

# The Contemporary Finnish Essay and the Question of Genre: Notes towards the Essay as Social Action

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During the last years the essay genre has enjoyed a considerable rise in popularity in Finland as several inspiring new essayists – e.g. Antti Nylén, Tommi Melender, Anu Silfverberg, Jaana Seppänen and Olli Löytty – have appeared on the Finnish literary scene within a relatively short time. At the same time, some of the established essayists – such as Markku Envall and Leif Salmén – seem to have regained their interest in the essay as the publishers are increasingly keen to publish this previously rather neglected form of literature. Instead of constituting a secondary occupation for authors that have already established their names in other areas of literature, the essay has asserted itself as the primary form of writing for a number of Finnish authors. It is no surprise, then, that the essay has also received critical attention from essayists themselves and literary critics discussing the characteristics and limits of the essay form.<sup>1</sup>

In Finland, however, the proliferation of the essay is not limited to literature, nor is it understood as a form of writing that effectively melds fictive and non-fictive elements; instead, it expands to other forms of textual and discursive culture. The major newspapers (e.g. *Helsingin Sanomat*), for example, and a number of magazines have started to print 'essays' alongside feature articles and news stories. Considering these 'literary' and 'extra-literary' aspects of interest, it seems that the essay has gained new visibility and territory in the broader context of cultural discourse. Even if declamations of a proper 'essay boom' might prove to be gross overstatements,<sup>2</sup> it is nevertheless evident that during the last years the essay has re-emerged as a thriving genre.

In this article I argue that in order to understand this proliferation of the essay in Finland, a phenomenon exceeding the boundaries of strictly literary culture, it is necessary to examine the theoretical and methodological tools, particularly the notion of genre, that are used to qualify what counts as 'essay'. The aim is to point out how the essay can be approached from other genres' theoretical perspectives, and to show how these approaches can contribute to both our

<sup>1</sup> Johanna Venho, ed., *Mitä essee tarkoittaa?* (Turku: Savukeidas, 2012). Of course, Finland is not alone in the vanguard of such a reevaluation of the essay as a literary genre. Especially in Anglo-American literature the 'coming' of the essay, particularly in its personal or familiar form, has been talked about since the 1990s (cf. Phillip Lopate, "Introduction", in Phillip Lopate, ed., *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* [New York: Anchor Books, 1995], pp. xxiii-liv) and similar trends are also visible elsewhere in the Western literary scene.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tommi Melender, "Liian nokkelien ja skeptisten laji", in Venho, pp. 91-106, pp. 94-5.

understanding of the essay form and to our perception of how texts and literature work in social reality. In the following I will sketch the literary genre of the essay, as it figures in the existing essay research, and then briefly elaborate on the notion of genre as proposed in rhetorical genre theory. By drawing from Amy Devitt's comparison of rhetorical and literary conceptions of genre I will offer some points in the way of a rhetorical theory of the essay.

### The Improbable Literary Genre of the Essay

Difficulties with genre designations should not surprise anyone familiar with essay research: precise definitions of the essay are rare if one looks for anything more than minimal dictionary definitions of the essay as "a short piece of writing on a particular subject" (*OED*). It is, after all, a well-known fact that as a literary form, the essay has always caused problems for both those who have tried defining it as well as for the practitioners of the genre whose "vague attempts to specify what they are doing"<sup>3</sup> often amount to mere approximations. When it comes to the essay, everybody feels the need to provide a definition of his or her own, and unfortunately nobody has been particularly successful at it.<sup>4</sup>

From a historical standpoint it might appear an easy task to define the essay as it is one of the few literary genres that have been associated with a birthplace and time – let alone a 'father'. Practically every account of the essay starts by crediting Michel de Montaigne with inventing the essay form (or at least calling the texts 'essays'), although it has been equally often pointed out that Montaigne's essays were deeply indebted to ancient classical genres practised especially by Cicero and Seneca.<sup>5</sup> Nominating a certain kind of text as essays did almost instantly get followers such as Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1621), who in 1597 published his first edition of *Essayes* that was later followed by two more editions. However, the two ancestors did not leave behind a legacy of a unified genre of essay writing. On the contrary, the history of the essay since Montaigne and Bacon has produced enough breaks with the past, re-interpretations and reincarnations of the essay form to result in a heterogeneous and porous history.<sup>6</sup> Further, it is clear that the heterogeneity in the history of the genre is only amplified as the essay is placed in diverse national and cultural

