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Essay, essaying, essayism and the experience of reading

British and American essay anthologies and critical assessments of the condition and character of the essay as an interdisciplinary or extra disciplinary and pluralistic form of literature, or even as an antigenre with collapsing limits, indicate its evolving potential to become, as Kuisma Korhonen argues, almost anything from literature to photographs, films, radio and music. The essay is amorphous, mobile, hybrid and by virtue of its permeability it has become a sort of in-between practice, often a sign of times of significant paradigm changes.¹ I read it as an informal practice of polyphonic openness and dialogicity. In the essay, especially in its personal and autobiographical frame of reference, multiple esoteric personal experiences of reading and thinking are related² to other experiences held together by a searching self. For the self in the essay always relates his voice to other voices, to other subjects, to the world. And it is by orientating to proximity with the world that the essay, one of the most personal forms of writing, promises a friendly ethos³. Cynthia Ozick says “it seduces agreement.”⁴

¹ K. Korhonen, *Textual Friendship: The Essay as Impossible Encounter — From Plato and Montaigne to Levinas and Derrida*, New York 2006, p. 34.

² Montaigne uses the word “relate” explicitly to describe his practice: “I speak as one who questions and does not know ... I do not teach I relate.” See G. Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, London 1988, p. 5.

³ If the essayist is the “amateur” (Hilsbecher, Woolf), then the friendship his writing gestures towards is about passion but also control of fusion or confusion between the I, the object, and the reader. This perspective can be challenged by those like Max Bense or Bolesław Miciński in Poland who saw the essay as a field of encounter of two parties “essaying” each other with the reality of “eyes, hands, meat, and blood.” See R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej: Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, p. 306.

⁴ C. Ozick, *She: Portrait of the essay as a warm body*, “Atlantic Monthly”, September 1998, p. 116.

First, the essay makes such relations possible by assuming a sympathetic reader and by establishing a dialogue with them.⁵ The modern essayist is not some pale, attenuated figure, lost in secluded speculation and spending hours of sunlight in some dark premises, as a bookish crabbed character in Virginia Woolf's sketches. Even Walter Benjamin's *Schemi* gets out. Essayistic practice and a sedentary pursuit are at odds. "Walking" features as "the perfect analogue of 'essay-ing,'" says Good, arguing for the essay as a peripathetic and ambulatory form (xii). Taking the reader on a stroll through the maze of his mind,⁶ says Korhonen, the essayist acts not like its master, but a host. The essayist "shares the homelessness with Socrates," who never took his interlocutors to his own house. "He is a guest in the conceptual houses of his fellow men" and one who "repays the hospitality badly, showing that the houses he visits are built on illusions, or false foundations" while at the same time venturesomely essaying his own milieu.⁷

To essay truth, the essaying I moves, walks, travels, or surfs and gets out into unexpected and unintended open spaces.⁸ The direction of the essay is away from "the prescribed itinerary," along what Kauffmann calls unmethodical paths that look "skewed and arbitrary," and that take us "through the thicket of contemporary experience."⁹ Adorno in his famous *The Essay as Form* relies on a figure of "someone in a foreign country" who in "continually changing contexts ... is forced to speak a foreign language" and who learns it by error.¹⁰ He is thinking of essayists like William Hazlitt who saw in such journeying "perfect liberty, to think, to feel, do just as one pleases."¹¹ In *Hours in a library*, Virginia Woolf pictured the activity of self-essaying as fitting more "the nature of a brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study." She says the essayist as reader "trudges the high road, he climbs higher and higher upon the hills until the atmosphere is almost too fine to breathe in."¹²

This deceptively natural walking and ascending, while assembling reflections, are not only figures of a formal texture of the essay, they are also figures of self-understanding attempted by the essayist who embarks on his adventure usually in his mature age. Absence of usefulness or verifiable truth, "no scaffolding and no structure"¹³ also the fact that, as Good says, nothing in the essay is carried over, that no two essays are ever alike, point to characteristics of the essay as a non-disciplin-

⁵ The essay in its use of language is closer to speaking than to moving, it is also composed as a dialogue. See W. Hilsbecher, *Tragizm, absurd i paradoks. Eseje*, Warszawa 1972, p. 131.

