



Sarah Kruse

The Essay: Landscape, Failure, and Ordinary's Other

The stupid repetition of things in my daily life goes unnoticed. On my way to the university, I pass the same buildings, the same trees, the same stop sign, street signs, light posts, traffic signal, mail box, and clock towers so often that I have ceased to see them at all. But one day I look up and the world is transformed, transfigured into something I somehow have ceased to recognize. Is this the work of the ordinary? Or a repetition? Am I making meaning or is this a loss of meaning? Or the recognition of an anti-meaning that I never possessed in the first place? Is it the loss of the ordinary or its reclamation? Does the familiar becoming unfamiliar mean anything at all? Or is it only the surface I am struck by? Like the repetition of one word over and over to the point where it means nothing—a game a child might play—I am struck by the nothingness of the world in the moment I cease to recognize things. The buildings have dissolved into two dimensional cardboard theater cutouts in the afternoon sun. A word repeated dissolves into a buoyant surface of sound, its meaning and signification gone. What strikes me most is not the essence of the ordinary, but ordinary's other, a failure in the ordinary in which I am enmeshed. Failure that signifies both lack and absence.

The nuance of the incomplete, wandering thought comes to the forefront of the essay as genre. From Montaigne to Thoreau to Benjamin to Barthes to Bouilly, the essay could be called a kind of wander. Objects as well as ideas often figure prominently, but do I cling to the detail as an artifact of the ordinary all the while because the ordinary object is all that remains of a shattered world? Is the smooth functioning of everyday ideology made to signify through its absence in the essay? What is lost through experience and repetition comes to rest in the ordinary object as a kind of *objet petit a*, a surface that haunts the essay

because it has been unmoored from its foundations in everyday reality. Once the ordinary is visible in the newspapers, the street sign, the plate glass window, it has already ceased to be. The cession of the ordinary or the break remains in the object itself. The object we then learn to read through the negative work and negation is inherent to the essay's form.

In this sense, negation is integral to the essay as a mode of writing because it is through our breaking up or cracking-up, as F. Scott Fitzgerald would have it, that the work of the essay becomes possible. What distinguishes the essay as form, I would argue, is its distinctive sense of loss, but a form of writing that is made possible through fissures and fracturing. One need only recall Fitzgerald's metaphor of the cracked plate. In "The Lyric as Negation" Brian Lennon writes, "The essay is *negative*, as 'nonfiction,' its genus is negative: not a fourth genre, but a negation of genre" (65). As a genre, the essay comes to be only that which it is not, claims Philip Lopate, adding that this negation of genre is countered by "adding the word 'creative' before nonfiction" (3). Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her essay "f-Words: An Essay on the Essay" addresses the idea of negation in the essay through the essay's function, hence the "f" words in her title: "Writing *on the side*, *through* interstices, *between* the pages, *on top of* the text, constructing gestures of *suspicion*, writing *over* the top, writing a reading, writing an *untransparent* text, writing *into* the book—all these practices and more frame the essay" (emphasis added, 16). De Plessis's concern here is with what the essay does and the ways in which the essay does not write *about* the subject but "on," "through," "between," "over," and "into." The subject itself is also not a subject but "interstices," "pages," "suspicion," "reading," "a book," and "untransparent."

While each of De Plessis's prepositions describe the place of the essay, I would also suggest that these spaces in which the essay exists also only come into existence through a tear in the ordinary fabric of our experience. To *assay* is not to encompass experience, but is to explore a riff, a gap, a fissure, or failure. In a Derridean sense, this act can be read as a practice of difference which is perhaps why so much of what Roland Barthes writes is an essay. Difference as that which both differs, defers, and displaces. The

