

## Thinking Narratively

# **Transcodifications: Arts, Languages and Media**



Edited by  
Simone Gozzano

## **Volume 4**

# Thinking Narratively



Between Novel-Essay and Narrative Essay

Edited by  
Massimo Fusillo, Gianluigi Simonetti  
and Lorenzo Marchese

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# Massimo Fusillo, Lorenzo Marchese, Gianluigi Simonetti

## Introduction

What Gilles Philippe affirms in a dense article on the philosophical implications of the novel form sounds like something that belongs to the common sense of readers, even non-specialists: “Whether one makes use of classical or contemporary categories of analysis, a priori, everything seems to contrast the novel text to the philosophical”.<sup>1</sup> However, the same reasoning could also be expanded beyond the novel, towards all those forms of mimetic and narrative representation that we define with the all-encompassing term *mimesis*. Since the dawn of modernity, narrative discourse and speculative discourse have generally been on opposite sides of the fence. They are different in their formal aspects, and they have different purposes, one to entertain and tell a story, the other, somehow antithetical, to convince and educate. According to a philosophical tradition consecrated by Plato, “poetry” is even inferior to philosophy, because guilty of telling copies of the truth, imitations that do not provide the reader with a more proper and socially useful model of life (see the classic study by Lamarque /Olsen 1994, for an exploration of the complex relations of *fiction* with the expression of truth). Nonetheless, since the theory of the relationship between narrative and philosophy rests on conceptual abstraction, starting from the history of the genres, it cannot help but return to them to reinforce its conceptualizations. When we focus on actual works and authors, we can easily see frequent and inevitable intersections and transcodings running both ways between fiction and philosophy. This implies that there are literary and narrative forms of philosophy (on this topic, see D’Angelo 2012) which are not addressed in this volume, such as the dialogues of Plato, the utopian tale (antinarrative like that of Thomas More, more narrative in his successors), Voltaire’s *conte philosophique*, the apologue, the essay (which has been taking on an increasingly narrative inflection), and many others. Moreover, there are more purely literary forms, which incorporate languages, issues, and stylistic features of past and present philosophical debate and claim a speculative vocation starting from a non-specialist position. These cases are the object of study of the authors gathered around *Thinking Narratively*, in the belief that literature is the place of discourse where it is possible to tell the truth, again and always, even though “the author’s thought is not expressed by theses and arguments, but by structuring a story and orchestrating

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1 Philippe 1998, 1541.

themes that are also questions”.<sup>2</sup> A long tradition of essays and miscellanea on the affinity and distance between fiction and philosophy precedes us. To summarise it all is impossible; from studies that insist on the intrinsic wisdom of the novel genre, unfair competitor of philosophy (Nussbaum 1990; Pavel 2003), to studies that investigate the ramifications of philosophical narrative (including such recent collective works as Dolfi 2014; Ercolino 2015; Wampole 2015; and Iotti 2019). Conveying abstract concepts through characters, stories, and dramatic situations is very different from presenting them in a systematic and impersonal way. The philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who never ventured into proper narrative writing, expressed this difference with extreme clarity:

There is no better attestation of the distance between literary and scientific writing, of the ability, which the former possesses on its own, to concentrate and condense in the concrete singularity of a sensitive figure and an individual adventure, functioning together as a metaphor and as a metonymy, all the complexity of a structure and a history that scientific analysis must laboriously unfold and show.<sup>3</sup>

We will not summarise the contents of the contributions provided by the authors included in this volume, which range from the birth of the modern novel with *Don Quixote* to the most recent attestations of the narrative essay in twenty-first century Europe. When we proposed to our authors to reflect on the circumstances where the gap between fiction and speculation becomes narrower, null, or confused, they did so from different perspectives and backgrounds. We chose a field of investigation that would cover large areas of world literature as far as possible, including Russian, Italian, Anglophone, Francophone, and German, as various are the topics behind the main narrative-philosophical theme, which deal with the common ground of novel and essay, Italian Modernism, the novel-essay in the last two centuries, the history of sexuality, and the narrative essay. The authors shared two premises with us; one being the ambition to always use the analytical samples to propose broader ideas on the theoretical issues of literature important to us, and the other to focus on the “philosophical” forms of fiction, those in which the dominance of the narrative is contested and threatened by a strong counter-thrust of reflection, as Genette affirms about Balzac.<sup>4</sup>

We are deeply grateful to our authors for accepting such a demanding challenge and pursuing each phase of their work with uninterrupted dialogue and

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<sup>2</sup> Salain 2010, 25–26.

<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu 1992, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Genette 1969, 86.



collaboration. The final words by Francesco Pecoraro provide an empirical counterpoint to the “scientific” core of the volume, a needed practical footnote after so much theory. *The Trunk and the Branches* is a testimony conducted by one of the most interesting current writers in Italy, on the issues and potentialities of choosing the narrative medium to reflect on oneself and the world with no other guide than one’s personal knowledge and writer’s instinct and a mobile narrative structure. We are extremely grateful to Francesco Pecoraro for this gift. Likewise, we thank the publishers for welcoming us in their catalogue and the Department of Human Studies (Excellence 2018–2022) of the University of L’Aquila, which has granted us full financial support for this initiative, launched almost three years ago.

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Raffaello Palumbo Mosca

# Disenchanted the World: A Reflection on the Common Ground Between the Novel Form and the Essay

I only offer *modi res considerandi*, new possible ways of looking at things. I invite the reader to try them on themselves, to see whether they are successful in yielding fertile visions; each person, then, by virtue of their intimate and faithful experience, will verify their truth or their error.

(Ortega y Gasset)

## 1 Every Novel Is Don Quixote

As Ortega y Gasset peremptorily put it in his *Meditations on Quixote*, the novel and the epic “are exactly opposite”.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the case of *Don Quixote*, which is the uniquely originary moment of the genre, Ortega was referring to the modern novel, which developed and reached its apex in the nineteenth century. In *Meditations*, as well as his later work, *Notes on the Novel* (1925), Ortega openly and bitterly polemicised with Croce and his *Aesthetics*, excluding from his analysis romance, picaresque, and fantastic novels, which he considered to be closer to the epic and the ancient novel, respectively, both in terms of function and characteristics. The genre is thus limited to the realist novel, as Auerbach would later understand it, a serious representation of the everyday. Ortega’s exclusive conception of the genre begins with the estrangement and complete opposition between the two terms “novel” and “epic”. He does so more radically than Hegel in *Lectures on Aesthetics*,<sup>2</sup> which postulated a form of relation or continuity between the two by referring to the novel as a “modern bourgeois epic”, and also more radically than the “Hegelian” Lukács in *Theory of the Novel*. Accordingly, whereas the epic narrates an idealised past, the novel describes a present caught up in reality. This also means that, whereas the epic is essentially action and adventurous improbability, on the contrary, the novel is “atmosphere” and “contemplation”, reaching its extreme in the Proustian *Recherche*

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1 Ortega y Gasset 2016, 110. The translation is ours. Due to the ongoing health emergency, retrieving the original texts has sometimes proved extremely difficult; however, we did our best to check the original version of the texts quoted.

2 Hegel 1997, 1223.

as “pure motionless description.”<sup>3</sup> As Ortega understands it, in the novel, the plot is reduced to a mere “mechanical necessity”, while the characters do nothing but “present to us, in a concrete way, what we already knew abstractly”.<sup>4</sup> The essence of the novel [...] does not reside in what happens, but rather in the fact that “nothing happens”, in the pure life and presence of the characters, situated in their context or environment.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, whereas epic figures are “unique and incomparable characters that, in themselves, possess poetic value”, the characters in a novel are “typical and extra-poetic”. Thus, the epic “is essentially none other than a form of archaism”, and its figures “correspond to a vanished fauna, whose characteristic is [...] the indifference between God and Man, or at least the contiguity between the two species”; conversely, the novel is not only the “new genre” but also the genre of newness and new themes, while its “spiritual fauna” is hopelessly other than God”.<sup>6</sup>

As a preliminary consideration, though Fusillo was correct in writing that “comparison of the epic and the novel is, in any event, a delicate operation”, given that they are “two modes of literary representation (...) that still belong to the same great expressive typology, the narrative regime”,<sup>7</sup> we propose to continue following Ortega’s reasoning; however, we shall begin with a decisive conceptual shift. We shall thus consider the epic and the novel—the latter understood in Ortega’s restricted sense—not as genres, but rather as historically determined forms which are never present in their “pure” states,<sup>8</sup> and belong to a macro-genre corresponding to the narrative realm, as distinct from the dramatic and the lyric. Eschewing problems of classification and origin will make it easier to isolate cues which can still prove useful in the discussion of certain constitutive characteristics of the novel that endure to this day, starting from Ortega’s argument.

Nonetheless, if Ortega is correct, we should wonder how the realism of the novel is able to catch our interest and move us. If, in fact, reality “cannot interest us”, and much less “its copy”,<sup>9</sup> this means that realism as Ortega understands it is the unveiling of reality, as the “spiritual fauna” described is taken from the

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3 Ortega y Gasset 2019, 80.

4 Ortega y Gasset 2016, 116.

5 Ortega y Gasset 2019, 87.

6 Ortega y Gasset 2016, 116.

7 Fusillo 2006, 35.

8 After all, Ortega himself affirmed that the epic perspective “will never die” (Ortega y Gasset 2016, 117).

9 Ortega y Gasset 2016, 129.

world, not copied; therefore, it is neither mimetic nor photographic. Better yet, it is the unmasking of the “pure materiality” of things, the signifier under the crust of myth, the ideal of culture understood as (the construction of) meaning. Thus, the “poetry” of this realist art resides in showing the crumbling of poetry, the illusory nature of the ideal meaning constructed from reality, as the “simple and terrifying ‘being there’”, the brute and brutal “presence, lying there. Materiality”:

This is what we call realism: bringing things to a determinate distance, put them under a light, to inflect them in a way so as to accentuate the aspect of them that slopes toward pure materiality. Myth is always the starting point of every poem, the realist poem included. Only in this form we witness the myth in its fall, its demise. The theme of the realist poem is the crumbling of poetry.<sup>10</sup>

We take Ortega as a point of departure for further reflection. By chipping away at the ideal, the novel shows both self-sufficient “pure materiality” and its illusory meaning, while denouncing the impracticality and insufficiency of the signifier not (illusorily) adorned by meaning. This is the moment in which the novel welcomes the tragic; indeed, from this point of view, the novel is always and constitutively tragic, because it is the result of perceiving the irreconcilability of being and having-to-be and, as Manzoni thought, the expression of the “bitter feeling that is born from this contrast”.<sup>11</sup> This is what moves us in the “spiritual fauna” adventures staged by the novel. As with Bakhtin, it is also true with Ortega that “only the human life can be engaging, or, in anything case, something that has a direct relation to it”,<sup>12</sup> nonetheless, without being its simple reduplication. For this reason, “the matter of the novel is – and cannot but be – properly, imaginary psychology”.<sup>13</sup> The novel takes away one’s illusions by revealing what Ortega sees as a fallacy, that is, investing a pure signifier with meaning, while nonetheless indicating at the same time the necessary existence of this illusory meaning.

We believe that no one has reflected on this crucial point better than Giuseppe Antonio Borgese. During the years when Ortega wrote and published *Notes on the Novel*, Borgese elaborated the art work “double similitude” theory in *Figurazione e trasfigurazione* (1925), referring to similitude with nature but also with an ideal moment, which nature (as a brute signifier) contradicts. According to Borgese, if the reconciliation of the two terms is impossible, art will then be

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<sup>10</sup> Ortega Y Gasset 2016, 130.

<sup>11</sup> Manzoni 2000, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin 1997, 254.

<sup>13</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 82.

“all tragic”, and it will produce “the sentiment, or rather, the *exigency*”<sup>14</sup> of the ideal, the “noumenon” (as defined by Borgese using Kantian terminology).

In the *First Meditation*, Ortega exemplifies the difference between the representation of the ideal and that of materiality in the figurative arts, by juxtaposing Michelangelo and Raphael – who paint the forms of things (and “the form is always ideal”) – to Velazquez, who, on the contrary, “emphasises the matter – satin, velvet, canvas, wood, organic protoplasm – from which things are made”.<sup>15</sup>

Like Velazquez’s paintings, the novel reveals in a single stroke the splendour and insufficiency of “pure materiality”. Indeed, according to Ortega, the beauty of pure materiality appears, or is revealed, in the work that mimics the world and its objects. Something that we would normally not even notice, such as a piece of fruit, or a piece of cloth, or a bottle, is suddenly revealed to be worthy of attention and reflection as an object of aesthetic pleasure. This is possible because the work does not reproduce reality; rather, it is a “neutralised epiphany”, as argued by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, where he wrote that Nature “is beautiful in that it appears to say more than it is”.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, while negating the “more than” in the name of the truth of disenchantment, art conserves the memory of the “ancestral shiver” of transcendence.

Artworks are neutralized and thus qualitatively transformed epiphanies. If the deities of antiquity were said to appear fleetingly at their cult sites, or at least were to have appeared there in the primeval age, this act of appearing became the law of the permanence of artworks, but at the price of the living incarnation of what appears. The artwork as appearance is most closely resembled by the *apparition*, the heavenly vision ).<sup>17</sup>

Given that materiality as mere presence is always on the point of disappearing and marching toward its own destruction, art shows its splendour while revealing its constitutive caducity. Such a revelation implies a denial, for art aspires to endure and impose its brief eternity on things, thus bearing witness to the fragility and caducity of that which exists while being a protest against death:

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<sup>14</sup> Borgese 1952, 129. The emphasis is ours.

<sup>15</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno 2020, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno 2020, 80.

Through duration art protests against death; the paradoxically transient eternity of artwork is the allegory of an eternity bare of semblance. Art is the semblance of what is beyond death's reach. To say that no art endures is as abstract dictum as that of the transience of all things earthly; it would gain content only metaphysically, in relation to the idea of resurrection.<sup>18</sup>

Like in Freud's *Vergänglichkeit* (Freud 1982), we could also wonder if the splendour of pure presence may be endowed with an intuition and sentiment of its own being-to-death. In this brief narrative essay from 1915, Freud wrote of three men walking through the German farmland. The first man is Freud himself, whose task is to describe the scene. The second man remains unnamed, but he is almost certainly the young poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The identity of the third man is also unknown, but it is most likely that of a woman, Lou Andreas-Salomé. The year is 1913, and the three are walking together enjoying the landscape. It is a radiant day of summer and nature is in full bloom, but the poet, already famous although so young, is inspired with contrasting feelings. Like Freud, he derives pleasures from the beauty he sees, but unlike him, he is also seized by an invincible sadness, a dismayed melancholy. He feels in an intimate way the fragility of the nature surrounding him; he knows that all the things of the world "live only in passing" and soon will no longer be there.<sup>19</sup> On the opposite end, Freud sees things to have more value because of their caducity and interprets Rilke's pain as a refusal of future mourning, in a rather banal way, we should say. Rilke cannot be consoled because his poetic and non-economic sensibility tells him that no springtime to come can provide consolation for the loss of that unique, individual, and unrepeatable instance. As Elvio Fachinelli observed in his commentary on the essay, Rilke does not anticipate a future mourning because "destruction is already present in him as he contemplates this flowery countryside".<sup>20</sup> The mourning Rilke feels is thus "not resolvable, because all living things go toward the end, they die before his eyes and they are unique and irreplaceable, as is the man who observes them".<sup>21</sup> It is precisely this essentially transitory nature of the world and humankind that would later form the basis of the beating heart of the *Duino Elegies*, in which, through "a more painful identification with the ephemeral", Rilke overturned the classic relationship between humankind and nature. No longer material and nourishing but, rather, a fragile companion, nature

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno 2020, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Rilke 1972, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Fachinelli 2012, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Fachinelli 2012, 90.

would invoke the help of humankind, the most ephemeral of creatures, which can nonetheless save it with its song:

But because being present is so much, because it seems  
that what is here is in need of us, this fading world  
has strangely charged us. Us who fade the most. *Once*  
to everything, only *once*. *Once* and no more. And we too,  
*once*. And never again. But this  
*once* to have been, if only this *once*:  
to have been of the earth seems beyond revoking.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, for the later Rilke, the heart of poetic sensibility lies in recognising one's own singularity and fragility in another, which recognition, however, does not cancel out the other. His gaze filled with pity for humankind, and the world that emerges from it, is poetry itself, at once an ethical and aesthetic task. "Are we perhaps only to say: house, / bridge, brook, gate, jug, olive tree, window –, / at best: pillar, tower... but to *say* them, understand me".<sup>23</sup>

It would appear that this is the reason why Ortega wrote that the characters in a novel – so "ordinary" and "void of attraction" – are not what moves us, "the representation of their reality" is; that is, their epiphanic splendour and already accomplished caducity, always intimate and unavoidable, as much theirs as it is ours.<sup>24</sup> According to Ortega, being made to face one's own materiality unmask one's ideals, be they love, heroism, and so forth. Again, this unmasking is not purely negative, as the novel, for example, does demonstrate that the romantic ideal is an illusion, but at the same time, it shows how surrendering oneself to the idea of love as mere friction between bodies would make the world unlivable. As it declares the nullity of the ideal, the novel denounces the insufficiency of reality. This is the conflict in which we live, and which the novel stages and unveils. If things, "from their inert materiality, send signals that we interpret", and if these interpretations "condense until they form an objectivity that comes to be duplicated by the primary one", then the ideal and materiality, the sense and "thingness" of the world, aspire to "fit together with each other" though they cannot.<sup>25</sup> It is in this first and fundamental sense that *Don Quixote* inaugurates the novel form. According to Berardinelli:

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<sup>22</sup> Rilke 1972, 65.

