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Towards the Forms and Functions of the Mini-essay*

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Abstract

The present reflection article, derived from an investigation on academic literacy and its implications in the formation of the teaching staff, investigates the possible forms and functions of the mini-essay, a discursive genre that is currently making its way as a didactic option in the field of the production of argumentative texts. Based on definitions of the essay, widely recognized by the academic tradition, it presents various conjectures regarding the mini-essay as a hybrid form in which it is exposed and argued, from the purpose of establishing bases for the defense of a thesis. Likewise, it explores its possible functions, within the framework of *docere*, *movere* and *delectare*. These approaches, the result of qualitative interventions from the design of action research, respond to a didactic concern that notices in the mini-essay, both a genre to teach how to argue, and a writing strategy that enables a dialogue between key concepts such as theme and rheme, own voice and other people's voice, logos and pathos, convincing and persuading.

Keywords: Essay, Didactics, Literature, Mini-Essay, Argumentative text.

Introduction

Writing, but above all, teaching to write argumentative texts is not only a complex task, but also a source of didactic reflection that is almost inexhaustible given the diversity of discursive genres that make up this typology and the multiple fields in which they are circumscribed; in addition to the needs and interests of those who learn and teach the writing process. On these and other reflections related to the teaching and learning of writing, the research group in Didactics of Mother Tongue and Literature (DiLeMa), has carried out various investigations (Camargo, Uribe and Caro, 2006-2007; Camargo, Uribe and Caro, 2008-2009; Camargo, Uribe, Zambrano, Muñoz and Medina, 2009-2011; Camargo, Uribe and Caro, 2011-2012; Zambrano, López and Orozco, 2014-2015; Camargo, Uribe and Caro, 2015-2016).

From a didactic perspective, the results of these investigations allow us to conclude that we are far from overcoming the problems related to the teaching of academic writing and that future teachers need to learn to tutor writing processes so that, once in the field, they can guarantee that their students will also develop these skills. The above implies asking, among other things: How can we optimize the teaching and learning processes of the written competence of students in the Bachelor of Arts in Spanish Language and Literature, around discursive genres typical of the argumentative typology?

This situation implies diversifying the ways in which the Program's subjects are oriented and that these changes are evident in the ways students understand, face and reflect on their text production processes. The above supports the intention of opening spaces for updating and training teachers, based on interdisciplinary dialogue, that is, the didactic reflections, typical of the intervention, generated in this and other research.

In relation to the theoretical foundations that support this proposal, the concepts of didactics, competences, writing skills, argumentative text, discursive genres and writing in digital contexts are fundamental. The process of construction of the mini-essay followed the proposal of the "Socio-cognitive, pragmatic and didactic model" (2003) of

the Didactext group, and its reformulation "New framework for writing academic texts" (2015), which points to a conception of writing that contemplates the context, the process and the text, which it implies: (i) making explicit each of the phases of the process to reach a product; and (ii) differentiating the activities carried out by students and those carried out by teachers or professors, in each phase.

Therefore, we are guided by a qualitative approach whose assumptions are made explicit in the action-research method, from Elliott's perspective (1993, 2000), and we structured the project in three phases: 1) Descriptive and preparatory: planning; 2) Experimental: development of the intervention; 3) Writing and dissemination of the project.

Therefore, we pursue the following general objective: To optimize the teaching and learning processes of the written competence of students in two subjects of the Spanish language and literature curriculum, from which these specific objectives are derived: 1) to design a proposal of intervention for the production of expository-explanatory and argumentative texts (context, activities, strategies, tools of help and mediations that are carried out in each one of the phases of the process); 2) to apply the proposal with students of the 5th and 9th semesters of the BA in Spanish Language and Literature; 3) to generate an Open Educational Resource (OER) to explain to future users how to carry out the intervention proposals, in order to develop the writing skills of both types of text; 4) to evaluate the scope of the OER, in order to determine its possible use in other academic spaces of the Bachelor's Degree, and 5) to carry out a conceptual approach to the mini-essay, a new genre of discourse, as part of the prospects of this research and the academic reflections that will feed the formation of the students of the Program.

Precisely, in this article we will deal with the last specific objective, with support in the following concerns: What is a mini-essay? Does it have basic characteristics? Does it differ in any way from the essay? What is it used for? We will try to answer these questions in order to consider the very being of this genre and to offer the reader some ideas as clues, as a guess.