<sup>3</sup> Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman, "An Introductory Essay", in Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman, ed., *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993), pp. 12-22, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hannu K. Riikonen, *Mikä on essee?* (Helsinki: SKS, 1990), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Marielle Macé, *Le Temps De L'Essai* (Paris: Belin, 2006), pp. 11-2.

contexts that have always played a crucial role in how the essay as a form of writing is eventually conceived.<sup>7</sup>

The problems in the histories of the essay are often followed by reflections on the impossibility of delineating formal characteristics of the essay form. As G. Douglas Atkins has noted, the essay form itself seems to encourage some of the blurring of distinctions as it has always been a loose and receptive form that seems to flirt with every other genre, a form that welcomes every topic and turns its back to none.<sup>8</sup> In critical approaches, this diversity of topics has led to a definition of various subgenres of the essay. For example, Graham Good states in *The Observing Self* (1988) that the most useful classification of the essay should be based on the content, or rather on "the basic activities which give the essays a recognizable and persistent forward movement".<sup>9</sup> Good himself distinguishes four principal types: the travel essay, the moral essay, the critical essay, and the autobiographical essay.<sup>10</sup> Good insists that this classification is not exhaustive but rather points to the fact that most essays contain characteristics of other text types. As such, Good's classification does not serve to illustrate the essays' eventual split into categories determined by the content or the particular activity, but rather the essays' questioning of such categories due to their hybridity.

It is little wonder, then, that Claire de Obaldia, in her groundbreaking *The Essayistic Spirit* (1995), notes rather sarcastically that if one looks any closer at the diverse attempts to define 'essay', one can quite easily come to the conclusion that the only consensus on the matter seems to lie in an agreement on the "uncircumventable indeterminacy of the genre",<sup>11</sup> and continues further that "the one commonly accepted fact about the essay is that indeterminacy is germane to its essence".<sup>12</sup> This perception of the essay as indeterminate, as existing without a definition and as situated outside any systematic attempts to classify it, is perhaps one of the most pervasive ideas that govern the view of the essay as a form of writing today. To be sure, this indeterminacy is not perceived as a lack, but rather as a freedom from generic constraints: in essence, the essayist is free, for example, to straddle the line between fact and fiction and to emphasise personal experience or impersonal science. With such an indeterminacy at its heart, the essay is living up to its etymological promise of

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Joeres and Mittman, pp. 15-6.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. Douglas Atkins, *Estranging the Familiar* (Athens / London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Good, *The Observing Self* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. xii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Claire de Obaldia, *Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

offering only an attempt, an experiment, and suggesting, hence, a certain tentativeness, looseness and randomness that eludes any unifying conception (syntactic or pragmatic) of a recognizable generic identity. According to de Obaldia, this indeterminacy inevitably also affects "the pragmatic dimension of the 'contract' between writer and the reader"<sup>13</sup> as the essays as a 'trying out' are subject to disclaims of any responsibility of treating the essays as anything else than playing out the 'as if' typical for fiction. Furthermore, de Obaldia speculates whether the singularity and uniqueness of the essay as an attempt posits in this regard a question concerning whether the essay can be regarded as a genre at all, or whether it might not represent the very denial of genre.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense the essay inhabits an interesting and crucial place regarding the literary system of genres. According to de Obaldia, the hypothesis of the essay as an a- or anti-genre is most often approached from the point of view of literature and of genre theory. The essay's resistance to resolving itself into identifiable generic contours is usually justified by the fact that the essay seems to be able to combine a "seemingly arbitrary mixture of literary characteristics",<sup>15</sup> which makes it effectively a literary hybrid.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Kuisma Korhonen, for example, has contended that in addition to being one of the most flexible genres (because of its ability to incorporate various literary characteristics), the essay seems to challenge the whole notion of 'genre' itself.<sup>17</sup> Korhonen continues that "if one can speak about the essay as genre, it can be done *only* by referring to the essay's refusal to follow strict generic laws".<sup>18</sup>

