STĂNESCU'S ESSAY – A PALIMPSEST OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

Our point of view about the essay is somehow far from the opinions until now, namely: we think that the essay is a distinct genre, always with an esthetic message, having a discursive architecture, a genre inside the "literature of frontier". Being of a major importance for literary culture, the essay should be regarded as a palimpsest of human values.

Keywords: aesthetic, encyclopedic ego, essayistic discourse, essay, ethics, palimpsest

Why Stănescu's essay and not his poetry? From the interpretative retrospective and analysis on Stănescu's work one can notice that the essayistic discourse was only tangentially reached by the critics, and it was seen as a (more or less) poetic 'adtext' or some other times it is omitted from the poetic 'calculus' of the poetry reader. We want to reestablish the value of a controversial genre, as well as the importance of poetic essays in the unitary understanding of artistic work, rebuilding the whole.

For the beginning we underline the fact that the essay faithfully registers the aesthetic seisms, defining itself as pure and essential form of the discourse.

The strength of the essayistic genre resides in information about 'paternity and diachrony' [Tiutiuca, 1979: 24-35], a history of the 'state of essay' from 1580, first edition of Montaigne's *Essays* until the 20th century, to Emerson, Unamuno, P. Valéry. But the sources of the essay are found in antiquity: Plato's *Dialogues*, Plutarh's *Parallel Lives*, Seneca's *Lucilius' Letters*, Augustine's *Confessions*, didactic texts in that literature.

We stop at three aspects of the essay's etymons: (1) meanings in the 15th century, used by Montaigne's contemporaries, at the publication of his *Essais: gustus* (root *gust* = to try; *coup d'essai* or *apprentissage* or *expérience*; (2) Montaigne's meanings seen in his work [*Eseuri*, 1984][2]: (a) *exam, test, trial* [I, XXV]; *experience* [II, XXXVII]; *taste, sample, specimen* [III, XIII]; *first try, attempt, exercise, apprenticeship* [III, IX]; cinetic meaning: *effort* [I, L]; *weirdness, novelty* [II, VIII]. And finally, (3), the etymologic meaning: Fr. *essais* from the Lat. *exagium*, which properly means *weighing*, and figuratively: *precise exam.*

Functionally the essay[3] is announced through the meaning *experience* (*essays or experiences of life*), contextually presenting either 'the of course' of the *attempt*, or that of *learning as a cognitive acquisition, a new gnosis or perception on reality*.

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[2] Michel de Montaigne, *Eseuri*, Trad. de Mariella Seulescu; prefaţă şi note de Ludwig Grunbeerg, Ed. Minerva, Bucureşti, 1984. v. cap. I, L: *Despre Democrit şi Heraclit*.

[3] In Romanian inter-war journalism where the term essay appears for the first time, there was an oscilation between the French neologism: *essai* (Perpessicus), *esseu* (Călinescu), *esseu* or *eseu* (Eliade, Ionescu, Camil Petrescu), and the English neologism *essay* (Zarifopol). Most of Romanian writers, critics and essayists make their option for the form adapted to the norms of Romanian language, namely *eseu* (Vianu, Lovinescu, Streinu, Nichita Stănescu, Marin Sorescu).

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As aesthetic function, the essay knows a structural variety: from Bacon's conventional or *moral* essay to periodic (journalistic) essay, illuminist essay [Voltaire], the aesthetic one[4] [Locke], the American essay (of manners, philosophic-speculative), the German essay of the 'monologue' type [Goethe] or 'Bildungs' essay [scientific pattern in Lessing's *Laokoon*, where there is a classification of arts in spatial and temporal arts], the Italian conventional essay, the Spanish essay of passion with neo-humanistic or metaphysical tendencies [Unamuno, Eugenio d'Ors, Ortega Y Gasset, 1982], coming back to the aesthetic essay [Valéry, 1929].

The *conventional essay (moral or ethic)* is dominant. What does the convention consist of? And what is the essence of the essay?

'The specific difference' inside the essayistic genre proves to be the method of transgressing the real. Because it is the configuration of the matrix of any essayistic discourse, imposing itself as the main principle of ideas, the ethic sustains the unity of the genre and its definition as an independent genre. The ethics gives the inner law of the essayistic discourse, legible as a tripartite structure of enunciation, modality, argumentation: *Ideea de frumos este o idee profund morală şi tot în acest sens putem considera zona estetică o culminaţie a zonei etice"*[s.n.] [Stănescu, 1990 - *FP/ Nevoia de artă*: 61] – an order in the chaos of ideas, an adjuvant of reason, added by us. By means of ethics, the essay is pulled out of the accusation of a meaningless writing.