We will trace paths, nothing pretentious, to understand the anatomy and physiognomy of the genre. We will take on the challenge of delimiting the mini-essay in dialogue with some of the most interesting definitions of a genre with a vast tradition: the essay, since we consider, as we will see later, that the mini-essay could be understood as a starting point for essay writing; as a previous moment, of a didactic nature, for an argumentative enterprise of greater magnitude. We do not take risks from another scenario nor do we think of this article with a categorical intention, then in the field of the genres of discourse, particularly the nascent ones, perhaps, the only thing that is certain are the uncertainties.

Possible forms ¹

In his famous treatise, *El deslinde: prolegómenos a la teoría literaria* (1944), Alfonso Reyes argues that the essay is the centaur of genres:

[...] where there is everything and it fits everything, typical capricious son of a culture that can no longer respond to the circular and closed orb of the ancients, but to the open curve, to the process in progress, to the 'etcetera' sung by a contemporary poet concerned with philosophy [our translation] (1944).

In the mini-essay this *entredós* (centaur) is accentuated, because it tries to argue, but also to expose; because it informs, but at the same time persuades; because it is concerned with the combination of the bimember scheme of *res* (idea) and *verba* (word), as the ancients claimed; because it mobilizes a wide variety of subjects. Like the essay, the mini-essay is a convenient genre for discussing the arts, sciences or any subject that one wants to stress, but with limitations of space, with a capacity for capital synthesis, with the certainty and willingness to say enough in a few words, to say the right thing at the right time (*aptum*):

Science, however, also runs the risk of becoming dogmatic when it stops questioning the accepted paradigm of a particular culture or age. Whether their ideas are based on those of Darwin, Einstein, or Copernicus, all scientists follow a paradigm to eliminate theories that arise outside of their orbits - such as the belief that the sun revolves around the Earth- [our translation] (Eco, 2010: §2)

Therefore, it is possible to say, paraphrasing José Luis Martínez (2001), that the mini-essay is a hybrid genre, because it allows a dialogue between the didactic (due to the possibility of use in the classroom), the logical (due to the presence of reason) and the literary (due to the use of language):

Perhaps at no time was the concept of the literate more removed from the concept of the seductive daffodil than in the case of Dostoyevsky. Literature meant for him the possibility of living. Many of his heroes have a theory, Raskolnikov even published an article; also Juan Karamasov has a theory. Dostoyevsky's question is: "Can these theories be lived? [our translation] (Zuleta, 2013: 167).

Professor Jaime Alberto Vélez (2000), on the other hand, points out that the genesis of the essay lies in continuous movement, it invariably fluctuates between adventure and order, and the essayist goes beyond himself, avoiding excluding accuracy or strict objectivity. In this respect, we think that the mini-essay orders more and risks less; it allows a thorough organization of ideas with an adventure conditioned not only by the margins of the sheet. Let us explain. The writer could fall in the attempt to go beyond himself to say something new about the subject and move in unexpected terrains, although the explored idea would not achieve a complete development; it would remain in the making. The mini-essay is limited and, for this reason, the author is halfway between his organizational capacity and his exploratory spirit (beyond that of this paper). In this genre the point of view (thesis) is not completely defended: it is outlined, the weapons for its defense are presented, the arguments are exposed. On occasions, this would be deliberate, with the aim of moving the reader, of awakening reflections that would enter into a direct dialogue with the mini-essay and form a larger text... a two-handed reflection, as the Colombian philosopher Julián Serna-Arango usually does in *Pensar en el límite. Heterodoxias científicas y filosóficas* (2019)².

That is why we consider the mini-essay as a previous moment or starting point: the prelude of the essay, a sort of form with didactic purposes: to value writing,

² essay; from its formal features to its content and potential structure.

¹ We understand the *forms* as characteristics or constituent aspects of the mini-

2. Apart from these considerations, we note in the recent work of this author a representative example of the use of the mini-essay as a genre *for philosophical provocation to the reader*; it seems that, after a long period of time of searching through the aphorism (2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2017), Serna-Arango found in the mini-essay a genre conducive to weaving his new reflections, as we can see in his works of 2016, 2018 and 2019.

to talk about argumentation, to explore the structure of the paragraph; because, let's ask ourselves: To what extent would a heterostructuralist writer manage to defend a thesis in a booklet? How many unfinished arguments and how many pointed ideas would we find? How feasible is it for the student to delve into the subject, from a special angle, given the extension of the mini-essay?