⁶ Phrase used in C. Ozick, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁷ K. Korhonen, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

⁸ See W. Hilsbecher, *Esejo o eseju*, [in:] *idem, Tragizm, absurd i paradoks. Eseje*, Warszawa 1972.

⁹ R.L. Kauffmann, *The schewed path: essaying as unmethodical method*, [in:] *Essays on the Essay*, ed. A. Butrym, Athens 1989, p. 238.

¹⁰ W.T. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, transl. S. Weber, New York 1991, p. 13.

¹¹ W. Hazlitt, *On going a journey*, [in:] *The Art of the Essay*, ed. L. Fakundiny, Boston 1991, p. 93.

¹² V. Woolf, *Hours in a library*, [in:] *eadem, Collected Essays*, London 1966, p. 34.

¹³ W.T. Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

any kind of writing. The essayist progresses casually, with no authoritative voice, without adhering to any single cognitive structure or methodical method.¹⁴ He produces, in the words of Montaigne, “intermingling” and “admixture” resulting in instability and conceptual unpredictability. That is why in academia the essay has been marginalized as an object of literary study. Its presence and manifestations have been handled only selectively. Good speaks of the essay’s neglect in higher levels of education, and a significant use in the lower levels where the essay is exercised as a form of expression not of researched knowledge but personal knowledge. But, he adds that the essay tends to re-emerge after giving way to properly validated “scholarly articles.” It re-surfaces at “the very top of the academic hierarchy” to enable a “greater indulgence of personal opinion,” as space where the essayist uses his own authority, often in defiance of other authority, to prove or illustrate his own points.¹⁵ This trajectory from personal through impersonal to the strongly personal is familiar to the readers of Montaigne’s *Essais*. Subsequent revisions of his masterpiece tended towards the rejection of “borrowed wisdom.” The Third Book speaks out of self and from self.¹⁶

But the essayist speaks also responding to cultural conditions and their specificity. Some argue that even the understanding of the meaning of the word “essay” is culture-bound. In comparison with other countries, England, for example, prides itself on the longest and most thriving tradition of the cultivation of the essay, tradition founded not by Montaigne but by Bacon.¹⁷ In his “brief notes,” as he called them in “Dedicatory Epistle” to *Essays or Councells, Civill and Morall* (1597) he used the term *essay* for the first time. Bacon perfected aphoristic, assertive and aristocratic style derived mostly from classical models. Evolved by Montaigne and Bacon, this kind of prose literature has enjoyed tremendous popularity in England. The English essay with its impressive variants and mutations has been testing the world and adapting itself to the changing tastes of its readers. Many comparative studies of the essay, despite its strong generic positioning, despite claims in favour of the aesthetics of the essay, defend the currency of the essay’s cultural conditioning. So the English essay, Claire Obaldia says “continues by and large to be perceived as belonging to a different, more ‘aphoristic’ tradition.”¹⁸ The Polish essay, for example, as Kott elucidated, had traditionally been an “em-

¹⁴ K. Korhonen, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 178.

¹⁶ Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński in his Introduction to Montaigne’s *Essais* suggests that age and failing memory can play a part in this pattern.

¹⁷ Graham Good acknowledges that the essay “has been practiced most continuously in England, despite the fact that its founder was French.” He claims that “the empirical and individualistic quality of English culture and the early dominance of the bourgeois values were obviously hospitable to the essay” (viii).

