrude Stein to describe the *living-and-being* in a contemporary moment. Stein's notion of the composition is 'the thing seen by everyone in the living they are doing,' (1990: 516) suggesting that a commitment to the 'now' of experience, and the continual awareness of this experiential engagement, are the general conditions of critical thought, contributing to sense of self-in-world. 'A composition of the prolonged present,' says Stein, 'is a natural composition in the world.' (1990: 517)

The word *essay* comes from an old French word meaning 'trial', or 'attempt'. It is, by nature, an incomplete thing, an experimental process that is necessarily inconclusive. To compose an essay is to experiment: an attempt to approach the natural limits of one's knowledge, 'in time', to engage critically with the experience of thinking, to essay, to wager. The presentness of the essay form asks: *what now*, and *now what*?

I would like to look firstly at an essay written at the end of Henry David Thoreau's life, 'Walking'. The essay was commissioned for publication in 1862, shortly before his death, when he was too ill to write and needed the assistance of his sister, Sophia, to finalise the proofs. Despite his physical deterioration at the time of writing, 'Walking' is a text of considerable movement. A lot of terrain is covered - both literally, in the recounts of jaunts across the endless miles of remote countryside in Concord, Massachusetts - and conceptually, across the many subjects of Thoreau's critical imagination.

At the heart of the essay is a complex desire to come to terms with nature. For Thoreau, nature (and its fetishised 'wildness') is vital to the wholeness and trueness of meaningful conscious experience, and yet at the same time, is impossible to fully know. His essay *walks* through the variations and nuances of his desire: the possibilities and impossibilities of transcendence. At times, his language is an intense reverie, arcing up towards the treetops and into the untouchable light of the skies, and at other times it is encyclopaedic: a taxonomy of plants, insects, flowerbuds and bogmarsh. Though throughout the essay, Thoreau makes a clear distinction between nature and culture, he does not seem to be arguing for bifurcation *per se*, but for a kind of hybridised and uncertain poetics of bodily knowledge, as the body moves through nature and/or culture. In a sense, it is as if the incomprehensible sensuality of nature defends Thoreau against the abjectness and alienation of capitalism. And yet, within the essay, notions of Nature (capital 'N') and Culture (capital 'C') problematise each other. While Thoreau despises the stasis of the nonautonomous subject in a new industrial economy - exemplified by the fencing-in of private property, the drawn curtains of non-social domesticity and the cultural pathology of labour relations - he romanticises the possibilities of the colonial project, citing agriculture as a kind of neo-natural impulse of the intelligent modern: 'I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects *more natural*' (1982: 614 [emphasis added]).

The uncertainty of Thoreau's thinking-while-writing - the contradictions and self-same feedback-loops, the friction between longing and despair - seems to ask of the reader, what is the time of the essay? What does it mean when we say that *time passes* in an essay, or that there is a *sense of time* in language? One of the formal distinctions of the essay is that it finishes; its duration is conceivably finite. But at what point does an essay finish? It is rarely a dénouement. There is rarely *one* moment of clarity (a scintillation, a lightning flash) that brings the essay into final be-ing. The essay is too slippery, too many things at once, to resolve finally. Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes the essay as 'lots of modes, a set of intersections of intention' (1996: 23). The essay is language that comes together in the uncertain processes of thinking, multiplicity into materiality. The connection is made *through* language, and the language is made *in time*. At the end of 'Walking', Thoreau has carried a long moment of discourse to the limits of its attentive geometry. (Which is to say, it ends when the duration is complete.) Thoreau's experiment is enacting this discourse as thinking-while-writing, bringing to the surface of the essay a sense of temporal interconnection, a point at which the notional and the material, the experiential and the discursive, converge. DuPlessis calls this an 'ethos of intense examination' (1996: 27). Thoreau's uncertainty remains - the irresolution is what keeps the essay in motion, and his failure to transcend is what makes the work so interesting. As John Cage says, 'our delight lies not in *possessing* anything' (1961: 111).