Another difference with the essay lies in the inquiry of the objections, or to say it in an image that will always remind us of Toulmin, the reservation (counterarguments, antithesis, exception to the assertion). It is quite common to find essays that introduce into the discussion objections to the thesis in favor of which they offer reasons, with the intention of examining its weaknesses and demonstrating that its position better resolves the problem addressed, a feature that Octavio Paz, in a generous reflection on the work of Ortega y Gasset, considers predominant:

The essayist has to be diverse, penetrating, sharp, novel and master the difficult art of the suspension points. He does not exhaust his subject, he does not compile or systematize: he explores. If he yields to the temptation to be categorical [...] *he must then introduce into what he says a few drops of doubt, a reserve*³ [our translation] (Paz,1983: §1).

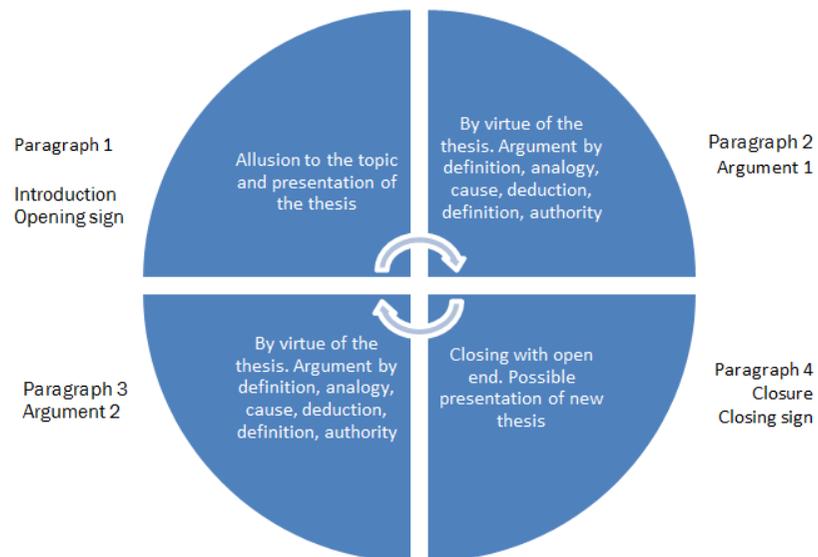
3. The italics are ours.

The mini-essay gives rise to such matter, albeit with less recurrence, from brevity, to shake the reader's fixed ideas or dissent from traditions, to confront their will or tension their behavior, to re-invent institutions or shake the apparent stability of human certainties, to question the infallibility of science or to influence the belief system and imaginaries of the audience:

Would the feat of the Austrian economist Karl Polanyi, who far from limiting himself to contributing ideas to make the system more profitable, be useless when he questions its budgets and ends, when he classifies land, labor and capital as fictitious commodities, when he warns that the market society did not exist before the industrial revolution, when he disagrees with his colleagues who do not recognize any purpose of economic activity other than growth, and advocates, instead, welfare? Of course not, when a society like ours demands the application of the formula in question [our translation] (Serna-Arango, 2019: 16-17).

On the other hand, in terms of its structure or schematic representation, the genre, following Vázquez (2016), is developed on one page at most; around four paragraphs (see figure 1). The first paragraph (opening sign) is devoted to the presentation of the assertion or thesis, which is presented in a concise and direct manner. The second paragraph introduces the first argument

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the mini-essay



(58); there the writer begins to elucidate the position taken on the subject. In the third, a second argument is deployed, which must be articulated with the first, since both translate into the evidentiary apparatus erected to support the assertion. It should be recalled that paragraphs two and three are arguments based on authority, example, analogy, causality, deduction, and definition, among others. According to Vásquez, in the fourth (closing sign) "it is not a matter of drawing a conclusion, but of endorsing or strengthening the thesis we were dealing with. Here is the moment to offer the reader other unobjectionable reasons or to point out other possible ways of argument" [our translation] (Vásquez, 2016: 59). In addition, we consider it relevant that the final paragraph serves as a platform for the author to announce a new assertion on the subject, so that the reader is faced with an open closing: the call for a new mini-essay.