¹⁸ C. Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay*, Oxford 1995, p. 37.

bittered companion of exiles” with a figure not of a wanderer or walker but of Touchstone as its “sacred patron.”¹⁹ In a recent interview for “The Guardian,” Michael Holroyd stipulating why the British are so focused on the individual life in portraiture and in literature concludes that the key factor responsible for that is living on an island without “being attached” to the mainland Europe and its collectivities. And thus “without research or artifice,”²⁰ often frivolously, the outstanding personal essay in England, revitalized and perfected in the twentieth century by Virginia Woolf, relies in a puzzling and attractive way on the trope of journey. Its paths often take the reader on mental journeying through and around books and the lives of these books and their authors. Books are figures of friendship and in the essay the friendship relationship which is established with them and around them constitutes one of the essays’ major themes.

The essay is a mobile form promising an unmethodical journeying via skewed paths.²¹ Most commentators begin their essaying of the essay drawing some sense of direction from etymological examinations. The origin of the word “essay,” we learn, departs not from the English language but the French “*essai* and *essayer*, to attempt, to experiment, to try out,” Obaldia explains in her rigorous and impressive study *The Essayistic Spirit*. She includes the possible roots of the word beyond French, in Latin “*exagium*, ‘weighing’ an object or an idea, examining it from various angles, but never exhaustively or systematically.”²² This placement of the etymology, she argues, is consequential for it sets our expectations for some irresponsible rehearsal and frivolity which goes along with provisional attempts, or at most something like the “as if” of fiction.²³ The trying out involves the object of the essay as well as the “person of the essayist made of flesh and blood and the essayist as defined or created out of words alone”²⁴ always a fictional self.²⁵ Obaldia also considers the displacement of “the essay” used to refer to an autonomous genre for the verb “to essay” which, she says, “denotes a relationship of transitivity and

¹⁹ *Four Decades of Polish Essays*, ed. J.E. Kott, Evanston 1990, p. 2.

²⁰ Thus Montaigne addresses his *lecteur* hoping that the public can accept it with reverence (own translation).

²¹ I am leaning here on metaphors used by R. Lane Kauffmann in his *The Skewed Path: Essaying as Unmethodical Method*. Richard M. Chadbourne highlighting the longevity and vitality of the essay in England quotes Leslie Stephen, V. Woolf’s father, who relates the essay to English “love of sermons of all varieties.” See R.M. Chadbourne, *A puzzling literary genre: comparative views of the essay*, “Comparative Literature Studies” 20, 1983, no 2, p. 133. He also points out the impressive growth of the English essay related to forms such as “the character, the letter, the portrait, the aphorism; the many strands that went into its making.” See *ibidem*, p. 136.

²² C. Obaldia, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁵ Hazlitt in his powerful and memorable *On going a journey* repeated that: “We measure the universe by ourselves, and even comprehend the texture of our own being only piece-meal.” See W. Hazlitt, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

dependence,” an act of “essaying” that is leading to penetrations of other forms like the novel or the “novel trying itself in the essay.” She extends the act to mean also “essaying” which “operates ... on the individual writer’s work.”²⁶

Most theorists of the essay also anchor their analyses of the form building connections with Montaigne’s *Essais*, regarded as the unquestionable founding text or model for the essay. Montaigne’s choice of the title, it is often observed, prepares more for an encounter with a new structural principle than formulations of generic features.²⁷ The choice of plural to bind the loose writings or notes as well as Montaigne’s use of the verb form as when he says “I assay my judgement”²⁸ direct towards provisionality and revelation of the man himself. The term “essay”, says Obaldia, is neither completely covered by the verbal (modal) etymological sense of “to essay,” nor made clear by the unifying generic utilization towards which it nevertheless gestures.²⁹ Korhonen, on the other hand, reads Montaigne’s title *Essais* as a kind of antititle, as he says, referring either to “its author’s literary exercises, his experience of life, his mental experiments, his way of weighing different arguments against each other, or his way of giving just a taste of his topics to the readers.” He is building on the etymological connections pointing to the sixteenth-century meaning of the term “essay” to mean also “‘an exercise’ (both physical and literary), and a ‘sample’ (of food).”³⁰ Connoting multiple and various possibilities, the title “essay” means for Montaigne “the self, the world, and the textual production” (Korhonen 130). Graham Good in his formidable study *The Observing Self* admits that the “essays” for Montaigne is still a “sketchy concept” and that it is Bacon’s use of the term which comes to denote the new genre which he qualifies as dispersed meditations or brief notes.³¹ Yet the term itself, says Good, “can be seen as an anticipation of similar ‘collective’ titles ... like *Explorations*, *Illuminations*, or *Prisms*.”³² Virginia Woolf’s individual essays, for example, bear revealing titles beginning with words like: “notes,” “outlines,” “reflections,” “memories,” “lives.” The essay as an attempt then promises courage, reflection, as well as risk connoting “adventure” with “improvisation.”³³

