

Essay and Essayism between Modernism and Postmodernism

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The article is an attempt to show to what extent the essay, which is situated between philosophy and literature, is an anti-systematic genre open to individual experience and aiming at the particular phenomenon. Although this openness is a feature common to modernist and postmodern essayistic writing, developments in literature and philosophy show that modernist essayism (from Musil to Adorno) contained a utopian dimension which disappears in a postmodern constellation (from Robbe-Grillet and Fowles to Barthes) marked by a one-dimensional view of society. The question concerning an alternative social order is no longer raised in postmodern essayism.

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In its long history (cf. Schärf 13–37), the essay has always been geared towards the particular and the incomplete, towards openness and philosophical or aesthetic experience. In all its phases and forms, it has avoided systematic closure and conceptual deductions at the expense of individual experience. In most cases, it has preferred the particular and concrete to the general principle. It has nevertheless been open to generalisation and argument: not only in philosophy, but also in literary criticism and in literature itself.

In fact, the most fascinating aspect of essayistic writing, one might argue, is its potential for bringing about a spontaneous synthesis between the particular and the general, for bridging the gap between experience and the concept. It is not by chance that modern literary criticism, which deals with increasing ambiguity, indeterminacy and openness, has always professed a penchant for the essay and an ingrained distrust of systematic discourse.

For criticism, as defined by a writer like T. S. Eliot or a deconstructionist like Geoffrey H. Hartman, is an art in its own right, is literature about literature. This is what T. S. Eliot means when he points out: “The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist.” (Eliot 31) This kind of union cannot possibly be realised in a systematic philosophical treatise or in a sociological

system. Almost half a century after Eliot, Geoffrey H. Hartman considers criticism as a literary genre. He writes about his critical work: “In *Criticism in the Wilderness* and *Saving the Text* I try to define the symbiosis or tangled relations of literature and literary commentary.” (Hartman 203)

At this stage, it would be tempting to assume that the form of the essay and essayistic writing in general is typical of literary criticism and has had little or no impact on philosophy and the social sciences. This is not the case. Although philosophy is well known for its ambitious systems – from Aristotle to Hegel – it also has an essayistic past highlighted by the works of Michel de Montaigne and David Hume.

In his text “On Essay-Writing”, Hume seeks to bridge the gap between what he calls “the learned and the conversible Worlds”, that is between the world of philosophy or science on the one hand and the world of social conversation. The latter is at the same time the world of experience which is frequently lacking in the “learned world” of philosophers and scientists: “And indeed, what cou’d be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search’d for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation?” As a logical consequence of this criticism, Hume envisages a synthesis between the two worlds, a synthesis that is “essayistic” in character: “’Tis to be hop’d, that this League betwixt the learned and conversible Worlds, which is so happily begun, will be still farther improv’d, to their mutual Advantage; and to that End, I know nothing more advantageous than such Essays as these with which I endeavour to entertain the Public. In this View, I cannot but consider myself as a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation [...]” (Hume 412–413)

It is not by chance that a philosopher who relies heavily on the empirical tradition favours a genre aiming at experience and the world of daily life. He is very much in disagreement with a systematic thinker like Hegel who exclaims “all the worse for the facts” whenever reality refuses to conform to the laws of the idealist system.

The Modernist Essay between Philosophy and Art

This fundamental disagreement between a systematic idealism and an essayism inspired by openness and individual experience reappears in late modern or modernist philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century. The political controversies between George Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno, which ultimately revolved around the question whether Soviet socialism was an acceptable model or not, are embedded in a philosophical and aesthetic context involving the problem of essayism sketched above.