From this point of view, we understand the mini-essay as a hybrid form in which it is exposed and argued; with few possibilities for adventure, but with qualities for the organization of ideas; in which the writer's capacity for synthesis not only seems indisputable but essential, thanks to its brevity. The mini-essay considers less reservations, unless its assertion crystallizes an objection per se. In short, if the ultimate goal of an essay is the defense of a thesis, the ultimate goal of a mini-essay would navigate the idea of laying the groundwork for the defense of that thesis.

Possible functions

For this approach, we will rely on the functions that, since the golden age of rhetoric, Quintilian proposed as the purposes to which the speaker should aim: "to teach, to give pleasure and to move" (Quintilian, 2004: 118). These functions -systematized by Pujante- deal with the fact that the orator has as his job "to instruct on the cause his speech is about (*docere*), to delight with his exposition to his audience (*delectare*) and finally to move, to impress, to change his mind, to influence the audience (*movere*)" (Pujante, 2003: 311). In our case, we assume them as a frame of reference to orient the discussion regarding the functions of the mini-essay, since, according to what was exposed in the previous section, the condition of the *entredós* - between exposition and argumentation- establishes diverse possibilities of perlocutionary effect in the readers;

without a doubt, it mobilizes in them the most plural reactions, which would lead us to concede that Quintiliano is right, in terms that:

the orator is not only obliged to instruct his listeners, but also to move them and give them pleasure, for which he needs vehemence, energy and grace in saying, as well as the strength of deep and mighty rivers is greater than that of a little stream running among little stones [our translation] (Quintiliano, 2004: 479).

It fits well here to infer that, in spite of its extension, the mini-essay aspires to the flow of the deep rivers and renounces to run among little stones; therefore, we will take care to outline, next, the functions of *docere*, *movere* and *delectare* in this conjectural frame of the effects of the things that the mini-essay does with the words.

As for the function of the *docere*, the mini-essay aims at leaving the reader with something new or, at least, at ratifying a learning, thanks to the careful process of access to knowledge and to the pertinent exercise of reading to summarize proper of the planning (phases 1 and 2 of the Didactext model, 2015) that previously has been carried out by its author. This means that the mini-essayist has to face two types of reading prior to the construction of the text: the first one, related to the semantic contents that will make his writing something new, striking and significant. To do this, going back to the origins, transformations, signs and emotions that have accompanied the subject he is writing about is essential; he must also become familiar with the structure and characteristics of the genre itself, including its functions. The second, aimed at deciding what kind of reader fits the intention of the text: whether he or she rows in the same direction of the thesis to be defended; to maintain it, to satisfy it, to expand or reinforce its encyclopedia of reasons, or that which goes against it; to attract it, to untie it, to sow doubt in it. Finalizing these moments, according to the Model, implies that "the writer organizes the information recovered on the subject of writing and plans its appearance in the text, that is, he or she thinks about the distribution of the information according to the structure of the discursive genre" and its functions [our translation] (Didactext, 2015: 238).

Therefore, to think of a mini-essay that teaches - or better yet, allows the other to learn - inscribes this discursive genre in the desideratum of the academic

world and in its expected dialogue with a previous tradition, as occurs in the following paragraph from a Serna-Arango mini-essay, *Didáctica de la provocación* (2016):

– A lecture, a seminar, a course, are justified by their effects, not by their causes; they are not worth what the professor says, but by what the student thinks once he leaves the premises [1]. Hence the importance of the staging, when the professor officiates as an amateur playwright, inexperienced in conjuring; when the statement not only says, when, moreover, he does (Austin), when the meaning of a word is only the tip of the iceberg, when the lexicon speaks, the rhythm speaks, the silence speaks, even [2] [our translation] (Serna-Arango, 2016: 81-82).

Here we note, once again, that, because of its condition as a centaur, the mini-essay inoculates a conclusion proper to the argument in [1], but returns to its inevitable vocation of exposing in [2]. In this way, the reader experiences the effect of learning something new (rheme) in [1] and ratifying it with the premises of the known (theme) in [2]. In other words, the function of the *docere* follows the line of the logos, touches the reason of the reader and seeks to convince him from precise ideas that emerge from his knowledge of the world.