²⁶ C. Obaldia, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁷ Aptly captured in Boy-Żeleński’s translation of Montaigne’s *Essais* into Polish as literally “attempts” (próby).

²⁸ C. Obaldia, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ K. Korhonen, *op. cit.*, p. 32. The food imagery, as I will show later, is used by Montaigne to describe the process of composition of the essay. Samuel Johnson, for example, declares that the essay is “loose sally of the mind; irregular, undigested pieces; not regular and orderly composition.” Tasting and savouring are evoked by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* where the “I” recommends reading books like aristocratic clans used to by “plucking and chewing finically.”

³¹ He uses Seneca’s letters at his first models.

³² G. Good, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

³³ W. Hilsbecher, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

It revolves around the self, for after all the Latin *esse*, meaning “to be” should also be recalled in the etymological considerations of the word “essay.”

Good’s analysis of the importance of Montaigne’s *Essais* leads him to a conclusion that what distinguishes Montaigne’s essay is the attitude, “critical or skeptical,” collapsing borders and claims to unity and solidity of the text as well as claims to authority thus separating this form of writing from “the old method of uncritically accumulated commentary.” His skepticism, the critic shows, also marks Montaigne’s refusal of “the systematic ambitions of the new science.”³⁴ Good’s definition of the essay as “an anti-ideological expression of the free individual reporting and reflecting on his experience in defiance and disregard of authority”³⁵ places the essay as a distinctive form of non-fiction. By acknowledging and openly prioritizing much distrusted experience, the essay reduces the claims of official identity as conformity, as self-sameness. It inclines us to accept the essayist’s authority based often solely on experience. In our age, R. Kauffman observes, the essayist cannot achieve the unity of experience that Montaigne arrived at for he has to “travel under a more rigid protocol, within more carefully patrolled boundaries” but, like Montaigne, he can still enjoy the pleasures and risks of essaying as a tentative, groping method of experience and its presentation. For the sentient self, essaying thus becomes not only a way of writing but a “form of life.”³⁶ Kauffmann brings forward the distinctions between lived experience and thought in Eduardo Nicol’s vision of the essay as both “the rehearsal and the final performance” to argue for the modern essays’ rebellion against imperialism of such separations.³⁷

Like walking, reading is a key essayistic activity, authorial and textual strategy. Itinerancy of the essay invites esoteric and often clandestine confluences and arrangements. William H. Gass saying that the essay is “born of books, nourished by books” confirms its connection and continuity with “the reality of writing,”³⁸ and with the dead treated as alive, and absent treated as present. It is in reading about the dead that, as Woolf says, we are tempted to “impute” to them “the qualities we find lacking in ourselves.”³⁹ Encounter with books features strongly in the process of self-figuration. The essay, as I will show in the remaining part of this paper, houses books⁴⁰ as defining objects in the collusions of the conceptual

³⁴ G. Good, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

³⁶ R.L. Kauffmann, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 226 ff.

³⁸ G.D. Atkins, *In other words: gardening for love — the work of the essayist*, “Kenyon Review” 13, 1991, no. 1, p. 58.

