

## The Politics of the Essay<sup>1</sup>

Frans Ruiter  
 Utrecht University  
[f.ruiter@uu.nl](mailto:f.ruiter@uu.nl)

The notion of ‘heteronymous literature’, as introduced by Bourdieu, covers literature which takes its significance from something else than literature itself. It is produced out of commercial, religious as well as political motivation. I will focus on the relation between literature and politics. Understood as the interrelation between politics and literature, the genre of the essay is potentially interesting to inquire into the interrelation between heteronomy and autonomy. As an argumentative and persuasive discourse, an essay very well may have a political message. What could then be the difference between the ‘literary’ essay and more strait forwarded kinds of political discourse? Starting from a taxonomy by Angenot, I will differentiate between genres closely related to the political essay (pamphlet, satire, polemics) which all negotiate their own pact with the reader. All these genres seem to be more ‘political’ than the essay. From the view point of ‘autonomous’ literature the political essay even may be a contradiction in terminus. I will investigate to what extend speaking from a political position is consolatory with ‘the essayistic spirit’ (De Obaldia). If, as I would argue, the literary essay has a politics of its own, what is its relation to ‘non literary’ political discourse?

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is the non copy-edited draft of a paper presented at the 2011 ACSIS conference ‘Current Issues in European Cultural Studies’, Norrköping, 15-17 June 2011 within the session ‘Revisiting the Literary Within Cultural Studies’.

## THE POLITICS OF THE ESSAY

In this paper I want to share some thought with you about the specificity of the literary. I want to do this by way of a discussion about a rather marginal literary genre, the essay, and more specifically about a subgenre thereof: the political column. And my simple question will be the following: can politicians write political essays? Behind this seemingly rhetorical question (“If not they, who does?”) looms a more fundamental issue: that of the relation between politics and literature, or between *Geist* und *Macht* as early twentieth century thinkers were fond to call it. A more recent and a more promising framing of the relation between “the politics of the literary” and “the politics of power” stems from the French philosopher Rancière. He uses the terms *politics* and *police* to characterize the two sides of the relation. *Police* (or *police order*) signifies a certain self-evident and accepted “distribution of the sensible” in a society (that is: what is visible, audible, what can be said, thought or done). This distribution may be questioned, challenged, tinkered with etc. by (for instance) literary works, which in that sense have a political effect on the society (Rancière 2004).

The (admittedly somewhat accidental) reason for my reflections is the fact that one of our (Dutch) quality newspapers recently has invited a few prominent politicians to write a weekly column. These political columns are printed exactly on the spot which normally is reserved for the more personal reflection on political or topical issues by “literary writers” or “intellectuals”. Fascinating is that one of these guest column writing politicians (Martin Bosma) is a prominent member of the populist party, the Party for Freedom. I guess, I won’t have to dwell on the aggressively anti-intellectual sentiment of populist political movements in Europe as well as in the US. But in his own party Bosma is considered to be an “intellectual” of the right kind, that is someone who relentlessly attacks “real” intellectuals who *qualitate qua* are reprehensible left wingers. Bosma has become the right hand of the political leader, Geert Wilders. His political program and speeches – supposedly rhetorically phrased with the help of Bosma – turned out to be one of the sources of inspiration for the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik. Anyway, by way of Bosma’s writing the populists in the Netherlands now not only abuse the intellectual elite from an outsider position but have begun to challenge them in their own domain. In his columns, Bosma positions himself sometimes as an undeservedly marginalized insider, sometimes as a courageous infiltrating outsider. The play with the outsider/insider position is peculiar for a populist politician and offers fascinating material for discourse analysis. But aside from that, columns of politicians as such – whether they have or don’t have any affinities with the language of the intellectual elite, and whether they are populist, right wing or left wing – raise the interesting more general question about politicians’ ability to write political essays or – more precisely -- to express themselves in an essayistic manner. Translated into Rancière’s terminology: are they involved in the politics of literature or in that of the police order?

I’m going to rephrase the question a bit, but first I want to give a minor terminological clarification. The column has been characterized as a mini-essay or dwarf-essay. I think it’s more appropriate to characterize the column as a “pop-essay”, the equalitarian version of the essay. This in itself of course is a significant political fact concerning the distribution of the sensible, an issue I won’t pursue here any further. In this paper, I won’t differentiate between essay and column and will use both terms interchangeably.