essay as difference is then never at home with a neatly closed subject. The event and practice of the essay is always an opening. Brian Lennon in his essay “The Essay, in Theory” strategically illustrates how the essay is a mode of theorizing against the backdrop of modernity and temporality. He states, “I want to suggest that the theory of the essay is an attempt to think this problem of genre in writing, or of modernity, as both the topic and a discourse, in time” (80). The essay becomes a double-edged entity in which both practice and subject are inextricable. The mode the essay works *in* is as important as what it takes up as subject. The slipperiness of the essay working against other genres Mikhail Epstein also argues, noting how “the essay retained its character only when it violates the laws of other genres... And breaks their coherence.... As soon as the essayist tries to take a break, to come to a stop, the nomadic and trans migratory essence of the essay, crumbles to dust” (189). The essay has no home, no resting place. It is a wanderer by nature, and a nomad always caught in a process that never stands still. Perhaps Epstein arrives at this conclusion under the influence of Georg Lukacs, who states “the end is not standing still but arriving there, not resting but conquering a summit” (17). Put another way by Theodor Adorno, “In opposition to the cliché of ‘comprehensibility’ . . . the essay requires that one’s thought about the matter be from the outset as complex as the object itself” (15). The essay is not concerned with the easy subject, nor does it function within a space that arrives at a tidy conclusion. As Philip Lopate puts it, the essay is often a “glorious thought-excursion” (6). The locus of the essay is, in part, the problematic and difficulty of thought.

Grounding the essay in the idea of reality in the world then seems slightly counter intuitive to the complexity of the work the essay does. David Shields in “Reality Hunger: A Manifesto” claims, “the lyric essay is a literary form that gives the writer the best opportunity for rigorous investigation, because its theater is the world (the mind contemplating the world) and offers no consoling dream world, no exit door” (85). Shields believes the essay is rooted in a between, the relationship of world and thought, not an imagined world, but that which really exists. While a quick reading may be consoled by the attempt at

grounding the essay in a stable reality, “the theater that is world” that Shields mentions already implies an idea of unreality at work through the use of “theater.” This does not actually seem his intention, yet the idea of reality brings us to another aspect of the essay, the real, the true, and perhaps even the ordinary. The everyday in the commonplace for some also becomes an integral feature of the essay. Patrick Madden has sculpted a whole project out of the quotidian. The epigraph to his book *Quotidianana* cites Montaigne’s essay “Of Experience,” noting it is from the “most ordinary, commonplace, familiar things” that the world of the essay begins. If we could only see things as they really are, would they somehow be transformed? Is reality so simple? Can we ever get to the root and reality of things in a post Derridian and Foucauldian universe?

Epstein too draws on the notion of the everyday in conjunction with the essay: “like a plebian who is not burdened by traditions of nobility, the essay easily adapts to the eternal flow of everyday life, the vagaries of thought, and the personal idiosyncrasies of the writer” (190). For Epstein it seems the history or tradition of genre becomes a burden, but the essay, because it is connected to the everyday, is the eternal. Keeping in mind difference in the essay, is it possible the everyday or ordinary makes the essay eternal? The eternal has a ring to it of the true and the universal, yet if we are working against genre from a position of difference does not the ordinariness of the essay also have to be doing other work? I pause here also to note Epstein’s use of the “plebian” “idiosyncratic” and “vagaries.” These nouns carry with them a touch of imperfection or inexactness that comes along with the pairing of the everyday. The ordinary is perhaps not the simple or the real, but something unruly, messy, and imperfect. Strangely enough, the etymology of ordinary arises out of order and the law. As an adjective and adverb, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us the *ordinary* originates in middle French and pertains to legal jurisdiction in the 14th century. The appearance of the habitual and everyday arises in the 15th century prior to Montaigne’s writing. (*OED*). The *ordinary* is also related to *order* which in the 12th century largely referred to religious orders and in the 6th century the order of Angels. The etymology of *order* is “perhaps a cognate with

ōrdīrī to lay the warp before weaving, to initiate (an enterprise), on the assumption that the weaving sense was primary, and that *ōrdō* originally denoted ‘a thread on the loom’” (*OED*). Weaving also connects to the text, for a text is originally derived from the word textile. The etymology here helps us think through the relationship of the ordinary to order. The ordinary is the fabric of my daily life that provides me with a sense of order and structures the habit of my week that once past I will not remember. However, what I am proposing along with this structuring and forgetting is something made visible through the essay as form because of the dissolution of order. The essay as a mode made possible because the fabric of the ordinary has split.

