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Life on a strip : essayism and emigration in contemporary chinese literature

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INTERLUDE

In Search of the Mechanics below the Moving Grounds of Contemporary Literature

One major challenge of the present research is overcoming the decades-long academic impasse around the essay (non-)genre. In part one I tried to do this by accelerating the discourse in the Higgs field of emigration. This led to the creation of Möbius-strip-shaped connections between virtually homoatomic particles of lived experience and text. The next step will be to throw more heterogenous molecules into this field and observe their behavior: by this I mean literary genres. In my laboratory jargon, genres are defined as systems comprised of various atoms of life and text, linked by relatively stable energetic bonds = genre conventions, in fixed mutual configurations in the process of writing. The fundamental question for the rest of this project is whether it is possible to transform such particles into structures displaying properties similar to those obtained at the previous stage, under what conditions, and with what side-effects. In other words: what is the ontological status of the phenomenon in essay-related scholarship that is often referred to as essayization? What physically happens in and to texts that are perceived as essayistic, and what can this tell us about literature at large? The present section is meant to provide some methodological and technological prep work.

The essayistic spirit and other post-metaphysical ghosts, who conjures them and why

Designed to describe the world in bird's-eye and worm's-eye views, the methods and tools used at previous stages of this study prove unwieldy in a space that may only be accessible to the "eye" of a virus: inside the living cells of the text. Many essayologists before have tried, and failed. Those watching from the clouds managed to observe formless puffs of mist covering the field of cultural production, identified by them as a mysterious *essayistic spirit* or, in the post-metaphysical era, *essayness*, being – in their opinion – responsible for the transformation of culture as a whole. As in Michael Hamburger's "Essay on the Essay" (Essay über den Essay, 1965):

The essay is not a form, but before all else, a style. [...] Because it has no form, the essayistic spirit may appear beyond the (essay) genre itself. [...] Bodies of essays are permeated by a limitless spirit of essayism, which emerges here and there, also in novels, poems or feuilletons.¹

¹ Hamburger 1965: 291-292.

Those closer to the surface drew a more precise picture. They noticed that certain normally non-essayistic works locally resemble essays in one way or another. Hence sub-generic terms like “essayistic novel”, “essayistic poem”, “essayistic play”, “essayistic reportage”, etc. began to enrich the vocabulary of essayology, but their definitions remain unclear.

Of course, one can distinguish a number of commonly acknowledged markers of essayistic-ness. For example, for poetry: long lines, a lack of regular rhythm and rhyme. For prose: some poetic elements, long passages of narration, and/or (inner) monologues that look as if they contain excerpts from philosophical treatises. With regard to subject matter, allegedly the most essayistic trait is meta-literariness: the text’s explicit reflection on itself, or on literature at large. Still, these features are not enough to say that something is essay-like, if only because the point of reference of this comparison – the essay-as-form – will not necessarily display the aforesaid characteristics. Instead, by questioning conventional literary bonds, they suggest the text’s ambition, or minimally its potential, to *work* like the essay. That is: to connect the author’s life and writing as closely, flexibly, and as fairly as possible. And, no less important, they provide the time to *make* it work.

The effect of the above departures from generic conventions is a perception of the text slowing down, suspending action, pacifying imagery. This allows for smuggling things from outside into the work, filling gaps with context, and hence reconfiguring the genre-bound energetic structure below the linguistic surface. In the circumstances of a broadened milieu of emigrant existence – especially when this comes as a radical and unexpected breakthrough in the author’s biography – the author and/or the reader often take this as a promise of enlargement of the work’s existential capacity so that it can encompass an “enlarged” life. In sum, the “essayistic surface” may be a visible effect of reactions underneath it that are initialized by an author, but also a trigger or a catalyst of such processes; a signal *of* essayization, or a signal *for* essayization. In the latter case, the one who essayizes is often an essayologist themselves.