On the contrary: under the incidence of the reading, the apparent emptiness of the texture registers an infinity of meanings 'hungry' for embodiment; thus we discuss about the *essay as a 'acategorial art'* [Borbely, 1995: 6].

The preference of the essayistic genre for lyric is explained through the liberty of the ideas which refuse limitation, constraint to a definition. There are vague ideas of logic, because they are made lyrical, they assume the role of the subject-creator; they are generous in the construction of the labyrinth. Furthermore: they seduce the reader too. In Stănescu's essay *Scrisori de dragoste sau înserare de seară*, Ioachim, the one who is carrying the stick and the book as divine marks, addresses the collocutor: *Toma, eu ard ca să-ţi dau foc! (Toma, I am burning in order to set you on fire!)* This is really a very pleasant and exciting calling for catharsis: the two actants' purification by means of art (creator and reader), actants engaged in the work – creation and understanding.

The essay is the text-discourse that does not betray the emittent (the subject). The essayistic discourse becomes existence: it is the actant's way of action. Finally, we admit that the essay is the living document signed with your own being. As a speech it is a *hemolexia;* as writing it is *hemography* [acc. to Stănescu]. **The essay is an aesthetic palimpsest**. It is obvious that "[...] *eseul se dovedeşte a fi arta specifică [...] solitarilor. Porneşte de la ecuaţia renascentistă a lui „uomo singolare", transsubstanţiind-o mai departe peste secole."* [Borbely, 1995: 6] (*the essay proves to be the art of […] the recluses. It starts from the rinascentist equation of uomo singolare, transsubstantializing it further on over the centuries).*

[4] In our opinion the conjunct use of the terms *eseu* and *estetic* is a pleonasm: any essay catches the esthetics of a literary, scientific etc. object.

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The first type of essay is represented by Don Juan, the character who aesthetically built his existence. But let's not forget Ulysses! The essay means placing between Ulysses and Don Quixote, an adventure of language. Therefore the essayistic genre illustrates human transformation, culture transformation [acc. to Vlad, 1970]. We are aware of the fact that the essay is an authentic writing, a chameleonic discourse in competition to the subject-author's existence.

Being authentic, the essay is enlisted in the theory of literary genres as a document, once it belongs to a lucid spirit who reveals the consciousness of the époque in which the work is written, indirectly as a part of the culture [acc. to the "morphologic interpretation of cultures", through Noica's metaphilosophical discourse [*Modelul cultural european*, Humanitas, 1993.]

The passion of real, the pleading for the truth of life as a mainspring of essayistic discourse represent the intuitive retort of art given to reflection, a naturalist and impressionist mechanism. The prejudice is wiped by authenticity, the metaphysical speculation gives up facing the physical reality (an aesthetic attitude present in Stănescu's discourse, poetic and essayistic as well). *Mirarea* (the wonder) is the state of grace that generously opens the essayistic composition: "*Mirarea poate fi declarată starea de grație a afirmației, nunta afirmației* [...] *Actul cunoașterii se schimbă din mirare în posesiune, din posesiune în nostalgie, din nostalgie în precept.*" [Stănescu, 1985, *Antimetafizica:* 91; 112]

The wonder is conditioned by the unpredictable as an element of aesthetic tension. Out of the pertinent observation of combining the knowledge and the wonder, it appeared a theory of art as a wonder [acc. to Blaga]: living the novelty, the pure sensation, the artist will give another reality to the metaphysical imaginary, a reality based on the values of reason and on the values of sensitivity: anti-metaphysics frequently understood as rediscovery of myth, *Force de frappe* – a title of the essayistic grouping *Răzgândiri* [*Secolul XX*, 1985; 2003/ V] – the dislocation of textual meaning as a synaesthaesic primary nucleus. In the rediscovered anti-metaphysical reality, myth defined as "tragic knowledge" [acc. to Nietzsche] represents the basis of an existential project with consequences in building up a different distortion.

Leading to essence and mystery, myth mediates the way of rendering conscious the human boundaries: Faust, Prometheus, Orpheus and Sissify are avatars of humanity. In here the **Faustian project** chosen by the neo-modern writer (N. Stănescu) finds its purpose. The biographic truths dully written, with the diligence of a scribe in a file of existences, like the medieval chronicler, meet a new route: from metaphysical and mimetic to psychological. Subjective discourse, more than any other fragment, the essay underlines the traces of the subject-author, it reveals the intention and the effort of the work in the process of creation. You can feel its perspiration on your forehead. You have the privilege of shadow … or even of the guardian angel. Moved, as a reader you feel the creator: one moment you are him. The aesthetic experience is more rapid and with more

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impact over the reader, because at the level of the discourse, the empiric ego[5] specific to any subjective literature (journal, memoires) is interrogated by the essayistic ego[6], very much alike, but never mistaken by the poetic ego. Hence we notice the poets' option for the essay, resembling an active creative … break.