Keeping Epstein’s associations of the ordinary with the unruly or faulty, I look backwards to Montaigne. Montaigne’s preface or note “To the Reader” is almost an apology for the essay. He writes, “I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory. My powers are inadequate for such purpose” (2). In the second paragraph he claims, “if I had written to seek the world’s favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining artifice” (2). He concludes by saying, “thus, reader I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject” (2). Montaigne begins with his inadequacies, setting himself up almost for failure. He does not seek the favorable, but the “simple,” “natural,” and “ordinary” as if in this triptych there is something unfavorable, something inadequate, something unworthy, and not worth the reader’s time. Here in Montaigne arises the negation of the essay, but in that negation also exists the mundane nature or the order of things.

By the 18th century, the essay is marked with a charge of carelessness or inexactness. Joseph Addison writes “Irregularity and want of Method are only supportable in Men of great Learning or Genius, who are too full to be exact, and therefore throw down their Pearls in Heaps before the Reader, rather than be at Pains of stringing them” (12). Addison here adopts a method without order, and similar

to Montaigne, admits a messiness seemingly inherent to the essay. Samuel Johnson too makes a similar claim for the essay's inadequacies, "the writer of essays escapes many embarrassments to which a large work would have exposed him" (13). The essay historically is not founded on an anti-genre, but on a kind of faultiness of genre. For Addison, if we take him at his word, the essay is not writing *about* the daily, but perhaps *is* writing the daily in the *Spectator* as a daily review. In the daily, one returns to the ordinary, but from a different angle. The essay through the example of Montaigne, Addison, and Johnson becomes a kind of faulty practice. Carl Klaus in his head note to Addison references the idea of the anti-methodological in Addison, but not the idea of the flaw or the potential for failure in the essay itself. If the essay is a work of negation or a specific kind of writing of difference, the moment when the essay fails (or is without method—Addison's heap of pearls) is also the moment when writing begins. Where the essay fails is where it becomes interesting, where it has something to say. The essay works around or through failure, and thus can never come to a conclusion because it is always already unfinished. However, it still remains possible that the daily or the ordinary becomes a part of the essay, not because the ordinary is somehow the proper subject of the essay, but because the ordinary itself is a failed subject. Failed in the sense that it cannot be realized.

While Montaigne's ordinary connects to the natural, the natural and nature in Thoreau and Emerson does not necessarily connect to the ordinary or the daily. The everyday for Thoreau in *Walden* is rather something somewhat suspicious. It is a distraction and is not the reality of things: "by closing the eyes and slumbering, consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations" (107). Thoreau's call to consciousness is of course famous, but with the history of the essay and the ordinary in mind, the daily in this passage takes on a new aspect. In light of the essay and what I have been tracing as a kind of failure, the question that arises is whether it is possible to ever really see the daily or the ordinary? What is it that men exactly "establish and confirm"? If the "foundations are illusory," does the daily as we construct it

actually exist at all? Is the ordinary actually an illusion itself? Thoreau continues, “Children, who play at life, discern its true laws and relations more clearly than men, who failed to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience that is, by failure” (107). Thoreau’s statement is curious. *Play* is more actual while experience is failure. To play is to be on the surface, to pretend, to act, to not take seriously. This is not a truer reality or recognition of the daily, but the truth of “laws and relations.” The necessary relation is *play* because play recognizes the patterns of structure, whereas experience mistakes these habitual patterns for reality. Thoreau’s statement is less a condemnation than a restructuring of the accepted order. The daily in this passage also connects to failure, but not the failure of eloquence or organization as in Montaigne or Johnson essay. Failure for Thoreau is perhaps in the daily itself. What the daily or ordinary is cannot really be discussed except in its negation, its failure. Much later in *Walden*, Thoreau also writes, “The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched” (244). What comes to exist through the everyday is “intangible,” or exists as a between space, the liminal light of dawn or dusk.