<sup>23</sup> Rilke 1972, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 127–129.

<sup>25</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 128.



Reality as it is (Cervantes seems to suggest) is not enough: it is insufficient, as was the non-life lived by the *hidalgo* Alonso Quijano before his metamorphosis into an errant knight. In the very moment in which he chooses, realism, Cervantes contests it, makes it confront a hero who challenges it.<sup>26</sup>

While *Don Quixote* tells us that the ideal is only illusion, it also shows us that a different way of living is possible nonetheless, and that illusion-free “reality” is not untranscendable, however “true” it might be. According to Ortega, the novel unmasks and annihilates reality while carrying it within itself; unless this “reality” is also value and culture, it is literally nothing but the result of a spell. If it is true that the heart of the novel form is this conflict between ideal and real, then every novel formally repeats *Don Quixote*, for every novel contains what it negates (the chivalric novel, meaning, ideal). As Ortega wrote:

Once its spell is broken, myth falls into an iridescent dust that gradually loses its colors until it becomes dark like the earth. We observe this scene in every novel. In such a way that, strictly speaking, it is not reality that makes itself poetic or enters into the work of art, but only that gesture or movement in which it comes to reabsorb the ideal.<sup>27</sup>

We agree with Lionel Trilling that, if it is said that “all philosophy is a footnote to Plato”, it also can be said that “all prose fiction is a variation on the theme of *Don Quixote*”.<sup>28</sup>

However, what does the novel’s realism consist of? As we have observed, it is not photographic, nor is it thematic, as shown by Ortega, for the novel imitates life in the form of an inexhaustible process of knowing; it does not imitate content. In a novel, we get to know the characters by their acts, not their definition – and reality through them. We discover them slowly, in contradictory ways, trying to establish a “unitary physiognomy” for them as the reading proceeds. Ortega took the world of art as reference once again in the following text:

A novelist must proceed in the same way as the impressionist painters who set down in the canvas such elements as the spectator needs for seeing an apple, and leave it to him to give to this material the finishing touches. Hence the fresh taste of all impressionist paintings. We seem to see objects of the picture in a perpetual *status nascendi*. In the career of everything there are two moments of supreme drama: birth and dath -*status nascens* and *status evanescens*. Non-impressionistic painting, superior though it may be in other respects, suffers from one shortcoming: that it presents its objects altogether finished, mummified, as it

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<sup>26</sup> Berardinelli 2016, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Trilling 2000, pos. 2035 of 10930.

were, past. That actuality, the existence in the present tense, which things possess in impressionistic paintings is irremediably missing.<sup>29</sup>

We learn to know characters in a novel in the same way as we learn to know people and the world in “real” life; as asserted by Ortega, we do so by experiencing the process of their “difficult reality”, not through a “simple concept” which presents a merely “mummified” reality. Thanks to this realism of form, Ortega could assert in the *Meditations* that “strictly speaking, it does not matter what objects the realist chooses to describe”.<sup>30</sup> As we have seen, the “poeticity” of the novel can never derive from an object, but from the representation of the contrast between brute materiality and meaning, the real and the ideal, what is and what the character wishes it were. Even in this case, like an “edge where the real and unreal worlds cut into each other and form a bevel”,<sup>31</sup> *Don Quixote* originates and defines the genre:

They can take away luck from our compatriot (*Don Quixote*), but it is impossible to subtract from him his spirit of sacrifice and his courage. Adventures are pure vapors of a fermenting brain, but the adventurous will is true and real. Adventure is a dislocation of the material order, a form of unreality. In the adventurous will, in sacrifice, and in courage, what comes toward us is a strange, two-faced nature. Its two elements belong to opposite world: the will is real, but what it wants is not.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the matter of narration and description is irrelevant, because, as we have seen, the object of the novel’s mimesis is more essential and profound, having to do with the process of knowing and the way our knowing is structured and unravels over time.

While Ortega loves referring to the world of art, it appears that the novel form can imitate the form of life more precisely, and in its essence. Indeed, unlike a painting, novelistic narration-description contains and reproduces the passage of time. Whereas the entirety of a painting can be seized in an instant with a single glance, even in the case of Impressionism, the novel and the life of the characters are in constant movement and construction for the entire duration of the reading. The unity of the novel (and its characters) can be grasped only at the end, just as we can only seize the unity of a person, their “character”, after knowing them for a long time, and by constantly adjusting our perspective.

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<sup>29</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2019, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 124.

<sup>32</sup> Ortega y Gasset 2016, 132.

However, unlike what happens in real life, the “whole” of the character, their “unitary physiognomy”, is finally grasped, and their fate is revealed to us. It is in this moment that, as Benjamin once wrote, the reader can “warm up his frozen life to the death of which he reads, that is, the static nature of the whole, the fate revealed”.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, we should emphasise the process by which the final and liberating moment is reached, not the moment itself. The novel will sometimes offer this resolution, which is always denied in real life. Its main interest lies in the duration of the construction of the final act – which imitates becoming, how life makes itself explicable –, not in the act per se.

Following Hegel, Mazzoni spoke of the novel as an “analytic of existence”, the form that “shows in the most detailed way what it means to be in time and to be in a world”.<sup>34</sup>

## 2 Novel and Essay

If we agree with Ortega that the task of the novel, unlike that of the epic, is to describe rather than narrate, then we should infer that such a task is close to that of the essay. There is a noteworthy connection between the two genres which is not limited to the period of the “novel essay” (see Ercolino 2014). We could begin by pointing out that only a few decades separate Montaigne’s *Essais* (published in three versions in 1580, 1582, and 1588) and *Don Quixote* (1605). The essayistic form and the modern novel were born almost at the same time, and under the same sky, as it were. This temporal coincidence reveals deeper affinities, since both forms asserted themselves in the context of the new interest for the lives of individuals which dominated European culture starting from the 1500s and culminated with the advent of the human sciences in the 1800s. The essay (as Montaigne delivered them to us) and the novel (as Cervantes inaugurated it) are both forms of interiority and the “problematic and split individual subjectivity”.<sup>35</sup> As Montaigne wrote in *On Vanity*, “the ‘I’ of now and the ‘I’ of just earlier are certainly two”; thus, both mirror and express modernity as the awareness of the partial and situated nature of knowledge and morality. As we read in *On Cannibals*, “I believe [...] that each of us calls barbarous what is not in our custom”. In *On Cripples*, discussing our understanding of reality and capacity to judge it, he wrote with sublime irony that “after all, it is putting a high

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin 2014, 254.

<sup>34</sup> Mazzoni 2011, 373.

<sup>35</sup> Berardinelli 2002, 22.

price on one's own conjectures, to cause a man to be roasted alive". Sciascia termed it "sublime secularism". It is no mistake that Auerbach referred to the *Essays* as "the first book of secular self-consciousness", and the world of the modern European novel certainly appears "de-devinized".<sup>36</sup> According to Milan Kundera, in this world, "the only divine truth is broken up into hundreds of relative truths".<sup>37</sup> Indeed, what are characters – Ortega's "spiritual fauna" – if not "imaginary 'I's'"?<sup>38</sup> They are "Contradictory relative truths" that confront one another and indicate the bumpy road toward totality (and a possible meaning). After all, Lukács's hero in search of himself is the literal incarnation of this process of knowing.

Therefore, the novel and the essay are the expression and representation of a modern world "marked by the absence of an ethical and aesthetic code, a foundation, a central value that gives meaning and unity to the multiplicity of life".<sup>39</sup> This is the world of conjecture, experimental confirmation, and the principle of falsifiability. However, novel and essay are also forms of knowing alternative to science and its specialisation, as well as its rigid idiolect, as we shall see. Although neither shies away from theory, when they do, it is "light and pleasant",<sup>40</sup> idiosyncratic, and non-systematic. Like the essay, the novel is a reflection, but one that is "stubbornly autonomous with respect to any system of preconceived ideas"; it is a reflection that, above all, "questions itself, wonders, probes".<sup>41</sup> Thus, both novel and essay are subjective, flexible, and radically free attempts at constructing meaning, not affirming it, starting with the disaggregation and chaos of the real and the subject. Montaigne wrote that "Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy. inquiry its progress, and ignorance its end".<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, the correspondences between the two forms are also measurable from a thematic and stylistic point of view. Unlike what happened in the epic (and what happens in modern science), in the essay and the novel, we witness a "democratisation" that unhinges and disrupts the hierarchical order of representability. Everything becomes narratable, there is no topic too "frivolous and vain" to be confronted, even a subject that, in *otium*, is in conversation with itself (see Montaigne, 2012, 51), even the mundane and (only apparently) insignificant events of "mechanical and insignificant people", or the inner life of a humble

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36 Auerbach 1973, 14–15.

37 Kundera 1988, 19.

38 Kundera 1988, 20.

39 Magris 2001, 873.

40 Kundera 2005, 18.

41 Kundera 2005, 83.

42 Montaigne 2012, 1719.

provincial maid. Though, starting with Bakhtin, many have characterised the novel as a “cannibalistic and polymorphous” genre, the same could be said of the novel-essay. In its full, eighteenth-century maturity, the novel-essay managed to “incorporate [...] the most noble and consolidated genres”, such as the epistolary form – which the novel also subsumed from the start, with the likes of Fielding, Laclous, Goethe, Foscolo, and Piovene – as well as the satirical and philosophical poem, eventually reaching the novel itself, according to Berardinelli, the “modern genre par excellence, with all its novelty and vitality”.<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, we could claim that the novel appropriated the essay, as in the cases of Swift, Defoe, Sterne, and Diderot, and in the twentieth century and beyond. In essence, it is all about attacking the same object – this “hybrid” critical son of modernity – from different points of view. However, either way one looks at it, from the essay side as Berardinelli does, or from the novel side, a panoramic view reveals the porosity of the borders between the two forms, and their continual miscegenation, even including elements of identity in some crucial respects. Even from a stylistic point of view, the novel and the essay shared the same function of rupture with respect to the norms of codified genres, or, similarly, freedom with respect to them. From that moment on, freedom and autonomy characterised the two forms with increasing force (but also a problematic character).

This book was written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one. I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory. My powers are inadequate for such a purpose. I have dedicated it to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive.

If I had written to seek the world’s favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining of artifice; for it is myself that I portray (...) Thus reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain subject.<sup>44</sup>

The “sincerity” inherent in this theme is also aimed at the sincerity of an “average and familiar” style,<sup>45</sup> which shuns ornamentality and favours communicability and adherence to reality. As Montaigne exclaims, “Fie on the eloquence that

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43 Berardinelli 2002, 17, 22.

44 Montaigne 1968.

45 Montaigne 2012, 454.

leaves us craving itself, not things!”.<sup>46</sup>The modern novel seeks the same form of naturalness as “poetry of mediocrity” (Thorel-Cailletau 2003) or the serious representation of the everyday. For example, Fielding’s claimed relationship between the new form and the *sermo humilis* should not deceive, since it merely functions as an ennobling attempt. As Mazzoni convincingly argued, the “simple style”<sup>47</sup> of the novel is a “prose about experience that has severed its ties with the rhetorical arts”, which succeeds with its simplicity in making credible that which it narrates “with a force that classical literature did not possess”.<sup>48</sup>

We should like to add that the novel is even more credible and forceful because of its “realism”, as stated by Ortega, that is, its capacity to crumble the ideal and imitate reality, caricaturing it in order to critique it and reveal its hidden face. Secondly, it is also because of its reliance on “reality effects”, as acutely analysed by Roland Barthes. Thus, imitation is understood here as both knowing and caricature (and knowledge through caricature), and also as entertainment or compensation, because the truth of the crumbling of the ideal is a bitter ideal:

Epic heroes either win or, if they are defeated, conserve to their last breath their greatness. Don Quixote is defeated. And without any greatness. Because all of a sudden everything is clear: human life is as such a defeat. Before the ineluctable defeat that we call life, all there is for us to do is try to understand it. This is where the *raison d’être* of the art of the novel resides.<sup>49</sup>

The project of Montaigne’s *Essais* is indeed to show without pretences the “chimeras and monsters” that inhabit our mind, and, if not defeat them, at least tame them by means of knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

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**46** Montaigne 2012, 452.

**47** Testa 1997.

**48** Mazzoni 2011, 198.

**49** Kundera 2005, 22.

**50** “Dernièrement que je me retirai che moi, délibéré, autant, que je pourrais, ne me mêler d’autre chose que de passer en repos, et à part, ce peu qui me reste de vie [...] mais je trouve [...] que, au rebours, faisant le cheval échappé, il se donne cent fois plus d’affaire à soi – même, qu’il n’en prenait pour autrui: Et m’enfante tant de chimères et monstres fantasques les unes sur les autres...” (Montaigne 2012, 50). Why aren’t there square brackets in the last omission? Please unify if possible.

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Valeria Cavalloro

# An Irreconcilable Discrepancy: Sketching a Theory of the Novel-essay

## 1 It All Starts with a Discrepancy

In *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, chapter seven, *The Years of Resistance: 1928–1933*, author-narrator Victor Serge lingers on some considerations about his artistic growth at the time that he is describing. These considerations revolve around a sharp feeling of dissatisfaction with the forms of writing that he felt were available to him in those years. He was especially concerned with the impossibility of reconciling the opposition between “literature” and “history”, to which he kept going back and forth in his intellectual engagement. Since the very beginning of his writing career, he had been bound to face and resolve a conflictual situation in order to achieve a confident narrative voice:

I had renounced writing when I entered the Russian Revolution. Literature seemed quite a secondary matter – so far as I personally was concerned – in an age like this. My duty was dictated by history itself. Besides, whenever I did any writing, there was such a striking discrepancy between my sensibility and my opinions that I could actually write nothing of any value.<sup>1</sup>

In the next few pages, he will further analyse this discrepancy between sensibility and opinions, which eventually lines up with the parallel discrepancy between the options of literary writing and historical writing, perceived as harshly conflicting. On the one hand, Serge states that:

Historical work did not satisfy me entirely; apart from the fact that it demands both resources and undisturbed leisure of an order that I shall probably never enjoy, it does not allow enough scope for showing men as they really live, dismantling their inner workings and penetrating deep into their souls. (...) In this respect, I belonged to the tradition of Russian writing.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, he also points out that:

Individual existences were of no interest to me – particularly my own – except by virtue of the great ensemble of life whose particles, more or less endowed with consciousness, are

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1 Serge 2012, 303.

2 Serge 2012, 304.

all that we ever are. And so the form of the classical novel seemed to me impoverished and outmoded, centring as it does upon a few beings artificially detached from the world.<sup>3</sup>

Victor Serge is the French pseudonym of Viktor Lvovich Kibalchich, born in Belgium from a family of Russian emigrants and raised with the cultural and political education proper of Western European intellectuals. In the years when the revolution was raging, he went back to Russia with the intention of collaborating in the building of the new Soviet State, but he was faced with the contradictions of the revolutionary movement and its quick degeneration into the Terror phase and then into Stalin's regime. *Memoirs*, the book in which he tells the story of those years, was composed between 1942 and 1943 in Mexico City, four years before his death. Its definitive edition was published in France in 1951. Written in the 1940s, *Memoirs* is on the very hedge of the chronological frame of reference usually attributed to the novel-essay as a genre. This period begins at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and peaks in the 1920s and 1930s, fading out and basically disappearing with World War II,<sup>4</sup> during which novelists developed a more meditative form of narration, based on personal introspection and asystematic philosophical digressions in the style of Montaigne's *Essais*.<sup>5</sup> As such, Serge's narrative style invites the kind of scrutiny that literary criticism usually applies to the contemporary novel-essay: "how can we make sense of the persistence of this form after the end of the season that gave it its reason to be? Why is this form still here? What does its presence mean to us?". Rather than answering on behalf of *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* or defending it from the suspicion of being obsolete, we would argue that this novel gives us precisely the means to prove that the question is misleading. Therefore, we will try and show how this text allow us to reshape our concept of the novel-essay by highlighting two elements. One of these is the identification of an epistemological conflict as the main trait that allows to define the novel-essay as a literary form. The other is the possibility to establish a tradition for the novel-essay as a mid-term genre brought about by Modernity, not by Modernism, insofar as this literary form does not rely on the (somewhat abused) allegorical border of the 20<sup>th</sup> century nor on the (similarly abused) trope of the introspective narrator.

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<sup>3</sup> Serge 2012, 305.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Ercolino 2014, who strictly delimits the form and its poetic premises to a sixty – year span, and V. De Angelis, 1990, whose theory is based on authors like Mann, Musil and Broch, suggesting a German and early twentieth – century positioning of the genre.

<sup>5</sup> On Montaigne's role in the development of the essay, see Berardinelli 2002.