It is a well-known fact that the young Lukács considered the essay as a form of life, as a form in its own right that mediated between art and conceptual thought and at the same time stood aloof from both. To Lukács, who published his famous collection of essays, entitled *The Soul and The Forms* (*Die Seele und die Formen*) in 1911, the essay appeared as a kind of conceptual thought which avoided the “icily-conclusive perfection of philosophy”. The original expression is: “der eisig-endgültigen Vollkommenheit der Philosophie”. (Lukács 7)

Unlike philosophy, which the young Lukács tends to assimilate to a science dealing with facts and their relations, the essay is not determined by its objects and contents, but by its *form*. Unlike the philosophical or scientific text, which may lose its relevance in the course of time because situations and facts change, the essay is read for its own sake. In this respect, it is close to art and is comparable to an aesthetic object. It cannot be refuted like a scientific treatise. One of Lukács’s examples is Johann Winkelmann’s essayistic work about Ancient Greece. “Is it conceivable”, he asks, “that Burckhardt and Pater, Rhode and Nietzsche might call into question the influence of Winkelmann’s Greek dreams?” (9) The answer, of course, is no.

The reason is not so much the – frequently doubted – erudition of Winckelmann’s dreams, but the *form* they were put in. The form defies the ravages of time, and we read Winckelmann, as we read Burckhardt, Pater or Nietzsche, because we are fascinated by their way of looking at reality, by the forms of their texts. The same argument applies to Lukács’s own essays, to *The Soul and the Forms*.

According to the author himself, they are located between art, life and conceptual thought: unlike works of art, they do not refer directly to life and the real world, but come into being as critical reactions to aesthetic experience, to art. This is why Lukács can argue that they come about “on the occasion of something else”: “bei Gelegenheit von”. (27) For the essay which stands between art and conceptual thought differs radically from art insofar as it never refers to life itself, but only to life as represented by art: that is to artistic experience. For that reason, it renders life only indirectly. It is nevertheless true that its forms give expression to the particular experience, but this experience is mediated by art.

As an expression of the particular, the essay cannot represent the totality of experience, but only a fragment. It is fragmentary in character. Those familiar with Montaigne, Hume, T. S. Eliot and especially Adorno are surprised to find, at the end of Lukács’s essay on the essay, i.e. in his letter to Leo Popper, that the essay is provisional in character because it is a forerunner of the “great aesthetic”, of “the system”. Let us hear Lukács himself: “With quiet pride the essay may confront its fragmentary character with the

small perfections of scientific precision, however, its utmost fulfilments, its greatest achievements fade away as soon as the great aesthetic arrives.” (29)

To Lukács, “the great aesthetic” appears as a system, and the final part of his essay is dominated by a Hegelian “longing for the system”, literally: “Sehnsucht nach dem System”. (30) This longing finds a kind of fulfilment in Lukács’s “great aesthetic” of the 1970s which is a materialist reconstruction and reinterpretation of Hegel’s aesthetic theory and philosophy of art. In Lukács’s work as a whole, the essay thus appears as a mere forerunner, as a provisional solution which is meant to be superseded – in the Hegelian sense – by a higher form: by the system. At the same time, the particular and singular is sacrificed to a future totality.

In the present context, the crucial aspect of Lukács’s text is its utopian ending. For the “longing for the system” is at the same time a longing for a new “system of values” (“System der Werte”) (30) – and, indirectly or implicitly, for a new society, a better world. It announces Lukács’s later conversion to a Hegelian Marxism (in *History and Class Consciousness*, 1923) and his endorsement of East European socialism in his mature life. It is undoubtedly a late modern or modernist utopia comparable to the utopian projects of other Marxists and some existentialists. However, it is not a utopia in the sense of Adorno, in the sense of Critical Theory.

Adorno’s essayistic utopia is irrevocably anti-systematic and anti-Hegelian. In his essay on the essay (“Der Essay als Form”, 1954-58), he follows the young Lukács in emphasising the fragmentary and particularistic character of the essay, but at the same time dwells upon the contrast between the essayistic consciousness and an official culture that is latently hostile to the particular and to individual freedom.

The freedom to give one’s opinion, to insist on one’s preferences – if necessary against dominant fashions and trends – is inherent in Adorno’s notion of the essay, of essayism: “The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck and play are essential to it.” (Adorno, *Notes I*, 4) “Luck and play” are absent from Lukács’s theory of the essay, but they are quite important in postmodernism, especially in Roland Barthes’s essayistic criticism. The affinity between Adorno’s and Lukács’s essayism is the utopian component. However, Adorno’s utopia is very different from that of the Hungarian philosopher.