³⁹ V. Woolf, *Reading*, [in:] *eadem*, *Collected...*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ An impressively well-stocked library or a reading-room, or an impenetrable and unique study in a large house is a familiar domestic space in the English essay of the twentieth century. It’s where “we breathe the air of freedom.” See V. Woolf, *How should one read a book*, [in:] *eadem*, *Collected...*, p. 63. Multiple representations of the library in the essay deserves a separate study in itself.

and sensual that the essay performs but also as the field of the other. Books in Woolf's essays are "the fruit of innumerable lives" but also with lives of their own (in *Reading* they "filled the room behind with a soft murmur") and the "seal of human experience" (26). The temper of our times is definitely against charming ambles with the essayists as imagined, for example, by Hilaire Belloc writing at the beginning of the twentieth century *On Nothing, On Everything, On Anything*, and finally *On*. The "me generation," as ours is called, expects "large subjects" the essay cannot but treat indirectly. But its invitation to participate in a ramble with humour and eccentricity of the essayists mind certainly proves open enough and permeable enough to meet the demands of new subjectivities and demands for sites that address self-understanding, self-trying, self-improvement — as answered so extravagantly on both sides of the Atlantic by autobiographical prose. For despite all the mutations and cultural differences, the essay remains a personal expression in prose, whether expressed formally or informally, and the essayist, conforming to the prevailing temper of times, is perhaps, to use again an image from Woolf, most sensitive of plants, a figure affirming individual experience and acts of experiencing. The experience of reading in the essay becomes a field of polyphonic relations where books and words mean more than they say; as bodily subjects they open access to the past, individual experience of it enables essayistic conversation.⁴¹

Certainly the nature of essayistic experiencing is complex⁴² and manifold. The essay embraces experience, is "saturated in experience" and it is not only, as Sendyka says of intellectual nature but also spiritual, physical, non-narrational, non-logical, and irrational, experience in its fleetingness.⁴³ Ephemeral and unorganized experience of an object or event reflected in the essay is never achieved, it is not de-scribed — consolidated or systematized after a period of sustained deliberation. Good attributes uniqueness of the discourse of the essay to the quality of immediacy, to the essay's response "on the spot" to "objects and events" as they interrupt, complement, and restrict each other's development. The self who experiences is the self who, momentarily receiving personal illumination coin-

⁴¹ The essay as conversation, its oral features and its connection to the letter is lucidly presented by e.g. Shirley Brice Heath in her paper *The essay in English: Readers and writers in dialogue*. Ortega y Gasset offers a counter-perspective in his essay *What is reading*. Relying on Goethe and Plato, he shows the sadness of the encounter with the book. As absence, written word is only a poor surrogate of the spoken word, of the face of the living being. It is communication without the communicator, a message where what is spiritual is always suppressed. See J. Ortega y Gasset, *Dehumanizacja sztuki i inne eseje*, transl. P. Niklewicz, Warszawa 1980, p. 383–406.

⁴² Sendyka shows the connection between the essay and experience to be argued by Lukács as revealing itself in the form of the essay, more so than in the content. She argues that both for Lukács and later for Musil experience, and they mean mostly intellectual experience, concerns inner sphere, that it is secondary to sensations and that it is unified, interiorized, and controlled with cognitive tools. See R. Sendyka, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

ciding with a sense of self-loss, gains self-recognition. This is a quality which, while being private, is also representative of, as Good says, “how we experience ourselves as untypical.”⁴⁴ The essay witnesses that experiencing which has been identified with being experienced, essaying something as being essayed by it.⁴⁵

Experience connotes the internal and the external balancing against each other. It is what connects the past with the present, and what makes necessary background for the future. Life and experience are prime motivating forces of the essay. Realizing⁴⁶ oneself in the acts of essaying, requires a sympathetic reader. The nature of experience is such that it is neither personal nor impersonal, that it is expressed with the help of intersubjective, tested tools, by coordinating osmotic indirect “equivalents of experience.”⁴⁷ Like a carpet, says Adorno, the essay weaves various strands of experience expecting us to read its patterning. On the one hand, experience is “impossible to share in its entirety, on the other, there is no experience without the desire to share.”⁴⁸ It seems that, as Korhonen argues, the greater the escape into privateness, “the greater is the desire for the others: the friend, the reader.”⁴⁹