## 2 The Tradition of Russian Writing: (not) a Detour

The two elements set out above are indeed two sides of the same coin. In fact, to be able to propose an irreconcilable conflict between forms of knowledge as a theoretical foundation for the novel-essay genre, we need to extend its time frame somewhat, and place its symbolic root a few decades before the epistemological fracture of the turn of the century, where underlining the presence of a conflict would be all too obvious. This new time frame opens when the “essayistic turn”<sup>6</sup> starts to take place, and specifically, in Lev Tolstoy’s body of work. Whenever we mention Tolstoy, we naturally think of *War and Peace* as the one literary masterpiece that triggers the onset of novel-essay instances, with copious essayistic digressions and a main plot that fades into a full-blown philosophical treatise. However, we should remember that the relevance of such instances persisted throughout Tolstoy’s life, and thus has a crucial role in defining his poetics as a narrator.

Let us now turn to an example that is not from *War and Peace*:

The syllogism he had learnt from Kiesewetter’s *Logic*: “Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal”, had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius – man in the abstract – was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but he had always been a creature quite, quite separate from all others. He had been little Vanya, with a mama and a papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with the toys, a coachman and a nurse, afterwards with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, youth. (...) “Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all my thoughts and emotions, it’s altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die.”<sup>7</sup>

This passage is found about halfway through *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a *povest*<sup>8</sup> written between 1882 and 1886. The quote revolves around the relevant theoretical point that abstract knowledge, even when based on the rigorous observation of general facts, cannot be reconciled with the scale and values of individual experience. This point can set a conceptual precedent for the “discrepancy between sensibility and opinions” that haunts Serge, and is a recurring theme in Tolstoy’s

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<sup>6</sup> Mazzoni 2017, 316 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Tolstoy 1967, 280–281.

<sup>8</sup> The *povest*’ is a genre of the Russian narrative tradition consisting of texts that are longer (both as far as number of pages and narrated time) than an average short story or a novella, but less complex and plural than a novel.

work that fuels his many experiments of hybridisation between narrative and essayistic discourse.

Tolstoy firmly believed that the proper mission of literary mimesis was to represent the irreducible singularity of individuals, that is, the ever so slight difference in perspective and point of view that makes every human being a precious and unique phenomenon:

I am writing a history of yesterday not because yesterday was extraordinary in any way, for it might rather be called ordinary, but because I have long wished to trace the intimate side of life through an entire day. Only God knows how many diverse and diverting impressions, together with the thoughts awakened by them, occur in a single day. Obscure and confused they may be, but they are nevertheless comprehensible to our minds. If it were possible for me to recount them all so that I myself could read the tale with ease and so that others might read it as I do, a most instructive and amusing book would result; nor would there be ink enough in the world to write it, or typesetters to put it in print.<sup>9</sup>

*The History of Yesterday*, written in 1851, is considered Tolstoy's first ever attempt at literary writing, which already and clearly sets the concept of individuality at the foundation of his narrative. He remained consistent with this premise throughout the whole sixty years of his artistic career, ending with *Hadji Murat*, written between 1895 and 1904 and published posthumously in 1912. Mimesis is for individual existences and their immanent unfolding, not for general thinking. Although there surely are innate intuitive powers in the human-animal that, in Tolstoy's view, allow all individuals to discern the Good and unveil all the disguises and distortions of society, powers which push them to pursue a more general knowledge, this knowledge appears to be unmanageable.

Consequently, Tolstoy's individuals are constantly struggling to balance the urge to access a superior understanding of existence with the desire to just be with others and stay in the moment. Even the characters' intimate truths (the only ones that they can indeed conquer) can only exist as brief epiphanies and not as applicable knowledge, even when they belong to those who appear to possess the greatest insightfulness and intellectual honesty. Tolstoy's heroes are all meditative, from the Andrej Bolkonsky and Pierre Bezukhov (and Nataša in her own way) of *War and Peace* to the Nekhljudov of *Resurrection*, as well as the Anna, Levin, Karenin and Sergej Ivanovič of *Anna Karenina* and even the relatively less developed *povesti* characters, like the aforementioned Ivan Ilyich, Pozdnyšev of *The Kreutzer Sonata* and the piebald gelder Kholstomer. Nonetheless, their conversations, even when exceptional circumstances bring them close together (e.g., Andrej and Pierre's dialogue at the eve of Borodino's battle, or

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<sup>9</sup> Tolstoy 1949, 142.

that between Nekhljudov and the old man on the barge), invariably end with a frustrating swerve that cancels the effort to reach one another. The only wisdom seems to come from giving up on *thinking*. The moral codes of our everyday actions contradict systematically the general principles that we pursue, while these general principles freeze our actions into a complete paralysis. The two are not just different, they are irreconcilable; they are nothing less than mutually exclusive alternatives.

Konstantin Levin regarded his brother as a man of great intelligence and education, noble in the highest sense of the word, and endowed with the ability to act *for the common good*. But, in the depths of his soul, the older he became and the more closely he got to know his brother, the more often it occurred to him that *this ability to act for the common good, of which he felt himself completely deprived, was perhaps not a virtue but ... a lack of something* – not a lack of good, honest and noble desires and tastes, but a lack of life force, of what is known as heart, of that yearning which makes a man choose one out of all the countless paths in life presented to him and desire *that one alone*.<sup>10</sup>

Levin's brother is Sergej Ivanovitch, scholar and “professional thinker”; the very first piece of information about him is that he is as writer of essays.

### 3 The Place of the Essay

At this point, we need to quote György Lukács' letter to Leo Popper *On the Nature and Form of the Essay* (1910), for it is one of the main contributions on the essay as a genre and essayism as an intellectual exercise, as seen through their relationship with the sphere of *mimesis*. The pivotal passage in which Lukács explores the distinction between a particular-mimetic principle and an abstract-logical one contains a small, peculiar detail about the coexistence of the two principles: “both are equally effective, *but they can never be effective at the same time*”<sup>11</sup>. If someone who knows nothing about Tolstoy read in sequence the three excerpts from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *History of Yesterday* and *Anna Karenina* quoted above, they could deduce that in his worldview there is just no place for the exploration of general, abstract, essayistic thinking. They could even deduce that this kind of thinking is willingly discredited and devalued. Whenever one of his characters tries to approach the plane of general ideas, their attempts appear clumsy and futile, doomed to hilarious or grotesque results, utterly inconsequential. There is a famous passage, in *Flight from Byzanti-*

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<sup>10</sup> Tolstoy 2000, 239. The emphasis is ours.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács 2010, 20.

um, where Brodsky states that “for all its beauty, a distinct concept always means a shrinkage of meaning, cutting off loose ends. While the loose ends are what matter most in the phenomenal world, for they interweave”.<sup>12</sup> Tolstoy’s narratives convey this sentiment exactly; his mimetic discourse is devoted to the loose ends, and even the moral judgement on the characters depends ultimately on their ability to be content with their loose ends, living within the borders of what direct experiences tell them, and keeping away from the contamination of abstract schemes and structures.

Yet, Tolstoy is a thinker, an author who develops a frantic cognitive tension that manifested as an overabundant production of essays, together with journal notes, textbooks, papers and letters that do not spare any theme. His interest in history and especially the work of historians, is at the core of Isaiah Berlin’s essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, whose deep re-evaluation of Tolstoy as a rigorous and original philosopher debunks the common trope (started by Turgenev)<sup>13</sup> that describes him as an amateur thinker and ultimately naïve victim of his own philosophizing fixation, leading him to spoil good novels with useless dead weight. Quite to the contrary, Berlin recognises in Tolstoy the presence of a philosophy of history that is not at all naïve, and that proves his attitude to pursue a general knowledge of the human world as a whole:

Tolstoy’s interest in history began early in his life. It seems to have arisen not from interest in the past as such, but from the desire to penetrate to first causes, to understand how and why things happen as they do and not otherwise, from discontent with those current explanations which do not explain, and leave the mind dissatisfied, from a tendency to doubt and place under suspicion and, if need be, reject whatever does not fully answer the question, to go to the root of every matter, at whatever cost.<sup>14</sup>

As evident in all of Tolstoy’s novels, attention to individual experiences is just one half of his poetic mission, the other being the excruciating need for a general explanation of the order of all things. Tolstoy is not a modernist. He is not a man of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His world has not yet dissolved in the kaleidoscope of its representations, like Kafka’s or Joyce’s or Proust’s. He still believes that an Actual Reality is somewhere out there, beyond the warping lenses of unquestioned certainties and habits. Hard as it is to reach, it is reachable, nonetheless, not just as

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<sup>12</sup> Brodsky 1986, 31.

<sup>13</sup> See the letter he wrote to Annenkov on 14 February 1868, regarding *War and Peace*: “the historical insertions [...] is a farce and a scam” (Turgenev 1990, XX, 129); this opinion was shared by Flaubert, who wrote Turgenev to thank him for sending a copy of the novel and lamented the essayistic insertions: “he repeats himself and philosophizes!” (Flaubert 1930, VIII, 356).

<sup>14</sup> Berlin 1978, 29.

an intimate, precious and incommunicable revelation of the deep self, but as an objective, general and conceptual truth conquered by force of intellectual work; the truth about the human world and the rules that dictate the path of humankind as a great collective entity. Thus, in Tolstoy's view, there is a truth of individuals and a truth of ideas, both of which can be true but never at the same time, as Lukács would say. This is the realisation that strikes Ivan Ilyich; his "little Vanja" reality is simply incompatible with the laws of the universe, and yet, at the same time, such laws, in all their alien immeasurable scope, are not less true, inescapable, or deserving of intellectual assent: "The syllogism (...) had always seemed to him *correct*", "That Caius (...) was mortal, was *perfectly correct*", "Caius really was mortal, and *it was right* for him to die".

Facing this irreconcilable duality, this conflict of truths that is tragic because both parts are right, as Hegel would say, Tolstoy opts for a paradoxical solution. Indeed, he stops looking for a solution and embraces the duality up to a point where it becomes the foundation of an intentional and relentless poetic project. If two kinds of truth exist, both effectively contributing to the pursuit of knowledge, but cannot coexist – neither within the mimesis, because that is the exclusive dominion of individuality, nor within the treatise, because that is the exclusive dominion of abstraction –, then one can only accept to have them separately. This means two separate languages and forms that are steady in their respective otherness while joined in the same text as two halves of a single artistic goal, with no obligation to merge or concur or metaphorically correspond with each other. They share the space of the same text in the name of a link that at best can be defined as *figural*, after Auerbach, meaning two autonomous elements that can eventually partake in a play of mutual completion, each with its own truth status and no subordination to the other. In Tolstoy's case, the two sides are engaged in a mechanism of merciless mutual correction and sabotage.

## 4 A Mid-term Genre

Let us now return to Victor Serge and the opening passage. When Serge says: "In this respect, I belonged to the tradition of Russian writing", he is doing something peculiar for a writer born in 1890 and grown up in the middle of the Futurist and Modernist Europe, he is acknowledging a 19<sup>th</sup>-century *tradition*. A tradition that he sees other writers of his day involved in (some of whom he openly mentions, like Boris Pilnyak) and that has its roots in Tolstoy. The author of *War and Peace* acts as a collective and almost universal cultural background that grants the possibility to bond with strangers, like the man "of Great Russian peasant stock" that shares Serge's cell at the Lubyanka: "we spent a few pleas-

ant days discussing Marxism, the future of the USSR, the Party crises, and Tolstoy, of whom he was able to recite whole pages. I remember him lecturing me, stripped to the waist, making the movement of a reaper”.<sup>15</sup> The movement of the reaper is the movement that Levin cannot perform in the famous scene of *Anna Karenina* and which stands as a symbol of incommunicability between “the people and the intelligentsia; a hundred and fifty million on the one hand, and a few hundred thousand on the other, unable to understand each other in the most fundamental things”.<sup>16</sup> Besides the obvious thematic relevance of the reference in the context of a memoir set amid the political and intellectual struggle of post-revolutionary Russia, we can see in the foreshortened form of Serge’s passage – which assumes the patency of the reference itself – an example of this role of Tolstoy’s work as a “cosmic background radiation” in cultural form. Serge’s writing is packed with images, ideas, moral and practical principles, observations on the relationship between individuals, history and power that are drawn from a sort of Tolstoyan thesaurus.

Serge’s choice to explicitly declare his link to a 19<sup>th</sup>-century genealogy, and the familiar and almost casual attitude he shows in the use of such references, as unusual as it may appear in the context of the Western-European literature of the 1940s, is actually a document of what could be called, playing with Malcolm Bradbury’s definition, “second style of modernity”<sup>17</sup>. We are referring here to a line of 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers, somewhat marginal in literary criticism but not irrelevant, who inherited and kept alive the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism, including a well-recognisable form of intensely meditative narrative that would later be known as the novel-essay. This is the kind of novel-essay that does not take the route of dramatized essayism relying on the characters’ individual pseudo-platonic dialogues inside the mimesis (Dostoevsky’s kind, in short);<sup>18</sup> rather, it brings forward the narrator and faces the challenge of a discourse that is entirely outside and parallel to the mimesis.

We shall now list some examples.

In 1923, Viktor Shklovsky published *A Sentimental Journey. Memoirs 1917–1922*, a hybrid text which crosses the boundaries of autobiography, memoir and historical novel with essayistic insertions, and which seems to seek an answer to that very dissonance between the inclination for a detached comprehen-

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<sup>15</sup> Serge 2012, 343.

<sup>16</sup> Blok 1978, 360.

<sup>17</sup> Bradbury 1973.

<sup>18</sup> For a more extensive discussion on the theoretical basis of this distinction, see Cavalloro 2021.



sion of History as a subject matter and the propensity to engage in current events in order to gain a direct and individual (if partial) knowledge of them. A conflict that mirrors Tolstoy's discrepancy and reiterates the impossibility to solve it: "When you are falling like a stone, you shouldn't be thinking; when you are thinking, you shouldn't be falling. I confused two crafts".<sup>19</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, Vasily Grossman wrote *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*, two novels that include large essayistic diversions whose model is clearly *War and Peace*. This is true both on the thematic level (*Everything Flows*, telling the story of a man that is released from a gulag after thirty years and goes back to a completely changed country, where he no longer fits, mimics the original project of *War and Peace*, the draft *The Decembrists*, about a man who is released after spending thirty years in a labour camp in Siberia and goes back to Moscow, only to find out that a totally different society has taken over the world) and on the poetic one (*Life and Fate* famously reenacts the signature Tolstoyan alternance of war scenes and reflections, like in the sequence of tank drivers stuck during a manoeuvre, each of them represented as he focuses on his little joys and sorrows, while the German army is storming the borders and the battle of Stalingrad is about to take place).

*The Gulag Archipelago* was published in 1973; a work that displays its heavy narrative-essay hybridisation already in the subheading: *An experiment in literary investigation*. Solzhenitsyn highlights the double nature of his writing, encompassing the expressive peculiarity of both the novel (with the representation of individual lives, encounters, and emotions) and the essay (from the opening line of the *Author's Note*: "In this book there are no fictitious persons, nor fictitious events"). His constant philosophical interlocutor is Tolstoy whose novels are just like bibliographic sources of an ongoing research: "Power is a poison well known for thousands of years. If only no one were ever to acquire material power over others! (...) Remember what Tolstoy said about power? Ivan Ilyich had accepted an official position which gave him authority to *destroy any person he wanted to!*".<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-1980s, we find Svetlana Alexievich's writings, which grew under a general impulse that she describes in her personal online page (significantly titled *A search for eternal man*) as follows: "I chose a genre where human voices speak for themselves. Real people speak in my books about the main events of the age (...). I'm writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, under-

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19 Shklovsky 1984, 190.

20 Solzhenitsyn 1973, 147.

stood and remembered during the event”.<sup>21</sup> Consistent with this poetics, her works are positioned between the symbolic spaces of the novel and the essay, as in the case of *Enchanted by Death*, 1993, subheading *Documental'nye povesti* (*Documentary Stories*), or of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, 1985, which opens with this sentence: “My goal first of all is to get at the truth of those years. Of those days. Without sham feelings. Just after the war this woman would have told of one war; after decades, of course, it changes somewhat, because she adds her whole life to this memory”.<sup>22</sup> This sentence reprises almost word by word one of Tolstoy’s most famous pages on how the record of real experiences is lost to the passing of time and to the exchange of the personal memory of an event with the collective, “historical” re-telling of the same events:

Make a round of the troops immediately after a battle (...) and ask any of the soldiers and senior and junior officers how the affair went: you will be told what all these men experienced and saw (...). Two or three days later the reports begin to be handed in. Gossips begin to narrate how things happened which they did not see; finally a general report is drawn up, and on this report the general opinion of the army is formed.<sup>23</sup>

Even a novelist in many ways outlandish like Viktor Pelevin pays his respects to this line of writers. For example, in *Babylon* (1999), dedicated “To the Memory of the Middle Class”, he revives the sarcastic posture of Tolstoy’s narrator when he mocks imperial historians and their attempt to reduce history to a handful of decision “from above”: “Once upon a time in Russia there really was a carefree, youthful generation that smiled in joy at the summer, the sea and the sun, and chose Pepsi. It’s hard at this stage to figure out exactly how this situation came about (...): it would be nice to think that the Party bureaucrat who took the crucial decision to sign the contract simply fell in love with this dark, fizzy liquid with every fibre of a soul no longer sustained by faith in communism”.<sup>24</sup>

Shklovsky was born in 1893, Grossman in 1905, Solzhenitsyn in 1918, Alexievich in 1948, Pelevin in 1962. In spite of their differences – of artistic goals, viable forms and generational identities –, all of them have accepted the challenge of the genre that we call novel-essay, and all of them have pointed at Tolstoy as their model, the champion of that harsh juxtaposition of different planes of truth that demand different forms and refuse to blend in the name of some forced

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<sup>21</sup> Alexievich 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Alexievich 2017, XIII.

