

# Who Speaks in Montaigne's *Essays*?

Marko Uršič, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, marko.ursic@ff.uni-lj.si

*In this paper three questions concerning singularity are discussed from the point of Montaigne's Essays: 1. Does the 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 we shall see, the answers are rather complex ...*

*Key words: Montaigne, essay, subject, individuality, death*

In the preface of the *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” (*The Complete Essays*, “To the Reader”, lix); 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” (*ibid.*). 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 truth of oneself. The writer himself is the “subject of this book”, since as Montaigne writes again in his last essay *On experience* (III. 13): “I study myself more than any other subject; that is my metaphysics, that is my physics” (*ibid.* 1217). Historians of philosophy and literature often point out that the “discovery of the individual” is the greatest novelty of the *Essays*, i.e., that Montaigne founded his thinking and writing in his belief that philosophy did not begin with “universals”, but with personal and individual self-reflection, because, as we read in the essay *On repenting* (III. 2), “every man bears the whole Form of the human condition” (*op. cit.* 908). And the essayistic discourse, which Montaigne formed in the cross-section between philosophy and literature, is the “natural” consequence of such a premise.

The main question of my paper is the following: *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” – since always when my-self <*moi-même*> becomes the subject of my writing, I am unavoidably a literary subject (in the broadest sense), i.e., a subject who is “dressed” or “enveloped” in the language of my writing (or speaking). However, when pointing out the literary subject of the *Essays*, here I am not following that structuralist line of thinking which some decades ago proclaimed “the death of the author” (Barthes, Foucault) – which has been criticized from many aspects meanwhile – on the contrary, I am joining to its critics by stressing that literature, as well as philosophy and especially philosophical essayistics, is dead without the author, as well as without the reader (even if an author is the only reader of his/her text), namely without the author and/or the reader as a *living spirit* who is free in recognizing or even identifying himself with those literary subjects that he/she creates and reads. So, 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: which are the *specific* features of the “essayistic subject”? The main features of the essayistic discourse have been often pointed out: essays,

compared with philosophy on one side and literature (*belles-lettres*) on the other, are “more free” in their expressive form, being singular, individual, documentary in some personal or social sense etc.; so they are quite close to prose, sometimes even to poetry, but on the other hand they preserve their “subjective objectivity”, their “personal universality” – essays express universals in particulars, we may say. These features, considered from the subjective point of view, more accurately, in considering relations between the author and his/her literary subject(s), yield the specific features of the “essayistic subject”, compared with the “philosophical subject” on one side and, let us say, “lyrical subject” (which is the best known and the most discussed among several literary subjects) on the other. The main feature of the essayistic subject is its “polyphony”; properly speaking, it comprises several different literary subjects, while still functioning as a single unity. When writing/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 – giving to my-self a high degree of intellectual, emotional and spiritual freedom.

The “polyphony” of essayistic writing, and in the same time 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. Vladimir Jankélévitch in his book *La Mort* (1977) distinguished three levels (or phases) of thinking and writing about death: in the third, second and first persons, roughly corresponding, respectively, to the philosophical (and/or scientific) approach, to “documentary” writing (by witnessing somebody dying), and to writing from personal encounters with death (say, in the “near-death experiences” and/or in proximity of death during old days and illness). It is interesting to see how Montaigne went through these three phases in his writings about death. Let us look at some characteristic passages.

On the first level there are Montaigne’s “premeditations” of death, his encounters with death “in the third person”. In the essay *To philosophize is to learn how to die* (I. 20) Montaigne tries to “premeditate” death by following some great classical philosophers in their “universal” discourse (“we all die, so my-self too”). The ways of premeditation of death are different, from Socrates’ “philosophical death”, described in Plato’s *Phaidon*, to Seneca’s acceptance of the universal fate (stoical *heimarmene*) and Epicurus’ and Lucretius’ “denial of death”. – Here are some characteristic passages from this essay: “We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere. To practise death is to practise freedom” (Montaigne, *The Complete Essays* 96). “Every moment it seems to me that I am running away from myself” (97). And here 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). Which 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). And then we come to a stoical 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, but we can surely say that their actual subject (maybe except concerning “my cabbages”) is in the third person (of plural), following the scheme of reasoning: *they all* → *we* → *my-self too*.

