

Who Speaks in Montaigne's Essays?

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This paper discusses three questions concerning singularity from the point of view of Montaigne's Essays: 1. Does essayistic language itself enable to express the individuality of the writer? 2. Is it really possible to write about my-self? 3. Who is the essayistic subject? As shall be seen, the answers are rather complex.

Key words: literature and philosophy / Montaigne, Michel de / essay / subject / individuality / singularity

In the preface to his *Essays*, Michel de Montaigne expresses his wish that the world would see him in his proper individuality: “for it is my own self [*moy-mesme*] that I am painting”; and if “I had found myself among those peoples who are said still to live under the sweet liberty of Nature's primal laws, I can assure you that I would most willingly have portrayed myself whole, and wholly naked” (*The Complete Essays* lix). At the very beginning, he assures the reader that “here you have a book whose faith can be trusted” (*ibid.*). The essence of this “trust” [*bonne foy*] is speaking the truth, first of all the truth about oneself. The writer himself is the “subject of this book” as Montaigne writes in his last essay “De l'experience” (On Experience; III. 13): “I study myself more than any other subject; that is my metaphysics, that is my physics” (*The Complete Essays* 1217). Historians of philosophy and literature often point out that the “discovery of the individual” is the greatest novelty of the *Essays*. Montaigne founded his thinking and writing upon his belief that philosophy did not begin with “universals” but with personal and individual self-reflection. As he states in the essay “Du repentir” (On Repenting; III. 2): “every man bears the whole Form of the human condition” (*The Complete Essays* 908). The essayistic discourse, which Montaigne formed in the cross-section between philosophy and literature, is the “natural” consequence of such a premise.

This paper's main question is: *who* is the “literary subject” of the *Essays*? It is not so simple to “portray myself whole, and wholly naked,” even if I have the best intentions to be sincere – for “it is my own self that I am painting” – because always when my-self [*moi-même*] becomes the subject of my writing, I am unavoidably a literary subject (in the broadest sense): a subject “dressed” and “enveloped” in the language of my writing (or speaking).

However, when pointing out the literary subject of the *Essays*, I am not following the structuralist line of thinking that some decades ago proclaimed “the death of the author” (Barthes, Foucault). This thinking has been criticized from many perspectives. On the contrary, I am joining with its critics by stressing that literature, as well as philosophy and especially philosophical essays, is dead without the author, as well as without the reader (even if an author is the only reader of his/her own text), namely without the author and/or reader as a *living spirit*, who is free in recognizing or even identifying himself with those literary subjects that he creates and reads. The difference between my-self as a living spirit (living in my body, “here-and-now”, being a person, named M. M. or M. U.) and my literary subjects (including philosophical, essayistic subjects) is irreducible. My-self, when writing/reading, I am always in some dialogue(s) with my “other” literary selves.

The first (sub)question is: What are the *specific* features of the “essayistic subject”? The main features of essayistic discourse have often been pointed out: essays, compared with philosophy on the one hand and literature (*belles-lettres*) on the other, are “more free” in their expressive form, being singular, individual, and documentary in some personal or social sense etc. They are similar to prose, sometimes even to poetry, but they also preserve their “subjective objectivity” and their “personal universality”. Essays express universals in terms of particulars. The features of essayistic discourse, considered subjectively, or more accurately, considering the relationship between the author and his/her literary subject(s), provide specific features of the “essayistic subject”, compared with the “philosophical subject” on the one hand and the “lyrical subject” (which is the best known and most discussed among literary subjects) on the other. The main feature of the essayistic subject is its “polyphony” that it is comprised of several different literary subjects and yet still functions as a single unit. When writing or reading an essay, *my-self* can “shift” among different “other literal selves” of mine. For example, *my-self* can freely “switch” between my philosophical and poetic “counterparts” or literary *Doppelgänger*s – allowing my-self a high degree of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual freedom.

The “polyphony” of essayistic writing, and of the “essayistic subject” is evident from Montaigne’s writings about death. Death is one of the principal themes of the *Essays*. For Montaigne, writing about *my-self*, about my own life, is writing about *my* death as well. In his book *La Mort* (1977), Vladimir Jankélévich distinguished three levels (or phases) of thinking and writing about death: in the third, second, and first persons: the third being the philosophical (and/or scientific) approach, the second “documentary” writing (witnessing somebody dying), and the first writing from personal encounters with death (near-death experiences and/or proximity to death

during old age and illness). It is interesting to see how Montaigne went through these three phases in his writings about death. Below I present some characteristic passages.