<sup>23</sup> Tolstoy 2010, 1312.

<sup>24</sup> Pelevin 2001, 1.

principle of poetic unity (the one to which, just a couple of years prior, Manzoni had finally surrendered.<sup>25</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

Obviously, it is not just a matter of recurring forms or quotations. The possibility to put Tolstoy in charge of a mid-term genre theory of the novel-essay (at least one variety of it) stands on a premise of strong aesthetic intentionality and formal necessity. We can move the chronological borders of the novel-essay backwards to the 1860s not because of a history of literary homages, but because those homages prove that Tolstoy's experimental hybridisations, were indeed a conscious attempt to face the early symptoms of our modernity, and not just a fortuitous anticipation of something that would belong exclusively to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tolstoy was trying to forge a symbolic answer to the questions of a time when the complexity of the human world was exploding and thousand-year-old collective institutions were crumbling down all around him. A time when grotesque and biased accounts of the Napoleonic wars were making it increasingly obvious that history could be easily manipulated into being the docile instrument of political power. A time when the uprising of 1848 had just proved that the civilised West stood on the uneven ground of laws that had lost any semblance of relation with the idea of "justice". Lastly, it was a time when utopias of better living conditions for all people were turning into social warfare that multiplied the violence of all against all, and even religion revealed its compromise with secular powers and loss of reliability as the absolute dispenser of moral norms. It was a world where the last defensible truths left standing were those hidden in the depths of individual human existences, not at all different from the reality that would later put under siege Joyce or Proust or Kafka or Musil, except that the great cognitive fracture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had not yet taken place. Therefore, amid the general dissolution of collective explanations of the universe, Tolstoy remained a solid believer that some universal truths were still somewhere out there, and that reality and its scrutiny should not be dismissed.

What we call novel-essay is a cloud of forms related to each other by recurring sets of poetic and stylistic traits derived from different traditions of various scale and longevity. As obvious as we hope it is that Tolstoy has contributed to the pool of formal options of contemporary literature, our goal is not to assert

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<sup>25</sup> See Manzoni 1984.

that all the novel-essays sitting on the shelves of our bookstores are secret great-grandchildren of the Russian family. Herewith, we wish to give some substance to the hypothesis of a change in the usual timeline of this genre, in order to grasp its poetic core instead of just focusing on the narrow selection of texts that brought it to its peak in the interwar period. Some better knowledge of this form could come from shifting its time frame reference. No more the novel-essay as the “compromise formation”<sup>26</sup> of a 20<sup>th</sup> century brought to its knees by the great cultural mourning for the death of positivism, looking for a genre that could put back together the pieces of a disrupted world and contain the dissolution of an epoch traversed by a sense of catastrophe. No more a novel-essay that is chained to the symbolic needs of those years and is required to justify its existence beyond that point in time. Rather, the novel-essay that rises from a conflictual late 19<sup>th</sup> century that has just been struck by the first cracks in the totems of Truth and Knowledge, produced both by history and the workings of its own cognitive endeavours;<sup>27</sup> a century starting to experience modernity as we still know it today, and reacting to those changes by conjuring a new literary genre. This is the form that embodies the scenario of what once was a totality of cognitive structures, breaking down into pieces drifting apart. At the same time, it embodies the will to not yet give in to ironic or resigned withdrawals from the pursuit of knowledge.

This is the very moment of disintegration of all certainties that traverses the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and coexists with the tenacious faith of people of intellect still looking for the truth. This unsolved duplicity and discrepancy embraced in its irreconcilability is precisely what may give us the answer to what the novel-essay is about and why it is still here. After all, the literary field that we can observe today seems to resonate a lot more with that distant era than with the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century period, which was so deeply sceptical and absorbed in the problems of how human language could possibly ever communicate anything, and how to even try and say something about the world and the self, since these did not exist anymore. What we see today is a symbolic ecosystem where,

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**26** For a definition of “compromise formation”, see the works of Francesco Orlando, especially Orlando 1965.

**27** In the words of Osip Mandelstam: “The great wings of the nineteenth century: its cognitive powers. The cognitive capacities of the nineteenth century had no correspondence with its will, its character, its moral growth. Like an immense cyclopean eye, the cognitive capacity of the nineteenth century turned to the past and the future. Nothing except sight, empty and rapacious, with a singular passion for devouring any object, any epoch” (Mandelstam 1975, 641).

even if we don't want to buy into the thesis of a "Return of the Real"<sup>28</sup> or a return of a realism that never really went away (see Bertoni 2007), the presence of the Real is thickening again, and claiming the attention of writers in spite of the many death sentences pronounced by Modernism and Postmodernism. In this ecosystem, the novel-essay is clearly assessing its relevance and giving us a choice. On the one hand, we could interpret it as a precise reaction to the infamous "crisis of the turn of the century", keeping its chronology strictly in the interwar period, which would force us to explain every subsequent instance as a matter of mannerism or epigonism. On the other hand, we could agree to widen the time frame and see the novel-essay as a more comprehensive answer to modernity in its broadest sense, which surely peaks in the interwar period, but does not exhaust its symbolic role in those decades; therefore, it does not need to justify its persistence, because the reality that it was meant to represent is still around us, with all its contradictions.

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<sup>28</sup> A concept brought up by Foster 1996, and discussed in Italy by Donnarumma / Policastro / Taviani 2008.

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Mimmo Cangiano

# The *Totality* that Does not Die: On the early Twentieth-century Novel-essay and two Rearticulations of Bourgeois Culture

Outlining the characteristics of the early twentieth-century novel-essay is not my purpose here. This article discusses the collapse of *totality* and its rearrangement as dealt with in some Italian modernist novel-essays and according to two different philosophical perspectives, inasmuch as the novel-essay is ideal for handling this issue but also leads to different analytical approaches.

I would like to begin in August 1906, when Giuseppe Prezzolini returned from his second stay in Paris, where he had attended Bergson's lectures. From there, he brought back to Italy the texts of a philosophy that he defined as "of contingency" (Henri Poincaré, Ernst Mach, Francois Le Roy). In Prezzolini's opinion, this philosophy was bent on denying any possible objective understanding of reality while exalting the concept of exclusively subjectivistic knowledge linked to a constant becoming (Prezzolini 1904). At approximately the same time, Giovanni Amendola published an article in the magazine *Leonardo* where he stated: "Our time has recognised the uncontrolled freedom of the particular". Amendola had thus observed an epistemological-moral degeneration that was framed precisely within the "philosophy of contingency" as defined by Prezzolini, which introduces us immediately to the *essayistic* dimension:

Our age can be called the age of the destruction of idols. [...] Now the critique addresses those abstractions that until yesterday were hegemonic: scientific laws, moral imperatives, universal principles [...]. The subjective and objective dogmatic beliefs of reality are suppressed [...]. At the start of the road we find Locke, Hume, Berkeley, [...] at the end James, Schiller, Bergson, Le Roy, Mach... [...]. Saying *I believe* and then adding that the beliefs mirror only our intimate nature, means saying with lack of clarity "I do not believe." [...] Man is now [...] deprived of any orientation, of any purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Amendola outlined a moral degeneration that centred in the context of a Nietzschean philosophy. This degeneration belongs to a Self that, after the "death of God", has become the creator of its own law but renounces that same law and even begins to declare the arbitrariness of its own beliefs. According to Amendola, "this Self is not Prometheus, it is Proteus". In Amendola's view, Proteus has

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1 Amendola 1906, 318–321.

become a dominant figure, a malign divinity set on building an indissoluble link between immanence and contingency. In the name of the “rights of the particular” and the rejection of every universal, this new link proclaims the end of the former connection between life and Values, existence and Judgments. In Europe, Amendola was not the only one taking note of the advance of this divinity; for example, a young Lukács wrote the following in 1910: “who does not want just to play with life [...] must grab this everchanging Proteus so firmly [...] that he cannot free himself anymore”.<sup>2</sup> As both Amendola and Lukács sensed, modernism is an exasperated expression of conceptual and aesthetic functions sliding towards the contingent and the “particular”, which is a basic characteristic of the modern era. At the same time, there is an equally progressive decadence of interpretative stylistic devices centred around universalistic functions pertinent to classical ontology, and of the premises of a gnoseology connected to an idea of Truth and the ethics of a collective Good together with the aesthetics of a Beautiful that participates in that Good.

Clearly, all of this can be expressed in essay form as a rejection of the very concept of “objectivity”, now brought into a subjectivistic horizon that invalidates every goal and every possible conclusive definition, bypassing the fences of aesthetics and ideologies. Thus, the essay form can certainly be interpreted as belonging to individualism or atomisation, as it causes a crisis for the supra-individual and conceptually systematic mind by suggesting a model of knowledge whose goal is to break down vertical truths and then recover them within a subjectivistic context, thus effectively removing their normative socialisation. This approach seemingly expresses self-criticism within liberal bourgeois ideology, for it limits the field of action of bourgeois conceptual abstractions to an individualistic horizon, thus both demolishing and exalting them. It demolishes them insofar as they are attributed to the personal point of view of the essayist, but, at the same time, it also exalts them, for what can liberal bourgeois epistemology best express if not precisely a reduction of truth to an individual perspective and a personal experience as well as literary style?

The crisis of the external and omniscient narrator, now following the passage from the essay form to the essay-novel, leads to the emergence (already inscribed in the form of the genre) of insignificant and contradicting impressions, followed by the inevitable shattering of the cohesive storyline, the open ending, etc. Along the same lines, the narrative with a psychological imprint produces a character that is the counterpart of the reality experienced and presented as accidentality in the essay form, a shattered individual that is prey to a subjectivity

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<sup>2</sup> Lukács 2002, 56.



completely nebulised in a dust of contrasting impressions, desires, and ideas. The collapse of any symbolic nucleus (and consequently also the possibility of narrating in any form) presents reality as a set of details that can no longer be put back in order.

According to Stefano Ercolino,<sup>3</sup> the novel-essay is an expression of a cognitive model that is certainly in crisis but set to relaunch itself well beyond the forms of sceptical subjectivism envisaged by the new gnoseology, that is, towards the representation of a possible *totality*. If this is true, the novel-essay stands out as a symbol of the crisis of modernity as conveyed by philosophy, while attempting at the same time to overcome that crisis... by representing it, which applies to both directions of the novel-essay we are going to present. It is an allusion to the need for a cognitive synthesis at the very moment of its collapse, and we would even venture to say by way of its collapse. Whereas the historical novel and the *Bildungsroman* had been a narrative (and ideological) expression of the bourgeoisie at the time of its revolutionary phase, the novel-essay represents the recovery of the *totality* in crisis through the symbolic forms that allude to the dissolution of that same totality. Outside of philosophy, the above refers to how the bourgeoisie managed to represent itself as a universal class at the very moment that the concept of universalism started lapsing into a crisis, making it *problematic* to express bourgeois values as universal (especially as the proletariat class is gaining self-awareness).

This is the very history of modernism, within the framework according to which modernism not only represents the crisis of the platonic-Christian-scientist totalities, but also the attempt to reformulate that totality in a cultural way, that is, sheltered from awareness of the dialectical relationship between culture and praxis, according to the concept of autonomous culture. As we shall now see, modernism set forth two contrasting ways of rearticulating this shattered totality, both of which, however, assumed an autonomy of the cultural sphere. Our task is to avoid this, otherwise we would end up evaluating modernism modernistically, that is, by following the ideological dictates of modernism itself, which would cause us to lose sight of the historical connection between modernist *topoi* and some of the great ideological-social issues of the times. One among many examples is given by Giovanni Papini, who would defend nationalism as a barrier against abstract generalisations, which implies that the attack on universal ideas that pertains to modernism would be used as an ideological tool supporting nationalist intentions. If the so-called “philosophy of contingency” became the picklock that would tear apart the universal certainties

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3 See Ercolino 2014.

of the old philosophy tending to metaphysics or scientism (materialism included), the political equivalent of this is identified here with the tendency to forced universality that would go on to characterise democracy and socialism:

democratic, egalitarian, progressive politics are one of the manifestations of the mathematical and physical spirit. (...) The tendency to generalize and universalize (...), the love of equality and universality (which in politics is internationalism) (...). A democrat is a man who seeks to abolish all differences between men.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the refusal of universalistic thought, seen as a tool to bring the different back to the same, attacks modernistically the unity created by conceptual thought as an arbitrary and fictional construction, and then connects nationalistically the homeland to the preservation of the “particular” under attack.

That is to say that modernism cannot be considered only as an epistemological theory or an artistic phenomenon, for it should be identified as the cultural logic of a precise historical moment, within which attacking concepts pertinent to universality and ontology is not necessarily progressive, as seen in the Papini example.

The historical context in which such modernism developed in Italy is connected to the so-called “failed Risorgimento” (or “betrayed Risorgimento”). Indeed, the perception of a failed Risorgimento (like, north of the border, the decline of the Hapsburg Empire) represented the acme of the intellectual disenchantment directly preceding Heidegger’s “fundamental crisis” which would detonate with modernism. As De Sanctis puts it, it is the loss of a direction of travel which, together with its vanishing utopia, leads to the abandonment of any hope for epistemological authenticity and social organicity, leaving in its wake only a fragmented image turning into a reflection on the uselessness of any ideology and conceptualisation (as is the case in De Sanctis’ *L’uomo di Guicciardini*). This is the central theme of Pirandello’s decisive Italian modernist novel *The Old and The Young* (1909, published in volume form in 1913), a novel that not only picks apart the new modernist *episteme*, but also identifies the historical reasons in which it arose.

Not surprisingly, Pirandello thus began to deconstruct the formalising capacity of the external narrator while describing a political scenario devoid of any common purpose, made up only of individual, contingent, and personal interests. In other words, Pirandello connected the political and moral crisis of post-unification Italy with the emergence of a modernist type of thinking that supported the epistemological impossibility of shared values and truths. Here,

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<sup>4</sup> Papini 1963, 184–186.

what appears to be narrative realism is indeed subordinated to a myriad of intradiegetic impressions which minimise the external narrator's ability to formalise (this had already happened in part with Praga's *Memorie del Presbiterio* and according to a procedure which would be carried to an extreme in Palazzeschi's *riflessi*). Pirandello's entanglement of intradiegetic impressions and interpretations reduces what was supposed to be an objective narrative to a flow of opinions (remindful of Nietzsche's "there are no facts, only interpretations"). First and foremost, the plot of this narrative strategy entails the beginning of a conceptual crisis for the unitary purpose of any given political group. Emblematically, the novel's highly contrasting characters (supporters of the ancient regime, liberals in power with the Historical Left, socialists) emphasise the lack of said unitary purpose as part of the absence of a shared value system. From Pirandello's point of view, psychological fragmentation is followed by social fragmentation; the former is the novel's true main character. Each of the characters has their own political reasons, which differ because they originate from different personal motivations, as individual interests have taken the place of shared programmes, meaning that psychological motivations have replaced historical-social ones. A character's right to their own contingent point of view (which we would define as 'essayistic') causes the crisis of supra-individual values by introducing a lack of cohesion which destroys every possible supra-individual symbolic element typical of the realistic historical novel.

This is precisely what Pirandello himself had defined in 1908 as a *humorous perspective*:

Art, like all ideal or illusory constructions, also tend to fix life; it fixes it in one moment or in various given moments – the statue in a gesture, the landscape in a temporary immutable perspective. But – what about the perpetual mobility of successive perspectives? What about the constant flow in which souls are? Art generally abstracts and concentrates; that is, it catches and represents the essential and characteristic ideality of both men and things. Now it seems to the humorist that all this over-simplifies nature and tends to make life [...] too coherent.<sup>5</sup>

It is the collapse of equality between sign and substance, an attack against any objectivity which refuses to accept its own transitoriness, resulting in the crisis of the classical Cartesian notion of subject and the language that had been used to express that subject in a stable way together with its relationship with reality. This perspective represented the starting point for an entire generation.

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<sup>5</sup> Pirandello 1974, 152.

However, there was another type of modernism which refused to accept the new sceptical and nihilistic horizon as a positive development; albeit the former was forced to function within the latter. We are referring to a subordinate line of modernism. Indeed, although a symptomatic analysis of the new existential and cultural condition shows modernist intellectuals to be in absolute agreement over the identification of certain predominant and intertwined issues, judgments regarding the new cultural horizon differed. While in Italy a writer like Palazzeschi analysed the theoretical ramifications of this matter, immediately finding a positive value in it, this second front recognised the new epistemological horizon with a nihilistic tendency as the cultural counterpart of a new form of social organisation. For example, according to Giovanni Boine, “we are witnessing the triumph of the forces of ambiguity”, a new reign of relativity expressed by the new excessive power of money and the disappearance of previous certainties due to the establishment of an economy entirely based on the value of exchange.