My slightly rephrased question then runs as follows: are political essays written by politicians indeed essays, or are they rather a travesty of the essay? That is: discourse that poses as an essay but is in fact something else. Modern genre theory defines a genre as a type of “rhetorical situation”, or as a “context of action” (Devitt 2004). What could be meant with a travesty of a genre if genre is thus defined? It means not only that another text-form is being used than what it seemed on first sight. More than that: another context of action is being created than expected. An example of a genre-travesty is that of a sales letter which poses as a

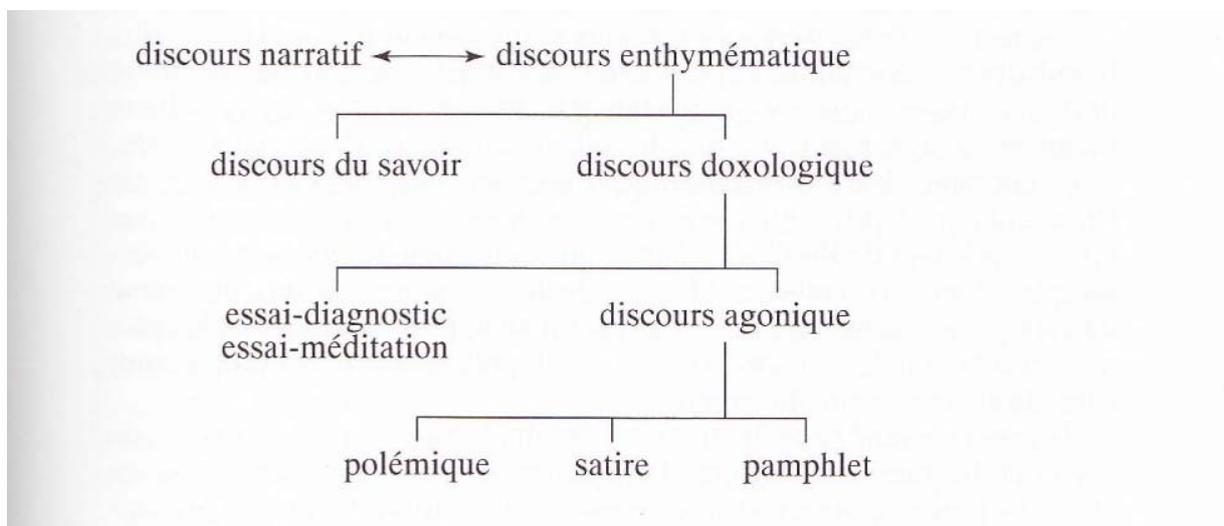
personal letter. Seemingly a situation of intimacy, trust and equality is created, which belongs to a personal letter. In reality the recipient of the letter is in the situation of a potential buyer who is being addressed by a salesman. There is an ambiguity about which pact with the reader is at stake, which can be exploited by the sender or enonciateur.

Do columns written by politicians produce this kind of ambiguity? Has the reader, under the veil of being in an “essayistic situation” (whatever that may be), got mixed up in quite another situation, to wit a political situation, a situation in which one is being addressed as a potential voter by a politician, or as a political adversary who has to be ruled out?

Time to ask ourselves the question: what exactly is an essay? This certainly is not an easy question to answer. The mere handful of scholars who have turned their thoughts on the issue come up with as different as evasive answers. The essay is a “drôle de genre” (Jean Sarrochi), a non-genre (John Snyder), a blurred genre, just to quote a few. One of the most interesting studies about the essay is Claire de Obaldia’s, *The essayistic spirit*, published in 1995. She characterizes the essay as a “not-yet genre”. Essays are not fully fledged texts; they are “literature in potentia”. Essays are preliminary sketches, or notes or paratexts of other texts. The other texts are what it really is all about: for example a fully fledged historical study, or a novel.

In this sense, the political essay or column is the not-yet from a well wrought political argument or address. To clear the issue, I want to refer to the study of Marc Angenot, *La parole pamphlétaire*, from 1982. In this study he discusses a range of genres that play a role in the political arena, or at least may have a political content: the pamphlet, the satire, polemics and also the essay. In a nutshell, one could say that in each of these different genres another pact, another contract, is negotiated with the reader.

Angenot presents the following taxonomy.



I will not comment here on the hierarchy of the classification. For the moment, I only use the figure to clarify the nature of the essayistic pact in contrast with neighboring genres.

Angenot argues that in the different genres the position of the author (or *enonciateur*) in relation to the reader (or *allocutaire*, the addressee) is more or less different, which makes that different rhetorical situations (cq. pacts between author and reader) emerge. Obviously, this varying relationship between enonciateur and allocutaire has consequences for the way rhetorical means are used in the enonciation. To give an impression of this, I make a tour along the different argumentative genres: satire, polemics, pamphlet and essay.