On the third level, there are Montaigne's "premeditations" of death, his encounters with death "in the third person." In the essay "Que philosophe c'est apprendre à mourir" (To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die; I. 20), Montaigne tries to "premeditate" death by following the examples of great classical philosophers in their "universal" discourse ("we all die, so my-self too") There are different ways of premeditating death, from Socrates' "philosophical death", described in Plato's *Phaidon*, to Seneca's acceptance of the universal fate (stoic *heimarmene*), and Epicurus' and Lucretius' "denial of death." Here are some characteristic passages: "We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere. To practice death is to practice freedom" (*The Complete Essays* 96). "Every moment it seems to me that I am running away from myself" (97). And this is the most famous: "I want Death to find me planting my cabbages [*que la mort me treuve plantant mes chous*], neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening" (99). That passage is followed by: "Just as our birth was the birth of all things for us, so our death will be the death of them all" (102). Then we come to a stoic conclusion: "Nature ... says to us: 'Your death is a part of the order of the universe; it is a part of the life of the world' ..." (103). In these passages, the formal (grammatical) person of the essayistic subject varies however, their actual subject (maybe apart from the passage concerning "my cabbages") is in the third person (plural), following the scheme of reasoning: *they all* → *we* → *my-self too*.

We may add that such "premeditations" of death are an element of the melancholy of the late Renaissance, of its various figures described by M. A. Screech in his well-known book *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays*. In that book one finds an important remark concerning Montaigne's melancholy: "His melancholy was not to be confused with *tristesse* – that refined sadness paraded by man of fashion" (24). In the second edition of Books I and II of the *Essays* (1588, together with the new Book III), Montaigne inserted the sentence: "I am among those who are most free from this emotion" (Screech 7) at the beginning of the essay "De la tristesse" (On Sadness II. 2). Later, just before his death in 1592, when he was preparing the third edition of the *Essays* (1595), Montaigne explained at the same place his attitude towards *tristesse* even more clearly: "I neither like it nor think well of it, even though the world, by common consent, has decided to honour it with special favour. Wisdom is decked out in it; so are Virtue and Conscience – a daft and monstrous adornment. More reasonably it is not sadness but wickedness that the Italians

have baptised *tristezza*, for it is a quality which is ever harmful, ever mad. The Stoics forbid this emotion to their sages as being base and cowardly” (Screech 7). In the late essay “De la vanité” (On Vanity; III. 9), when his own death was closer than ever before, Montaigne says again, following the ancient wisdom, that “Joy we should spread: sadness, prune back as much as we can” (*The Complete Essays* 1108).

But even in his younger years, Montaigne’s encounters with death were very close, namely “in the second person” (in Jankélévich’s terms). He witnessed the death of his beloved friend Etienne de La Boétie in 1563. Montaigne began to write his *Essays* some years after the death of his friend, and they were primarily intended as an *hommage* to Etienne, wholly dedicated to his memory. That was later, but only a few days after Etienne’s death, Michel wrote a letter to his own father, describing in details his friend’s terminal illness and dying. It is probably the most moving passage of Montaigne’s opus, and in spite of the fact that later he did not include this documentary writing in *Essays*, Montaigne’s intensive “second-person experience” of death had an important role in his creation of the “essayistic subject.” Here is a fragment from Montaigne’s letter to his father. I prefer to quote it in the original, Renaissance French: “[Etienne] me dit, à toutes peines: ‘Mon frere, mon amy, pleust à Dieu que je visse les effects des imaginations que je viens d’avoir.’ Apres avoir attendu quelque temps qu’il ne parloit plus, & qu’il tiroit des souspirs tranchants pour s’en efforcer, car deslors la langue commençoit fort à luy denier son office. ‘Quelles sont elles, mon frere?’ Luy dis-je. – Grandes, grandes, me respondit-il ...”¹ (*Œuvres complètes* 1358).