It is not by mere coincidence that Scipio Slataper was an attentive reader of Ibsen and Boine; authors like him tragically attempted to recreate the possibility of stable values through culture and art:

Without the concept, life almost does not exist for me, it is chaos, a swirling fog, a muddled anguish [...] But if we identify life with thought, thought is rather like the enchanted knight of the legend [...] mounted on a demon-horse that can shake him off whenever it pleases.<sup>6</sup>

“And how could I stop what I found to be naturally prepared to flee?”<sup>7</sup> answered back Palazzeschi in his unfinished novel entitled *Vita* [Life].

It is precisely here that a rift opened in the heart of the Italian modernist novel-essay. From the Nietzschean side, we shall take as an example Palazzeschi’s *Il codice di Perelà* and Soffici’s *La famiglia Turchi*, and from the anti-Nietzschean side, Boine’s *Il peccato* and Slataper’s *My Karst*. We will thus find ourselves at the centre of what we usually define as the contrast between *Florentine irrationalism* and *La Voce moralism*. We are referring to the need for a *ubi consistam* against what Amendola termed “the uncontrolled freedom of the particular”.

Robert Musil, the writer who best understood the epistemological revolution which we are describing, wrote that this new intellectual approach exists in a texture of smoke and subjunctives.<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, Musil had not read Palazzeschi

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<sup>6</sup> Boine 1997, 127–128.

<sup>7</sup> Palazzeschi 2005, vol. II, 1245.

<sup>8</sup> See Musil 2011, 11: “Such possibilists are said to inhabit a more delicate medium, a hazy medium of mist, fantasy, daydreams, and the subjunctive mood”.

schi's novel (*Il codice di Perelà*), written in 1911, whose main character is indeed made of smoke, and where the other characters make futile attempts to give shape to this smoke, now that reality itself appears formless. This novel by Palazzeschi was the first attempt to create a *mimesis* of reality experienced entirely within the context of contingency. The elusiveness of the Perelà character, the man made of smoke, expresses a critical charge against any discourse where power tends to segregate people with the formal logic of fixed schematisations. The issue here is that modernism does have its own formal logic, whose starting assumptions can at least be identified with this Nietzschean attitude, because it tends to hypostatise existence as a contradiction that cannot be corrected. This position arises from a purely epistemological and cultural interpretation of the real, meaning that it does not consider the possibility of any modification based on a changing historical process; this makes it perfectly coherent with an ideology set to hide the connection between structure and superstructure, as Marx puts it. In other words, modernism does not see the impossibility of reaching objectivity as a cultural counterpart to what is happening on the historical and social level; rather, it hypostatizes such impossibility as an anthropological and natural discovery which does not allow for further changes (this "nature" is seen in the passage from Pirandello cited above). Thus, Becoming becomes the only Being possible, but the continuous movement that this would suppose is only the immortalised and motionless image of the modernist movement; as such, it marks the end of all objectivity in philosophy and the crisis of classicist and imitative aesthetics in art, which is a fundamental bridge towards the novel-essay. This is how a normal historical limit such as the psychological and cultural implications of a historical situation came to be seen as an anthropological limit. The apparently progressive function of a cultural attack against any reification of nineteenth-century bourgeois common sense was reduced to the absolutisation of the epistemological perspective itself. Getting back to Pirandello:

Tomorrow a humorist could picture Prometheus on the Caucasus in the act of pondering sadly his lit torch and perceiving in it, at last, the fateful cause of his infinite torment. He has finally realized that Jupiter is no more than a vain phantasm, a pitiable deception, the shadow of his own body projecting itself as a giant in the sky, precisely because of the lighted torch he holds in his hand. Jupiter could disappear only on one condition, on condition that Prometheus extinguish his candle, that is, his torch. But he does not know how, he does not want to, he cannot.<sup>9</sup>

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9 Pirandello 1974, 141.

Prometheus, in order to free himself, must understand that Jupiter is exclusively a formative and conceptualising objectivity created by his civilising anxiety (the torch) from his own mind, and which opposes the eternal flow of nature. However, as Amendola had warned, it is not Prometheus but Proteus, because in this perspective the psychological reifications of a specific historical moment become a *condition humaine*. The same thing happens in *La famiglia Turchi*, where Soffici outlined the possibility of *rebirth* connected to Bergsonian contingency:

Sometimes I imagine that in some infinitely ancient time life flowed with a divine rhythm, moving and winding as if dancing, and that suddenly something stiffened, grew cold, and broke the elasticity of movement; and I believe that this something was like a question: Why? Where? How? And that from then on [...] evil begins.<sup>10</sup>

Here, the contingency perspective is linked to an image of “life” which, in line with Bergson, breaks open the gates and limits of intellectual constructions attempting to lock it up inside the “forms” of the mind. The culturalist immobilisation of historical progress, the main characteristic of bourgeois thought, no longer involves the proposition of immutable and absolute values, as it is now based on the premise of a continuous *becoming*, an unstoppable mobility which precludes any calcification but excludes forward movement. Naturally, the latter is not excluded at the level of real utility (for example, science must advance as it is necessary for production), but it is at the generalised level of philosophical theory, where intellectuals (and essayist-novelists) regain prestige by becoming the guardians and revealers of the new gnoseology. They are those who have “understood the game” and thus bring the sceptical assumptions of epistemology back to the level of a (still objectifying) general law. In short, the destruction of the norms of objectivity hides an objectification, but an objectification of a different kind can also be found in the tragic ethical positions that make up the subordinate line of modernism.

In this subordinate position, we find the novel-essay of the so-called *La Voce moralism*. In the novel *Il peccato*, Boine goes through a conversion from the ancient abyss of Being that religious experience is for him to the new, I quote, “torment of contingency”. Mr. B., the main character, is torn between the opposite poles of order and disorder right from the start. The whole novel is built upon a continuous counterpoint, such as the “doing” in the community versus the desire for pure contemplation and the necessity of “having to be” versus the sensation of a continuous mutation of the “geometric relationships between things” that “sinks you beyond the world of rigid forms and conventional tradition into

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<sup>10</sup> Soffici 1997, vol. II, 11–12.

the humid hazy mystery of Chaos".<sup>11</sup> Additional themes include the sense of law and tradition versus the constant presence of the sea as a metaphor of the indomitable movement of reality and the connection between the possibility of a coherent conceptualisation of reality and a coherent (organic) narration:

You have allowed yourself to break the rules and the customs as if they were unnecessary fetters; but they are the levees on the river, they are wisdom and experience, [...] you are denying tradition, you are destroying security, the human faith of all these honest people who toil patiently from day to day, [...] and hold up your world. Your true law [...] which you see and call meanness; law enshrined in codes.<sup>12</sup>

Only the space of contradiction remains:

with the broken/real hardness of contradictory life [...]. This is reality: this horrible tangle. Not the hierarchies that I establish and the distinctions of sound logic. [...] and below my contemplating self lies the great mass, the inexhaustible conflagration of the particular and its contradictions. [...] without the abstractness of moral law or composed thought to guide them.<sup>13</sup>

The form that opposes it (what Mr. B. calls the *Code*) is then the Kierkegaardian embankment of the choice that again determines hierarchies between things and leads life, the unstoppable flow that wants everything to be accidental, back to meaning.

While functioning within the same immanentist perspective, this sector hence tried to maintain the possibility of a cognitive objectivity connected to the re-elaboration of the relationship between *Sein and Sollen*, that is to say, connected to the horizon of ethics that realises value again, beyond contingency, in the form of a moral imperative. In short, by referring from the sphere of immanence and subjectivity to the possibility of a *Heimat*, this side represents one of the highest points of bourgeois criticism to the progressive establishment of modernist ideology.

We find a similar process in *My Karst* (originally *My Karst and My City*), where Slataper used the relationship between the Karst and Trieste to allegorise his changes in poetics, correlating them with the progressive conquest of a stable identity. In the first part, Slataper re-elaborates the vitalist myth of the fusion of subject and nature, a myth to be rejected because it is extraneous to the progressive moral advancement that will lead humanity to realise its own Self. Truth/

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<sup>11</sup> Boine 1983, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Boine 1983, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Boine 1983, 55.

identity can no longer be given to humanity within the nostalgic space of nature as life (the space of the Karst); rather, it will be conquered in the social horizon of the very metropolis which destroyed it. “The countryside is not for me. Every action of mine must correspond to the actions of others. I want the city”.<sup>14</sup>

The first such attempt, aesthetic par excellence, is made in the desire to revitalise the city with the karstic element. After climbing Mount Kâl, the purifying principle of the obstacle posited by Hebbel, which definitively separates the individual from the myth of intact nature and protects them from *dispersing* in it, the protagonist arrives in a city, Trieste, where the disintegration process has advanced to the point of easily incorporating the vitalism of the Karst, leading the *hero* to the threshold of a perfectly bourgeois life:

From the café where I drank *petess* on the evening of my descent erupts a group of bearded men dressed as women: big-bellied women and other uncouthness, shouting, jumping around with lanterns and sticks. I draw aside. I'm glad that I have a nice clean bed at home, with no bugs in it [...]. I went to the Credit to ask for a job.<sup>15</sup>

A second climb, this time on Mount Secchieta, will later reformulate the implementation principle from an ethical point of view, focusing the *poet's* action no longer in terms of vitalist redemption, but within the boundaries of moral duty: “even if the whole city and its weariness are forever in you and you cannot escape, it doesn't matter; you must go up, this alone is true”.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, individuals must become aware of ethics before they can understand the pain of the “particular” (that which is relative) which causes the need for ethics. The indissoluble cycle of ethics and relativism, their tragic opposition, will allow us to open our eyes to a common experience which artistic *expression* has the task of redeeming.

Nevertheless, although this second sector indeed conceived the lack of totality of the first side as the compulsory form of a new totality (albeit given in the negative), it itself fell into a false totality. A hard question indeed arises, which we will get to below. The connections of the para-nihilist cultural horizon with social modifications are evident, especially when it comes to the phenomena of work specialisation and exchange. 'God' as the possibility of conferring symbolic meaning upon immanence dies just when workers can no longer see the overall product of their work because they are focused on its parts, its details. By the same token, value hierarchies collapse and relativism triumphs just

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<sup>14</sup> Slataper 1950, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Slataper 1982, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Slataper 1982, 76.



when the possible value equivalence of goods is realised, for everything flows, and they are definitively separated from their use value and related instead to the fluctuating value of money. So why did almost all the main interpreters of the oppositional discourse end up extolling as its space some of the most compromised social norms of that very same system? We are referring here to Slataper's nation and Boine's army, among others. Here, the ethics which aims at the reconstruction of the broken *totality* functions on the level of a purely formal overcoming of the system in which it operates, and as such ends up by arriving at the intellectual reproduction of the system itself. Social fragmentation is only overcome by the ways of a *whole* including neither the historical nor the pragmatic perspective, thus re-proposing the same desire for stasis found at the basis of the bourgeois social functioning mode. The above is the reason why the critique expressed by *this* modernism towards capitalist modernity found it almost always utopian to counter past social orders, often marked by feudalism, which were equally compromised by then. Bourgeois thought formalised in both cases an idea of stasis, whether it is the "flow" of the contingentist side (a still kind of flow, because it would correspond to life's natural way of being) or the dream expressed by the subordinate side to restore "certainty" (Eagleton's "viceroy for God").<sup>17</sup> A motionless truth and an equally motionless flow. This is how, as in the title of this paper, *totality* does not die. However, what totality are we talking about? What survives is only a false totality which develops in the clearly ideological perspective of a persistent and strongly defended culturalist autonomy, a cultural horizon separated from social praxis, that is, one of the fundamental hidden aims of modernism as an ideology.

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<sup>17</sup> Eagleton 2014, 44.

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Silvia Cucchi

## Thinking and Narrating Eroticism in Italy in the Sixties

“Enjoy it without restraint!” “Forbidden to forbid!” “Make love not war!”. These are some of the best-known and most emblematic slogans used during the 1968 demonstrations in Italy. They reflect the centrality assumed in those years by erotic desire and a sexuality freed from taboos. What took place in those months was the climax of a long questioning process of the Catholic-bourgeois mentality and its main institutions (the family), which began to take hold in Italy at the end of the 1950s and continued throughout the following decade.<sup>1</sup> During the 1960s, the attempt to modernise customs was accompanied by a genuine process of eroticisation of the Italian cultural system. Advertisements and magazines began to show sexualised bodies in skimpy clothes; niche publications were also created, almost exclusively, for a male audience, such as “Playmen” and “Kent”.<sup>2</sup> Television and cinema established themselves as the “means of communication that contributed most to the eroticisation of the media system in our country”.<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, in fact, artistic productions based on sexual and erotic themes multiplied, including everything from popular cinema to the sub-genres of Italian entertainment, auteur cinema (Bertolucci, Tinto Brass, Pasolini), and pornography, this last being launched in those years,<sup>4</sup> thus breaking free from a censorious mentality which, in previous decades, had considered sexuality and its representation as a taboo. This process of liberalisation of social mores aroused in many Italian intellectuals the need to question it theoretically and critically, leading to discussions and the re-thinking of certain reflections on eroticism and sexuality that had spread or were spreading internationally in those years. We are referring to texts such as, to name a few, those by Wilhelm Reich (*Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf*, 1945; *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 1946, translated into Italian only in the 1960s), Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*, 1955; *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 1964), Georges Bataille (*L'érotisme*, 1957), René (Men-

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1 In fact, this process would come to fruition after 1968 with the acquisition of some important civil rights (in 1970, the Workers' Statute and the divorce law, and in 1978, the “Basaglia” law and the abortion law). See Crainz, 2003; Castronovo, 2006; Magagnoli, 2019.

2 See Maina 2019; Rigola, 2021.

3 Rigola 2021, 29.

4 See Ortoleva 2002 and Ortoleva 2008; Maina/Zecca, 2014.

*songe romantique et vérité romanesque*, 1961). This attempt to theorise and take a position on such a powerful and delicate subject gave rise to a heated debate which took place mainly in magazines (“Nuovi Argomenti”, “La fiera letteraria”, “Paragone”) and newspapers (“L’Unità”, “Il Corriere della Sera”), and which many authors would later assimilate in their literary writing. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to provide an account of the main theoretical elements around which the debate on eroticism was built in Italy in the 1960s. On the one hand, we will try to understand how Italian thinking interacted with international theoretical reflection and, on the other, we will observe how some reflections on sexuality and eroticism were transposed at a narrative level by many of the authors who took part in this critical debate. Our focus will be on some of Luciano Bianciardi’s texts (*I sessuofili*, *La solita zuppa*), which show the author’s perspective on eroticism and the instrumentalisation of sexuality in vogue in those years.

## 1 Against Repressive Morality

In Italy, the debate on the symbolic function of desire in society developed in response to an international trend that had already been placing sexuality at the centre of the public and sociological debate. An example of this is the two Kinsey reports<sup>5</sup> on the sexual behaviour of American men and women, written between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, which were followed by similar studies carried out in England and France.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the 1960s that Italy tried to tackle the question of sexuality from both a sociological and a theoretical-ideological point of view,<sup>7</sup> as demonstrated by the proliferation of enquiries into the relations between eroticism and cinema and literature at the beginning of the decade.<sup>8</sup> The starting point for many of the reflections on eros and sexuality in Italy and abroad is Freud. The father of psychoanalysis was the first to link the concept of repression to the development of civilisation, in addition to emphasising the centrality of the sexual element in personal development and

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5 Kinsey 1948 and 1953.

6 Chesser 1956; Rémy Woog 1960.

7 See Pasolini’s *Comizi d’amore* (1965), or the inquiry made in 1969 by “Novella 2000” about the sexual behaviour of Italian women.

8 See *Inchiesta “Sesso e letteratura”*, edited by Luigi Capelli, “Corriere Lombardo”, 1961, no. 11–12 and 18–19; *Otto domande sull’erotismo in letteratura*, “Nuovi Argomenti”, July–October 1961, no. 51–52; *Inchiesta L’erotismo nel cinema*, edited by Luigi De Marchi, “Film selezione”, 1962, no. 9, 10, 11, 12.

the presence of sexuality from earliest childhood. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), he argued that human progress always comes at the cost of repressing or sublimating instincts, i. e., their distorted satisfaction. In the struggle between the 'pleasure principle' and the 'reality principle', the latter prevails, resulting in the identification of civilisation and neurosis. This dualistic perspective, which creates a profound separation between the sexual and cultural dimensions, is compounded in Italy by the influence of religious morality, which has a significant impact on the way people experience sexuality and think about eroticism. Indeed, in those years, many reflections by intellectuals pointed at the centrality of Catholicism in the development of a repressive and sexophobic mentality in Italy. The enquiry of "Nuovi Argomenti", for example, addressed as many as four questions out of eight to issues related to the influence of Catholicism in the current perception of eroticism and in the past. They included the concept of sexual taboo and sin in relation to carnal acts, the changes in the representation of eroticism before and after the advent of Christianity, and the opposite relationship that science and religion establish with sex, one including it in the cultural system as an integral part, the other excluding it drastically. The intellectual Luigi De Marchi described how the conception of sexuality changed in relation to religion. In *Sesso e civiltà: dalla crisi della sessuofobia alla riforma sessuale* (1960), he provided a history of sexuality in the Western world, identifying the transition from the ancient to the Christian world as decisive, the transition from the ancient to the Christian world, insofar as it is characterised by the introduction of a sexophobic conception of sex creating a split in the individual "between ethical existence and psychophysiology",<sup>9</sup> between the erotic psyche and morality.