The essayist is temperamental, a feature asked by his reader. Once the essayistic ego reaches self consciousness, it becomes one with the universe; it participates in its existence, together with its faithful reader whom he cannot forget. It is that kind of reunion like that between Gilgamesh and Enghidu.

The essayistic pages appear to be autobiographical. But it is not an autobiography lived sentimentally, but intellectually, it is the creator's real biography. Differently from the (discontinuous, episodic) lyric ego, the essayistic tries to reach the spirit of the epic: **the encyclopedic ego**, continuous knowledge specific to "Martians", Nichita Stănescu wrote. And the gain is obvious: it drops out the frames of the intimacy, it is open to cultural values of all times, the masks that it adopts assuring it spiritual immunity, and last but not least it has intimacy with the collective ego, whose voice is easily posed. The observation becomes pertinent by means of the first person in the case of essayistic person as a sign of intimacy and of epic privilege as well; hence the essayist's statute of narrator-creator.

The frequently used technique of writing the essayistic discourse is the monologue. Of intellective nature, the essay does not ask for initiation, but for solidity of knowledge in order to suggest, once entered the game, many strategies as possible solutions, without assigning them as laws. The state of the essay is given by the liberty of the spirit.

The stylistic constants of the essayistic discourse are seen under the power of the critic spirit that raises questions over the truth. The aesthetics of essayistic voluptuousness is stimulated by the balance between certainty and skepticism; they are attitudes manifested from irony to hedonism lived the ethic plan. The rhetoric of essayistic discourse catalogues the charge, the paradox, the game as ambiguity, the irony, the contradiction seen at the level of antinomy (the game of antinomies or antagonistic), and the figures of construction and of thinking with dynamic consequences on the essay.

The artistic language will gradually give up metaphor. The artist's option will be the metonymy, the "Gordian knowledge" of paradox. "*Dacă aş avea de ales între un adevăr şi un paradox,* mărturiseşte Eliade, *aş alege paradoxul. Adevărurile se schimbă, dar paradoxul e de o astfel de natură încât rămâne întotdeauna plin, real şi justificat.*" (*if I have to choose between the truth and the paradox*, says Eliade, *I would choose the paradox. The truths change, but the paradox is of such type that it always remains full, real and justified)* [s.n.][Eliade, 1991: 68]

As a modality of presentation, the essay revolts against rhetoric, but especially against the systemic. Far from being hazardous, the essay tolerantly unifies the

[5] The empiric ego refers to the statute of derived ego, the one who has fallen out of the "common" family of humanity.
[6] The essayistic ego integrates in the artistic ego: the authentic hypostasis, the profile of creative personality.

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provocative real of the objects inside the adventure of language. We mention the fact that the finality of the essayistic discourse becomes a "knot of light", as the poet would say, the categorial knot of the good.

As we have already underlined, the self consciousness has the precedence over the essayistic subject, no matter who is he. It is also known that art does not imply only knowledge, but also a surplus of consciousness – self knowledge, hence the union between the esthetic and the ethic; and also the subordination of aesthetics to ethics. The poet concludes: "*Aesthetics is ethic*".

Some critics pleaded for the composite genre as a didactic genre, literature that comprises: proverbs, sayings, wise saws, anecdotes, fables, skits, epigrams, didactic poems. We think this is superficial. The confusion is made due to the moral value absolutely contained in all these texts, and obviously in the essays as well. But things are not as simple as they seem to be. It is true that the essay is composite, as we have said before, but it is **not** a heteroclite genre. And we can bring arguments, such as the statute of the essay as a matrix or witness of authentic experiences that (sincerely) give the creator's effort in writing his work. We underline: the essay is not a didactic genre.

In the rhetoric of the essay we can see influences from critics and journalism. From the chronicle, the serial, the reportage, the inquiry, the interview, the montage, types of the publicistic, the essay borrows the formula of writing literary journal, but without becoming "literature of popularization", mass-media. From the critics it keeps the spirit and less the critical reason which is replaced by a philosophy of taste: namely the esthetic pleasure. Thus the essay will establish its esthetic discourse. Or better to say: aesthetics "speaks" about beauty only in the essayistic discourse. It is true that through its statute of science of arts, aesthetics calls on critical reason, but every time it appeals to esthetic tension, it requires the essay, a literary genre adequate to the discourse that "launches" the judgments of value over the object of all the arts, the universal beauty.