With Thoreau’s “tints of morning” and “star-dust,” I am reminded of Epstein’s claim that when the essayist tries to stop “the dramatic and transmigratory essence of the essay crumbles to dust” (189). Thoreau’s daily is as ephemeral as the final movement of Epstein’s essay. The essay takes up the ordinary as subject but gives us occasion to rethink what is happening within the very use of what seems ordinary. If the ordinary is a kind of impossibility, then what is it at work in the essay when critics claim the essay’s grounding in the ordinary? Returning to the idea of the negative discussed earlier, it seems the ordinary that appears in the essay is not really a smooth unnoticed repetition of the daily, but where the repetition of the daily ceases or breaks. The ordinary in the essay is really the loss of the ordinary, the way in which the daily life that we cannot see is marked by loss. The ordinary is the very thing we do not see; once it rises to our recognition and comes to signify, it is already gone. The ordinary as written is an other,

something we cannot reach or obtain. The ordinary only manifests through its own absence. Ordinary's other in the essay must do different work than merely represent the ordinary as it is conceptualized in the everyday. It must recognize the breaking point that creates its own otherness.

The ordinary is often taken up as a subject in the essay, but consensus to what the ordinary *is* remains elusive. Kathleen Stewart in *Ordinary Affects* attempts to orient the ordinary around forces of movement that occur within the scene and the event, while Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* takes a rather opposite approach in examining the effects of language as social productions that are masked in the concepts of material objects. Somewhere between these two approaches lies Michel DeCerteau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* that takes up the ordinary and daily in terms of a rereading and rethinking of everyday functions. Reading actions and what we *do*, DeCerteau's book links everyday practice such as walking to a practice of reading while also reading the practice itself. What emerges through DeCerteau's method is perhaps not the everyday itself, but the invisibility of the everyday. The everyday is that which we cannot really see: DeCerteau says, "it is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that is neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of space: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (93). There is something about the practice of the everyday that cannot be seen, that is "characterized out of blindness." The everyday or ordinary then seems something like the function of ideology where we are always practicing it, and always doing it, but without knowing we are doing it. The ordinary is without "author" or "spectator" because to be consciously aware of it would be to destroy its function. The everyday can only function by not being seen. Recall how Thoreau states that most men are asleep. In relation to representation, it "remains . . . indefinitely other." The everyday and the ordinary (I'm consciously conflating terms a bit), remain other to representation because they resist representation. To attempt to represent action strips it of the function that exists through practice. The "writing" that occurs

in this passage is walking through the city which is a practice of the ordinary for DeCerteau, but is simultaneously without “author.” It is this movement that becomes a text, but it is also walking that for DeCerteau writes the city. The city as representation is different from the city in practice. DeCerteau uses the practice as a form of writing in order to shift our emphasis of understanding from representation to act and practice.

The idea of act over representation becomes most clear in the relationship of the map to the peripatetic for DeCerteau: “[S]urveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing-by. The operation of walking, wondering, or ‘window shopping,’ that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map. They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhen of the surface of projection” (97). The map becomes the representation of objects that traces the route but misses the action and movement of walking itself. It is the peripatetic, the action that DeCerteau draws in relationship to writing, which also shifts the emphasis of representation in writing to something that resists static representation. Writing like walking is not the totality of points drawn on a map. The points on the map that only *trace* what did exist are a relic. Set in a no-when, that which is represented is somehow untemporal and outside of time because it is not able to capture the motion of action itself. The relic or representation comes to be only a projection as if it were only image without referent. The anti-teleological and representational begins to echo with the anti-genre and anti-form that contemporary practitioners and critics find integral to the work of the essay. Using Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Philip Lopate notes briefly that Thoreau “fixes on a subject that is close to the very nature of essay writing: walking. An essay is akin to taking a mental stroll” (479). While Lopate in this short head note does not go on to theorize the peripatetic, the idea of the essay as a form of wandering appears in the work of Epstein and Lukacs as well.