It is the utopia of non-identity, inseparable from individual emancipation and from Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of Enlightenment rationalism and Hegel’s systematic philosophy. The essay is defined negatively by what it opposes: “The essay allows for the consciousness of non-identity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism,

in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character.” (Adorno, *Notes I*, 9)

It is interesting to observe how Lukács’s and Adorno’s ideas about the essay converge only to diverge in the last but crucial point. The two philosophers agree that the essay aims at the particular experience and that its form is geared to this aim. But unlike Lukács, who believes that the essay is to be superseded by a higher form of thought, by the system, Adorno maintains that the essay is a permanent rebellion against systematic philosophy from Plato to Hegel: “In particular, it rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy – that old injustice done to the transitory, whereby it is condemned again in the concept.” (Adorno, *Notes I*, 10) In this respect, Adorno’s and Lukács’s comments on the essay anticipate their later works: While Lukács’s thought evolves towards the system in the Hegelian and Marxist sense, Adorno’s thought becomes increasingly radical in its rejection of systematic philosophy and in its defence of the particular, the individual, the non-identical.

His *Negative Dialectics* (*Negative Dialektik*, 1966) is an attempt to map out an alternative to Hegel’s positive dialectic and its materialist reincarnations in Marxism and Marxism-Leninism. Once again, Adorno defends the individual and particular against Hegelian attempts to integrate it into a totality, thus sacrificing it to the general. “Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity” (Adorno, *Negative 5*), Adorno points out and adds elsewhere: “The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity – things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and which Hegel labelled ‘lazy Existenz’.” (Adorno, *Negative 8*)

In his *Negative Dialectics* and elsewhere – especially in his collection of maxims entitled *Minima Moralia* – Adorno attempts to do justice to this particularity by developing his theory of the essay. Once again, the idea is an adaptation of theoretical, conceptual writing to the singular, the particular. In *Minima Moralia*, the maxim links the individual case to the general concept, the fragment to the whole. Truth thus appears not as an abstract thesis but as a concrete case. In *Negative Dialectics*, this process of particularisation culminates in the model. The author of this rebellious, unorthodox text envisages a series of model analyses as an alternative to the rationalist treatise or the Hegelian system: “Philosophical thinking is the same as thinking in models; negative dialectics is an ensemble of analyses of models.” (Adorno, *Negative 29*)

In his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno radicalises his essayistic, particularizing approach and tries to go beyond the model. His ultimate

alternative is the paratactic order of the text: a parataxis that avoids hierarchy and systematisation. It is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's "configuration" and – in the last instance – of Mallarmé's "constellation". It is meant to simulate simultaneity and to present an alternative to traditional argumentation which yields a result. Adorno's utopia is a reconciliation of the particular and the general, of subject and object, spirit and nature.

Essayistic Literature: Essay and Utopia in Proust and Musil

Adorno's modernist utopia of a critical thought aiming at the particular and at reconciliation with nature reappears in the works of Robert Musil and Marcel Proust. Both authors are averse to a systematic, didactic approach that reduces the particular to an epiphenomenon of the general, the individual case to a mere example of an overarching totality. Like Adorno, they seek truth in particular experience.

In his essay on Proust, Adorno is quite explicit on this subject: "In Proust, however, the relationship of the whole to the detail is not that of an overall architectonic plan to the specifics that fill it in: it is against precisely that, against the brutal untruth of a subsuming form forced from above, that Proust revolted." (Adorno, *Notes* II, 174)

It is a fact that Proust's novel does not follow teleologically a grand design, but is composed of autonomous units which are linked paradigmatically and paratactically rather than by a causally and syntactically structured narrative. "Un amour de Swann" is as autonomous a unit as "Noms de pays: le nom". Moreover, Proust's narration is constantly interrupted – like Musil's – by essayistic excursions into very heterogeneous fields of knowledge such as science, psychology, politics, history and art.