Montaigne met death and wrote about it “in the first person” after the event in the middle of his life when he himself was very close to it. One of his most interesting and best written essays bears the unambitious title “De l’exercitation” (On Practice; II. 6). It is the first-person account of his near-death experience (circa 1568), a “practice” of dying. During one of the Huguenot wars, Michel, who was about thirty-five years old at that time, rode with his people not far from the castle. He fell from his horse in some misfortune, was badly wounded, lost a lot of blood, and remained unconscious for quite a long time. In the essay “De l’exercitation” he described his feelings after having regained consciousness, and there we find the following beautiful and precious passage: “To me it seemed as though my life was merely clinging to my lips. It seemed, as I shut my eyes, as though I was helping to push it out, and I found it pleasant to languish and to let myself go. It was a thought which only floated on the surface of my soul, as feeble and delicate as everything else, but it was, truly, not merely free from unpleasantness but tinged with that gentle feeling [*cette douceur*]

which is felt by those who let themselves glide into sleep" (*The Complete Essays* 420).

My second question concerning the "essayistic subject" is the following: Can somebody named M. M. or M. U. – namely, "I" as the author – be truly *sincere* when writing about *my-self*? Is it possible? I have already given the general answer *no*, because, at the moment when *moi-même* becomes a subject of my writing, I am unavoidably transformed into a literary subject – in the case of essays, into an essayistic subject – that is "made" in the language, indeed "from" the language, growing out of the dialogue with *my-self* as a living spiritual being, named X.Y. A more specific question is whether a writer can be "quite sincere" in his or her autobiographical writings (e.g., essays or diaries), in the sense of giving the "naked truth" of *my-self* as promised by Montaigne in the preface. The answer is again *no*, at least *not quite*. The inability is due not only to the subject's non-transparency of his or her own self (this point is over-stressed by psychoanalysis), but also to the simple fact that the difference between my living self and my literary counterparts always remains.

It is not enough to follow the maxim of sincerity in speaking *Non pudeat dicere quod non pudeat sentire* (Let us be not ashamed to say whatever we are not ashamed to think – as Montaigne wrote in one of his most sincere essays, covertly titled "Sur des vers de Virgile" (On Some Lines of Virgil, III. 5, *The Complete Essays* 953). This interesting and amusing late essay on human bodily pleasures and pains is an excellent case for disputing the "correspondence" (i.e., "sincerity") between the author himself and his "naked" essayistic subject. For example, when Montaigne writes "It pains me that my *Essays* merely serve ladies as a routine piece of furniture – something to put into their *salon*. This chapter will get me into their private drawing-rooms [*cabineŕ*]: and I prefer my dealings with women to be somewhat private: the public ones lack intimacy and savour" (958), we may ask: Should (or could) we imply from these written words that the very *self*, the living spirit in the body of *monsieur le comte* Michel de Montaigne, would like to enter personally into the drawing-rooms of his female readers? Probably not, at least *not in the same sense* as the author of *Essays* expressed this wish in his book. It is only *this* essayistic subject however, known to the world as Michel de Montaigne, who really counts now, four centuries later. Here one might remember the words written by Céleste Albaret in the memoirs of her master Marcel Proust: she stated that, if some person believed that Proust's books were the veritable tale of his life, this person would have a really bad opinion of his imagination.

The third and final question of this paper, concerning the literary subject of the *Essays*, repeats more generally the main question that was asked

at the beginning: *Who* is the *essayistic* subject? How is it related to its author? These issues are quite complex and should be discussed in a much larger study than the present. Nevertheless, I have already mentioned that the principal formal feature of the essayistic subject is its flexibility: it is a singular and unique manifold of several literary (including philosophical) subjects. It enables shifting among several fields and/or discourses of philosophy, prose, personal diary, and sometimes even poetry.

In the case of an “autobiographical essay,” as in Montaigne’s *Essays*, the essayistic subject encompasses more particular psychological features of its author. If it is compared with some other literary or philosophical subjects, however, the dividing line between “subjective” and “objective” features is blurred (e.g., Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and others). For every writer of essays, the following recognition, expressed clearly by Montaigne in his essay “Du démentir” (On Giving the Lie; II/18), is very relevant and important: “By portraying myself for others I have portrayed my own self within me in clearer colours than I possessed at first. I have not made my book any more than it has made me – a book of one substance [*consubstantiel*] with its author, proper to me and a limb of my life” (*The Complete Essays* 755).