One of Claire de Obaldia's main arguments in *Essayistic Spirit* is to perceive the essay as a 'marginal genre', existing on the borders of genres, or in outright opposition to the system of genres. Drawing upon Alastair Fowler's conception of the essay as belonging to the "literature in *potentia*",<sup>19</sup> de Obaldia demonstrates how the essay effectively embodies a discursive space where the divide between literary and extra-literary, or non-literary, is being actively contested.<sup>20</sup> In Fowler's understanding the 'literature in *potentia*' signals those forms of writing, "looser plasma of neighboring forms" (essay, dialogue, biography etc.), that surround the nucleus of central genres forming literature proper.<sup>21</sup> In de Obaldia's view this place on the margins of literature enables the

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kuisma Korhonen, *Essaying Friendship* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. de Obaldia, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler, p. 5.

essay to be taken seriously when insisting on much more widely resonating questions concerning the nature of the literary and the role of the notion of genre in the constitution of literature as canon. Reflecting Reda Bensmaïe's view of Roland Barthes's essays, de Obaldia contends that the essay is better understood not as a "mixture of genres" that might be appropriate if one considered the marginality of the essay as a tendency to transgress generic boundaries, but rather as a "matrix of all generic possibilities".<sup>22</sup> In this sense, what appears to be the essay's inevitable banishment to the margins of the system of literary genres is actually putting it into the center of literary affairs. In similar fashion, Mariella Macé, in her study of French twentieth-century essay writing, notes that the indeterminacy of the essay as a (literary) genre can become a reason to value the essay precisely as a form of literature.<sup>23</sup> Consequently the indeterminacy of the genre is, after all, 'germane' to its essence as literature.

The notion of the indeterminate essay is also apparent in the discussion of contemporary Finnish essays. For example, literary researcher Olli Löytty – also an essayist himself – emphasises, among others, the generic indeterminacy of the genre by calling the essay an "eccentric hybrid".<sup>24</sup> Löytty further insists that the nature of the genre will remain relative as the only possible formal definition is nominal: a text is an essay if it is designated as such by authors themselves, critics, publishers, readers, or other literary institutions.<sup>25</sup> The lack of apparent criteria for such a designation can, of course, lead to an abundance of essays (hence the essay 'boom') but it can also result in a misplaced reverence for the genre. One of the few contemporary woman essayists in Finland, Anu Silfverberg, notes in the introduction to her first collection of texts that she hesitates to call her writings essays and prefers to think of them as being "essayish".<sup>26</sup> Silfverberg explains the diminutive and almost dismissive characterisation of her own texts with the fact that they were all previously published as columns in a variety of newspapers or magazines. It seems that, while Silfverberg is willing to question the certainty of generic boundaries between the essay and neighboring forms (hybrid!) and to include her own texts, previously read as columns, into a broader category of essays, she nevertheless harbours a notion of the 'proper' essay, expectations of which she sees her own texts as unable to meet. However, Päivi Kosonen has pointed out that such modesty seems to be gender-bound.<sup>27</sup> Even in the contemporary scene, men are more likely to call themselves 'essayists', even though the discursive origins of

<sup>22</sup> de Obaldia, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Macé, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Olli Löytty, "Välimuoton estetiikkaa", in Venho, pp. 75-90, p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Anu Silfverberg, *Luonto pakastimessa* (Helsinki: Teos, 2011), p. 7. My translation.

<sup>27</sup> Cit. in Melender, "Liian nokkelien", p. 102.

the published essays were similarly scattered across the generic spectrum. Certainly, it might be that among the contemporary Finnish female essayists Silfverberg is alone with her modesty, but Kosonen's comment serves as an apt reminder of the masculine history of the essay.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to Silfverberg's misgivings about 'belonging' to the essay genre, other (male) essayists are perhaps more concerned with the essay's 'inherent' vacillations between genres and the consequences as well as possibilities this holds for the practice of 'essaying'. One of the recurrent topics in the contemporary Finnish discussion seems to relate to "the pragmatic dimension of the 'contract' between writer and the reader",<sup>29</sup> as Claire de Obaldia has put it elsewhere, namely to the role of the writer either as an author of fiction or as a communicator of facts. For example, Antti Nylén and Tommi Melender both address the issue in the introductions to their collections of essays. In his first collection Melender notes that throughout the essays he has used the first-person singular but emphasises that the essays are autobiographical only in the sense of autobiographical novels. "Often", writes Melender,