The satirist. The satirist wants to ridicule certain abuses, but he considers himself above (or at least positions himself above) the faults he denounces. From the start, the satirist has the truth at his side: it’s from this Truth that he speaks. That what he denounces is totally without

authority. Implicitly his message is directed at people who actually think like himself, to kindred spirits. He uses reversals, the carnivalesque. In the laugh, the pact with the reader is settled. He doesn't seek the debate, like the polemi(ci)st does. Unlike the polemicist, the satirist breaks of the relations with the world of his adversary, a world which he considers to be preposterous, pernicious, chaotic, and hopeless, and on which he looks down pityingly. The mistaken has prevailed. The satirist observes this from a distance. He has the outlook of an outsider.

The polemicist. The polemicist aims his arrows on a adversary. Rarely in the hope to convince him with arguments, but usually to eliminate him. Unlike the satirist (who is the possession of the Truth) the polemicist still has to win over the Truth to his side: that Truth has to be snatched away from mala fide opponent. To this aim, the opponent has to be exposed as a fraud and an imposter. But with what aggressive pathos the polemicist carries on, he is forced to concern himself with the arguments of his opponent to be effective for his audience. In spite of the gap that separates the polemicist from his opponent, there has to be common territory on which they fight each other.

The pamphleteer. The pamphleteer has quite a peculiar position here. For him, the world as a whole has sunken away in falsehood, he is the only one who is in possession of the Truth, but doesn't have the authority of the Truth. The pamphleteer is a loner, a Cassandra, a martyr: he runs up against a brick wall of general ignorance. In fact, there is no one to turn himself to. The pamphleteer hasn't received a mandate from no one; he fights against the ubiquitous institutionalized ignorance which claims the same values as he himself believes in. This makes that he is left behind with empty hands. His language has been stolen from him. His pamphlet is a message in a bottle, thrown into the water after the shipwreck. Written in the hope that later by accident someone will find it and understand it. Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly thought of their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* as *Flaschenpost*. They thought it improbable they could intervene with the book immediately.

And how about the essay? Angenot distinguishes between *essai* diagnostic (discourse, treatise) and *essai* méditation (say the literary or personal essay).

The *essai* diagnostic is characterized by the *enonciateur* pretending to be the impersonal medium of his argumentative discourse. The essayist is already in possession of the Truth about his subject, and neutrally presents the results of his findings, in a more or less structured and complete argument. The *enonciateur* is not emphatically present. This type of essayist has a distanced position in relation to his subject. Often, the illocutionary power of his argument is institutionally legitimated. The writer doesn't have to legitimate his argument, which is precisely what gives him legitimacy. The relation to the *allocutaire* is didactic.

The *essai*-méditation is almost in everything the opposite from the *essai* diagnostic. No objective distance in relation to the argument, no strictly logical structured argument, but meandering, associative and imaginative. It gives the impression of thinking in *actu*. This doesn't mean that it is the transcription of a stream of consciousness, because it definitively is an argument, in the form of an inner deliberation. The I of the *enonciateur* is continually present, not as much as the guarantee of the Truth of his argument ('I'm of the opinion that') but as the thinking consciousness and as temper or mood in relation to the topic under discussion (which may be playful, bitter, serious, sneering, etc.). Sometimes polemical, but always with a certain distance. The essayist doesn't take himself all too seriously; he doesn't have an institutional legitimation. The relation to the *allocutaire* is conversational, on a basis of equality, yes amicable.

Angenot, who we have been following till now, doesn't really bother to systemize his findings. But his characteristics are very helpful to get a general idea of the different kind of pacts between writer and reader of the different genres.

	<b>Enonciateur</b>	<b>Enunciation</b>	<b>Allocataire</b>
<b>Pamphlet</b>	expelled	disgruntled/irritated/peddling	“barbarian”
<b>Polemic</b>	equal	Aggressive/invectives/ad hominem	opponent/audience
<b>Satire</b>	superior	carnavalesque /aggressive/disapproving	kindred spirit
<b>Essay-diagnostic</b>	neutral	didactic/structured/objective	attentive
<b>Essay-méditation</b>	personal	dialogic/associative/subjective	friend