This is not an indictment of the essay, the essayist or the essayologist. Quite the contrary, it is crucial for the discussion. If essayization may offer a rewarding perspective on literature, it does so precisely as a process of the text’s, the author’s and the reader’s joint search for form, and their negotiation of form at the basic sub-cellular level of literary discourse. Perhaps instead of essayization we should speak of different degrees of essayizability, i.e. the text’s relative proneness to essayization. The text’s visual essayistic-ness is one factor that increases essayizability, but there are also other determinants, commonly perceived as extra-textual, that are likely to lead to a refunctionalization of the text, either on the author’s or the reader’s initiative, or due to changing context. I will discuss various instances of such situations in part two. Be it as it may, the “discovery” of the essay’s interactions with other genres, however paradoxical and however awkwardly described, is arguably one of the earliest harbingers of an essential change in our perception of and approach to literature. The circumstances in which it took to the stage, in Western and Chinese literary discourse alike – times of shaken worldviews and literary reforms in response – seem to reaffirm this.

Slipped from the strip: paradigm shifts in culture seen through literary evolution

In Western literature these circumstances were mostly numerous individual breakthroughs in the lives and works of particular artists. The most widely discussed is the case of Robert Musil. After the World War I, Musil started writing what is regarded as the first fully-fledged essayistic novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930-43). The book depicts the intellectual and spiritual chaos in Austria-Hungary at the threshold of the new social-political order. Its protagonist, Ulrich, tirelessly preaches “the utopia of essayism” against the intellectual chaos. Musil himself was never to arrive at this utopia. He passed away before finishing his *opus magnum*. In China the trend was more collective and systematic, and coincided with the New Culture movement of the late 1910s and the 1920s.

Carolyn FitzGerald’s study on cross-generic phenomena in Chinese wartime culture shows that over the first two to three generations after the collapse of imperial China, essayization, taken mostly as an aesthetic phenomenon, but with an apparent intuition of its broader potential, had a fairly good and abundant press among scholars and writers alike.² It was perceived as a natural consequence of adopting the vernacular language to traditional literary forms, a step toward liberating literature from stiff conventions and structurally re-joining it with everyday life. In the 1980s, Wang Zengqi (1920-1997), the most active and most consistent advocate of essayistic aesthetics, retrospectively theorized this current in the essays “Self-Introduction” (自报家门) and “The Essayization of Fiction” (小说的散文化). His core argument, in FitzGerald’s translation, reads as follows:

I very much admire [classical poet] Su Shi’s saying: “Like floating clouds and flowing water, rigid in its inception, yet it follows its rightful course and stops when it is meant to stop. Its pattern is spontaneous and unexpected figures arise.” In China my fiction has been called “essay-like” fiction. I feel that “essayization” is a trend (but not the only one) in short stories around the world.³

Wang uses the word *sanwenhua* 散文化 (‘*sanwen*-ization’), the most common Chinese counterpart of “essayization”, which in the context of poetry is often rendered also as “prosification”. Derivatives of other generic categories, including *suibihua* 随笔化 ‘*suibi*-ization’ and *zawenhua* 杂文化 ‘*zawen*-ization’, occasionally appear in Chinese literary discourse, too.

However, in the present study these distinctions will no longer play the important role they played in part one, where they were needed to demonstrate transformations of virtually homogenous vector spaces of life and text into non-orientable Möbius strips. In the literary physics that underlies the idea of essayization among other things, attempts at applying vector mechanics to literature are doomed to failure. And so, spacetime-sensitive categories from the Chinese discourse are literally torn away. Quite aside from this physical argument, when Chinese authors and critics speak of *sanwenhua*, what they usually have in mind is an international discourse on essayization into which they want to inscribe their own reflection (such as in the case of Wang Zengqi) – and why shouldn’t they? A confusion appears, because just like Western scholarship lacks specific terms that correspond to

² FitzGerald 2013; for essayism and essayization see esp. pp. 12-13, 32, 126-136, 220-231, 280-282.

³ Cit. from FitzGerald 2013: 135.

sanwen, *suibi* and *zawen*, Chinese has no counterpart of the general term “essay”, and demands the use of one of the available, semantically narrower words.