The essay is similar to the seismograph that registers the most intense creative mobility. How can you explain the dynamic phenomenon of ideas if not by the essayist's adventurous spirit? His acquaintance with the experiment or the trial, a method compromised by naturalism, will give coherence and individuality to discourse; hence some artists' option for literature or art as an experiment.

Even if the statute of a distinct literary genre is be disputed, the essay will survive as long as the human being exists, manifesting his existential needs.

Once the essay astonished a relatively great number of scholars of that time, philosophers, writers, estheticians, it means that it has a special feature; it has its own ontos. We agree to W.V. Ruttkovski's classification [acc. to Tiutiuca, 1979: 163]. Referring to the concept of "literature", there are three conceptual spheres covered, namely: "the basis of literature", an exterior sphere that comprises the publicistic, the essayistic and the rhetoric writings; the intermediary sphere, materialized in belletristic and the inner sphere: poetry. Through the option for the real, "the basis of literature"

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later identified in a syntagm frequently used in literary theory, "literature of frontier", is in a dialectic relation with belletristic and especially with poetry.

Furthermore: we limit the area of "semantic field" of "frontier genre": without forcing it, we put essay close to poetry. Unlike the epic or the dramatic, when the foreground is asked by fiction, "the tide of ideas" reestablishes the cosmic rhythms according to the poetic thought, new to reason: we refer to *dianoia*, a term belonging to Plato and borrowed by N. Frye to name the "theme": "[Când cititorul se va întreba:] <<*Care este semnificația acestei povestiri?*>> *Întrebarea se referă de această dată la dianoia, demonstrând că elementul revelației este prezent nu numai în cazul intrigii, ci și în tematică." (What is the meaning of this story? The question refers to diannoia this time, proving that the element of revelation is present not only in the case of the intrigue, but also in the theme)*[1972: 444]

Once the accent is moved from the fiction to the theme, the *mythos* receives narrative meaning. No matter the typologies, the criteria, the theme, it is obvious that the essay is an esthetic discourse, and the esthetic keeps its ethic matrix, its original nature, by the values for which it pleads.

For instance, let's discuss about one classification: B. Berger [acc. to Tiutiuca, 1979: 172-173], a modern German theoretician decides upon the form as a criterion, bringing in the next classification: (a) mainly *descriptive and instructive* essay that uses the rhetoric inventory peculiar to epic and didactic discourse; (b) mainly *critical* essay, with the science as source, being intellectually and culturally motivated; (c) mainly *meditative-considerate* essay, of philosophic origin, attitudinally calling on distance, austerity; (d) mainly *ironic* essay, of the same semantic field as the pamphlet. On a close look, anybody can see that in here the formal criterion is not the real participant in differentiation, but the essayist's attitude.

The essay is only one, but attitudinally it can manifest in a variety. Actually the attitude refers both to the author of the original work of the subject which becomes the theme of the essay, and to the essayist, whose discourse depends on the value of the essay: the esthetic value. Therefore, in order for the essay to have a life, there is a need for compatibility of knowledge and method: the subject that incites the essayist's thought, the "antigenre" needs to be given an "antibody". We have thus reached the delicate term of "antigenre" given to the essay. We reject this because the truth is exactly upside down, if we follow the path of science: namely "antigenre" identifies with the phenomenon or the subject that incites the interest in esthetic approach, and "antibody" would be the equivalent of the essay. Is there urgency in naming "n" terms for the evidence of essayistic genre?

We plead for the esthetic nature of essay, no matter the theme. The esthetic man does not live in an imaginary that can be (de)constructed, neither accessible to any … terrestrial individual; in the existential route, he rests in a *mundus imaginalis*, he can "fly" in the territory between worlds – *inter mundii*.

The essay is generous with all the problems of mankind, permanently changing "the reference system" or the criterion, as the poet gives arguments for changing the

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theme and of course, the structure: "*Cititorule, închei aici, alunecându-mi gândul într-un cu totul şi cu totul alt sistem de referinţă...*" [1985, in *Secolul XX*, *Răzgândiri*: 189]

… And the reader, Toma or any other disciple intensively lives the master's existence: "you – you are him", as Eminescu would say [*Înger de pază*]

Our point of view about the essay is somehow far from the opinions until now, namely: we think that the essay is a distinct genre, always with an esthetic message, having a discursive architecture, a genre inside the "literature of frontier". Of a major importance for culture **the essay is a palimpsest of human values**. "The substance of the essay" is the proof of the classic ideal towards the man accedes: a document of man's special nature in cosmos.

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