

Chapter 14

On The Birth Of Genres

Mikhail Epstein

The concept of genre as a cultural (rather than a narrowly literary) category was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his works of the 1920s and 1930s. For Bakhtin, a genre is a stable, conventional form of social communication that does not depend on the individual message or intention of interlocutors: "Certain features of language take on the specific flavor of a given genre: they knit together with specific points of view, special approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents characteristic of the given genre."¹ The same mechanisms of "generic," interpersonal communication transmit a cultural heritage from generation to generation. As is an archetype, a genre is a reservoir of a cultural unconscious, and it transcends the limits of personal meaning and individual creative imagination. A novelist invests her work with personal vision, but the genre of the novel possesses its own experience and world view that is communicated to the reader beyond any authorial intentions or efforts. Bakhtin and some of his disciples and followers, such as Georgy Gachev, analyzed the specific super-personal contents of such genres as the epic, the novel, and the tragedy. For example, the novel constructs a specific "experimental" status for the hero who "generically" oversteps all social, ethnic, and psychological boundaries. "One of the basic internal themes of the novel is precisely the theme of the inadequacy of a hero's fate and situation to the hero himself. The individual is either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man. . . . An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories."²

However, this interpretation of genres as preexistent forms that dictate their artistic will both to the author and to the reader should be significantly revised in the postmodern era. What is at stake is not the survival of genres through succeeding epochs and individual authors, but the possibility of producing deliberately new genres here and now. The very phrase "new genre" may appear to be oxymoronic since genres from a traditional perspective are never new; what makes them genres is their cultural inheritance and rootedness in the past. However, what is needed for a work of art or for any sign system to become generic, to represent a genre, is the minimal requirement of repetition. For example, if I produce a spontaneous gesture it can convey the meaning peculiar to the specific moment and psychological or social context of its production. But if I repeat this gesture deliberately and vary it to produce several interconnected meanings, it becomes a genre of this specific gesture—refers not just to its singular moment or context but to its reproducible form. What is reproduced at least once becomes reproducible in principle. Even an instinctive, "raw" manifestation of an individual, such as a cough, can be serialized into a generic succession of "coughs" producing various semantic and social effects. Sometimes it is sufficient for somebody to cough once in an audience to provoke a series of imitations with effects ranging from irony to anger. A cough may be not just an arbitrary physiological reaction to dust in the air, but a genre of social behavior.

The problem of the genre becomes especially loaded for the epoch of mechanical reproduction of works of art, to use Walter Benjamin's idiom. Although the work of art loses its originality through the series of its reproductions, simultaneously through this series of reproductions a new original genre comes into existence. In fact, it is only through reproduction that the creation of a new genre becomes possible; thus the "mechanical" epoch is favorable for the formation of new genres. An original genre arises exactly when and where the uniqueness of a work of art becomes questioned. Thus the very relationship between the individual work and its genre becomes reversed.

Traditionally genre is the form of repetition and variation; what is unique is an individual work created in this genre. In twentieth-century aesthetics, the focus is shifting from individual works to the generic laws of repetition—and then to the individuality of genres themselves. After the experimental excesses of originality in the historical avant-garde of the 1900s and 1910s, the late modernists of the 1920s and 1930s, especially those influenced by Marxism, underwent a crisis of originality, and as a result the problem of genre and of the generic came to the forefront.

In this sense, Bakhtin and Benjamin are contemporaries: Both theoretically extend Marx's critique of individualism, both conceptualize the loss of an original "aura" and uniqueness in the work of art through the search for its organic "popular" roots, its generic nature (in the living past) or through the analysis of its mechanical reproducibility (in the technological present).