Reading as an intersubjective experience is interrelated with living, re-reading and reviving memories of previous readings and feelings connected with them as opening access to an earlier-self, a way to re-experience it.⁵⁰ Previous re-readings, however, are readings of what was created and in the process of essayistic reading and then writing about it is re-created. Essays by those essayists who, in the words of Woolf spent their life in the orgy of reading, for whom their life was reading, create very active ideal templates for testing themselves as readers, testing the life seasons of their reading, testing the books, their lives, and the audience as readers.

Walter Benjamin sees the experience of reading but also collecting books as a ritual of renewal. Through the figure of the collector he speaks of his extensive personal library that includes not only the books but also “booklike creations,” which he calls the “prismatic fringes” including albums, leaflets, periodicals, stick-in albums. His books, called property, live, their copies have fate of their own; in his library they feel freedom. They act upon the collector by activating the chaos of his memories and images transporting him to distant places where they originated or where their narratives unfold. Thus he lives in them, not they in him. The relationship between him and his books, carefully selected and handled, is the most intimate one, he says, because it “belongs to tactical sphere” and because it is based on ownership. He feels responsible for them and that’s why he has erected

⁴⁴ G. Good, *op. cit.*, p. 8 ff.

⁴⁵ R. Sendyka, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Term used in O.B. Hardison, *Binding Proteus*, [in:] *Essays...*, p. 26.

⁴⁷ R. Sendyka, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁴⁸ K. Korhonen, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

⁵⁰ G. Good, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

“dwellings with books as the building stones” with him “inside.” Interestingly, its precious furnishing includes “the most personal sample of personal prose in German Romanticism.”⁵¹

In her essay *Out of a book* (1946) Elizabeth Bowen shows how “Almost no experience, however much simplified by the distance of time, is to be vouched for as being wholly my own.”⁵² What is not hers, not personal — books, like people, introducing, magnifying, representing, and making seeing possible in life are used to “make oneself.” Bowen acknowledges their magic power, especially when read in childhood, and their affecting and infecting impact. But what’s striking about her reflections on “the enormity” of the impact is her bald acknowledgement of its decay in consecutive stages of cognitive and emotional development. Books, become “compost,” they are “forever used up” and “devitalized,” and “stale.” Once read, they become “only the husk” one physically abandons. The one who reads, and she means reads like a child whose experience, because it is limited, is also more intense, responds to books: “deeply, ravenously, unthinkingly, sensuously.” Reading is experiencing, what she calls “the greater part of life,” and a “power-testing ... advance.” This early organic process for Bowen is reciprocal, we strip the books bare while investing our sensations in them, while we “lend” or “fling” into the story. Later it evaporates, “I came to an end with Dickens when I had absorbed him into myself,” says Bowen. Books like people are “taken.” Abandoned, some survive in memory, “indenting” it for life — a source of what she terms “synthetic experience.” It is that “residuum” that informs everything we feel and think which is to follow. It is the *philia* that later informs *polemos*.

Montaigne in Book II, ch. X under the title *On Books* speaks of books instrumentally, directly and impatiently. Reading like eating is a life experience, it should be pure and complete. He admits, he gladly devours books, not like fine connoisseur but a healthy eater, consuming wide range of food, preferably without “sauces or spices.” Books serve a moral purpose, books help order and clarify his thinking. Once he finds the wisdom he seeks, he discards them physically — but, on the other hand, he returns to careful notes he keeps on some of them, his adulterations participate in his life longer than the volumes themselves. He selects the books that can offer “support,” we can extend his culinary metaphors and say sustenance, in the areas he feels incompetent. Books provide solid points in arguments and also entertainment. He expects his choices to possess processed knowledge, not its raw representation. Like an arbiter of taste, he marks presentation, beauty, sweetness, gloss. But mostly, he looks for instruction in order to live better and die better. His books, he suggests, should reveal, should allow to get to know not the measure of things, but the measure of his vision, his-self. And as it changes, so do his choices. Those texts which once inspired, lose their power.