I have made up, changed and distorted events and details in order to give a literary impression. In the end the 'I' of these essays doesn't bear very much similarity to my everyday person, and the episodes of his life do not correspond to those of mine, but on most of the matters we can certainly agree upon.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Antti Nylén, likening essay to fiction, emphasises that every literary author is a writer of fiction: "An author always 'makes himself up', whether he wants it or not, consciously or unconsciously, and the outcome is either deliberate or thoughtless".<sup>31</sup> Nylén understands the authorship thus constructed as a necessity that cannot be ignored, even in the essay that is usually seen as straddling the distinction between fact and fiction. Precisely because the essay is a form of literature, an essayist cannot be held accountable for his / her words, but at the same time the essayist bears a certain responsibility for his / her work. Nylén holds that it is necessary, especially for essayists, to stand up for their own truths, to be, in other words, moralists.<sup>32</sup>

The notion of the essayist as a 'moralist' bears a similarity to Scott Russell Sanders's conception of the essay as portraying a distinctive relation to the world or reality. In his widely acknowledged article "The Singular First Person",<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Joeres and Mittman, pp. 13-5.

<sup>29</sup> De Obaldia, pp. 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> Tommi Melender, *Kuka nauttii eniten* (Turku: Savukeidas, 2010), pp. 6-7. My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Antti Nylén, *Halun ja epäluulon esseet* (Turku: Savukeidas, 2010), p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Antti Nylén, *Vihan ja katkeruuden esseet* (Turku: Savukeidas, 2007), pp. 18-9.

<sup>33</sup> First published in *Sewanee Review* 96 (1988) but reprinted in Alexander J. Butrym, ed., *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre* (Athens / London: University of Georgia Press,

Sanders, an essayist himself, makes a case for distinguishing the essay from the short story, its neighboring literary genre, "not by the presence or absence of literary devices, not by tone or theme or subject, but by the writer's stance towards the material".<sup>34</sup> Sanders, like Nylén a couple of decades later, maintains that while the essay cannot be "true" in sense of "satisfying the court of law", it is nevertheless marked by the author's intention of telling something that is not entirely "made up".<sup>35</sup> Taking an example from his own writing, Sanders points out that he was shocked to find one of his earlier essays treated as fiction: even though he had used several literary devices in describing what it was like to grow up in a military base, his intention was not to produce literary fiction but rather to "preserve and record and help give voice to a reality that existed independently of me".<sup>36</sup> He specifies the last point: "I felt responsible to the truth as known by other people".<sup>37</sup> By emphasizing the intention of the author, Sanders is not, however, arguing that it is necessary to identify the essayist with the 'flesh-and-blood' writer. On the contrary, he insists that essayists are also always literary fabrications, "simulacrum", and "characters who wear the label *I*".<sup>38</sup> Rather, Sanders is questioning the validity of literary theory that prohibits the notion of authorial intention and complains that he is forced to break this theoretical and critical taboo in order to describe his activity as an essayist and to explain how the essay is distinguished among literary genres.<sup>39</sup>

Even though contemporary Finnish essayists – for instance Antti Nylén, Tommi Melender and Anu Silfverberg mentioned above – are not as explicitly frustrated with the taboos of literary theory in their conceptions of the essay genre, it is still evident that the overarching influence of literary genre theory and the accompanying notion of indeterminacy germane to the essay has had an effect on the current practices and the reception of the genre. At the same time it is clear that the literary notion of genre is not particularly well-suited to provide an insight into the social phenomenon of this recent proliferation of the essay in contemporary Finland. In the following I will turn to rhetorical genre theory in order to understand how genre is a crucial component in a text's – in this case the essay's – interaction with social reality. The aim is to re-assess the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the essay genre that have almost exclusively been restricted to literary genre theory. The intention is not to

1989), pp. 31-42; and in Scott Russell Sanders, *Secrets of the Universe: Scenes from the Journey Home* (Boston: Beacon Press 1991), pp. 187-204.