Postmodernism challenges this modernist commitment to the social and technical dimensions of art with the understanding that the mechanical and the generic are themselves based on deviation and caprice. According to Jacques Derrida, each genre potentially exceeds its own boundaries, and as such signals its own madness; the law of genre is the deviation from the law.³ This madness, however, has another implication. The most whimsical, paradoxical, arbitrary things and occurrences have a tendency to mature into genres, to acquire regularity through repetition. Not only are genres "mad," but madness itself has a proclivity to become "generic." Deviation is more insistent and repetitive than regularity which easily diffuses in the ordinary, loses its constructive principle and form. In fact, the novel and the essay, the two most productive genres of modernity, are generated by the personal whims and deviations of the hero and the author, respectively, from regular patterns of epic or mythic narrative.⁴ It is not only that an individual work is ready to betray its own genre, but that genre itself arises from a betrayal. The generic is born everywhere and instantly as a caprice in the form of (self-)repetition. This is a twofold process: Victimized by the "law of genre," spontaneity avenges itself in producing genres out of a single whim of a pen or a brush. What a contemporary artist usually pursues is not the production of still another work of art but the creation of a new genre, a new form of repetition. It is important to emphasize genre, not method or style. Method is a narrow and transitional category loaded with historical meaning, whereas genres are truly nomadic forms of trans-historical value. Sentimentalism or critical realism are methods long dead; the novel is a genre ever new.

Seriality becomes indispensable for postmodern creativity: Only through repetition of the same device in two or more works does an artist achieve a new status as the creator of a genre. This reproductive capacity that previously came from the cultural traditions of the past (Bakhtin) or from the technical facilities of the present (Benjamin) now is addressed to the future, to the artist's capacity to create a precedent in the very act of production, which becomes potentially reproductive not after but even before the work of art is produced. For example, Ilya Kabakov in the

1970s produced a genre of albums in which the status of a unique painting was sacrificed to a series of very similar pictures reproducing the same object with a slightly changed pattern in each successive frame.⁵ In order to vanquish the mechanical force of reproduction, an artist had to simulate and incorporate it into his own act of painting or writing. Thus works of art become intentionally repetitive whereas original genres proliferate at a rate unknown to previous centuries. In the late twentieth century each artist worthy of this name has to author a new genre in order to maintain his/her creative status.

Any single act, gesture, or discourse is capable of instructing a new genre, if this act creates a precedent, contains a premise of possible repetition or variation, generates a series of similar acts. For example, one can write a word or draw a pattern on a frozen or fogged surface of a window. It is an individual gesture, but it can also be treated as a new genre of writing or painting. It does not matter that the products of this art are ephemeral and short-living, often disappearing momentarily without a single viewer to evaluate the performance. It is necessary, however, that these acts be made deliberately and in some articulate relation to each other, as a matter of repetition or variation. Then the act of leaving traces in the fogged window glass will become generic and may produce masterpieces, inspire great artists, competitions, awards, a Nobel Prize in capturing fog." Photo-museums, virtual galleries, hordes of people changing their residences to northern cities to be able to exercise their favorite genre for the largest part of the year possible. . . .

Another example. A sculptor invited friends to see his new works, but on that night an electricity outage occurred. In order not to lose the time and opportunity, friends decided to touch the statues with their fingers. "Isn't that beautiful?" said one. "It's so palpable that one can see it with one's fingers," said the other. . . . Then it occurred to them that for the first time in their life they were able to perceive the statues in the very same way they were shaped—by touch, by fingers. Why don't we perceive sculptures in a way adequate to the mode of their production? Are not they designed to stimulate our skin sensibility, to stir up our sense of touch? Seeing kills the immediate power of feeling. Why not create special art objects for touch alone, and let them be contemplated in darkness? Thus a new genre can be born, called "night vision," or the "art of palpability."

Thus crystallization of new genres, "generalization" (to distinguish it from its "generalization"), is an absolutely open process that may be improvised here and now, with any single act produced consciously and leaving repetition and variation.

Notes

1. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 20.
2. *Ibid.*, 37.
3. "The genre has always in all genres been able to play the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference, taxonomic classification, organization and genealogical tree, order of reason. . . . Now, the rest . . . brought to light the madness of genre. Madness has given birth to, thrown light on the genre in the most dazzling, most blinding sense of the word." Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992): 252.
4. See the next chapter "An Essay on the Essay."
5. On the constructive meaning of repetitions in Kabakov, see Mikhail Epstein, "Emptiness as a Technique: Word and Image in Ilya Kabakov," in his book *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (with Alexander Genis and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover). (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 304–306, 320–324.