The striking affinities between Proust and Adorno are partly to be explained by the French novelist's aversion towards the abstractions of intellect and towards a way of life entirely governed by intelligence and conceptual thought. At the end of Proust's search, the latter is subordinated to "artistic instinct". Not the intellectual, brilliant Causeur who manipulates concepts and ideas has access to truth, but the artist capable of listening to his unconscious, to his "involuntary memory" (the *mémoire involontaire*): "The ideas formed by the pure intelligence have no more than a logical, a possible truth, they are arbitrarily chosen. The book whose hieroglyphs are patterns not traced by us is the only book that belongs to us." (Proust 241) Naturally, this is not what Adorno would have said; but it comes rather close to his distrust of purely conceptual thought and to his orientation towards artistic mimesis.

There is another reason why Proust can be considered an essayistic precursor of Adorno: like Adorno he stands Hegel on his head by continuing the romantic tradition (F. Schlegel, Schelling) and by proclaiming that art, not philosophy, is the supreme form of consciousness. This inversion of Hegel's hierarchy implies an orientation towards the particular, towards essayistic writing unhampered by conceptual constructions and logical deductions.

This is the point where Proust and Musil meet. From a philosophical point of view, Musil is a lot more explicit than Proust. What he has to say about systematic thought in philosophy could be read as an implicit critique of Hegel and possibly of Plato and Aristotle. About Ulrich, his main character, we read: "He was not a philosopher, for philosophers are violent characters, who haven't got an army at their disposal and therefore try to rule the world by locking it up in a system." (Musil 253) Like Musil, Ulrich is a non-systematic observer who is more fascinated by a significant detail than by ideologies and metaphysics. Unlike other characters in the novel, he distrusts all ideological rhetoric which he tries to deconstruct by emphasizing modernist ambivalence and by dwelling on paradoxical situations.

Ambivalence and the paradox are responsible for the crisis of narration both in Proust's *Recherche* and in Musil's fragmentary novel. In a situation where characters, actions and statements can no longer be defined unambiguously (as was the case in 19th century novels), it becomes difficult to establish a narrative causality based on the assumption that certain thoughts and actions can be attributed to certain actors. Ulrich is not a man of action, but a thinker and dreamer in the sense of Virginia Woolf's Orlando. Woolf's narrator remarks about her heroine or hero: "If then, the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her." (Woolf 257) The fact is, however, that the modernist corpse is full of ideas and dreams which cannot be used in a traditional narrative structured by action. In modernism, action is superseded by an essayistic writing closely linked to thought and imagination.

Like Virginia Woolf's Orlando, Ulrich mainly "thinks and imagines" – and this is one of the reasons why essayism and an essayistic philosophy are so important in Musil's novel. About Ulrich his narrator remarks: "Roughly like an essay, which, from section to section, considers a phenomenon from many perspectives, without ever defining its meaning, – for a perfectly defined phenomenon loses its volume and boils down to a concept, – he believed that he could deal with the world and his own life in the most satisfactory manner." (Musil 250)

At this point, the affinity between Musil and Adorno need hardly be emphasised. Although Adorno never abandons conceptual thought, he distrusts the concept, especially in its rationalist or Hegelian form. Like Musil, he refuses to reduce the particular phenomenon to a conceptual definition, to an abstraction, and writes about the essay that “it rejects definition of its concepts”. (Adorno, *Notes I*, 12)

In the 62nd chapter of his novel, Musil refers to the “utopia of essayism”. An unambiguous definition of this utopia is hardly possible and would certainly not be approved of by the essayistic novelist. However, he might agree with the idea that this utopia is a move away from the ideological or philosophical schemes which have precious little to do with the reality they pretend to explain. It is a utopia in the sense of Adorno: a state of mind and a social situation that may not ever come about, but that are worth aspiring to because they promise to be infinitely better than the situation we live in.

