

The Essay and Singularity: Introduction

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The essay cannot be categorized in the typology of literary genres inherited from Romanticism – that is, as epic, lyrical, or dramatic. Instead, since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, literary studies has treated it as an independent genre. Its history stretches back into Antiquity, to Plato, Pliny, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. Montaigne is considered to have started the genre, and in the twentieth century the best-known authors and poets writing essays included. Among the reasons that the essay can be labeled the genre that, alongside the novel, best suits the modern age are its structural characteristics such as the mixing of various genres, reflection and self-reflection, the use of the first person (which can be compared with lyrical expressiveness), autobiography, poetic style, narrative elements (especially anecdotes), intertextuality (especially citationality), open form, treatment of culture in the broadest sense of the word, and so on. The essay enables the individual (the non-metaphorical self) that does not have pretensions of objective truth to write down his subjective truth, and so it can also be understood as a key genre of post-modern society or of its art, philosophy, and science.

Like the essay, the second concept contained in the title of this thematic section also evades an unambiguous definition. In the light of singularity, the essay can be approached in at least two ways.

First, the characteristics of the essay, its uniqueness and singularity, are in the foreground. Here one possibility is to refer to a special new school in recent literary studies: the “poetics of singularity.” Writers such as Timothy Clark, Derek Attridge, and Samuel Weber have treated literature as an event of singularizing that takes place in reception, and they have based their studies on the arguments of Kant, Heidegger, Gadamer, Blanchot, and Derrida. According to Clark in his book *The Poetics of Singularity*,* singularity is not some hidden quality, origin, or affect of literature. It inheres in what Derrida terms “syntax,” the placement and not the content of words. The singularity of literature is the syntactic, logical, or poetic operation that relates the words. One of the terms introduced by Derrida in order to describe the singularity of literature is “fold” or “folding” of terms across,

* Clark, Timothy. *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

over, and about each other through the text, and through the possible contexts that are projected by the text. Singularity cannot be fully captured in some sort of thematization or summary proposition. It may produce the effect of extra depth, sacrality, density, or mystery. No interpretation can gather the secret or singularity of the text under some summary heading without leaving some remainder (131–132).

Second, the singularity of the essay writer is in the foreground, in which it is possible to rely on various philosophical concepts of the subject and single individual (Kierkegaard). In addition, one cannot overlook the fact that even Montaigne discussed the formation of his identity in the writing process, subjectivity, the universality of his findings, and so on. According to Montaigne, who ascribed the possession of absolute truth to God alone, the conceptual self, the objects of conceptualization, and knowledge about objects are equally changeable and fluid. In his essays, Montaigne repeatedly discusses himself, his flows, and changes. He criticizes the idea that he himself, Michel, should be of less interest than man in general (III/9). Although his interest is directed to “a particular one” (III/2), he is well aware that his portrayals of the singular Michel convey general implications.

In the papers brought together on the following pages it is possible to trace both of the approaches roughly sketched out here, although most of the contributors have concentrated on the singularity of the essay. **Peter V. Zima**'s paper determines that the modernist essay had a utopian dimension that has disappeared in the postmodern essay and has been replaced by a one-dimensional perspective on society. **Remo Cesarani** highlights prophetic tension as a special characteristic of Walter Benjamin's essay-writing style, in addition to allegory and surrealism. The next three papers focus on the singularity of the essay writer. **Marko Uršič** examines the relationship between the author and the subject of the essay in Montaigne's essays. **Varja Balžalorsky** also analyzes Montaigne's achievement, highlighting parallels with non-ego-based theories of the individual. **Ignacija Fridl** shows that Montaigne's stance on the essay as a reflection of the self can be understood as the self seeking to define the scope and limits of its own existence in essay form. The papers by the next three contributors highlight characteristics of selected essay-like writing. Based on Czech essayists of the 1920s and 1930s, **Ivo Pospíšil** analyzes specific thematic and formal features of the Czech essay and its typology. **Péter Hajdu**'s paper describes the literary character of biographical essays by the Hungarian writer **Kálmán Mikszáth** through analysis of metaphors. **Mária Bátorová** determines that the essays of Czech and Slovak dissidents have not only documentary value, but also authentically exceed the boundaries of the

genre. According to **Marko Juvan**, the singularity of the essay would not be possible without a *sensus communis* – a concept understood as a common place, referring to common sense or Kant's *Gemeinsinn*. **Bart Keunen** also draws attention to an under-acknowledged characteristic of the essay by accentuating its applicability for the study of everyday life. According to **Iztok Osojnik**, the essay can never originate through reportage, or representation, but only as indirect linguistic testimony, as an event. **Tomaž Toporišič** deals with a special type of event, the theatrical essay, in which he uses the concept of singular plurality and aesthetic performativity in order to analyze selected examples. This thematic section concludes with a paper by **Tomo Virk**, in which he examines the nature of essay-like discourse in literary studies and determines that the essay makes it possible to open up those segments of literature that are not accessible to discourse that is oriented towards objectivizing disciplines.