Chapter 15

An Essay On the Essay¹

Mikhail Epstein

The essay is part confession, part discursive argument, and part narrative—it is like a diary, a scholarly article, and a story all in one. It is genre legitimated by its existence outside any genre. If it treats the reader as confidant to sincere outpourings of the heart, it becomes a confession or a diary. If it fascinates the reader with logical arguments and dialectical controversies, or if it thematizes the process of generation of meaning, then it becomes scholarly discourse or a learned treatise. If it passes into a narrative mode and organizes events into a plot, it inadvertently turns into a novella, a short story, or a tale.

The essay retains its character only when it violates the laws of other genres, interferes with them, and breaks their coherence. It is driven by a spirit of adventure and by the desire to attempt everything without yielding to anything. As soon as the essayist tries to take a breath, to come to a stop, the nomadic and trans migratory essence of the essay tumbles to dust. If sincerity threatens to cross a limit, the essayist intermingles with abstractions. If abstract reflection threatens to grow into a metaphysical system, the essayist unexpectedly throws in a peripheral detail or anecdote in order to undermine its systematicity. The essay is held together by the mutual friction of incongruous parts that obstruct one another. At the heart of the essay is an uneven and discontinuous intonation—that of the sad exile and the brazen vagabond, combining a lack of self-confidence with an extremely casual demeanor. Not knowing from moment to moment what he will do next, the essayist can do almost

anything. He is in a permanent state of need or lack, but he releases, in a single line or page, enough riches to potentially fill an entire novel or treatise.

A good essayist is not a completely sincere person, nor a very consistent thinker, nor an extraordinary and imaginative story-teller. The writer who cannot successfully construct his plot or argument, and who consequently loses out as a novelist or philosopher, gains as an essayist. This is because in the essay only the digressions matter. The essay is thus an art of compromises, of surrenders. In the essay, the weaker side wins. The founder of the genre, Michel Montaigne, declares his creative and intellectual weakness on almost every page of his *Essais* (1571). In the essay "On Books" he complains to the reader about his inability to create something striking, polished, and generally useful due to his lack of philosophical and artistic talent. "If someone exposes my ignorance, he will not insult me because I do not take the responsibility for what I am saying even before my own conscience, let alone before others. Any form of self-complaisance is alien to me. . . . Even if I am able to learn a few things occasionally, I am definitely incapable of committing it firmly to memory. . . . I borrow from others what I cannot express well myself, either because my language is poor or my mind is weak."²

The essay is the offspring of the "ménage à trois": poor unsystematic philosophy; bad and fragmentary literature; and an inferior and insincere diary. However, it is just this sort of hybridized and bad pedigree that has given the essay its flexibility and its beauty. Like a plebeian who is not burdened by traditions of nobility, the essay easily adapts to the eternal flow of everyday life, the vagaries of thought, and the personal idiosyncrasies of the writer. The essay, as a conglomeration of various deficiencies and incompleteness, unexpectedly reveals the sphere of a totality normally hidden from the more defined genres (such as the poem, the tragedy, the novel, etc.); determined by their own ideal of perfection, these genres exclude everything that cannot be encompassed by their aesthetic model.

We can now clearly see that the essay did not originate in a void. Rather, it came to fill the space of that integral verbal form that once belonged to myth. Because its roots run so deep into antiquity, the essay's second birth in the sixteenth century, in Montaigne, appears to be without origins and without tradition. In fact, the essay is directed toward that unity of life, thought, and image, which in its early synthetic form was at the origin of myth. Only at a later stage did this original unity of myth divide into three major and ever-proliferating branches: the sphere of facts and historical events, the sphere of the image or representation

and the sphere of concepts and generalizations. These three spheres correspond to three broad categories of genre—the documentary-descriptive, the artistic-imaginary, and the theoretical-speculative.