<sup>34</sup> Scott Russell Sanders, "The Singular First Person", in Butrym, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

undermine or question the idea of the essay as an indeterminate literary genre but rather to supplement this view by pointing towards the ways in which the essay can be seen functioning and being used in the contemporary Finnish literary scene. For this aim understanding the genre as social action is extremely relevant.

### Rhetorical Genre Theory and the Essay

The cornerstone of much of the success of rhetorical genre theory during the last three decades is the ground-breaking article "Genre as Social Action" (1984) by Carolyn R. Miller.<sup>40</sup> Drawing on previous rhetorical theory, especially Lloyd Bitzer's work, Miller argues that, in order to be rhetorically sound, the definition of a genre is to be based on the action it is used to accomplish and not on the substance or form of the discourse.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, Miller emphasises the importance of understanding genre as intrinsically conflated with social situations in which the discursive activity is taking place. However, in order to be anything else than random responses to singular social situations, Miller famously defined genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in *recurrent* social situations".<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on the influence this definition of genre has had on subsequent rhetorical genre theory, Amy Devitt maintains that even quite different theories of genre have adopted at least some premises from Miller's notion of genre, including "that genre is action, that genre is typified action, that typification comes from recurring conditions, and that those conditions involve social context".<sup>43</sup>

For reasons of brevity, and as my intention is not to *replace* literary genre theory with rhetorical genre theory in addressing the essay genre, I will refrain from attempting a comprehensive overview of the advances made in rhetorical genre theory. Instead, I will focus on similarities and differences between the two approaches to the notion of genre and on the effects this perspective might have on our understanding of the social nature of essay writing and especially the essay boom in Finland.

In comparing the rhetorical and literary conceptions of genre, Amy J. Devitt points out that the distinction between literary and non-literary texts is itself a

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Amy J. Devitt, *Writing Genres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984), pp. 151-67, p. 151.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159 (emphasis added).

<sup>43</sup> Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 13.



question that has long been debated.<sup>44</sup> Depending on how this distinction is approached, it might very well be that there is no significant difference between these notions of genre. Devitt maintains, however, that even though contemporary approaches to texts might prove the difference is baseless, the long history of textual study in both disciplines justifies attention to both traditions. From the standpoint of rhetorical genre studies, many of the traditional views on genre, either literary or rhetorical, are unsustainable as they emphasise common textual characteristics as the basis of genre. As both disciplines are renewing interest in genres, this rather limiting view is challenged in favor of a much more dynamic notion of genre that can better accommodate current approaches to literature evident, for example, in cultural studies and historical studies.<sup>45</sup>

In Devitt's comparison of literary and rhetorical genres the disavowal of reducing genre to formal and stable characteristics of text is the most evident feature of a common approach to the notion of genre. According to her, literary and rhetorical genre theorists would seem to agree, first, that genre is not an optional aspect of texts, but that all texts, whether literary or non-literary, "participate in genres",<sup>46</sup> and, second, that genres are not formal but conceptual and that they "encompass difference as well as similarity".<sup>47</sup> Further, most of the literary and rhetorical theorists would agree that genres are dynamic and situated in specific historical circumstances. Following Ralph Cohen, Devitt highlights the dynamic nature of genre by insisting that "generic grouping" is always a process, "purpose-specific classifications that people construct at specific historical moments".<sup>48</sup> Literary and rhetorical approaches to genre are thus similar in understanding genre as historical, institutional, cultural, situated, and as an indelibly social phenomenon.<sup>49</sup>

Together with the similarities there are also major differences. In Devitt's comparison the most significant of them relate to the questions of function and communities of literary genres: "What are the functions of literary genres? And what communities do literary genres serve?"<sup>50</sup> The concern with the functionality of genre comes almost naturally to rhetorical genre theory as it is