If the essay works on the premise of the wander, the fragment, and the incomplete, the ordinary cannot simply be the subject of the essay. If anything, the thing the essay’s discovery is not the ordinary

itself, but is the break in the ordinary, ordinary's other. As in Lacan, the desire for the other is always a desire arising from loss. It is the other who I can never attain or know, and yet because of this impossibility, it is also the other who comes to structure my desire. As Charles Bernstein notes, "any attempt . . . to claim style is "ordinary" is always a move away from the ordinary. Indeed, such an "ordinary" poetic diction has fetishized what is in fact a literary style" (174). Writing about the ordinary or trying to represent the ordinary always destroys it. It can also be argued this was Marcel Duchamp's point in the readymade. Once recontextualized in an art gallery with a signature, the object comes to signify differently. What comes to exist in the essay as a trope of the ordinary is actually a confrontation with the break in the ordinary. The "blindness" that ordered or structured the practice of the ordinary in DeCerteau has been disrupted. The landscape has shifted and a different landscape has opened or manifested in its place.

The trope of landscape is not incidental. For DeCerteau it is the landscape or rather cityscape that we move through, but we do not see the environment in daily representation. Landscape itself then comes to represent an ordinary everyday occurrence, but its possibility of existing or coming to be understood is only realized in its destruction. In the essay, the writing that wanders is often placed within the context of place and a particular landscape, and yet this landscape or what might be initially read as the ordinary and everyday, only functions in the essay because of immanent lack and loss. What I see as the ordinary landscape within the essay is always marked by loss. Just as I may desire the city on a West Coast in which I no longer live, my desire is only produced by the absence of place. Indeed, what I now love so much is the very thing I could not see while I was there. What I desire cannot be regained. What I desire, I only desire because it has ceased to exist. What I cannot see is the everyday. It is only through its loss that I see it and wish to recapture it. Like Marcel in search of Combray, I can never go back to it, cannot hope to rediscovered it. Even in physically revisiting a place, it no longer signifies the same way, or perhaps now

signifies too much. I can never recover a place that I have lost because the very desire to recover it is also the cause of its original loss.

Looking then at what appears to be the ordinary in the essay, often enough, manifests in the trope or aspect of landscape, but a landscape that is marked by a break. What we read as “ordinary” is really an occurrence of loss. Yet, simultaneously, it is through a strange kind of doubling that the landscape of ordinary’s other becomes the landscape in which the essay comes to “wander.” The loss of the ordinary is what makes writing possible. These broken landscapes appear throughout nonfiction. From Albert Camus’ Prague to Jamaica Kincaid’s Antigua to Joan Didion’s New York, it is not the ordinariness of these places that gives rise to them becoming subject, but their difficulty and the way in which they can never be simply “ordinary.” Ordinary’s other as a trope of landscape is seen in Walter Benjamin’s “A Berlin Chronicle”; Sarah Kofman’s *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*; and James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son.” Each of these texts uses place as setting, but also uses place as more than setting. Where we are in a place is often the most ordinary, and at times, unremarkable thing in the world; however, as trope landscape becomes ordinary’s other. Benjamin’s Paris is lost to time and childhood, Kofman’s two streets are pulled between the tension of her birth mother who is Jewish and Mémé the Christian woman who comes to be a second mother; and Baldwin’s shattered Harlem that is a landscaped literally shattered by the race riots and metaphorically shattered through the death of his father. What gives power to the otherwise mundane settings is not that they are ordinary streets that secretly signify something extraordinary, but that they have lost all caniness of the ordinary. They are the ordinary that is marked by its loss and its failure. The essay as form writes that which is not understood, and yet perhaps because of our habitual use of language, the subject is misread as a sign of the ordinary and daily.