It is a modernist utopia insofar as it calls into question the entire bourgeois order which rests on the dubious assumption that the dominant ideas and ideologies correspond to reality – or, rather, that reality corresponds to them. The plausibility of this correspondence is only maintained by the Subject’s domination over the Object, over nature. The utopias of essayism are attempts to subvert the principle of domination and to think outside of its conceptual systems. The difficulties Musil and Adorno encountered in their search for alternative discursive forms – in their essayism, their aphorisms and their paratactic writing – show how difficult it is to break out of the established order.

Postmodern philosophers, literary critics and writers no longer attempt to break out. They still adhere to the critical idea, to essayism and even the essayistic novel, but they have abandoned the utopian search for an alternative social order and a subjectivity emancipated from the principle of domination. The latter is still criticised – by philosophers and literary critics alike – but alternatives are no longer envisaged. Postmodernism has become one-dimensional.

From Deleuze and Rorty to Barthes: The Loss of the Utopian Dimension in Postmodernism

It would be misleading to assume that postmodernism is one-dimensional in the sense that it renounces criticism or the critical activity as such. It is one-dimensional in so far as it deletes the notion of truth and the complementary modern and modernist question concerning a better

society and a more humane world. Postmodern critique no longer aims at an overcoming in the sense of the German *Überwindung*, but accepts what Gianni Vattimo, quoting Heidegger, calls *Verwindung* in *The End of Modernity*: “Precisely this difference between *Verwindung* and *Überwindung* can help us to define in philosophical terms the ‘post’- in ‘post-modernism’.” (Vattimo 164) Translated into political terms, this should be taken to mean that postmodernists no longer believe in an overcoming of capitalist and bourgeois society. They have accepted it – albeit grudgingly.

Postmodern essayism bears witness to this situation marked by *Verwindung*. In art and literature, it no longer aims at truth and the truth content of artworks in the sense of Adorno, but disavows truth as a metaphysical relic. The philosophers who most convincingly plead against the modern and modernist metaphysics of truth are probably Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Their rapprochement between philosophy and art, between philosophy and literature is designed to outmanoeuvre the notion of truth in the traditional, metaphysical sense: “Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure.” (Deleuze, Guattari 82) Although they never attempt to dissolve philosophy in literature, they do emphasise the literary, non-conceptual aspects of philosophical discourse: “Melville said that great novelistic characters must be Originals, Unique. The same is true of conceptual personae. They must be remarkable, even if they are antipathetic; a concept must be interesting, even if it is repulsive.” (Deleuze, Guattari 82) “Interesting”, “remarkable” are the new criteria – not “true”.

A postmodern philosopher such as Richard Rorty is even more explicit when, going one step further than Deleuze and Guattari, he crosses the generic border and dissolves philosophy and even science in literature. What he calls “twentieth century textualism” could be viewed as a postmodern essayism which, having abandoned the notion of truth, encompasses literature, philosophy and science: “[...] Twentieth-century textualism wants to place literature in the center, and to treat both science and philosophy as, at best, literary genres.” (Rorty, *Consequences* 141) Like Geoffrey H. Hartman, a literary critic and a deconstructionist, Rorty considers Jacques Derrida’s experimental text *Glas* as a model of postmodern textuality: “It is no small feat to get this sort of thing down on paper, but what we find in *Glas* is not a new terrain. It is a realistic account of a terrain upon which we have been camping for some time.” (Rorty, *Deconstruction* 15)

Glas could best be described as an essayistic textual collage which criticises Hegel’s systematic, absolutistic thought without proposing – like Adorno’s or Horkheimer’s modernist critique – an alternative truth content

in artistic mimesis. In postmodern philosophy, critique is no longer linked to the complementary concepts of truth, emancipation and overcoming, but is geared towards the new notions of play, desire and pleasure.