<sup>44</sup> Cf. chapter six – "A Comparison of Literary and Rhetorical Genres" – in *Writing Genres* is a revised version of "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre" originally published in *College English* 62:6 (2000), pp. 696-718. All references are to *Writing Genres* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Devitt, *Writing Genres*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* See also Ralph Cohen "History and Genre", *New Literary History* 17:2 (1986), pp. 203-218.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Devitt, pp. 168-9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

based on a pragmatic theory of textual meaning: genres help language users to achieve certain aims, fulfil certain functions, perform certain actions – in a word, do things with language.<sup>51</sup> A similar certainty concerning the pragmatic dimension of literary texts is much harder to fathom, after all, as a form of art literature has often been considered detached from the mundane pragmatics of daily routines. In her *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski states that the current critical scene in literary studies betrays contrasting attitudes toward conflating literature, use and value: "ideological critics", on the one hand, insist that the value of literature can simply be measured by its use in either obscuring or accentuating social antagonisms; on the other hand, some critics insist that every attempt at reducing literature to the idea of use is inevitably a reductive understanding of the value invested in literature.<sup>52</sup> "What distinguishes literature, in this line of thought," writes Felski "is its obdurate resistance to all calculations of purpose and function".<sup>53</sup>

It is no wonder, then, that Devitt finds it difficult to incorporate such a notion of literary genre into a theory of rhetorical genre that has its foundation in conceiving genres as being used and put to work in specific social settings. However, an equal discrepancy between the theories is created by the notion of community that is closely linked to the notion of situation. In re-interpreting the notion of situation in her seminal article, Carolyn Miller already objected to earlier accounts of situations as ontological, as referring to real, objective and historical events.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, she insisted on the need to reject the materialist tendencies in existing situational theory and emphasised that what recurs in a given situation is not the materialist reality itself but rather our conception of the materialist features of a certain situation.<sup>55</sup> "Situations", Miller points out, "are social constructs that are the result, not of 'perception,' but of 'definition'. [...] We define, or 'determine,' situation."<sup>56</sup> Devitt further argues: "We do not construct the situation directly through the text, [...] we reach the situation through genre".<sup>57</sup> Consequently, understanding genre as simply *responding* to the exigencies of particular situations is to reduce the dynamic, reciprocal and mutually constructing relation to a mechanical determination. Situation is, in Miller's words, best approached not as a material fact, but as "an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence".<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>52</sup> Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden / Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Miller, p. 156.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Amy J. Devitt, "Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept", *College Composition and Communication* 44:4 (1993), pp. 573-68, p. 578.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, p. 156.

Considering the importance of situation in understanding rhetorical genre, Devitt argues that what sets literary genres apart from the rhetorical ones is their ability to being read, interpreted, and valued in diverse situations. In other words, unlike rhetorical genres depending on the *recurrence* of situations, literary genres are read in a variety of situations that differ in time, place and community (audience) and can still be seen as 'belonging' to the same genre. In the spirit of 'comparing' and 'integrating',<sup>59</sup> Devitt strives to incorporate the idea of genres being read in various situations without undermining the "unity" of genres by invoking Catherine Schryer's phrase that genres are "stabilized-for-now".<sup>60</sup> However, genres (not necessarily literary genres) transcend their initial situations and participate in multiple genres. Based on these observations Devitt argues that genres may not even be stabilized 'for now'.<sup>61</sup> If rhetorical genre study can point towards how to understand the situation of the genre as an intersubjective phenomenon that is not reducible to the context as material circumstances, the literary genre can inform rhetorical genre study as to how one can cope with the growing uncertainty concerning generic identities.

### Situations of the Essay

In addition to Amy Devitt's attempt to 'integrate' or 'compare' literary and rhetorical conceptions of genre, there is evidence of growing interest in approaching the two genre theories as mutually beneficial rather than exclusive approximations to textual practice and meaning.<sup>62</sup> Considering that the essay is usually seen as containing the distinction between the literary and the extraliterary,<sup>63</sup> such an approach seems particularly well-suited to provide new insights into the genre that has been, until recently, rather neglected in genre studies. One starting point for such a project, which could benefit research into the essay as well as genre studies in general, is to concentrate on the situation as the key component of the rhetorical understanding of genre.

<sup>59</sup> See note 44

<sup>60</sup> Qtd. in Devitt, *Writing Genres*, p. 187.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. especially Anis Bawarshi, "The Genre Function", *College English* 62:3 (2000), pp. 335-60; Susan Wells, "Genres as Species and Spaces: Literary and Rhetorical Genre in the Anatomy of Melancholy", *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 47:2 (2014), pp. 113-36; Susan Wells, "Freud's Rat Man and the Case Study: Genres in Three Keys", *New Literature History* 34:2 (2003), pp. 353-66; and Sune Auken, "Genre as Fictional Action: On the Use of Rhetorical Genres in Fiction", *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab og Kulturformidling* 2:3 (2013), pp. 19-28.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. de Obaldia, p. 4.