After this overview, I want to return to the political essay. The essay is a form in which an I investigates something in (or ideas over) the world. The reader looks through the eyes of this I to the world. And not alone the eyes, because in everything the ideas formulated in the essay hang together with what the essayist is: his character, temperament, emotions, mentality, and psychology. As it were, the world is tested on the own experience, the own being of the essayist. Precisely this constitutes the essay’s skeptical undercurrent. Without any hold or Archimedean point the essayist tests a personal arrangement. In this sense, the I of the essayist is totally unlike the subject of Descartes. The Cartesian I is a point zero – stripped of all content – from which reliable knowledge about the Reality may be build. The essayist on the other hand stands with all he embodies in the middle of the world and tests out what he encounters with his own fluctuating experience. Or as Graham Good formulates it in his study over the essay (*The Observing Self*): “The essay is a reflection of and on the changing self in the changing world, not the pure abstract, Cartesian construction of the self or the Newtonian construction of the world, but a construction of, and a response to, this time and place in the world, by this self. [...] **the essay is an act of personal witness**” (p. 22, bold FR) Experiential as well as experimental. Or Christian Schärf (in *Geschichte des Essays*): “Der Essayismus bildet das Experimentierfeld des Menschen ohne normatives Weltbild, des sichselbst perspektivisch erforschenden Subjekts.” (p. 10) Or Peter Sloterdijk in een plea for the essay (which he sees as the basic form of intelligent communication in an experimentally moved world) conceives as the essayist as a writer who uses himself as a probe.

All these statements about the character of the essay converge and in essence say that the essayist tackles the world on his own account and with his own imagination. I would like to call this the politics of the essay, which I consider to be closely connected to the politics of the literary. The politics of the essay is that he/she is looking for a match between I and the world. Mind that this is different from the other genres we discussed above: there the I and the world are far more antagonistically placed. The essayist tries to acquire knowledge starting from his own experience and imagination and to structure his experience independently from existing opinions (doxa). And in fact there are no restrictions at all here, nor concerning topics, approach or form. Because of that, the genre has a certain indeterminacy.

De Obaldia: “This indeterminacy also inevitably affects the pragmatic dimension of the ‘contract’ between writer and reader. The very word ‘essay’ disorientates the reader’s horizon of expectations, for it is associated with the **authority and authenticity** of someone who speaks **in his or her own name**, it also **disclaims all responsibility** with regard to what is after all only ‘tried out’ and which is therefore closer, in a sense, to the **‘as if’ of fiction.**” (p.2-3, bold FR)

And this is exactly what constitutes the pact with the reader. The reader is not so much interested in the information about the world that is mediated by way of the essay, but he is interested especially how this particular essayist looks at the world.

This is just not the rhetorical situation of politicians writing essays or columns. Here the essayist doesn’t speak primarily on his own account but in the role as representative of a

political party who analyses the world from the perspective of the specific ideology of the political party. The authority from which he/she speaks isn't derived from his/herself, but is derived from an institutional position. Being a member of parliament for instance. This point was succinctly illustrated in our casus, when one of the politicians immediately stopped here column when she withdrew from her political position. There is nothing wrong with this external or heteronymous legitimization. It can be interesting to read comments on developments from this position, but another game is played here than in the essay as I have sketched it here. The politics of the essay is replaced by politics in the form of an essay.

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the question whether this should be considered as a kind of travesty. I think this, in general, is somewhat overstated. When for instance a politician writes a column in the magazine of his or her party, it's clear that we have a personalized way of doing politics. We also can speak of personalized politics when a politician appears in a television quiz games in the hope to give his popularity a boost.

But in this particular context, in which the columns of the politicians appear on the same spot which is normally reserved for independent columnists indeed something ambiguous is going on. In fact it boils down to the difference, maybe even conflict between the politics of the personal and personalized politics. I have tried to show that, notwithstanding that on the surface their discourse may look very similar, they have radically different agenda's.

## REFERENCES

- Angenot, Marc (1982). *La parole pamphlétaire. Typologie des discours modernes*. Payot.
- Amy J. Devitt, *Writing Genres*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- Good, Graham (1998). *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. Routledge Kegan & Paul.
- de Obaldia, Claire, (1995). *The Essayistic Spirit. Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay*. Clarendon Press.
- Rancière, Jacques (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated with an introduction by Gabriel Rockhill. With and afterword by Slavoj Žižek. Continuum.
- Sarocchi, Jean (2002), "Un drôle de genre", in: Pierre Glaudes (ed.), *L'essai: Métamorphoses d'un genre*. Presses Universitaire du Mirail, pp. 17–29.
- Schärf, Christian (1999). *Geschichte des Essays. Von Montaigne bis Adorno*. Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.
- Sloterdijk, Peter (1993). 'Essayismus in unserer Zeit', in: Peter Sloterdijk, *Medien Zeit: Drei Gegenwartsdiagnostische Versuche*. Cantz.
- Snyder, John (1991). *Prospects of Power. Tragedy, Satire, Essay, and the Theory of Genre*. University Press of Kentucky.