

Fülöp József

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF A GENRE – OUT OF DOORS

The theme of my thesis deals with the long history of the transfiguration of the essay as a genre. Its poetical variety makes it difficult to define the essay. With the first main part of my work I have been exploring issues of its hidden and uncommon etymology. The very word *essay* derives from the ancient Greek ἐξάγειον, meaning “scale” (solidus) or “to measure”, and the Vulgar Latin *exagium*, meaning “weighing”, “to examine”, “to drive out” etc. Through this etymological glass, typical synonyms like “try”, “attempt” become dark and rash. The main question, however, is whether the various definitions or conventional categories will be enough to give us a synthesis of all the poetical potency the essay is capable of. As a result of my research in this first part of my work I propose an enhancement and expansion of the conceptual matrix. To describe the essay as a flexible genre following criteria can be listed: center position of the subject and the object; perspectivism; self-reflective dynamism; presentism; integration; vividness of writing; experience of self-creation; invocation; ethical measure; evaluative attitude.

The middle section offers three portraits through a close reading of the selected essayists. The monumental *Adages* of Erasmus is a proto-essay before Montaigne. The humanist’s digressions in his texts are fine examples for the familiar (and critical) essay. The young Lukács is simply one of the most important theorists of the modern essay writing. I examine here his *The Soul and the Forms* with the help of its all possible surrounding contexts. Lukács is the first critical essay writer in Hungary, besides he expanded the platonic theory of the genre. His sources could have been the works of Walter Pater and Rudolf Hirzel on the same subject. Another prominent essayist is the Austrian Rudolf Kassner. The most interesting essays Kassner’s are those on musical subjects. His very unique and self-consistent style reveals a sophisticated self-made man in the history of aesthetics and essay writing.

In the last part of my thesis I pointed out the immanent resistance of the essay to dogmatism and its deep tendency to conservatism. I studied the literary topos of the “leisurely walk”, too. In its Proteusian form and with all of its unique, brave or gay digressions the essay as a reciprocal of myth is capable of to unify the diversity of the modern culture.