One of the institutional reasons behind the rise of the essay in Finland is a shift in the publishing industry: as the big publishers have been forced to downsize their operations, smaller companies have seized the opportunity to publish more marginal titles and genres that are not profitable enough for the established publishers. In an article about the contemporary Finnish essay, Kuisma Korhonen maintains that much of the increase in essay writing can be attributed to the fact that essays are published by small publishers which are better adjusted to low financial returns: a small economic structure of the publishers is, in other words, more suitable for a marginalized and thematically agile genre such as the essay.<sup>64</sup>

Of course Korhonen does not credit the essay boom solely to the activity of small publishers. On the contrary, he insists that the recent interest in the essay in Finland is a result of a social and generational shift in authors as well as readers of essays. Korhonen points out that until recently the history of Finnish essays had been divided into a Swedish and Finnish tradition that are characterised by decidedly different themes and tones. Starting from the mid-twentieth century, the Swedish essay has featured an urban, cosmopolitan, and more sophisticated tone, whereas the Finnish essay has often relied more heavily on the ideal of intellectual independence as it has put more stress on questions of national culture. According to Korhonen, the rise of recent essay literature means the emergence of a new 'prototype' of essayists that has a significantly different relation to the projected idea of sociality. For him, 'the new essay' displays an international orientation and academic sophistication with a deep mistrust of the capitalist and technological underpinnings of modern society.<sup>65</sup>

In this regard 'the new Finnish essay', as outlined by Korhonen, understood as a new formation of the rhetorical essay genre, is evidence of a shifting social situation in twenty-first century Finland. The idea of the essay as being relatively sensitive to its historical context and social circumstances is not, of course, dependent on the rhetorical genre theory. For example, O. B. Hardison writes in his essay "Binding Proteus" that for him the authentic note of Montaigne's *Essais* and of the essay as a genre lies in "the enactment of a process by which the soul realizes itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment. It is the literary response to a world that has become problematic".<sup>66</sup> From a rather different perspective Kuisma Korhonen has speculated that

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Kuisma Korhonen, "Esseistiikan uudet kuviot", in Mika Hallila, Yrjö Hosiainluoma et al., ed., *Suomen nykykirjallisuus I* (Helsinki: SKS, 2013), pp. 304-16, p. 305.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 304-9.

<sup>66</sup> O. B. Hardison, "Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay", in Butrym, pp. 11-28, p. 20.

it is not perhaps an accident that the essay has flourished especially in times of great paradigm changes when old world views have been shaken and new ones have not yet been firmly established. The need for an open and flexible genre like the essay is especially urgent when we have to return to the foundations of our ethical and aesthetical beliefs, or when we want to build a communicative relation between different sectors in our fragmented society.<sup>67</sup>

In both of these cases the essay is valued as a genre in a close relationship with social reality and mirroring the changes and shifts in that reality. What sets these accounts apart from the understanding of situation in the rhetorical genre theory is, however, the use of a vocabulary centered on reaction-response: in other words, the essay is responding – quite literally in Hardison's view – to social reality. On the contrary, rhetorical genre theory emphasizes that we have to give up the notion of genre and situation being in any way separable. The use of a genre is the enactment of the social situation and through genre the situations receive form.

In *Uses of Literature* Rita Felski insists that difficulties arise whenever critics try to enforce an equivalence of textual structures with social structures, "to assert a necessary causality between literary forms and larger political effects".<sup>68</sup> Along the same lines rhetorical genre theory maintains that when the genre – in this case the essay – is understood as a means of imagining possible action in the social world, it is at the same time participating in the construction of the situation which it is seen as being a response to. The essay as genre – as an indeterminate literary genre and a socially attentive rhetorical genre – is an indispensable tool in comprehending the shifts in social reality and in making sense of the world.

<sup>67</sup> Korhonen, *Essaying Friendship*, p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> Felski, p. 8.