A model of this new postmodern textuality is Roland Barthes's essayism. In some respects it is similar to Adorno's anti-systematic, anti-logocentric approach; in other respects it represents a break with Adorno's modernist search for truth and truth contents in the realm of art. With Nietzsche, Barthes shares "the *good* will to hold on to appearance" (Nietzsche 113) which characterises the artist and the aversion towards metaphysical truth. Inspired by the essayistic and aphoristic spirit of the German philosopher, he emphasises the impossibility of translating the polysemic signifiers of literary and philosophical texts into conceptual systems or – as he himself puts it – into "structures of signifieds". (Barthes, *S/Z* 5)

His critical essays of the 1960s and 70s can be read as a permanent struggle against rationalist, dialectical or structuralist attempts to define the meaning or the truth content of literary or even philosophical texts. "The instance of the text", he points out in *The Semiotic Challenge*, "is not signification but the signifier, in the semiotic and the psychoanalytic acceptance of the term [...]." (7) In reality, Barthes is not interested in semiotic or psychoanalytic deep structures (in the sense of Greimas or Charles Mauron), but in the playful interaction of polysemic signifiers.

This becomes obvious in his essays on Robbe-Grillet, where, following the anti-metaphysical stance of the Nouveau Roman, he tries to avoid all metaphysical connotations, all references to a "truth content" in the sense of Adorno. The objects, as described by Robbe-Grillet, he argues, are simply there. In another article on Robbe-Grillet, he maintains that the novelist of the new type systematically avoids associating objects with meaning and human intentionality; his objects are purely material and linked by "indifferent chance", "hasard indifférent" (Barthes, *Essais* 65), as Barthes himself expresses it.

His essays are reactions to this "indifferent chance" and indirectly to postmodern indifference as such which gradually supersedes modernist ambivalence. In Kafka's, Musil's and Adorno's works, this ambivalence was responsible for the essayistic search for meaning and subjectivity. In Barthes's essays, the indifference of words and things puts an end to the search and essayism becomes one-dimensional. The postmodern essay is no longer a search, but a playful experiment, a game, aiming not at truth, but at pleasure.

This one-dimensional character of postmodern writing is amply illustrated by Barthes's book *The Pleasure of the Text*, whose author defines writing as the "science of the pleasure of language" (14) and eventually pleads

in favour of an “aesthetic of pleasure” (“esthétique du plaisir”). (94) Like many postmodernists – e.g. Linda Hutcheon – he considers Brecht as a prominent forerunner of such an aesthetic – forgetting Brecht’s Marxist engagement and his emphasis on the link between popular pleasure and popular revolution.

Postmodern Essayism in Literature: John Fowles and John Barth

The tendency towards a playful and indifferent one-dimensionality reappears in contemporary essayistic literature which is considered as postmodern by many critics. In John Fowles’s novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), for example, essayism and metalingual commentaries – considered by various literary critics as a postmodernist feature – are quite prominent. The numerous quotations from philosophy and literature preceding each of the novel’s 61 chapters could also be considered as essayistic elements which are meant to induce the reader to stop and ponder on the text and the plot instead of consuming both uncritically.

One of the best examples is probably chapter 13 which begins with a brief quotation from Tennyson’s *Maud*. Its beginning is a clearly essayistic, “metalingual” reflection on the author’s positions within the literary evolution and within society. It is worth quoting extensively, especially since it establishes a link between Fowles’s art of the novel, Barthes’s literary criticism and Robbe-Grillet’s *Nouveau Roman*. Answering the question “Out of what shadows does she [i.e. the heroine Sarah] come?”, Fowles’s narrator answers:

I do not know. This story I am telling is all imagination. These characters I create never existed outside my own mind. If I have pretended until now to know my characters’ minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in [...] a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (Fowles 85)

So what exactly is it?

It is a postmodern novel whose narrator and author reflect on their positions within the literary evolution, the literary field and the literary institution. Their essayistic approach is certainly not uncritical. Yet it is very different from Virginia Woolf’s, Robert Musil’s or Adorno’s utopian essayism. Far from aiming at a utopian future like Musil or at an aesthetic truth content like Adorno, Fowles envisages a playful text and an aesthetic

game. At the beginning of the 13th chapter, he is quite explicit in this respect: “So perhaps I am writing a transposed autobiography; perhaps I now live in one of the houses I have brought into the fiction; perhaps Charles is myself disguised. Perhaps it is only a game.” (85)

Very much like Barthes, who abides by Nietzsche’s Hellenistic maxim that only appearance counts, that one ought to avoid the depths of essence and remain on the surface, Fowles inaugurates a textual and intertextual game in which quotations from the works of Marx and Darwin do have a critical function, but at the same time contribute to a better functioning of the game: of Fowles’s “intertext”, Barthes would say. Like the narrator’s “metalingual” comments, they are essayistic elements within a novel which is no longer a metaphysical search in the modernist – Proustian or Joycean – sense, but a playful experiment designed to entertain the cultivated postmodern reader.