As for the function of the *movere*, it is unquestionable to warn that if the mini-essay does not shake the reader out of his comfort zone, he will have lost a good part of his argumentative heritage. This effect is not only measured in the planning phase with the definition of the thesis, but also assured in the writing phase, when the writer refines the semantics and pragmatics of his words. In terms of the Didactext Model, it is necessary for the writer to supervise the plan and the strategies aimed at achieving the adherence of the public, that is, to develop the scheme drawn up in the planning and to establish relationships between ideas and/or prepositions; to create analogies, make inferences, look for examples and counter-examples. (2015:236).

As an example of this, let us quote one more paragraph from the Serna-Arango mini-essay:

–In an interim world like ours, the student must learn; but also unlearn. Once the ism has been established in the Church [1], mimicked by common sense, and committed to prejudices of a linguistic nature, it is necessary to resort to a didactic of provocation in order to liberate meaning. Hence the protagonism of irony, whose

affinities with the carnival are undisputed, when it would be in a position to turn the world upside down as a shock psychology, as opposed to the *agelastos* [2] which confuse academic rigor with academic seriousness, literally, to shield their innocence, if not their ignorance, with borrowed rituals [our translation] (Serna-Arango, 2016: 81-82).

Here we witness the exacerbation of the pathos proper to the critical, irreverent, contradictory and seditious condition of an argumentative act; Thus, acute postures that warn of the currents that can change into religion [1] or words brought from Greek that denounce the loss of laughter and enjoyment, based on a misunderstanding of academic rigor [2], constitute a direct provocation to the reader's emotions or an attempt to adhere to them from the standpoint of the feelings involved here, since, perhaps, he himself runs the risk of already being an *agelasto* or of turning his *isms into a church*.

Finally, as for the function of the *delectare*, of giving pleasure to the reader, of leading him or her through a pleasant experience of dialogue with the text, the challenge is greater, since, perhaps because he or she is attentive to the *docere* and the *movere*, the author forgets to provoke the effect of enjoyment and becomes refractory to the happiness of the text, to the feast of thought, to the pleasure of the argument. Here, following the assumptions of the Didactext Model, it is indispensable for the writer to intervene and transform the content of the text. This transformation does not only imply the amendment of structural or content errors, but also the confrontation between the text produced and the one to be produced. The concern for style emerges, then, as well as the use of figures or tropes that capture the reader's attention and allow him or her to enjoy it: a metaphor here, an irony there; perhaps a fine dose of humor. An expression that provokes sensations (synesthesia) or one that invites to reflection (paradox); a euphemism that attenuates prejudices or one or another ellipsis to emphasize ideas.

In this regard, the paragraphs already cited from Serna-Arango may serve as an example, since there the fine irony fulfills the function of *delectare*; after all, as the author has already indicated in other texts, it is irony - in coalition with metaphor, paradox, oxymorous and so many other rhetorical figures - "the missing link between reason and emotion" (Serna-Arango, 2009: 72), "the terror of the *agelastos*" (Serna-Arango, 2012a: 46), "the art of smiling in fright " (Serna-Arango, 2009: 46) (Serna-Arango,

2017: 48), "the defenestration of certainties by the short cut of the ridiculous" (Serna-Arango, 2012b: 39), or in short, "the didactics of provocation" (Serna-Arango, 2016: 82). Thus, to think also about *delectare* supposes bringing to the forefront of the argumentative intentions that teach and move, the concern for forms and their forcefulness, for style and its effects, for the thousand ways of saying and its thousand ways of resonating in the reader's universe.

Conclusions

We have attempted an approximation -in excess of coarse and, therefore, dangerous in generalizations and imprecisions- to some possible forms and functions of the extremely labile genre of the mini-essay. A genre with a perspective or didactic intention (which can be used to teach the genesis, anatomy and physiognomy of argumentation, to teach how to argue and evaluate writing). A genre that can also be understood as a strategy (to write a mini-essay). A bridge genre that we could consider as the basis for rehearsal, or as a (other) moment of preparation for the art of argument. An intermediate genre, but one that, by the force of its brevity (a sign of the present times), seeks in its readers the functions of teaching, moving and delighting. A centaur genre (like the essay that gives it its name) in which it is exposed and argued. A genre of the *entredós*, in which the subject and the remake, the own and the other's, the form and the function, the logos and the pathos, the convince and the persuade, the world of the text and the world of the reader are brought into dialogue.

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