

The following thesis looks at the Hispano-American essay through the lens of essays by 1990-Nobel-laureate Octavio Paz (Mexico City, 1914-1998). Until recently the essay was not considered a literary form, for the three classical genres of epic, lyric, and drama excluded the essay. By studying Paz's essays--primarily *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude, 1950) and *Posdata* (Postdata, 1970)--in the context of their reception in Mexico, as well as touching on the Hispano-American tradition of the essay, this thesis traces the evolution of the essay as a literary genre.

The history of the modern essay begins with Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). In his work, *Essais* (1580), Montaigne, immersed in the humanism of his era, discovers his own voice, that of an individual. Montaigne's voice became possible largely because the unity of the Medieval communitarian way of life, throughout Europe, had fragmented. However, in Hispano-America, the essay did not emerge as a literary form until the nineteenth century, as countries throughout the region fought for independence from the empires of that time: Spain, North America, and France. The rupturing of empires, the fragmenting of a once unified community--in both cases the essay emerges as a genre from disturbed circumstances. The critical voice of Modernity emerges, thus, along with the essay, from these ruptures--personal and historical.

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