Walter Benjamin’s “A Berlin Chronicle” recalls his childhood, opening with a recollection of his childhood guides. It is shortly after this introduction that Benjamin notes a “fourth guide” which is the city

itself, not Berlin, but Paris (8). Calling up the everyday practice walking in the city, or getting lost in the city, Benjamin creates an unexpected division:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance — nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city— as one loses oneself in a forest— that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a Lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying; it filled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinth on the blotting pages of my school exercise book. (9)

This passage juxtaposes multiple ideas that reverberate off of the ordinary, but also seem to be its undoing. Susan Sontag examining “A Berlin Chronicle” in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, notices, “With these metaphors, he is indicating a general problem about orientation, and erecting a standard of difficulty and complexity” (113). What is the ordinary but a familiar kind of orientation, one so familiar that we do not even see it anymore? Benjamin’s listing of signs, roofs, kiosks, and passers-by suggest a mundane setting, but each item is transfigured by a refusal of the ordinary. The “uninteresting,” “banal,” and “ignorant” each suggests something of the common and everyday, but are disoriented precisely through loss. Here “losing oneself” is not the same as “not finding one’s way.” It is the loss of the ordinary that allows for Benjamin’s wandering in Paris, and perhaps also for his writing. The emphasis in the passage falls on the “startling,” the “sudden,” and “straying,” which corresponds both to the experience of Paris, but also to the writing of the essay itself. The undoing of the ordinary occurs not because the ordinary is secretly extraordinary, but because what is ordinary is lost, hence the difference between “not finding one’s way” and “losing oneself.” The landscape of the essay is the loss of the ordinary landscape. The loss of the ordinary is also connected to writing, but a form of writing that is not writing. It is in the “blotting pages

of my school exercise book” that the idea of this labyrinth of loss is first discovered. In the pages, but not what is written per se, but the blots, the obliteration of writing, and also the reverse of writing. The reverse of writing becomes that which cannot be read. At the heart of this labyrinth or the Minotaur’s chamber, as Benjamin calls it, is desire or rather “the small brothel on rue de la Harpe” (9). Through the idea of loss and becoming lost, we also come in contact with desire. The ordinary has vanished, but with its erasure, the subject of the essay, the wandering through the city, emerges.

A different reworking of the street occurs in Sarah Kofman’s *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*. The ordinariness of place and of the street name comes under erasure through the disruption of the order of things with the arrival of the Gestapo. The two streets which as separate instances of street names have little weight, stand differently in Kofman not because they are ordinary, but because the place itself becomes the site of loss and rupture in the everyday. At the end of section 9, Kofman leaves the reader in the middle of things: “Leaving our vegetable broth unfinished, and not even realizing what the stranger had said, we set out for her house. One Métro stop separates the Rue Ordener from Rue Labat. Between the two, Rue Marcadet; it seemed endless to me, and I vomited the whole way” (31). In reality, in the occurrence of the everyday, there is not much that separates the two streets, only one street between the two, only one Métro stop between the two. Only one Métro stop, and yet it “seemed endless.” There is of course a world that separates these two places for Kofman. One is the loss of her family; the other is the secular that slowly erases her Judaism, and the complex tension between the two mothers. The two streets achieve weight as sign not because they are ordinary places and not because they are emblems of the change and tension Kofman undergoes, but because they *are* the tension. The tension arises through the displacement of space, a displacement of the ordinary and the everyday. In the following section Kofman notes, “This lodging on the Rue Labat was to have been temporary. It lasted throughout the whole war” (36). While these two statements of fact create juxtaposition of time and intention, they also testify to the irreparability of the loss of the everyday, of the ordinary. To experience such a break is not

temporary, it refigures the world, and nothing is ever quite the same. The ordinary once gone does not return. Like a break in ideology, the shift becomes irreversible. And yet it is equally possible that this break becomes the occasion for writing and even writing the essay in particular. Kofman opens her book with the occasion of her father's fountain pen on the desk, but "it failed me before I could bring myself to give it up. I still have it, patched up with scotch tape; it is right in front of me on my desk and makes me write, write. Maybe all my books have been the detours required to bring me to write about 'that'" (3). Like Benjamin's blotting pages, the broken fountain pen becomes the impetus for change. Writing is the thing that emerges from a confrontation with failure. The failed fountain pen or the unreadable inkblots become that which has ceased to have meaning or function and yet also become the wandering of the essay. The ordinary then, if it exists at all in the essay, is not the subject of ordinary objects but is the essay itself. The essay is a form of the ordinary because it wanders through the landscape of the ordinary that has been shattered.