Later, George Bataille, one of the main theorists of eroticism, conceived sexual desire in relation to the concept of forbiddance. In his essay *L'Érotisme*, he explained eroticism by using the concept of *interdiction*. According to Bataille, during the centuries, Western societies developed their own idea of civilisation from a set of paradigms and prohibitions whose purpose was to control and exclude violence from civil life, the first of which is the prohibition of incest. As stated by Lévi Strauss, incest can be considered as the first truly great interdiction in human history, leading man from a state of nature to a state of culture. However, the presence of a prohibition, whether on an individual or collective level, invariably produces in the individual the desire to break it, so that eroticism is developed precisely "from the inextricable association between sexual

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<sup>9</sup> De Marchi 1960, 47.

pleasure and prohibition”,<sup>10</sup> and the sexual life of humans should be brought back into the sphere of the illicit rather than the licit. This oppositional dimension between eroticism and reality, inherent in Bataille’s conception, was observed in all its destructive power by Moravia. In his interview with Jean Dufлот *Qu’est-ce que l’érotisme?* the Italian writer captured the mystical dimension of this vision of eros: “Erotism and mysticism reject the world of values by annihilating them in ecstasy; but religious ecstasy leads to self-obliteration, erotic ecstasy to the obliteration of the other. [...] Eroticism seems to be a form of knowledge that destroys reality as it discovers it. In other words, it is possible to know reality through eroticism; but at the price of the complete and irreparable destruction of reality itself”.<sup>11</sup> In the same interview, Moravia explained his own conception of eroticism, which can be seen in many of his novels, and which is at odds with Bataille, who sees eros not as opposed to reality but rather as the most natural means “of reaching reality, [...] the bridge that a being in despair throws between the world and himself, wildly”.<sup>12</sup>

Parallel to this “existentialist-religious” perspective, other schools of thought were also gaining ground in Italy, attempting to merge Freud’s conception of eros with Marxism. The theories of Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich were quite popular in those years. Although they were formulated in the 1930s, they had a disruptive diffusion only in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to the Italian translation of Reich’s books (*L’irruzione della morale sessuale coercitiva*, 1932 and *La rivoluzione sessuale* 1936, were translated into Italian in 1972 and 1963). Luigi De Marchi, Reich’s main advocate, also contributed to the dissemination of his thought.<sup>13</sup> Starting from Freud’s latest reflections, Reich made a ruthless critique of capitalist societies, responsible for the neurosis and unhappiness of the masses because based on a morality that negates sex and represses all sexual impulses. The ultimate expression of these patriarchal and authoritarian societies is the institution of the family, founded on monogamy and governed by the law of the father (master). For the Austrian psychoanalyst, this condition of repression is perpetuated through an oppressive form of education based on guilt, which transforms amorous pleasure into anguish. Since sexual activity is at the centre of man’s psychic functioning, this coercive mechanism hinders the development of the individual’s personality, making the masses subservient to those in power. According to Reich, the only way to free humankind from this oppressive condi-

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<sup>10</sup> Bataille 1957, 289.

<sup>11</sup> Moravia 1970, 102. See Moravia 1969, 252–255.

<sup>12</sup> Moravia 1970, 102.

<sup>13</sup> Reich’s thought had a controversial reception in Italy, and was criticised by many intellectuals; See Marzuoli 1963; Bini 1966.

tion is to bring about a revolution based on freedom from sexual moralism and religious mysticism, abolish marriage as a coercive sexual relationship, and recognise the natural right to satisfy the need for carnal love. According to De Marchi, Reich's perspective was the starting point for interpreting the process of liberalisation of customs and sexual expression. Although the Italian psychoanalyst profoundly criticised the repression caused by a sexophobic education, he was lukewarm about judging the massified eroticism of those years in a positive way:

I would like to make it clear that it is obviously not the case that we should rejoice at the often anaffective and serialised forms that [the erotic explosion] so often takes. Observing this form, whether at the level of the sexual freedom of certain juvenile circles, or at the level of the press and mass entertainment, one is often struck by the fear that the traditional split between spirit and flesh risks perpetuating itself in a new form, merely changed in sign: devaluation of the spirit and exaltation of the flesh in a purely physiological sense, by the same rampant mechanistic materialism.<sup>14</sup>

Against this split between morality and body, which does nothing but perpetuate a repressive morality and which had already been criticised in the volume *Sesso e civiltà*, De Marchi imagined, in line with Reich's thought, a future where sexuality can be free from any form of coercion or taboo. In order to reach this goal, it is necessary to educate people to freedom and abolish repressive judgments:

As far as I am concerned, I am certainly not an advocate of a certain mechanistic and perverse eroticism that prevails today, but I believe that in this, as in any other field, freedom (i. e. responsibility) can be educated only in freedom. Not the indiscriminate and pathogenic repression, but the decanting of morbid elements, the evocation, even partial and occasional, of emotional participation, can initiate the individual to the reconquest of natural sexuality, which – as I said at the beginning – is unitary in its psycho-physical components, limits aggressiveness, makes us brothers and is poetic.<sup>15</sup>

Another philosopher extremely influenced by Reich's thought was Herbert Marcuse, whose theories became very widespread in Europe and the United States as well as Italy. One of the pivotal points of his reflection is the concept of "repressive desublimation", formulated in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, which gave an interpretation of the new relationship established by power between the principles of pleasure and reality:

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14 De Marchi 1970, 39.

15 De Marchi 1970, 42.

The range of socially permitted pleasures has been greatly expanded, but through them the pleasure principle is reduced and deprived of those instances which are irreconcilable with the established society [...] The loss of consciousness due to the freedoms of gratification granted by an unfree society gives rise to a happy consciousness that facilitates the acceptance of the misdeeds of this society [...] In light of the cognitive function of certain forms of sublimation, the “desublimation” that spreads so rapidly in advanced industrial society reveals its truly conformist function.<sup>16</sup>

According to Marcuse, a refined and evolved form of authoritarianism and social control would be accomplished under the guise of increased tolerance and freedom (in the erotic field, but not only). Its tendency to serialise and conform the behaviour of the masses would prevent the maturation of the individual personality, which is essential in the development and evolution of its impulses. The eroticisation of society and the liberalisation of customs should therefore be interpreted as a strategy implemented by power to perpetuate its authoritarian dominance.

Marcuse’s point of view would later be assimilated and critically reworked by many Italian intellectuals, especially Marxist. One of these was Franco Fortini, who, in a “Nuovi Argomenti” survey, expressed a conception of eroticism very close to Marcuse’s thought in relation to the coercive dynamics of capitalism. Defining eroticism as “the most vulgar and accessible of taboos” (Fortini, 1961, 38), Fortini emphasised that the attention paid to the sexual question in those years was not a symptom of a liberalisation of customs; he rather maintained that it was a front for a deeper and more stratified exercise of power acting at the economic level and not destined to change:

Every relatively rigid society probably tends to establish a “scale of visibility” of prohibitions; and therefore, only if sexual-eroticism has been made the scapegoat or the most visible taboo of a society, can the latter pretend to fear, for its own institutions, the “unrestraint” o freedom. [...] Let’s not deceive cinema or advertising, nor let’s mistake some limited sectors (such as the upper middle class or artistic environment) for the reality of a productive society. In offices and factories, at least in Italy, the public removal of the erotic and its repressive containment in the sphere of the private life make truly archaic forms of sexual-erotic tension persist [...]. Anything but freedom or reasonableness [...]. The relationship between social-economic repression in the world of profit [...] and apparent non-repression and apparent freedom, is actually invigorated, in the world of erotica. All the official and clerical prudery, the censorship and its farces, are an elementary and even crude stratagem, a rear-guard skirmish in which the men of “progress” have allowed themselves to be caught up, thus complicit. And today, for me, those who preach sexual freedom are little less than reactionaries. Substantial tolerance in matters of sex is made possible by

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16 Marcuse 1968 94–95.



the certainty of the effectiveness of the true taboos, the economic-social ones. For me, there is no desirable “freedom” or “reasonableness” other than those that help to read sexual prohibitions from an economic-social perspective.<sup>17</sup>

Fortini’s clearly criticises the optimistic attitude of those considering eroticism as a disalienating and subversive possibility for society; this presumed freedom of eros is impossible, because it does not act at all social levels and is not associated with a real economic-political change. Roberto Roversi and Giovanni Scalia followed this same line of thought in their answers to the inquiry *L’eroismo nel cinema* published in the magazine “Film Selezione”. When asked about the possible reasons for the spread of eroticism in cinema and the arts (which De Marchi connects either to a possible reaction to sexophobic morality or to a product of the neo-capitalist “liberalism” of those years), the two intellectuals agreed that the phenomenon of liberalisation of customs taking place in Italian society was not the expression of real freedom, hiding instead a new and deeper exercise of power; “eroticism is [...] the expression of the will for power of a ruling class, it represents the confirmation of its a-morality, its economic hunger, the plurality of its ramifications, its mimetic abilities, its lack of scruples, of courage”. Eroticism is encouraged ‘as a spectacle’ by the very economic forces above us; it is the new bread thrown into the circus”.<sup>18</sup> Parallel to this observation, Scalia’s reflection on the effects produced on the individual by the media, with this hyper-exposure of sexuality and eroticism, introduced the concept of “emotional, aesthetic and intellectual underconsumption”; a slow but inexorable process of disempowerment and “limitation of the transformative and creative freedom of the immense sexual heritage”,<sup>19</sup> which ends up by conditioning even the private life of the individual. Anticipating some elements of the Lacanian “discourse of the capitalist”,<sup>20</sup> Scalia argued that the overexposure of sex in the media produces a gradual weakening of its symbolic value within the individual imagination. Cinema contributes to this process of devaluation in the first place, but so do art and literature.

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<sup>17</sup> Fortini 1961 38–40.

<sup>18</sup> Roversi 1962, 36. Understanding contemporary eroticism in this way would lead Roversi to declare to be paradoxically in favour of censorship, as the only true instrument to show the new generations a “clash of powers, a momentary demystification of an alliance, an exhibition of contradictions” (Fortini 1961, 38–40).

<sup>19</sup> Scalia 1962, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Lacan 1972, 40–51.

## 2 From Theory to Text

Besides the public debate, many of these reflections on eroticism and the liberalisation of sexual customs found expression in the literary works of several authors. As an example, Moravia's narrative reserved a central role for erotic desire and sexuality (*Agostino, La romana, Io e lui, La cosa e altri racconti*); in *La noia* (1961), sex is experienced by the protagonist as a dimension that alienates him from everyday life against the tedium that makes him indifferent to things. In this novel, eroticism is narrated and perceived as an *interdiction*, a different dimension incompatible with Dino's (bourgeois) social condition. It is no coincidence that the object of his desire is a girl much younger than him who is from a lower social class. A novel in some respects very similar to Moravia's is Buzzati's *Un amore* (1963). Here too, in line with Bataille's conception, sexuality and eros continue to be experienced as forbidden dimensions and excluded from the protagonist's social reality. For Buzzati, it is as if Dorigo's belonging to the bourgeoisie prevented him from fulfilling his sexuality within his milieu; only with a young proletarian prostitute will he be able to freely realise his desire. Besides this dynamic, the novel faithfully reproduces the Girardian theory (formulated in those years) of the triangular desire,<sup>21</sup> where the arrival of a potential competitor in the relationship between the protagonist and Laide deeply shakes Dorigo, arousing in him an unbridled jealousy that will transform his love into a burning obsession.

An interesting transposition of the theoretical reflection on eroticism into a narrative form was made by Luciano Bianciardi in his "erotic" short stories,<sup>22</sup> written between 1961 and 1971, where he criticised the cultural system of the 1960s and warned of the controversial effects of the sexualisation of society. While writing these stories, he collaborated with various non-conformist magazines ("Playmen", "ABC", "Kent"), siding in favour of the great civil battles for

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<sup>21</sup> In *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961), Girard defines the very nature of desire as mimetic, i.e., rooted in the imitative principle that is at the basis of every relationship between individuals. According to Girard, one always desires what is desired by others. The very existence of desire is determined by the presence of two human beings who desire the same object; the relationship between the desiring and the desired is therefore not linear but triangular, since desire is not conveyed by the intrinsic qualities of what is desired, but by the fact that another person (whom Girard defines as a "mediator") also desires the same thing and attempts to possess it. See Girard, 1961.

<sup>22</sup> Among the numerous tales written by Bianciardi (published posthumously), those of an erotic nature are: *Il peripatetico* (1961); *I sessuofili* (1963), *La solita zuppa* (1965), *La pillola* (1966), *Il complesso di Loth* (1968), *Il ritiro e Il prete lungo* (1971).

sexual freedom and against censorship.<sup>23</sup> One of his most interesting articles was *Una lettera di Luciano Bianciardi*, published in “Kent” in March 1968, in which he took a clear position in favour of the abolition of Law 528 against censorship, at a time when the director of the magazine Francesco Paolo Conte had been sentenced to three months imprisonment for the production and distribution of obscene material. Emphasising the paradox of a verdict condemning “anyone who, with a series of images and other expressive means, offends the common feeling of decency”,<sup>24</sup> while however excluding works of art (because otherwise museums, libraries and churches would have to be closed), Bianciardi considered the concept of decency itself, defining it as “an irrational way of standing in front of the representation of an aspect of reality that our conscience refuses to accept”.<sup>25</sup> Starting from this definition, he used irony to criticise the principle according to which this feeling should only be applied to the sexual sphere and not others, such as that of death. Declaring his thanatophobia, Bianciardi lamented the fact that this form of decency does not meet with the same reactions in politics and public opinion as sexuality does:

but if all thanatophobes like me can obviously protect their feelings of decency, I don't understand why sexophobes couldn't do the same thing. You don't want to look at naked women? Don't look at them. Don't buy men's magazines. Don't go to the beach. Don't buy *Historie d'O* or *Sexus*. [...] I therefore see no other way out than the abolition, pure and simple, of 528 and all the other articles that deal with this matter. Look, I do not agree with what *Kent* says. I do not regret, as you do, that we have tried to lump everything together. I do not say no to bad taste and yes to good taste. Because in this way censorship is re-established, shifting it to aesthetic arguments, and therefore highly debatable. What I am saying is that pornography must be (and always has been) a literary genre, and as such its legality must be recognised.<sup>26</sup>

Bianciardi concludes the article by clearly reiterating his opposition to any form of censorship and emphasising its dangers and future drifts. If, as Rinaldi has noted, one of the distinctive features of his work is the pastiche and intertextuality between his writings (Rinaldi 1985), the same formula could be used to describe the profound relationship between his narrative and essayistic-journalistic

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**23** Several other intellectuals wrote on “Playmen”, such as Giorgio Bassani, John Dos Passos, Allen Ginsberg, Alberto Moravia, Alain Robbe – Grillet, Jean – Paul Sartre, Luchino Visconti and Cesare Zavattini, while authors such as Mario Soldati, Gian Carlo Fusco and Gianni Brera wrote on “Kent”.

**24** Bianciardi 1968, 1259.

**25** Bianciardi 1968, 1531.

**26** Bianciardi 1968, 1533.

activity. This paradoxical and ironic way of analysing reality is also found in the “erotic” section of his stories, based on the dynamics of semantic reversal. For instance, in *Il peripatetico*, a story written in 1961 in parallel with *La vita agra*<sup>27</sup> and Miller’s translations, the shift can already be seen in the title. The term “peripatetic” is used by the author to identify the protagonist, a wealthy owner of an antiquarian bookshop in Milan and a regular frequenter of prostitutes, who force him to wander restlessly around the city, ironically making him a peripatetic (at the time, a term used to refer to a prostitute). In the tale, Bianciardi inserts essay extracts to address themes publicly debated in those years, such as the polemic against unsafe natural contraceptives, like the Ogino-Knaus method,<sup>28</sup> which were the only ones not condemned by the Church. These parts are often marked by a biting irony,<sup>29</sup> used to reveal the hypocritical respectability of the bourgeois world, perfectly embodied by the protagonist, a “whoremonger but a ‘good family man’, and an atheist very careful to have his children baptised”.<sup>30</sup>

“However, in *I sessuofili* and *La solita zuppa* the reappropriation and narrativisation of some of the theories on eroticism are most effective and convincing.” The first opens with an essayistic-theoretical insert where the narrator traced the origins of sexophobia in the culture of those years, also affecting the intellectual class, whose names are specifically provided:

In short, think of St Angela of Foligno, to say the least, who applied embers to her genitals to extinguish the fire of lust with fire. Or think of the rules of St. Columbanus: two hundred

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**27** Part of Chapter IV of this novel is also dedicated to a personal advocacy of greater sexual freedom. See Bianciardi 1962, 614–617.

**28** The same theme would in fact return in a minor story of 1966, *La pillola*, published in the magazine “ABC”.

**29** For instance: “Physiological method, also known as rhythmic method, or Ogino – Knaus method (named after the two scientists, a German and a Japanese, who discovered it). Once it has been established that a woman has periods of fertility and periods of sterility every month, one tries to identify the rhythmic sequence of the former and abstains from sexual intercourse when they occur. It is a method that even the ecclesiastical authorities tolerate (without, of course, welcoming excessive publicity) and it is also, theoretically, the healthiest. Theoretically: in practice, ovulation (this is how the ‘fertile period’ is defined) varies greatly from person to person, is influenced by external and internal factors—such as the changing seasons, body temperature, even moods—and there is nothing to prevent it occurring not once but twice in the same month. Some witty gynaecologists, I forget whether they are American or Swedish, would even like to name the maternity ward of their clinic after Ogino and Knaus, in order to show how many newborns owe their good fortune to these famous scientists. My son Augusto, who was born in 1948, is part of the team”. Bianciardi 1961, 1587–1588.