John Barth’s well-known short story *Lost in the Funhouse* reveals what kind of reader the postmodern writer has in mind. It is a reader who is familiar with pre-modernism and modernism, but who considers both with growing irony, as Umberto Eco puts it in his *Reflections on the Name of the Rose*. (67) Essayism within the novel turns out to be an important instrument of this postmodern irony. In Barth’s story, it appears in the guise of a regularly recurring metalingual comment: “The function of the beginning of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action [...]” (Barth 77) This sentence is to be found at the beginning of the story and signals a self-reflexive attitude of the narrator. It suggests that, in modernism and postmodernism, literature has become an essay on literary writing: a kind of meta-literature.

The narrator reflects ironically upon the modernist novel (Joyce, Th. Mann) and its unfortunate heroes whose literary genius is inseparable from their suffering, from their outsider status. He tells us about his hero Ambrose who is destined to become a writer: “Though she had never laid eyes on him, she recognized that there was one of Western Culture’s truly great imaginations, the eloquence of whose suffering would be an inspiration to unnumbered.” (Barth 96) The essayism of this sentence does not only consist in its irony, but also in the parodistic attitude adopted by the postmodern narrator towards the modernist hero whose metaphysical pretensions are cut to size.

Finally, they are reduced to a game similar to that played by other postmodern authors such as Umberto Eco or John Fowles. At the end of Barth’s story, literature appears as a funhouse: “He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he’s not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret

operator – though he would rather be among the lovers for whom fun-houses are designed.” (Barth 97)

Essay and essayism, which were instruments of a metaphysical search in modernism, both in philosophy and in literature, are thus turned by postmodern authors into a textual game which has its critical components, but excludes the utopian dimension.

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Esej in esejizem med modernizmom in postmodernizmom

Ključne besede: literatura in filozofija / literarni žanri / esej / modernizem / postmodernizem / utopija / partikularnost

Odkar je esej postal žanr, je meril na partikularno, na odprtost in individualno izkušnjo. Vedno se je izogibal sistematičnemu zaprtju in identifikaciji z realnostjo: identifikaciji subjekta in objekta v racionalističnem ali hegllovskem smislu. Na tej ravni bi lahko esej ahistorično opredelili kot žanr, umeščen med filozofijo in literaturo. A takoj ko sprejmemo zgodovinsko perspektivo in se ukvarjamo z vlogo eseja in esejizma med modernizmom (pozna modernost) in postmodernizmom, pridejo na dan funkcionalne in družbene spremembe, ki kažejo, da esej nikakor ni filozofska ali literarna stalnica, ampak besedilo, prežeto z zgodovino in politikom. Modernistični esej – v Lukáčsevem in Adornovem smislu – meri onkraj obstoječe realnosti, onkraj obstoječe družbene ureditve, in naznanja utopično stanje, ki pa ostaja nedoločeno. Podobno funkcijo ima v esejističnih romanih pisateljev, kakršna sta Musil in Proust, kjer ni le povezan s posebno in individualno izkušnjo, ampak premore tudi utopične razsežnosti v filozofskem, estetskem in umetniškem smislu. Te utopične razsežnosti se v postmodernizmu izgubijo; esej je še vedno povezan s posebno izkušnjo, vendar se odreka ideji kritične negativnosti in boljšega sveta v Adornovem smislu. V delih Rolanda Barthesa, Johna Fowlesa, Johna Bartha in Itala Calvina se esejistično pisanje sčasoma preobrazi v enodimenzionalno igro s tekstualnostjo.

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