The ordinary becomes the thing we cannot see. As for Kofman, all other writing was a "detour"; the writing itself becomes a form of reality. It is what I must move through, and yet I may not be fully conscious of how I am moving. If there is a political dimension to the ordinary, it would seem to have to be the occasion of its failure. The point where the ordinary ceases to exist is the same point where it becomes recognizable. That which I cannot see may indeed be political, but it does not become political for me because I do not yet have any power to cause change or affect or even the ability to see it. The essay is political because it picks up from the point of failure. The failure of the ordinary renders it visible.

In James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," the break of his father's death coincides with the literal break in the streets and the smashed glass from the race riots: "on the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass" (85). It is at two junctures of failure— death and destruction— that Baldwin begins his essay. The once familiar city has become a wilderness through its destruction. Epstein writes that the essay has two conditions, "boldness

of propositions and meekness of conclusions” (193). The boldness of propositions in Baldwin is the juxtaposition of the breaking up of the world in more ways than one. The starting place of the essay is both the personal and the political because the essay starts at the juncture of failure of both. How can failure be completed? The answer is it cannot. Meekness of conclusion then is not because the essay chooses not to conclude, but because the essay cannot conclude. Once the world has been broken open, there is no putting it back together without it giving way to fractures and cracks. The inability to conclude is also the place of political potential, as Epstein suggests, the essay offers an “open wholeness” (193). While Epstein’s idea may initially seem oxymoronic, it is perhaps a truth in paradox. While a whole would suggest a closed system, the opening is the refusal to conclude, to come to an easy answer, and to shut down discourse through the trite closure of empty dialogism. This possibility and refusal exists in Baldwin’s description of Harlem after the riots. In the moment of realization that runs against the everyday, Baldwin also counters his observations by the end of the paragraph. He says,

I truly had not realized that Harlem had so many stores until I saw them all smashed open; the first time *wealth* ever entered my mind in relation to Harlem was when I saw it scattered in the streets. But one’s first, incongruence impression of plenty was countered immediately by an impression of waste. None of this was doing anybody any good. It would have been better to have left the plate glass as it had been and the goods lying in the stores. (111)

What has been there all along in the everyday does not become visible until it is destroyed. Baldwin only notices the stores when they have ceased to be stores and are smashed open. From this he realizes the wealth, but the “incongruence of thought” is quickly countered by the juxtaposition of waste. The thought or conclusion here is not allowed to rest, but as soon as it has asserted itself, it also undoes itself. Such oppositional thought seems counter to political sides that might either condemn or justify. Baldwin refuses to do either and for this reason is more political because he remains in the question of what should

be done or taken away from the scene. While the scene becomes a moment of realization, it also “does nobody any good.” In the refusal of oppositional thinking, the reader is left to question and is not given an answer ready-made and easy to swallow. The scene sticks in all its complicated mess through the destruction of what outside of the riots might otherwise remain an everyday scene. The act of writing is a confrontation with desire that cannot be placated with an object because the object has ceased to exist. Here it is the object of the ordinary.

It is then through the complicated relationship of the essay to the world, of rewriting and recognizing the limits of the ordinary, and through the break with the ordinary that ordinary’s other becomes an instance of the essay itself. If the essay is classified as an anti-genre, it is not because it directly takes up a position against genre, but because what it works through is an instance of failure. From Montaigne’s apology to Thoreau’s remonstrance of blind habit to Kofman’s over signifying streets, the form of the essay in one way or another confronts a failure in the world. It is perhaps then not so much “nonfiction” that is the work of the essay or even its defining quality, but wrestling with that which defies reality, that which does not fit, does not belong, or is awkward. The essay writes difference. Ordinary’s other is a mode of difference through which the blindness we practice in the world is erased.

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