**30** Varotti 2017, 222.

lashes on the buttocks for anyone who, in the absence of trustworthy witnesses, so much as spoke to a woman. These are our cultural roots: on the one hand the Greek-Roman civilisation, on the other the Mazdean-Judeo-Christian civilisation, the most formidable creator of sexophobic taboos. Thus, over the centuries, they have forbidden us, at meals, to offer chicken thighs to the ladies, and they have imposed on us, in bed, a shirt of coarse cloth closed at the neck and feet, with only a hole for carnal union.

We may think we have evolved, but if we look at the panorama of contemporary fiction, here is the squalor: ranging from the coitus-vomit of Alberto Moravia to the infantilism of Cesare Zavattini, the sadistic aggressiveness of Curzio Malaparte, the programmatic chastisement of eroticism of Vitaliano Brancati. Cassola and Pasolini are best left alone, for heaven's sake. With the possible exception of the Calabrian Rèpaci, it is all a procession of more or less conscious sexophobes.<sup>31</sup>

In this sexophobic setting, Gianni's story tells of a young man from a good family, married to Olga, a young woman who is a former prostitute with whom he fell in love in a brothel. Although the protagonist's sex life is basically fulfilled, he is deeply jealous of his wife and the fact that she has had sex with other men before him, a possessive instinct "typical of a patrilineal society such as ours".<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to overcome this obsession, Gianni begins to associate with a group of activists working for the "liberation of sexophobic taboos", including monogamy, so much so that he decides to found a group of sexophiles who freely experience love and sex beyond the limits the couple. The word "sexophiles" was coined from the antinomian term "sexophobia", which was used by the more progressive wing of public opinion in the 1960s and which recurs very frequently in the text in association with other terms ("sexophobic block", "sexophobic taboo", "sexophobic civilisation", "rigidly sexophobic morality", etc.). As noted by Varotti, however, this continuous reiteration of terminology ends up by "taking on ridiculous traits, making the adjective a sort of desemantised *flatus vocis*".<sup>33</sup> The narrative also abounds with explicit quotations to Wilhelm Reich's theories, which are borrowed by sexually oriented groups as a theoretical basis. There is a reference to Malinowski's studies, taken up by Reich, on Trobriand Island communities experiencing a collective and polygamous sexuality free from Western taboos. The author also makes references to the connection between neurosis and repression, "orgone energy" and "orgone accumulator", terms that Reich explained in his *Teoria dell'orgasmo* (Bianciardi 1963, 1651–1655). According to Bianciardi, precisely because they are spread by hearsay and without being examined in depth, these theories become pure chatter that empties them

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<sup>31</sup> Bianciardi 1963, 1645.

<sup>32</sup> Bianciardi 1963, 1647.

<sup>33</sup> Varotti 2017, 224.

of their original meaning. In fact, it is no coincidence that the author's irony is aimed at the protagonist's three sexually addicted friends, who camouflage their substantial sexual frustration under the guise of theory and technicalities, so much so that they brand Gianni as sexophobic just because he refuses to take part in this idea of "common sexophilia" and share his wife with them. However, criticising the various commonplaces spread about eroticism does not make Bianciardi a 'sexophobe', quite the contrary. In spite of his irony towards contemporary chatter, the author included in his stories explicit positions in favour of a substantial liberation of sex from retrograde taboos, as shown by his reflection on prostitution in relation to sexophobia and gender inequality: "A woman also sells herself out of need, I know, but don't think that eliminating economic need will make prostitution disappear. Two other things are needed: the recognition of women's dignity as equal to ours, and the liberation from sexophobic taboos".<sup>34</sup>

A similar critical mechanism is staged in *La solita zuppa*. In this story, Bianciardi used paradoxical reversal to transpose the sexual taboo into a food taboo. The protagonist narrates in the first person how he lives in a world in which all the restrictions that used to be about sex now refer to food. There is no such thing as a monogamous marriage but, upon turning eighteen, every individual must choose only one food that they will eat for the rest of their lives (the protagonist chooses semolina). While sex is practised freely and promiscuously (people can go "out for sex"), any food other than the one chosen is consumed secretly and with a sense of shame, as demonstrated in the beginning of the story, when the protagonist secretly visits a flat (a transposition of a brothel)<sup>35</sup> to have a Florentine steak. Whereas everything related to the alimentary sphere is subject to prohibition and strict control (there is "divorce", "food annulment", "consensual fasting"), the sexual sphere is freely experienced; the protagonist and his wife have several lovers, children masturbate in front of their parents and practice masturbation in school, sex toys are sold as gifts on birthdays and holidays, and so on. The alienating effect of the text is mainly due to the process of linguistic inversion of the two areas (sex and food); "gastrography" is used in place of pornography, "food-appeal" replaces sex-appeal, "food attraction" replaces sexual attraction, and a novel has a "gastronomic background" instead of a sexual background. Even in advertising, the vocabulary used to describe a product and encourage sales is no longer sexual, but food-related:

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<sup>34</sup> Bianciardi 1963, 1646.

<sup>35</sup> The text explicitly refers to the Merlin law, which had decreed the closing of brothels and introduced the offences of exploiting and aiding and abetting prostitution. Obviously, in this case, the Merlin law applies to food and not sex.

“Appetising, succulent, peppery, meaty, crunchy, these are the adjectives used to sell a car”.<sup>36</sup> Through this process of inversion, Bianciardi does indeed show the absurdity of sexophobic morality, but also its elementary principle, namely that the more something is forbidden, the more it is desired and talked about (and the more it becomes part of the public discourse). As in the previous story, the author makes explicit references to Reichian theories on eroticism and the relationship between neurosis and repression. References to anthropological studies on the eating (and non -sexual) habits of the peoples of the Trobriand Islands return, and De Marchi is cited as one of the main Italian intellectuals fighting for “food liberalisation”. *Cibo e civiltà* and *La rivoluzione alimentare* (which refer to Reich’s *La rivoluzione sessuale* and Marcuse’s *Eros e civiltà*, and also De Marchi’s *Sesso e civiltà*) are mentioned as fundamental works, in which he theorises how “an abundant but above all varied diet has positive consequences for man’s physical and psychological health, while the consequences of the food taboo, the negative ones, are very evident, for those with eyes and minds, in every aspect of our so-called civilised life”.<sup>37</sup>

With a writing style continually mixing narrative and essayist speculation, irony and paradox, Bianciardi succeeds in representing the risks of a fictitious clearance of erotic discourse. Although arguing in favour of modernising customs, he deeply criticises the public the public trivialisation of theories on eros turning them into commonplaces and empty speeches. While in his articles the essay is used as a clear stance against the sexual taboos in vogue, in his stories this form becomes a parodic tool to represent false progressive fashions. If in those years authors such as Buzzati and Moravia transpose and integrated some of the theories on erotic desire into narrative, Bianciardi rather opts for for an alienating staging of the discourse on eroticism, using style to represent the contradictions and hypocritical postures of the society of the time. A society that, as later argued by intellectuals like Lacan, Deleuze and Foucault, would increasingly exploit and control eros in the years to come, transforming it into a veritable instrument of power.

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<sup>36</sup> Bianciardi 1965, 1685.

<sup>37</sup> Bianciardi 1965, 1688.

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Lara Toffoli

# Between the “Roman-Essay” and the “Essay-Roman”: Jean Améry’s *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* and W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*

## Introduction

Recently, literary critics have been applying labels such as “novel-essay/essay-novel”, “essayistic novel”, “novelistic essay”, and “narrative essay” to emerging forms of contemporary literature which combine storytelling techniques with philosophical reflections and cut across the generic boundaries between the novel and the essay.<sup>1</sup> To better study the development of such forms, this article will consider two Germanophone texts, *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch. Roman-Essay [Lefeu or the Demolition: Novel-essay]* (1974) by Jean Améry and *Austerlitz* (2001) by W. G. Sebald.<sup>2</sup> As we will seek to demonstrate, both works can be considered as representative of two different, even opposing, ways of understanding the relationship between the novel and the essay in two specific historical moments.<sup>3</sup>

Jean Améry, after a long career as an essayist, decided to try his hand at a *Roman-Essay*, following a then recent trend of critical studies on concepts such as *Essayismus*, the *essayistischer Roman*, and the *Roman-Essay/Essay-Roman*.<sup>4</sup> These studies had examined novels such as Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1942), Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and *Doctor Faustus* (1947), and Hermann Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers* (1930–1932).

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1 For a general discussion of these and other similar labels, also in relation to other genres of contemporary literature (autofiction, biofiction) see Rizzante (2012), Palumbo Mosca (2014), Ivanovic (2017), Nünning/Scherr (2018), Marchese (2018) and (2019), Gallerani (2019), Aubry – Morici (2021), and Cavalloro (2021).

2 *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* was never translated into English. Some translations used here are based partly on those given by Markus Zisselsberger in his article on *Lefeu* (Zisselsberger 2011). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations given here of German or Italian texts are ours.

3 Both authors, despite spending their entire lives far from their countries of origin, continued to reckon with the German and Austrian literary world.

4 See Berger (1964, 127–136), Haas (1966, 127–147), Rohner (1966, 565–593), Bachmann (1969, 131–192), and Frisé ([1960]1987). As Ivonn Kappel (2009, 105–129) has pointed out, *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* is one of the first texts to use the subtitle “Roman – Essay” together with *Die Reise The Trip* (1977) by Bernward Vesper.

More recent scholars have identified such texts as the principal exponents of the novel-essay, a genre defined by the integration of narration and reflection. Stefano Ercolino wrote that the novel-essay “presents the organic fusion of two distinct forms, the novel and the essay” which “reached its highest formal complexity in Austria and Germany, during the interwar period”.<sup>5</sup> By taking on this literary form at a time when it had already gained solidity, Améry sought to resist contemporary experiments in the German *Neue Literatur* and the French *Nouveau Roman*.<sup>6</sup> His decision to undertake a novel as an essayist in that specific period is also significant, since his writing appeared at the threshold of post-modernism, when the great period of essay writing was already beginning to wane in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, *Austerlitz* emerged within a literary context which, despite its variety of forms, was rooted in the dense intertwining of narration and reflection and in the combination of factual and fictional elements. This work took its inspiration particularly from the pioneering models of documentary literature in post-war Germany, namely Alexander Kluge and Walter Kempowski, who were faced with the necessity of “coming to terms with the past” [*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*], meaning Nazism.<sup>8</sup> Sebald’s text can thus be associated with those genres of contemporary literature that distanced themselves from the novel without abandoning narration itself, such as the personal essay, the narrative essay, and historical non-fiction.<sup>9</sup> In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields reinforced this tendency towards the essayification of the novel by including Sebald among the contemporary writers who made “a necessary postmodernist return to the roots of the novel as an essentially Creole form, in which ‘nonfiction’ material is ordered, shaped, and imagined as ‘fiction’”.<sup>10</sup> According to Donnarumma,<sup>11</sup>

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5 Ercolino 2014, XV. Recent studies addressing the novel – essay in similar terms also include Mazzoni (2011, 313–338), Graziano (2013), Marchese (2018), and Cavalloro (2021).

6 For an overview of the *Neue Literatur* in the German literary context and its significance for *Lefeu*, see Zisselsberger (2011, 156–160). For an interpretation of the “Roman – Essay” in contrast to the *Nouveau Roman*, see Kappel (2009, 77–129).

7 As Paolo Zanotti (2011, 21–24) has pointed out, the 1960s correspond to one of the most flourishing periods for the essay in Europe, starting with the success of this genre in France. For a historical overview of the essay as a genre, see Schärf (1999), Macé (2006), and Zima (2012).

8 Wolff 2014, 45.

9 Lorenzo Marchese (2018, 154) and (2019, 83–84) defined the narrative essay as a nonfictional first – person text in which narration and reflection alternate. On this topic, see also Palumbo Mosca (2014, 187–252).

10 Shields 2010, 14.

11 Donnarumma 2014, 152.

Sebald’s writing is even “hypermodern” [*ipermoderno*], and one of the first attempts to overcome postmodernism.

*Lefeu* and *Austerlitz* can thus be placed at the limits of a literary tendency which privileges the novel in its most exuberant forms of fictionality. In the pages below, we shall discuss how the two authors use symmetrical and contrasting techniques to integrate narration and reflection in their texts; where Améry dissimulates the essay in the context of the crisis of this genre, Sebald dissimulates the novel in the period of its essayification.

## 1 Jean Améry’s “Roman-Essay”: Dissimulating the Essay

In 1974, Jean Améry published his first work of fiction: *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch. Roman-Essay* [*Lefeu or the Demolition: Novel-essay*]. By that point, Améry could boast of a long career as a journalist and essayist; he was well-known especially for a collection of autobiographical essays, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (1966), which focused on his experience in Nazi concentration camps. His return to fiction, forty years after a first aborted attempt at a novel,<sup>12</sup> arose above all from a desire to distance himself from the image that had been established and achieve public and critical recognition as a novelist.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the novel-essay represented the most appropriate form for uniting his “desire to tell a story” [*Wunsch zu erzählen*] with a drive “to climb to a higher level of reflection, to reach a critical precision of a new order” [*eine höhere Reflexionsebene zu erklimmen, kritische Präzision einer neuen Ordnung zu erreichen*], as Améry explains in the self-critical commentary that makes up the last chapter of *Lefeu*<sup>14</sup>. As he claims, the project to write a “novel-essay or essay-novel” [*Roman-Essay oder Essay-Roman*] was also inspired by the principal exponents of the novel-essay, identified by contemporary critics

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<sup>12</sup> This first attempt at a novel, *Die Schiffbrüchigen* [*The Shipwrecked*], dates to the 1930s; it remained unpublished until the publication of Améry’s *opera omnia*, for which, see Améry (2007a).

<sup>13</sup> In a 1971 letter to his friend Ernst Mayer, Améry had already confessed that he was planning to write “a novel – essay or essay – novel”, as he realised that he “was not destined to be a pure thinker but rather a thinking storyteller [*denkenden Erzähler*]” (Améry, 2007d, 384; translation by Zisselsberger 2011, 152). See also Heidelberg – Leonard (2007, 668).

<sup>14</sup> Améry 2007c, 484.

with Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*, and Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*.<sup>15</sup>

Despite having tried his hand at a work of fiction, Améry continued to prioritise the essay over the novel and authorial discourse over fiction, unlike his models. We can deduce the importance that Améry attributes to the essay from his terminology. Although the two terms “Roman-Essay” and “Essay-Roman” are typically used as synonyms, Améry chose to identify his work with the former, which would be more properly translated with the expression “novelistic essay”.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, he used the second term “Essay-Roman” (also translatable as “essayistic novel”) to refer to the earlier masterpieces of modernism.

Another element to consider is the relationship between plot and reflective digressions. The overturning of the hierarchical relationship between these two elements is one of the principal results of the “essayistic turn” which, according to Mazzoni, led to the emergence of the novel-essay between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth<sup>17</sup>. As Ercolino has claimed, “the irruption of the essay into the novel powerfully challenged the reasons of the plot”.<sup>18</sup> Such a situation also manifests in Améry's “Roman-Essay”; however, his point of departure, as well as that to which he attributes greater importance, remains the essay, again in contrast to his literary models. As explained by Améry in the outline of his project “Konzept zu einem Roman-Essay”, he sought to recount the “story of the painter Lefeu”, a character inspired by his friend the painter Erich Schmid, by combining “essayistic and narrative elements”. Yet, in opposition to the events of the plot, he also wanted to afford “clear predominance” [*klares Übergewicht*] to “essayistic reflection”, the latter assuming the task of “driving” the whole work.<sup>19</sup>

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**15** See Améry 2007c, 482, 484–485.

**16** In the term “Roman – Essay”, the word “Essay” occupies a position of priority from a grammatical point of view and is the element that confers meaning to the entire locution, since, in German, the head of a compound word is usually placed at the end of the sequence (Nurmi – Schomers 2005, 146, no. 3). Guido Mattia Gallerani (2019, 146–153) also uses the term “novelistic essay” for Améry's later “Roman – Essay” *Charles Bovary, Country Doctor: A Portrait of a Simple Man* (1978), in which the author camouflages a work of criticism about Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as a work of fictional rewriting.

**17** Mazzoni 2011, 336.

**18** He continues: “Resoundingly stunting the flux of narration, the introduction of a non – narrative, atemporal form (the essay), into a narrative and temporal one (the novel) constituted a formal exorcism of the new pressure of historical time”. (Ercolino 2014, 40; see also: Graziano 2013, 42)

**19** Améry 2007b, 649; translations based on Zisselsberger 2011, 154.

The work is thus structurally organised into “essay units” [*Einzelessays*]<sup>20</sup>, in which the philosophical reflections of the “thinking painter” [*denkender Maler*]<sup>21</sup> Lefeu – in the form of a monologue or dialogue with other characters – prevail over the effective development of the story, even though they are tightly connected to the plot.<sup>22</sup> The last two chapters, on the other hand, are dedicated solely to the relevant narrative event and its consequences, that is, the moment of epiphany in which Lefeu remembers his German origins (his real name is Feuermann) and recalls the murder of his parents in the Nazi camps.