⁵¹ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, transl. H. Zohn, New York 1969, p. 66 ff.

⁵² E. Bowen, *Out of a book*, [in:] *The Art...*, p. 282.

In what seems like an attitude of a consumer with well-defined needs, the I in this passage reserves a special attention to the texts which make character study and speculation of the motifs of the author possible. The personal, the intimate and unstaged offer more interest than the public “theatre of the world.” Historians, but only those simple ones or the sophisticated ones, offer narratives which are pleasant and easy, fuller and livelier. Unlike the average ones, they do not devour best morsels, do not abridge or change anything in the pulp of the matter, but generously reveal a word or a feature for his instruction. Life narratives which engage questions of intensions and plans, what is inner over what is external as executed in Plutarch, deserve special consideration. Montaigne finishes his section with reference to his practice of reading supplemented with written notes, supposedly to anchor his failing memory and inaptitude. The notes of judgements on the authors of the book and their aesthetic and moral evaluations are used to justify writing by others and his altruistic interest in them that, too, should lead to self-improvement.

And finally, Woolf, like Montaigne,⁵³ looks for “the fruit of innumerable lives” in “travels, histories, memoirs,” she looks for variety that always carries “the seal of human experience in it.” Her own reading as traveling, being “carr[ied] along as upon the back of a large smooth-paced cart horse, through green pastures” ensures being sated. Her model of an ideal reader as amateur, Sir Thomas Browne, making reading as easy as “riding an electric train” is also an ideal writer, a figure of friend who “is hospitable to everything and tastes freely to whatever is set before him.” He is the perfect other “now hidden, now apparent.” Others, read long time ago, like time “which has deposited itself so thickly” continue to live “like a moss” (*Reading* 12–33).⁵⁴

The ethos of friendship in the essay, especially in its personal forms, belongs to both reading and writing. To engage in the activity of reading, as most essayist do, is, as Korhonen puts it, “both to desire the ultimate fullness of experience ... toward an imaginary personal satisfaction,” the satiety essayed in the above examples, “and to let something unpredictable happen, to give the voice of the Other a chance, at least a provisional one.”⁵⁵

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⁵³ The influence of Montaigne on Woolf is a well-researched subject. For a list of very interesting connections with Montaigne’s text and Woolf’s family see R. Sendyka, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁵⁴ V. Woolf, *Reading...*, p. 12–33.

⁵⁵ K. Korhonen, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

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Esej, eseizowanie, eseistyczność i doświadczenie czytania

Streszczenie

Brytyjskie i amerykańskie antologie oraz krytyczne opracowania charakteru i kondycji eseju jako interdyscyplinarnej czy pozadyscyplinarnej formy literatury, czy nawet antygatunku o chwiejnych granicach, wskazują na jego ewoluujący potencjał. Kuisma Korhonen twierdzi, że obecnie prawie wszystko — od literatury po fotografię, film, radio czy muzykę — może mieć eseistyczny charakter. Stąd w najnowszych ujęciach esej jawi się jako amorficzna, mobilna, hybrydowa praktyka znamienna dla okresów zmian dominujących paradygmatów.

W eseju autobiograficznym, poufałym czy osobistym wielorakie ezoteryczne doświadczenia lektury i samego procesu czytania zbiegają się z innymi doświadczeniami konfrontowanymi przez afirmujące *self*⁵⁶. Eseistyczne „ja” zaprasza czytelnika na sokratejską przechadzkę w bogatych labiryntach myśli i wspomnień. Eseista, niczym bezdomny i wolny grecki filozof, zamiast do własnego domu, wprowadza do conceptualnych domostw przyjaciół i oddanych, wskazując po drodze na iluzje i marne fundamenty, na jakich zostały zbudowane te budynki.