Essay writing, like a weak and somewhat sickly growth, found a place for itself in the gap created by the branching-out of myth into those three major directions. From there, this thin branch grew vigorously to become the main offshoot of the great tree of myth. The essay thus became the central trunk of that totality of life, image, and thought, which split into the various branches of knowledge that have become further specialized over time.

In our own times, which have seen a renaissance in mythological thinking, the experience of spiritual totality finds expression more and more frequently in the essay. With Nietzsche and Heidegger, it is *philosophy* that becomes essayistic; with Thomas Mann and Robert Musil it is *literature*; with Vasily Rozanov and Gabriel Marcel it is the *diary*. Henceforth it is no longer only peripheral cultural phenomena that acquire qualities of the essay but central ones as well. The pressure of mythological totality can be felt from all directions. In the essay, however, this totality is not experienced as a given, as accomplished, but as a possibility and an intent, in its spontaneity, immediacy, and incompleteness.

Almost all the mythologemes of the twentieth century have their origins in the essayistic mode: Camus's Sisyphus, Marcuse's Orpheus, Miguel de Unamuno's Don Quixote, Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus and "magic mountain," Kafka's "castle" and "trial," Saint-Exupéry's "flight" and "citadel." This kind of essayistic writing is in part reflexive, in part fictional, in part confessional and didactic. It attempts to derive thought from image and to lead it back to Being. Major trends of literature, philosophy, and even scientific thought of the twentieth century have accrued as tributaries to this mainstream of *essayism*. Among its exemplars are Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Theodor Adorno, Albert Schweitzer, Konrad Lorenz, André Breton, Albert Camus, Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Yasunari Kawabata, Kobo Abe, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Susan Sontag. In Russia, too, outstanding poetry and fiction writers, philosophers, and literary scholars expressed themselves as essayists: Lev Shestov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandel'shtam, Victor Shklovsky, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Bitov, Andrei Sinyavsky, Georgy Gachev, and Sergei Averintsev.

Essayism is a considerably broader and more powerful trend than any single artistic or philosophical movement, broader than Surrealism or

ism, Phenomenology or Existentialism. It is of this interdiscipline precisely because essayism is not a trend of one of the cultures or a method of one of its disciplines but a distinctive contemporary culture in its entirety. Essayism tends toward a logical wholeness, a merging of image and concept inside culture; also a merging of culture with Being itself and with the sphere; and daily occurrences that are usually considered beyond the culture.

It is thus—like its earlier counterpart, mythology—an alluring mode of creative consciousness. Essayism functions as a force in relation to all the artistic, philosophical, and documentary of representation that feed into it and that originated in cultural wholeness.

There is also a profound difference between mythology known before cultural differentiation, and essayism, which arose as differentiations themselves. Although essayism unites the fact, image, and concept; or the sensible, the imaginary, and the ideal—it does so without destroying their autonomy. This is how it differs from the syncretic mythology of earlier epochs as well as from totalitarian mythologies of the twentieth century. The latter are by force what was naturally not subject to differentiation in the case of totalitarian mythology requires the ideal to be treated as a possibility or even impossibility to be treated as real; an abstract created as material force, the prime mover of the masses; and ideal to be treated as a model for all other individuals. Essayism is a fragmented portions of culture. But in so doing, essayism creates a space between them for play, irony, reflection, alienation, and mythologization. These are definitely antagonistic to the dogmatic and totalitarian mythologies based on *authority*.

Essayism is a mythology based on *amborship*. The self-consciousness of the individual tests the limits of its freedom and plays with all possible connections in the unity of the world. In an essay, individualism is not negated in the name of a myth, with its tendency toward totalization, but flourishes in the right to individual myth. This is a mythopoetic freedom, which includes freedom from the impositions of myth itself, constitutes the foundation of the genre. The individual instantly vacillates between myth and nonmyth, between reference. Consequently, the particular intersects and some-thing with the universal, image with concept, being with meaning.

ing. However, these correspondences are not complete: Edges protrude, creating uneven surfaces, disruptions, and discrepancies. This is the only way in which the contemporary vision of the world can come to fruition: aiming for wholeness, it at the same time does not claim to overcome the difference of its constituent parts.