At the end of this short essay regarding the essayistic subject, I am adding the following conclusion from my own experience of writing essays: I have tried to paint *this man*, namely my-self, “whole, and wholly naked,” and now I would like, if it were possible, for this close literary counterpart of me, the author, to be indeed *myself*, a living spirit. I am not sure whether Montaigne would agree with me on this point; however, *time* works in this direction, passing always and for all – in time, Montaigne *has become* just “this man,” the essayistic subject of his own great book.

NOTE

¹ “[Etienne] said to me with the utmost difficulty: ‘My brother, my friend, please God I may realize the imaginations I have just enjoyed.’ Afterwards, having waited for some time while he remained silent, and by painful efforts was drawing long sighs (for his tongue at this point began to refuse its functions), I said, ‘What are they?’ ‘Grand, grand!’ he replied...” (translation by Charles Cotton).

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Kdo govori v Montaignevih *Esejih*?

Ključne besede: literatura in filozofija / Montaigne, Michel de / esej / subjekt / individualnost / singularnost

Zgodovinarji filozofije in književnosti radi poudarjajo, da je največja novost *Esejev* »odkritje posameznika«, namreč da je Montaigne svoje mišljenje in pisanje utemeljil na prepričanju, da se filozofija ne začne z »univerzalijami«, ampak s sámopremislekom, saj nosi »vsak človek v sebi celotno formo človeškega bivanja« (III/2). Esejistični diskurz, ki ga je oblikoval v preseku filozofije in književnosti, pa je »naravna« posledica takšnega izhodišča.

V tem prispevku si zastavljam tri vprašanja o singularnosti v Montaignevih esejih:

1. Ali esejistični diskurz bolj kot kak filozofsko abstraktni omogoča izražanje *individualnosti* govorca/pisca, in če je tako, ali naj to zmožnost eseja pripišemo predvsem njegovi literarni formi, ali pa gre bolj za odločitev, subjektivno intenco samega avtorja? O tem vprašanju razpravljam na »primeru« Montaignevega pisanja o smrti, ki ga v *Esejih* razvija na treh ravneh (če parafraziram Vladimirja Jankélévitcha): kot govor v tretji, drugi in prvi osebi, drugače rečeno, od filozofije prek pričevanja do osebne izpovedi, vse od eseja na sokratsko temo »filozofirati pomeni učiti se umreti« (I/20) prek pisma očetu po prijateljevi smrti do tiste »vaje« umiranja v osebni »predsmrtni izkušnji« (II/6) in naposled spricho neizbežne starostne bližine smrti (III/13).

2. Ali je v eseju res mogoče pisati o »samem sebi«, o svoji konkretni, človeški eksistenci? Je sploh mogoča takšna *iskrenost*, ki jo Montaigne zahteva od svojega pisanja? (»Ne sramuj se izreči, česar se ne sramuješ misliti.«) Mar ni mojemu pogledu bolj ali manj »zastrt« lastna duševna in telesna

resničnost, tako da vselej, ko želim pisati o sebi, neizogibno pišem o nekem svojem »drugem jaz«, se ubesedujem kot literarni subjekt? O vprašanju možnosti esejistične *sámoizpovedi* bi lahko razpravljali na »primeru« Montaignovega pisanja o lastni telesnosti, ljubezenski strasti in starostnih tegobah in se navezali zlasti na njegov pozni esej »O Vergilijevih verzih« (III/5).

3. Kdo je *esejistični subjekt*? Se v subjektovem pogledu esejistični diskurz razlikuje od, na primer, osebnoizpovedne lirike? V formalnem pomenu gotovo, a tudi pri še tako osebнем eseju se razločujeta subjekt pisanja in zapisani subjekt. Montaigne v eseju »O zavračanju laži« (II/18) ugotavlja: »S tem, da sem se slikal za drugega [tj. za bralca], sem se naslikal tudi zase v bolj razvidnih barvah, kot sem jih videl poprej. Svoje knjige nisem nič bolj ustvaril, kot je ona ustvarila mene.« Lepo in resnično povedano! Jaz sam pa dodajam vprašanje, mar ne bi bilo dandanes, po štirih stoletjih razvoja novoveškega subjekta, bolje že v nagovoru bralcu reči takole: prav *tega* človeka (tj. subjekta esejev) bi rad naslikal »vsega in docela nagega« – in če bi bilo mogoče, bi bil to jaz sam, ne le kak moj »drugi jaz«, ampak rajši kar moj »prvi jaz«?

Maj 2010