Here is a paragraph from the essay:

For my part, I feel that with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only, and my patriotism and allegiance to the state into whose territories I seem to retreat are those of a moss-trooper. Unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o'-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable, but no moon nor firefly has shown me the causeway to it. Nature is a personality so vast and

universal that we have never seen one of her features. (1982: 625)

This border-life is the site of Thoreau's troubled sense of worldliness; the idea that what separates one from nature separates one from the world and from the full knowledge of sensual pleasure. This position as separated self is a central concern of Thoreau's: separation from 'capital N' nature in 'Walking', and separation from the developing culture - 'capital C' culture - of capitalism in *Walden* and 'Civil Disobedience'. From this position of separated, or un-whole self, Thoreau's essay-walk is a process of negotiation between the tensions of divergence and convergence, self-and-world. As Adorno says in 'The Essay as Form', 'the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal' (1984: 159). If this negotiation of self-and-world is eternally transitory, then its material rendering in language is as well. Or, and perhaps this is more to the point, the language *is* the negotiation, resulting in an accumulative collection of meaningful experience that occurs in the essay as *duration*. The poet David Antin (1984) talks about duration as the temporal quality of thinking *as it occurs*, the act of cognition as its own unit of time. In Adorno's words, 'The essay becomes true in its progress' (1984: 161).

Towards the end of 'Walking', Thoreau speaks of a need to live in the present. Perhaps this is the greatest claim that I can make for the case of the essay as an experimental practice. To experiment is to *try*, closely related in its etymology to *experience*. It is the act of putting something at stake, risking (or revelling in) the possibilities of failure. 'Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barnyard within our horizon, it is belated,' says Thoreau. 'That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thought. His philosophy comes down to a more recent time than ours' (1982, p.628). To celebrate the 'last instant of time' is to be sensually aware, fine-tuned to the be-ing and happen-ing of the natural fluxes of the world. 'When ... I hear a cockerel crow far or near, I think to myself, "There is one of us well at any rate," and with a sudden gush return to my senses' (1982: 629).

Joan Retallack's essay on essays, 'Essay as Wager', originally inspired me to write this paper. Retallack speaks of the essay as a critical practice, central to her idea of 'poethics'. At various times in her work, Retallack defines what she means by this term 'poethics', and the definition that I will use is the following:

[Poethics is] what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood. (2003: 9)

The obvious echo of the word poetics reminds us that 'poetry' comes from the Greek verb, *poiesis*, 'to make'. Poetry is a continued process of making and transforming the world, of enacting an ethos.

In 'Essay as Wager', Retallack refers to the 'swerve', or *clinamen* - the Epicurean notion of indeterminate atomic collision - as the necessary agent of change in life and in language. According to Epicurus, and later the Roman poet Lucretius (who expounded Epicurean atomism in his oeuvre), the *clinamen* is a sudden, random deviation of an atom falling through space, causing collision with another atom. It is this encounter, and the resulting atomic activity, from which all forms of life occur. Retallack (2003: 2) quotes Lucretius' epic poem, *On the Nature of Things*:

For if they [atoms] were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused amongst the first beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything.

The swerve is a sudden dip or swoon into another being, an intimate togetherness, a bodily pleasure. Retallack uses the swerve as a trope to discuss the sensual relationships between words in language and language in the world. Though the swerve is, to a certain extent, an indeterminate occurrence, Retallack talks about the need to approach the event of deviation with a certain responsibility - an *attitude* - in which courage to embrace the swerve is met with commitment to an ethics of the contemporary (2003: 3). This is, for Retallack, the *poethical wager*.

According to Retallack, the *poethical wager* is at play in the composition of the essay form. She describes the essay as a 'commitment to a thought experiment that is itself an ethical form of life' (2003: 6). The essay as a site of play, improvisation, collaboration and conversation: a space open to the swerve and its affects on the experienced world. 'I count on the form of the essay,' says Retallack, 'to undertake a particular kind of inquiry that is neither poetry nor philosophy but a mix of logics, dislogics, intuition, revulsion, wonder' (2003: 4). The result is a philosophical investigation with certain behavioural traits of the prose poem.