In part two I am most interested in the said paradigm shift in literary thought, which is in evidence starting from the early 20th century through the notion of essayization “but not only”, to repeat Wang Zengqi’s parenthesized qualification. If, among the many aforementioned scholars and theorists of the essay in China and the West, I have chosen to give more attention to Epstein, who made a brief appearance in chapter 2, this is because he is the one in whose work the said issue becomes particularly prominent, and this constitutes a good point of departure for my reflection. Epstein discusses essayization in the context of world literature with special attention to Russian authors, arguing first that the essay is a Modern-Age successor of the myth. He proposes:

The extrapersonal nature of ancient mythology gave it a harmonious resonance with the cultural state of the primitive collective. But in the Modern Age any attempt to produce or recreate a depersonalized, mass mythology fails to provide the basic property and value of myth: its holistic, integral character and capacity to embody the multifaceted spiritual life of a new cultural subject that is now the individual, rather than the human mass. [...] Although it would appear to be an antimythological form, taking individual reflection as its basic point of departure, essayistics takes upon itself the function of unification and consolidation of the various cultural spheres that mythology fulfilled in antiquity. The functional commonality of myth and essay rests upon their deep structural similarity, even as it bears the imprint of enormous epochal differences. One of the main qualities of myth, observed by virtually all researchers in this field, is the coincidence of a general idea and a tangible image. The same impulses are conjoined in the essay as well, although here they have been separated from the primal state of indivisible identity to become independent entities: the idea is not personified in an image, although it freely combines with images, whether in aphorism and example, or fact and generalization.⁴

At the micro-level of the literary work, Epstein suggests to use the notion of *eseme*, whose conceptual shape notably corresponds to the structure of a Möbius-strip-shaped “life particle” which I described in the introduction, as emerging from reactions and experiments performed in and on emigrant literature:

A thought-image such as this—whose components are maintained in mobile balance, belonging to one another in part, but also open to new interconnections, entering into mental and imagistic combinations independently of each other—could be called an *eseme*, on analogy with *mythologeme*, whose components are syncretically connected and indivisible. As a unit of essayistic thought, an *eseme* represents the free combination of a concrete image and a generalizing idea. At the same time, fact remains fact, idea remains idea. They are not connected in an obligatory or exclusive way but rather through the personality of one who unites them in an experiment of self-consciousness.⁵

⁴ Epstein 1995: 228.

⁵ Ibidem: 229.

In line with the tentative discussion on Möbius-stripness in the introduction, I would add that another thing that essay and myth have in common is their consistent use of “the higher dimension” in order to deal with contradictions and paradoxes of everyday life. With one significant difference: the myth treats this multidimensional realm as something that should be respected and obeyed, and to a certain extent reenacted in earthly reality, while the essay tries to make it work for its own purposes, that is overcoming binarity without obscuring dualism, and sticking together the textual with the real, as on the Möbius strip.

Epstein identifies another issue that merits attention, yet does not develop this in the end, namely that “[l]ike myth, the essay not only melds a general idea with a tangible image, but further melds them both with the flux of reality”.⁶ In this process, Epstein’s *esemes* have to be unbound to enable establishing connections with particles coming from the pluralistic, heterogenous external world, which not necessarily fit the intracellular receptors of the essay particles. He observes paradoxical consequences of essayization, which he defines as “the expansion of the principle of essayistic thinking into other genres and types of creativity”, calling essayism a notion that signifies “the totality of this trend as a unified cultural phenomenon”:

The paradox of essayism lies in the fact that it brings out the separate elements of an image, while at the same time bringing it together with concept and being; it destroys a specifically integrated artistic whole, only to recreate in its place a broadly cultural whole that is both integrated and creatively universal. Indeed, that which is normally called an “artistic whole” is, in actuality, decidedly partial and incomplete in its derivation from the originary syncretic state. The partial nature of artistic convention must be further exposed and expressed, in order to be fully integrated into a newly growing, unconventional whole.

If one wants to extrapolate the essayistic shape that ensures the unity-in-duality of the author’s life and the text so that it would also encompass other spheres of reality, one encounters countless micro-collapses at the most basic level of the textual world. Together, these micro-collapses lead to the fragmentation of the picture that was supposed to become “integrated”.