Literally "essay" (from French "essai" and Latin "exagium") means "weighing," "testing," an "attempt," an "experiment." This is its indispensable quality. The essay is *experimental mythology*, the truth of a gradual and unfinalizable approximation to myth, not the lie of a totalizing coincidence with it. Essayism is thus an attempt at preventing the fragmentation of culture, on the one hand, and the introduction of a coercive unity, on the other. Essayism is directed against the plurality of disconnected particulars as well as against the centripetal tendencies of a dictatorial totality. Essayism is an attempt at stemming the tide of narrow disciplinary particularization at work in contemporary culture. But it is also a bulwark against the petrification of culture into cult and ritual, which becomes all the more fanatical the greater the discrepancy between the extremes of fantasy and reality grows (which makes it all the more difficult to force them into the immutable dogmatic unity of faith).

Essayism is an attempt at unification without violence, an attempt at projecting compatibility without compulsory communality. It is an attempt at leaving intact, in the heart of a new, nontotalitarian totality, the experience of insecurity and the sphere of possibility, the sacred Montaignesque "I cannot" and "I do not know how," which is all that remains of the sacred in the face of the pseudo-sacralizations of mass mythology. "I speak my mind freely on all things, even on those which perhaps exceed my capacity . . . and so the opinion I give of them is to declare the measure of my sight, not the measure of things." Two conditions must be met in the essay: audacity of vision and awesome respect for things themselves. Or, to put it differently, *boldness of propositions* and *modesty of conclusions*. Only by fulfilling these two conditions, inherent in the essay, can something of true worth be created in our age: an open wholeness.

The present essay has transcended the confines of its topic—"the essay"—and entered the wider sphere of "essayism," which carries a new hope for contemporary culture. But it is only by departing from its topic that the essay remains true to its genre.⁴

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Notes

1. Translated from Russian by Stobodanka Vladiv-Glover.
2. *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957): 298.
3. *Ibid.*, 298.
4. For a more systematic exploration of this genre see Mikhail Epstein, "At the Crossroads of Image and Concept: Essayism in the Culture of the Modern Age," in his book *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1995), 213–253, and "Essesitika kak nulevaia disciplina" (Essayistics as a Zero Discipline), in his book *Bog detalei: Esseitika 1977–1988* (Moscow, IIA Elitina 1998): 225–240.

Chapter 16

The Catalog of Catalogs

Mikhail Epstein

Preface

The genre of the catalog is pertinent to transcultural experimentation by virtue of its paradigmatic structure that juxtaposes various judgments on the same subject. Such discourse is released from the order of time or the relationship of cause and effect.¹ In contrast, the syntagmatic structure, in which one proposition is deduced from another, one event succeeds another, is subject to the restrictive and oppressive effects of logical or narrative sequence.² Transculture is a metaparadigm, a set of elements (cultures, canons, traditions, epistemes, worldviews) that coexist in a structured space rather than succeed and displace each other in time.

In Japan there existed a special literary genre, *shibubiki* (literally, "following the brush"), that enumerated various attributes of one object—or various objects that possess one attribute. Classical samples of this genre can be found in the *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon (966/7–1013?). In some sections, she lists things that most attract or annoy her, or things that distract in moments of boredom. This genre, which can be called the "catalog," arises at the intersection of abstraction and factuality, of the generic and the unique. In its simplest form, the catalog presents the diversity of things that belong to one general category, or the diversity of categories within which a single thing may be located. The beauty of the moon, the beauty of snow, the beauty of pearls . . . The beauty of the moon, the coldness of the moon, the deceptiveness of the moon . . .

Similar compositions are used in structural studies in which a strictly