Geometrically, Retallack (2003: 1) speaks of the *poethical* essay as having the properties of a fractal coastline: unable to be measured, constantly shifting its trajectory and infinitely self-same in its difference. Fractal geometry is essentially a dynamic, chaotic play between boundary and shape, and can be explored continuously into the infinitesimally small. In the recently published *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*, Philip Mead describes poethics (with a specific interest in contemporary Australian praxis) as 'the name we give to the fractal geometry of textual meanings' (as cited in Brown 2009). This geometrical model embraces indeterminacy and togetherness, deviation and encounter. Retallack's approach to her own essay writing enacts this chaotic playfulness, and her essays often refer explicitly to the composition-play occurring:

I am writing an essay on John Cage - living inside and outside that past participle, 'writing,' for a number of months, piling on other present participles like 'puzzling,' 'exploring,' 'questioning,' what this idea, this practice of a Cagean poethics could mean; beginning with a hypothetical. 'Thetical,' not 'ethical;' not yet. My problem, in part, is just that - getting from the conceptual zone of the 'thetical' to the pragmatics of the 'ethical,' both descriptively and prescriptively, discursively and formally, in order to enact, not just write about, a poethics. When, toward the end of this writing process, I activate my Spell Check, it stops at every instance of the word *poethics*, flashes 'WORD NOT FOUND,' and suggests that I must mean *pothooks*. Maybe I do. Maybe my computer has found the fast track thetical to ethical as John Dewey's 'common or mill run,' in this case, kitchen functional. (2003: 207)

The lateral movements of Retallack's language suggest a willingness to yield to the swerve, while simultaneously enacting an attitude of intense examination; attention as ethical practice, not negated by indeterminacy but

stimulated. The fractal nature of this kind of thought experimentation, performed in the essay form, is concerned with the continuous contemporary, and the momentum of what Retallack calls 'breaking experience,' (2003: 4) but this does not mean that it is imagined in isolation from the past or in refusal of history. On the contrary, the continuous contemporary is a process deeply connected to the past, the process of beginning again and again; it is all things happened in a new system of happen-ing.

I am reminded of the various essay forms that might be described as poethically fractal: the chance-generated lectures and voice compositions of John Cage ('What I am calling poetry is often called content. I myself have called it form. It is the continuity of a piece of music' (1961: 111); the improvised talk-poems of David Antin; the syntactically-fractured poetics of Leslie Scalapino's critical prose. The language of composition in these essays is, in Retallack's words, 'urgently and aesthetically aware' (2003: 4), language of wide-reaching intellectual and imaginative engagement.

In Scalapino's critical work (essaying the practice of poetics), her attempt to describe the in-time duration of her compositions is, in itself, an experiment:

In writing the writing was the same actions - only. At some point I was desperate; now I do not reenter that state of mind - which is intrinsic conflict as itself an action of the writing in the real 'outside' - that is tied to - detached from freely - itself - that is a joy - or being serene - walking by / oneself, as: alongside, freely. (2003: 37)

The use of dashes, also prevalent in her poetry, is described as a spatio-temporal imperative: 'I was frantically trying to get the motions (as words separated by dashes and in line breaks) to be minutely the same - which is separate per se' (2003: 37). Similarly, David Antin's talk-poems - transcriptions of improvised lectures, formatted to resemble the phrasal cadences of non-grammatical speech - are concerned with the 'motions' of language. His work attempts to *talk through* the intense stimulation of everyday experience, and the accretion of experience as lived knowledge. Connections are made as synaptic impulses. In this sense, Antin's work is part-essay, part-poem, part-lecture and an attempted 'score' of speech-cadence. It is interrogative, inquisitive and multiply engaged with discourses of science, art, poetics, history, linguistics and mathematics. And yet, his interrogation occurs in the casual, humorous context of banal anecdotes and family yarns: a story about buying a new mattress with his wife becomes the site of intense investigation on the notion of chance. Antin's interest is a poetics of *thinking*:

if i am going to be a poet i want to be a poet who
explores mind as the medium of his poetry not mind as
a static thing but the act of thinking and the
closest i can come to the act of thinking is the act of talking
and thinking at the same time the closest i can come to
my thinking is by talking myself through it talking myself
through it talking my way through my thinking
thinking my way through my talking (2005: 49-50)

Much of Retallack's focus on the continuous contemporary comes from Gertrude Stein. Cage, Antin and Scalapino are all, in different ways, exemplars of a Steinian present-ness. Stein's lecture 'Composition as Explanation', now variously published as an essay, was written as a lecture, given at Cambridge and Oxford Universities in 1926. From her notebooks

and draft manuscripts, now kept at the University of Yale's Beinecke Library, we know that during the long process of writing, Stein was anxious about the lecture and about how she would be received by an academic audience. This was still seven years before the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a time when Stein's work was only celebrated by a small readership and was very rarely published. It is interesting to know that Stein spent months writing and re-writing the text, literally 'beginning again and again,' that Steinian refrain (1990: 516).