Taking up Epstein’s reflection, one could argue that just like the evolution of cultural consciousness from myth to essay marks the line between antiquity and modernity, the paradigm shift, or rather the paradigm slippage, that occurs when essayization enters the stage draws an elusive line between the modern and the postmodern, with fragmentation as the most distinct feature of the latter. But this is not what I want to do. I believe this shift / slippage does not necessarily extend through the space of cultural-historical discourse. Instead, it runs through the minds and lives of individuals, and cuts through particular literary works, when their unifying, “integrative” ambitions fail, undermined as they are by invisible dynamics between textual and extratextual reality, and they end up in a densifying web of interactions.

This is not so different from the situation in the physical world – where one object at its different structural planes and in different situations is effectively described by different paradigms, be it everyday Newtonian mechanics or Einstein’s specific or general theory of relativity or, at the subatomic level, once Newton and Einstein are rendered helpless, by quantum mechanics, with all its uncertainties and paradoxes.

⁶ Ibidem: 239.

I will draw this analogy a bit further, in the hope that the language developed by physicists, may help me grasp what cannot be grasped by the vocabulary of the humanities, in China or elsewhere, as it operates mostly on terms that characterize large-scale processes and “shifts”, like the one between the modern and the postmodern, and not those that operate within single objects. It is of course naïve to think that, for example, quantum mechanics will automatically facilitate the understanding of literary phenomena, as it is hardly understandable to itself to begin with, as its co-founder Niels Bohr clearly said: “if you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don’t understand quantum mechanics”. Explaining anything *through* quantum mechanics is arguably a self-contradictory enterprise. Still, thanks to its long-time engagement with micro-un-understandables, it has built a useful terminological apparatus which may come in handy.

The myth, the essay and the essayistic; and their respective physics

The physical definition of the literary form that could be extracted from the works of Epstein and other literary scholars who have engaged in this field of reflection after the more or less collective essayistic “slippage” first happened, could be roughly reconstructed as follows. Form is a multidimensional spatiotemporal, dynamic shape described by parameters such as positions of, and distances and forces between, the author, the reader, and various objects from their surroundings and from literary discourse. As such, form exists through constant negotiation and restructuring. Only under very specific conditions may form preserve a degree of stability, and can the natural laws of the literary universe be roughly systematized and codified by the law of the genre.

The fact that for many years in the history of literature these very specific conditions were taken as universal resembles the situation in the natural sciences, where Newtonian physics was long considered a definitive knowledge of nature. It had been so until it turned out that Newton’s model is a mere approximation of complex mechanisms, which depending on level and scale, appear to work in vastly different ways. Or, put another way, the Newtonian world – that is the world as we experience it in our everyday life – is but the narrow neck of an hourglass between the cosmic space believed to obey Einstein’s laws of relativity, and the sub-atomic quantum reality that was discovered just several years after Einstein’s theories and whose mysterious laws have not been deciphered as yet.

In genre-ruled Newtonian constellations, all participants of the text-author-reader-world system have their predefined place, which they accept and assume automatically at the first contact with the text, often prompted by its title if this signals a generic category, which is frequently the case. The law of the genre regulates not just textual qualities, such as line length or rhyme patterns. Usually genre forms are designed to mediate particular moods or modes, for example odes and hymns are meant to praise, limericks to entertain, etc. In such universes, the classic laws of gravity and motion work almost infallibly. The mood or mode descends from some metaphysical realm, through the author, into the reader’s mind. The reader’s role is to decode the primary content in a faithful way. This could be, in broad strokes, a physical description of Epstein’s pre-modern realm of the myth, whose power is exercised in literature, among other things, in various conventional genre-ruled constellations.