We may add that such “premeditations” of death are the kernel 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* (1982), where we find also an important remark concerning Montaigne’s melancholy: “His melancholy was not to

be confused with *tristesse* – that refined sadness paraded by man of fashion” (Screech 24). In the second edition of Books I and II of the *Essays* (1588, together with the new Book III), Montaigne inserted at the beginning of the essay *On sadness* <*De la tristesse*> (II. 2) the sentence: “I am among those who are most free from this emotion” (*The Complete Essays* 7), and later, just before his death (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.” (*Ibid.*) In the late essay *On vanity* (III. 9), where his own death is closer to his mind as ever before, Montaigne says again, following the ancient wisdom: “Joy we should spread: sadness, prune back as much as we can” (*op. cit.* 1108).

But even in his younger days, Montaigne met death very close, namely “in the second person” in Jankélévich's terms, when he witnessed the death of his beloved friend Etienne de la Boétie (1563). Montaigne began to write his *Essays* some years after the death of his friend, and they were primarily intended as a great *hommage* to Etienne, wholly dedicated to his memory. Truly, 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: this 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 into *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. ...” (Montaigne, *Œuvres complètes* 1358)

Last but not least, indeed *first* by experience, Montaigne met death and wrote about it “in the first person”, after the event when he himself was very close to it, so to say, in the middle of his life. One of his most interesting and best written essays bears an unambitious title *On practice* <*De l'exercitation*> (II. 6): it is the first person testimony of his near-death experience (~1568), a “practice” of dying. During one of the Huguenote wars, Michel, who was ~35 years old at that time, rode with his people not far from the castle, where he fell from his horse in some misfortune, he was badly wounded, he lost a lot of blood and remained unconscious for quite a long time. – In the essay *On practice*, he described his feelings after having regained consciousness, and there we can find also 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).

Our second question concerning the “essayistic subject” is the following: can somebody named M. M. or M. U., namely “I” as the author be really *sincere* when writing about

*my-self*? Is it possible at all? We have already given the general answer: no, since 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 – who 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 (essays, diaries ...), in the sense of giving the “naked truth” of *my-self*, promised by Montaigne in the preface? – The answer is again: no, at least *not quite*; this impossibility is due not only to the subject’s non-transparency for him 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 remain.

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, titled covertly *On some lines of Virgil* (III. 5, *The Complete Essays* 953). This interesting and also amusing late essay on human bodily pleasures and pains is an excellent case for disputing about 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 <*cabinet*>; and I prefer my dealings with women to be somewhat private: the public ones lack intimacy and savour” (*ibid.* 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 personally to enter into the cabinets of his female readers? Probably not, at least *not in the same sense* as the author of *Essays* expressed this wish in his book. However, it is just *this* essayistic subject, known to the world as Michel de Montaigne, who really counts nowadays, four centuries later ... Here we might remind of the words, written by Céleste Albaret in her memories of her master Marcel Proust: she stated that if some person believed that the books of Mr. Proust were the veritable tale of his life, this person would have really a 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 which was asked at the beginning: *who* is the *essayistic* subject? And how it is related to its author? These issues are quite complex and they should be discussed in a much larger study than the present one. Nevertheless, we 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, so that it enables shifting among several fields and/or discourses of philosophy, prose, personal diary, sometimes even poetry.

In the case of an “autobiographical essay”, like in Montaigne’s *Essays*, the essayistic subject includes more particular psychological features of its author, if we compare it with some other literary or philosophical subjects – however, the dividing line between “subjective” and “objective” features is far from being sharp (think, for example, of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty *et al.*). Anyway, for every writer of essays, the following recognition, expressed clearly by Montaigne in his essay *On giving the lie* <*De démentir*> (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 on 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, that this close literary counterpart of me, the author, would indeed be *myself*, a living spirit. I am not quite sure if Montaigne would agree with me upon 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.

### **Bibliography**

- Montaigne, Michel. *Les Essais*. Édition de Pierre Villey, Livres I–III. Paris: Quadrige, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999 (3rd ed.).
- Montaigne, Michel. *Œuvres complètes, Lettres*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade).
- Montaigne, Michel. *The Complete Essays*, translated by M. A. Screech. London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Conche, Marcel. *Montaigne ou la conscience heureuse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002 (4th ed.).
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. *La mort*. Paris: Flammarion, 1977.
- Langer, Ullrich (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*. Cambridge: University Press, 2005.
- Screech, M. A. *Montaigne and Melancholy. The Wisdom of the Essays*. Lanham (Maryland), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).
- Uršič, Marko. “Sedem filozofskih esejev p/o Montaignevih *Esejih*” <“Seven philosophical essays (up)on Montaigne’s *Essays*”>. *Sedmerke (Štirje časi – Poletje*, II. del). Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2006, pp. 159-378.