The text starts out with a series of shifting sentences, declaring that what separates each generation is *composition*; composition is what changes through time, the act of composition and the engagement with composition. In other words, the world is consistently and complexly messy, and it is the way in which this chaos is brought to meaning through the creative act of composition, that the world-view changes:

By this I mean this. The only thing that is different is from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen (1990: 513).

Stein makes a distinction in this essay between making art or writing (and being occupied with the preparation of making and writing) and *composing* (being involved in the making of making, in the 'becoming' or 'as' moment). According to Stein, those who are 'authentically contemporary,' in the act of composition are rarely recognised in their lifetime, and are often 'outlawed' until after their death, when their work becomes classified, becomes 'classical', ceases to be contemporary (1990: 514). It's an interesting notion, albeit perhaps affected by her anxiety as a little-read writer. Again, as with Thoreau, it raises questions about the difficult relationship that composition has with time: a text is written, in a sense, 'during' a time, in which time passes *and* the composition is composed, and yet there is little understanding of how this duration is represented compositionally. In other words, does a composition *contain* its temporal elements, as though it were a recording, an archival moment, or does it renegotiate its temporal elements each time it is experienced by a reader? My feeling is that the latter is the case. A composition, composed *during* time, reactivates temporal qualities in its subsequent readings, though these qualities are non-repeatable, variable, subject to swerve.

Stein's notion of the 'authentically contemporary' outlaw is also a criticism of the reading habits of her culture. A work becomes 'classic' only when it is 'classified', when it is grouped genealogically or chronologically (i.e., archived) and is understood to be historically significant, at which time its temporal qualities are, in a sense, deactivated. As Stein says,

No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is one that his contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept (1990: 514).

Stylistically, this lecture-cum-essay is a wonderful example of Stein 'creating her own time'. Sentences that are almost identical shift incrementally, repeating until completely different, gently easing into new territories of inquiry: a relentless string of metonymic self-sameness. For Stein, there is no such thing as repetition; sameness is only ever an *insistence*, a re-emphasis.

Each time a word or sentence is repeated, its time has changed and its emphasis has adjusted. 'Composition as Explanation', while seemingly using the same small collection of words, changes its trajectory constantly into new areas. A new word or set of words is introduced and then shifted around the discourse. Here is an example:

Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition. After life has been conducted in a certain way everybody knows it but nobody knows it, little by little, nobody knows it as long as nobody knows it. Any one creating the composition in the arts does not know it either, they are conducting life and that makes their composition what it is, it makes their work compose as it does (1990: 517).

This relationship between knowing and not-knowing - Thoreau's border life; Retallack's notion of a *poethics* approaching near-unintelligibility; Cage's not-possessing; Scalapino's 'minutely the same / which is separate per se'; Antin's thinking-thinking; and Stein's 'everybody knows it but nobody knows it' - is crucial to the experimental essay. To be open to the experiences of knowing and not-knowing is to wager, in a very real sense; there is something at stake at all times. And it is this relationship that brings pleasure to the writing and reading of essay compositions. DuPlessis (1996: 23) says that the contemporary essay occurs in the 'seam between sociality and textuality.' It is an act of both reading and writing; collaborative, performative, shared and compromised. It is concerned with how language is used to negotiate social/textual encounters, and how language is composed 'durationally'. At a similar time that Stein wrote 'Composition as Explanation', Henri Bergson wrote a series of essays on time and duration. Bergson (1992: 12) speaks of time as mobility, as 'what is happening,' and of duration as pure continuity. Mobility and continuity, these words that keep recurring in this paper, are words connected to the present, to 'breaking experience.' And yet it is the almost-unpresentability of the present, the sense that the present is happening interminably, that makes the contemporary essay interesting: it is an experiment of continuous inquiry.

To finish, a sentence from Jean-Luc Nancy's essay, 'Finite History':

A time full of 'now' is a time full of openness and heterogeneity. 'Now' says 'our time'; and 'our time' says: 'We, filling the space of time with existence.' This is not an accomplishment; this is happening (1994: 159).

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