Growing dissatisfaction with the stiff, logocentric literary order led to the increasing popularity of another paradigm in the history of literature, whose embodiment is a phenomenon that in Western scholarship, since Michel Montaigne's eponymous work, has been referred to as the essay. Epstein sets essayistic order against vertically structured mythical reality, which in light of the previous paragraphs could be described as one that follows Newtonian rules of gravity. The conceptual essayistic formula finds its analogy in Einstein's famous equation: $E = mc^2$. Similarly to energy and matter, textual form and lived content – although not equal – in the essay are supposed to be perfectly equivalent and mutually convertible. Or, in a visual metaphor, they function like the two sides of a one-sided Möbius strip. Or, like the two sides of the Epsteinian *eseme* which represents a “free combination of a concrete image and a generalizing idea” while “[a]t the same time, fact remains fact, idea remains idea”. Wherever one enters the text, one easily distinguishes what belongs to form and what to content, but when one comes full circle, one realizes that all the time one was traveling on a single surface, along a single edge.

The essay can be taken as a one-off linguistic construction that belongs to a particular experience, and simultaneously shapes the author's reality. In this model the reader and their own surroundings do not count. S/he can only walk along and get transformed, as was illustrated in the introduction. There is room for only two mutually codetermining active elements.

Let's take now one more step forward, as Einstein did proceeding from the special theory of relativity whose representative equation we have just discussed, to his subsequent general theory of gravity. Unlike the specific theory, his general theory is based mostly on the pure geometry of space, independent from its actual furnishment, objects and subjects involved. One of its claims is that any mass / matter warps its surrounding spacetime. Continuing in this Einsteinian spirit, potentially, the concept of essayistic geometry could be applied to interactions not only between authors and texts, but also between readers and texts and between other extratextual objects (“any mass”) and texts. This is roughly what Epstein tries to show in *After the Future*, when he discusses the universalization of the essayistic “integrative” tendency that is observable also in other constellations than only the author-text entanglement, and transforms various genre-ruled literary universes.

In a sense, Epstein is right. We can speak of phenomena such as, for instance, essayistic reading. There are many possessive readers who try to expel the author beyond a primarily non-essayistic literary constellation and make the text fit their own reality, as if they were reading an essay about themselves, and expect it to curve their world into a more desirable shape, so that they can “live” the text. At another extreme, we find empathetic readers – among them a numerous group being Western readers of Chinese literature – who try to minimize their own presence in a genre-ruled universe of a novel or a play, or a poem, and treat the text as an unambiguous account of the author's experience, trying to ascribe to it the essayistic unity-in-duality, believing that this is the only right and objective way of reading. But things are never that simple.

These two are exemplary cases when the abovementioned “slippage” occurs. Einstein is famously quoted as assuring that in his efforts to reveal the mathematical secrets of the Nature, he tries to put himself in God's shoes, and asks himself how he would design the universe if he were God. But he wasn't... Bohr scolded him: “don't tell God what he should

do”. Indeed, if you act as a C/creator in the empty space, building a textual universe from scratch and establishing laws they should obey – that is writing an essay – the elegant Einsteinian formulas will probably work, as we have seen in the case of various strip-shaped essays analyzed in chapters 1 and 2. But if you try to refurnish a constellation that already exists, and is defaultly defined, for instance, by a genre in which every textual particle has its place, by changing distances and forces between its basic elements, you will encounter difficulties like those that Einstein encountered while developing his general theory of everything: quantum phenomena, which discretely eat his elegant “objective” and “universal” model away. He never accepted them, calling quantum entanglements a “spooky action at a distance” and repeating stubbornly that “God doesn’t play dice”, but designs everything in the most beautiful way.

Simplifying in the extreme, similarly to the physical world, at the quantum level of literary discourse, a literary work functions as a unique entanglement of particles that originally belong in numerous optically distinguishable realities. Among them one can specifically point out the reality of an author, of a reader and of a text itself. Every single unit of language, like every basic unit of reality, originally exists simultaneously in many different states, which in the case of linguistic particles (morphemes and sometimes words and phrases) means that they can have multiple, equally valid meanings. Only after being brought into contact with other particles or objects, such a free particle is disambiguated and acquires one stable, context-determined sense (physicists sometimes call this the “collapse of the wave function”).