Tropem eseju jest więc podróż, przemieszczanie się nieoznakowanymi drogami, arbitralnymi ścieżkami. Eseista, jak mówi Virginia Woolf, to nie błądy i słaby czytelnik pochylony w zakurzonej bibliotece nad stertami tekstów. Próbowanie siebie w eseju zakłada, zdaniem tej najbardziej poetyckiej z eseistek angielskich XX wieku, nie tylko ruch, ale i świeżość oraz gotowość na podjęcie wyzwania przygody. Nie ma bowiem w eseju wytyczonych ścieżek, oznakowanych dróg, materii; brak autorytetów, które nadawałyby się do ponownego wykorzystania. Nie ma też tego, co Montaigne nazywał „pożyczoną mądrością”.

W artykule zostały wskazane istotne kulturowe uwarunkowania rozwoju eseju w Wielkiej Brytanii, zdaniem wielu krytyków obszaru obfitującego w najbogatszą w esej tradycję. Claire Obaldia, czerpiąc z doświadczenia eseistów piszących w języku angielskim, zauważa stopniowe rozprze-

⁵⁶ Roma Sendyka proponuje wprowadzenie „sobie” jako najbardziej adekwatnego tłumaczenia angielskiego *self*. Istniejące i często używane „jażń” w żadnym stopniu nie oddaje współczesnych odmian świadomości „ja”.

strzenianie się w owej kulturze formy czasownikowej *to essay*, akcentującej czynność próbowania czy wręcz eksperymentowania. Esej coraz odważniej penetruje, a nawet wchłania inne formy literatury, jak na przykład powieść. W formach eseistycznych, szczególnie o charakterze osobistym, stanowiącym przedmiot zainteresowania w prezentowanym artykule, owo próbowanie, które nie zakłada już, jak u Montaigne'a, jedności doświadczenia, wyznacza eksperymentowanie nie tylko eseistycznego „ja”, lecz waży ono także świat oraz samą tekstualną produkcję.

Dlatego czytanie jako praktykę i jako wydarzenie można uznać za jeden z centralnych tematów esejów w XX wieku. Czytając — „czytamy” i doświadczamy siebie, ale i wchodzimy w relacje intersubiektywne. Od-czytując teksty przeczytane, od-czytujemy przeszłość naszą i innych. W artykule została zilustrowana i sprobmatyzowana teza Kuismy Korhonen, że doświadczenie czytania przeżyte w formie eseju jest wyrazem silnego pragnienia pełni doświadczenia oraz ponawianą próbą otwierania się na nieprzewidywalne. Jako egzemplifikację proponowanego ujęcia oraz ilustrację tezy wybrano osobiste eseje irlandzkiej autorki Elizabeth Bowen *Out of a book* (*Z książki*) i Virginii Woolf *Hours in a library* (*Godziny w bibliotece*), jak i Montaigne'a *On Books* (*O książkach*, rozdz. X, ks. II *Prób*). Montaigne, Woolf i Bowen w zaskakujący sposób przywołują podobne metafory jedzenia i podróży jako wyznaczników modalności doświadczeń lektury w życiu, które spędzili w „orgii czytania,” jak to określiła Woolf. W wymienionych esejach testują oni własne czytelnicze życie, cykle czytania i nieczytania, ale również mobilizują samego czytelnika do ponownych prób od-czytywania własnego życia. Analiza użytych kulinarnych tropów doprowadza nas do stwierdzenia, że osobisty esej ulega rzeczywistości samego pisania, żywi się on książkami, przyswaja je, przerabia na niezbędny kompost zaspokajający potrzeby przynajmniej tymczasowej afirmacji prób.