This happens in each act of writing, when words are joined together in phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and lose their quantum polyvalence. If there still remain some unentangled pieces, they become pinned down in the process of reading. The latter could be likened to the quantum operation of measuring, which, as physicists demonstrate, inevitably influences the measured reality. The observers’ eye or the measuring apparatus become an integral part of the final result of the measurement, so we will never know what was present before our reading, and what we added, complicated or simplified. Finally, we cannot tell what the proportion between the textual and the real / experiential is, just like physicists cannot rely on copies made with the use of a hypothetical “quantum xerograph”, because when the xerograph interacts with the “original”, its waves “pollute” the picture and become inscribed into the final image. If we try to think about a literary work as a copy of the lived experience, we need to take into account that this copy was disturbed by waves of language that are emitted by a writing pen and a mind.

These are basic reasons why essayization as a universal “integrative process” in which everything connects harmoniously with everything cannot go smoothly according to wholistic models that want to enclose the universum of culture and / or individual literary universes in a perfect shape designed by the human mind. When the process is launched, it leads instead to various unpredictable reactions, micro-collapses of meaning and creation of entanglements of words that grow uncontrollably. And our helpless measurings of the changing world only add to the complexity and weirdness of the image, instead of giving a reliable description. Most of us, in particular as readers, slip into this cognitive hell unknowingly and unintentionally, just as our collective consciousness slipped unknowingly from modernism

into postmodernism. But once we slip, our eyes are opened to many exciting microphenomena whose existence we have not been aware of.

Both quantum physics and quantum literature are helpless when facing their own, mostly accidental, discoveries. What is known as the first of quantum experiments, a so-called double-slit experiment – never mind its content – was just a “mistake” that occurred when carrying out other routine observations.⁷ It might have well been overlooked, if it had not been for the researchers’ alertness and open-mindedness. And it still, in fact, has not been given a satisfying interpretation. Physicists continue to look for accurate equations to describe its results. In the middle of the general confusion they discovered one thing: when they mathematically add several extra dimensions to the experientially available 4D spacetime, all problems quite easily solve themselves, and everything fits several neat equations, at least in theory. The question is, can we assume the existence of dimensions that we will never be able to grasp only because they help us save the beauty and elegance of our vision of the world?

Humanities, in many spheres, face the same hang-up. What to do with the chaos that phenomena such as essayization (“but not only”) lead us into? We are wired in a way that makes us consistently seek for meta-levels, on which our chaos could be dealt with – but at the same time not cleaned up, because we truly enjoy its dynamic aesthetics and the feeling of freedom it gives us. Instead, we prefer to see our chaos framed inside some higher form of order. This can be, ultimately, a problem of supernatural reality, religions, gods, etc.; but this study focuses on more earthly spheres. In a sense, I would argue, the recent popularity of translation studies at least partially stems from this feature of our “collective consciousness”: we are trying to access a meta-linguistic level at which particles of language involved in various entanglements in the space of cultural discourse may be re-matched in a new idiom, in a way that does justice to the sense they convey in a text, and to the freedom they enjoy in the environment of original language. Theorists like Benjamin and Derrida, to give but two well-known examples, delineate translation as the process of moving the original on to a higher plane (Benjamin in “The Task of the Translator” [Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers]), with the translator always operating on the meta-level, in a position of the one who speaks of the text (Derrida in “Towers of Babel” [Des Tours de Babel]). This intuition will be fleshed out in the last part of this study.

Obviously essayization is not the only thing that may trigger literary quantum transformations. The same literary-physical laws probably hold for poeticization, novelization, and other interventions in default generic structures as delineated by the Newtonian law of the genre. But I would venture that, unlike poeticization or novelization, which are usually

⁷ This is Brian Greene’s account of the accidental discovery that was made during observations of nickel’s properties:

In April 1925, during an experiment at Bell Labs undertaken by two American physicists, Clinton Davisson and Lester Germer, a glass tube containing a hot chunk of nickel suddenly exploded. Davisson and Germer had been spending their days firing beams of electrons at specimens of nickel to investigate various aspects of the metal’s atomic properties; the equipment failure was a nuisance, albeit one all too familiar in experimental work. On cleaning up the glass shards, Davisson and Germer noticed that the nickel had been tarnished during the explosion. Not a big deal, of course. All they had to do was heat the sample, vaporize the contaminant, and start again. And so they did. But that choice, to clean the sample instead of opting for a new one, proved fortuitous. When they directed the electron beam at the newly cleaned nickel, the results were completely different from any they or anyone else had ever encountered. By 1927, it was clear that Davisson and Germer had established a vital feature of the rapidly developing quantum theory (Greene 2011: 222; for more information and possible interpretations of the experiment, see chapter 11 of the book).

undertaken for artistic reasons and considered mostly as a way to make a text more attractive or aesthetically diverse, essayization is usually driven by philosophical or cognitive aspirations, and hence makes one focus on the ontological layer of the work, where the most surprising things happen. Essayistic form is associated with things like freedom, personal truth, intellectual discovery, a promise of a more spacious form which does justice to both the lived and the written. So, if we slip from this imaginary, cognitively safe Möbius strip, the fall is deep and painful, and eye-opening. But it is worth it. Therefore, what I will sometimes do in part two of this study, especially in chapter 3, is not only observing but also intentionally provoking various essayizations, in order to experience, observe and describe mechanisms of this fascinating inner dynamics of the literary world, keenly conscious that my account bears a deep imprint of my own “wave” as this gets entangled with the image during my interpretation. This is something that can only be acknowledged, and never overcome.

Essayization (disambiguation)

For terminological clarity, as regards various existent and hypothetical usages of the word “essayization”, I believe the functionality of this category is limited for those who are engaged in literary discourse on other than the elementary quantum level, but there are two situations in which it might be considered a useful analytical category within Newtonian and Einsteinian paradigms of literature as well.

Essayization may be taken statistically, as a trend towards quantitative dominance of the essay genre over other genres in one’s literary oeuvre or in a certain field or period of literary production. This is indeed what I was dealing with in part one without naming it so, when we were reading essays written by emigrants and examining authors’ meta-literary utterances that explain their predilection for the essay-as-form at particular stages of their life. As suggested earlier, such analysis might be instructive for those interested in psychological or sociological approaches to literature. In part two of my research these issues will no longer be the subject of extensive discussion, but will return occasionally as context for reflection on particular works.

The notion of essayization can also be quite effectively used with reference to a specific literary-historical fact, namely to cases in which a text representing another genre at some point becomes re-written as or inscribed into an essay (which in the course of this study will be occasionally referred to as capital essayization), and then, sometimes, written back into its generic form. Palpable and objective as it appears, this phenomenon raises some challenging questions that cannot be answered by using the classical Newtonian physics of the genre or by using the relativistic Einsteinian model. For instance: is the final product of such an operation the same text as before, or is it a new work inspired by the original version? Or, asked from another angle, where is the limit of text’s plasticity, to borrow Benjamin’s term, to which I will return in part two of this study? Does this plasticity break at the moment of re-writing or does it go far enough to guarantee ontological sameness, so to say, of two optically utterly different objects? To these issues I will devote several paragraphs in chapter 3 while analyzing Wang Xiaoni’s poem “Becoming a Poet Anew”.

Mostly, however, I will pay attention to essayizations that are not the result of an authoritative gesture of re-writing, but are expected to occur through negotiations of form between all participants of the discourse, and, essentially, do not move beyond the stage of

negotiations. Essayization of the kind that Epstein called an “integrative process”, aimed at arriving at the optimal, coherent and transparent shape of the author-text-reader constellation, leads to a growing disintegration of formal structures. From the “scientific” perspective this is a beneficial situation as it allows us to observe a given text in various configurations and under dynamically changing circumstances. Therefore, as noted above, I will sometimes be purposely simulating essayizations to learn more about textual mechanisms that are crucial for the micro-physics of literature. Outside the laboratory, however, the phenomenon requires a more nuanced approach and assessment, considering not only epistemological but also aesthetic, ethical and social-political factors. Although these things are not what interests me primarily, I will certainly not dodge responsibility for my experiments and when it appears important, I will write about the potential broader consequences of various essayizations. This will hold specifically for my discussion of essayization in life-writing.