As Améry<sup>23</sup> himself later recognised, this integration of essay and novel is not easily digestible, insofar as the narrative and the reflections are continuously immersed in Lefeu’s monologues, or more rarely, in those of other characters. Additional aspects that make it difficult for the reader to identify the speaker are the absence of any typographical markers for direct discourse, *verba dicendi*, or even words of self-consciousness, and the almost total disappearance of the narrator’s participation in the narrative. Such textual complexities provoked negative responses from Améry’s contemporary critics and likely represent the reason for the work’s continued lack of success.<sup>24</sup> Even recent scholars have complained about the Austrian author’s inability to satisfy the basic conventions of the novel form. Susan Nurmi-Schomers, for instance, has gone so far as to define *Lefeu* as an imperfect “attempt at a novel” [*Romanversuch*].<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, Améry’s work can be understood as the product of two opposing pressures. The priority of the essay corresponds to an opposing attempt to technically dissimulate the essay itself, emphasising those aspects of the novel-essay that seem more typical of fiction, such as the frequent recourse to the protagonist’s quoted or narrated monologue. A clear indication of this is represented by Améry’s conception of character, which he outlined in the previously mentioned “Konzept”:

Since the characters, including Lefeu himself, are anything but characters in the usual sense (i. e. they are not characterized by external features, do not speak their own language

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**20** Améry 2007b, 652.

**21** Améry 2007c, 345.

**22** The titles of the first four chapters refer to the topics addressed in the reflections: I. “Verfall” [*Decay*]; II. “Erfolg” [*Success*]; III. “Die Wörter und die Dinge” [*Words and Things*]; IV. “Die Jäger, der Neinsager” [*The Yea – sayers, the Nay – sayers*].

**23** Améry 2007b, 496–497.

**24** Marcel Reich – Ranicki’s disparaging review was particularly noteworthy, as the critic complained of a lack of clarity in the text’s literary representation (Reich – Ranicki, 1974). For the reception of the work, see Heidelberger – Leonard (2007), and Kappel (2009, 18–48).

**25** Nurmi – Schomers 2005, 145.

es and are not at all precisely individualized), they are all bearers of the essayistic reflection with equal rights. They [...] partly adopt the essayistic style of the author [*essayistische Sprache des Autors*], if necessary. [...] The relative anonymity of the characters does not intend to testify that “in this epoch there can be no more individuals”; it is the consciously developed stylistic device [*das bewußt entwickelte Stilmittel*] that seems to the author to be appropriate for the novel-essay.<sup>26</sup>

By establishing distance from traditional characters, Améry situates himself within the same line of modernist novel-essays whose characters face a loss of singularity.<sup>27</sup> Even if the reflection is primarily entrusted to the protagonist Lefeu (Améry’s alter ego), “the essayistic style of the author” is also adopted by other characters. An example of such attribution occurs in the reflection carried out by Jacques, an art gallery director and friend of Lefeu, during a conversation with one of the German gallery owners trying to convince Lefeu to show his paintings in Germany. In this passage, Jacques moves beyond essayistic reflection, outlining a conceptual opposition between two types of universalizable attitudes, the “nay-sayer” [*Neinsager*] represented by Lefeu and the “yea-sayer” [*Jasager*] incarnated by Jacques himself:

The yea-sayer [*Jasager*] who abandons himself to the epochs and fashions or, more precisely, to the “currents” – whereby he must always sense the end of such currents and the influx of new ones in good time, so as not to look like the fool in front of himself, which he does not want to be at any price – has a more dangerous position than the nay-sayer [*Neinsager*]. [...] The man who says “no” is free in the unfreedom of his bindings: he claims the freedom to set irrational values, remains subservient to them, and hereafter acts self-importantly within the realm of his presuppositions or illusions. The man who says “yes” is unfree in freedom: he voluntarily accepts – *il assume!* – the word of reality as the last one, and thus renounces the very sovereign self-positing [*Ichsetzung*] that is the nay-sayer’s ultimate refuge and his security.<sup>28</sup>

The essayistic dimension of this passage is even more evident when compared with another of Améry’s essays, *On Aging: Revolt and Resignation* (1968), in which the author takes up a similar line of thinking:

Our aging person has to sit back and watch as the processes of formation, popularization, and devaluation roll off at an increasingly rapid tempo. [...] For him the logical question whether the acceleration should be called progress is not even under discussion. Since

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<sup>26</sup> Améry 2007b, 652.

<sup>27</sup> The disintegration of the characters’ identity in the novel – essay belongs to the approaching crisis of the novel between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth; see Graziano (2013, 42), and Marchese (2019, 82).

<sup>28</sup> Améry 2007c, 391–392.



he does not withdraw to the definitely unassailable but hopeless position of the intransigent conservative, for whom cultural events once and for all found their climax and end point in his individual system, with everything coming after only delusion and fool's play, he has to recognize the acceleration as an authentic phenomenon, unless he wants to be a stupidly proud nay-sayer from another world [*als Hinterweltler zum dummsolgen Neinsager werden*].<sup>29</sup>

In this context, the author presents the *Neinsager* as “a stupidly proud nay-sayer” – as Jacques describes Lefeu in the “Roman-Essay” –, that is, a man growing old who does not want to adapt to new fashions and literary currents, in contrast to Jacques, who describes himself as a “yea-sayer [*Jasager*] by definition”.<sup>30</sup>

Although in *On Aging* the author carries out the reflection himself, he occasionally introduces a hypothetical character to incarnate different expressions of the “aging human being”.<sup>31</sup> This character is indicated with the symbol A, “both the most mathematical and abstract specification imaginable and one that leaves to [the] readers the most extensive free space to think imaginatively and concretely”.<sup>32</sup> As observed by Alfred Andersch, Améry's essays often use a mode of exposition where “a described third person alternates with a reflecting first”.<sup>33</sup> We could say that, *mutatis mutandis*, in Améry's essay, the relationship between author (“reflecting first person”) and hypothetical character (“described third person”) retraces the type of mediation found in a work of fiction where an external narrator recounts the events of his characters in the third person while commenting on them in the first person and from the author's point of view. Using Franz Karl Stanzel's terminology, we could define this as an “authorial narrative situation”.<sup>34</sup> Thus, to distance himself from such a situation, that is, to dissimulate the essay, Améry chooses to attribute reflection directly to his characters in his “Roman-Essay”. Despite using the “essayistic style of the author”<sup>35</sup>,

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29 Améry 1994, 96 and 2007e, 133.

30 Améry 2007, 390.

31 “The aging human being – the aging woman, the aging man – we will frequently meet such persons here, presenting themselves to us in many variants, in many different kinds of dress. At one point, we will recognize an aging person as a figure well known to us from a work of literature; in another place she will be a pure abstraction drawn from the imagination; finally, he will be revealed in his contours as the author of this series of essays” (Améry 1994, 1).

32 Améry 1994, 2.

33 Andersch 1977, 26.

34 Stanzel 1971, 22–58.

35 Améry 2007b, 652.

he takes this option over that of the external narrator, by way of quoted monologues and dialogues in a prevalently “figural narrative situation”.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the attribution of this “essayistic style of the author” to Jacques also serves to conceal an autobiographical identification between Améry and the work’s protagonist.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the fact that the *Neinsager* Lefeu shares with Améry the same Holocaust survivor experience, the painter’s philosophy of negation corresponds to Améry’s own thinking. Grounded in Sartrean existentialism, Améry’s philosophy consists in refusing to internalise his Auschwitz survivor trauma while at the same time continuing to resent his torturers, a position which he attempts to problematise in his essays.<sup>38</sup> This subject lies at the heart of *Resentments*, an essay part of *At the Mind’s Limits*, in which the negation of the torturer becomes the sole act able to counterbalance the self-negation experienced by the victim. Améry writes:

I do not want to become the accomplice of my torturers; rather, I demand that the latter negate themselves and in the negation coordinate with me. The piles of corpses that lie between them and me cannot be removed in the process of internalization, so it seems to me, but, on the contrary, through actualization, or, more strongly stated, by actively settling the unresolved conflict in the field of historical practice.<sup>39</sup>

The Austrian writer develops this awareness even further in his “Roman-Essay”, through the character of Lefeu; his philosophy of negation, which ultimately also negates itself, is destined for failure and thus self-destruction. Such self-awareness emerges in the book’s finale, when the protagonist begins to suspect that his own “aesthetics of decay” [*Verfallsästhetik*]<sup>40</sup> and his protest against the commodification of art and capitalism are nothing more than vain attempts to logically justify the destruction of his subjectivity caused by trauma. With respect to the models of the novel-essay, Améry’s “Roman-Essay” has lost faith in the ability to contemplate a possible future, in conjunction with the decline of the essay as a form offering a valid philosophy for concrete political action. Such a stance,

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**36** Stanzel 1971, 22–37, 92–120. The external narrator’s position in the “Roman – Essay” is marginalised and more focused on Lefeu; it is limited to either summarising the protagonist’s thought processes or marking the introduction of another character’s perspective.

**37** Améry (2007c, 482) himself suggested this autobiographical identification.

**38** For Améry’s relationship to Sartre’s work and its relevance for *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch*, see Heidelbergberger – Leonard (2004, 109–147, 158–166) and (2007, 671–675), and Kappel (2009, 346–367).

**39** Améry 1980, 69.

**40** Améry 2007c, 504.

at the threshold of postmodernity, seems to anticipate the crisis of utopia that Lorenzo Marchese (2018) has attributed to contemporary novel-essays.<sup>41</sup>

## 2 W.G. Sebald’s Fictional Prose: Dissimulating the Novel

W.G. Sebald’s last work, *Austerlitz* (2001), was published several months before his untimely death in a car accident. Because of its themes and formal choices, it is seen as his most ambitious text.<sup>42</sup> Just like *The Emigrants* (1992), the work that gave him international fame, this work of fictional prose deals with the theme of Holocaust survivors and is based on true accounts. However, unlike the rest of Sebald’s previous prose, which lacked a structured plot, *Austerlitz* comes closest to being a novel thanks to the presence of a single character driving the narrative development of the story.<sup>43</sup> The book is centred around a fictional character, the architectural historian Jacques Austerlitz, whose story is inspired by the real life of Susi Bechhöfer, a woman who was brought to Britain as a child on a so-called “children’s transport” [*Kindertransport*] to escape Nazi persecution.<sup>44</sup>

As such, *Austerlitz* has been considered as a Holocaust novel, even though Sebald himself refused the generic label of “novel”. He preferred the term “prose book” instead, which he used for all his works.<sup>45</sup> Early on, Sebald had worked primarily as an academic critic, then, starting with *Vertigo* (1990), he inaugurated a new form of prose, in which he achieved a synthesis of essayistic and literary impulses. In this unconventional form of writing based on broad documentary research, he combined narration with reflection as well as factual and fictional elements, thereby distancing himself from both academic writing and the novel form. As he stated in an interview:

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41 According to Marchese (2018, 165–167), the ability to contemplate a possible future, based on a Musilian “utopia of essayism” (Musil 1996, 267) was a typical element of the novel – essay until modernism.

42 The English translation appeared almost simultaneously with the German original, underlining Sebald’s status as an internationally renowned author (Wolff 2017, 48).

43 Sebald’s former PhD student Uwe Schütte (2020, 385) views *Austerlitz* as a step backwards in comparison with his previous book, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), which he regards to be the German writer’s highest prose fiction achievement.

44 An architectural historian and colleague of Sebald’s served as a further model for the book’s protagonist. See Sebald’s interview with Martin Doerry and Volker Hage in *Der Spiegel* 11 of 12 March 2001, now in: Sebald (2012a, 196–197).

45 Sebald 2012a, 199.

Historical monographs cannot produce a metaphor or allegory for the collective course of history. It is only in this process of metaphorization that history becomes empathetically accessible. [...] This of course does not mean that I am making a case for the novel. I find all cheap forms of fictionalization horrific. My medium is prose, not the novel.<sup>46</sup>

Another peculiar feature of Sebald's prose is the homodiegetic narrator, who often seems to share characteristics with the author himself, as he alternates reflections and events according to the flow of his mental associations, while visiting historical sites, contemplating natural landscapes, or following the traces of emigrants. Despite its stronger narrative character with respect to earlier works, *Austerlitz* adopts the same expository approach grounded in the process of association. However, in this case, Sebald entrusts this digressive mode to the protagonist Austerlitz, in the form of reported speech maintained throughout the entire text. After meeting the narrator on a trip to Antwerp, Austerlitz converses with him on different occasions. During these meetings, Austerlitz recounts his search for traces of his parents, who had been deported and then killed in a Nazi concentration camp; however, he also launches into lengthy historical and philosophical digressions in which an essayistic discourse emerges concerning architectures of power.

Austerlitz thus plays the same role as Lefeu, the protagonist of Améry's "Roma-Essay", driving both narration and reflection and moving beyond simple characterisation. Because of this and the many intertextual connections with *Lefeu*, Susan Nurmi-Schomers has even considered *Austerlitz* as an implicit "re-writing [*Nachdichtung*] of Améry's text", through which Sebald achieved "a poetic redemption [*Rettung*] of the novel-(essay)".<sup>47</sup> By placing "essay" in parentheses, Nurmi-Schomers emphasised the greater literary success of Sebald's text, both in terms of quality and with respect to novelistic conventions. Yet, in contrast to Améry's "Roman-Essay," Sebald employs a series of techniques which, due to their attribution to a fictional character, have the goal of dissimulating the form of the novel. The homodiegetic narrator, who shares many traits with the author himself, has the function of testifying to the truth of the story; he collects Austerlitz's testimony directly from his conversations and becomes the guardian of his photographic archive, to which images are said to belong throughout the book.

Beyond this attempt to dissimulate the work's fiction, the Austerlitz character even appears to be modelled after Lefeu. They are both tormented by the death of their parents in a concentration camp, of which fact they become

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<sup>46</sup> Sebald 2012b, 85; translated by Wolff 2014, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Nurmi – Schomers 2005, 167.

aware during episodes of involuntary memory. Both Austerlitz and Lefeu are thinker-characters and represent the “epitome of the existential experience” of victims of the Holocaust.<sup>48</sup> This correspondence between them is further reinforced by a network of intertextual connections, as Irene Heidelberger-Leonard has recently shown.<sup>49</sup> A first indication of this connection appears in the opening pages of *Austerlitz*, where the narrator recalls that the nocturnal animals in the Antwerp Zoo “had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze [*unverwandt forschenden Blick*] found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking [*vermittels der reinen Anschauung*] and thinking [*und des reinen Denkens*]”.<sup>50</sup>

Accompanying this discussion are four photographs depicting four sets of eyes, belonging to two different species of owls and two men, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the German painter Jan Peter Tripp, the latter a friend of Sebald’s.<sup>51</sup> The gaze of the nocturnal bird of prey used as a metaphor for illuminating the truth comes from the title of one of Sebald’s essays, “Mit den Augen des Nachtvogels” [*Through the Eyes of the Night-Bird*] (1987),<sup>52</sup> which the author had indeed dedicated to analysing Améry’s novel-essay. In this essay, Sebald alludes to the book’s tragic epilogue, “Nachtflug” [*Nocturnal Flight*], in which the painter Lefeu identifies himself with the “Oiseau de malheur” [*The Bird of Ill-Omen*], the subject of one of his self-portraits and the symbolic representation of his misfortune.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the equivalent German term *Unglücksvogel* indicates both the bird of ill-omen, of which the owl is one possible incarnation, and a person tormented by misfortune.<sup>54</sup>

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48 Heidelberger – Leonard 2005, 128.

49 Based on such intertextual elements, Heidelberger – Leonard (2005) has referred to *Lefeu oder Der Abbruch* as an “Urtext” for *Austerlitz*.

50 Sebald 2001, 7 and 2018, 3; see Heidelberger – Leonard 2005, 122–123.

51 See Sebald / Tripp 2003.

52 Now in Sebald (2003). The English translation by Anthea Bell loses track of this intertextual relationship: “Against the Irreversible: On Jean Améry”; in Sebald (2004).

53 The fictional painting is inspired by an Erich Schmid work entitled *Oiseau de malheur* (1956), which Améry himself owned. In this painting, the artist depicted himself with the features of a bird. See Améry (2007c, 502).

54 Sebald’s interpretation refers above all to this second meaning. The link with the owl is further suggested by one of the last lines uttered by Lefeu on his deathbed: “Owls howl high from the tower” (Améry 2007c, 479).

This implicit juxtaposition between Austerlitz and Lefeu reappears elsewhere in Sebald's text with another reference to Wittgenstein,<sup>55</sup> to whom the narrator of Sebald's fictional prose compares the protagonist:

And now, whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz it is as if I see in him the disconsolate philosopher [*den unglücklichen... Denker*], a man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking as inextricably as into his confused emotions, so striking is the likeness between the two of them [...].<sup>56</sup>

The terms used to describe Wittgenstein produce a convergence between the gaze of the "disconsolate philosopher" [*den unglücklichen Denker*] Austerlitz-Wittgenstein and that of the *Unglücksvogel* Lefeu, another thinker tormented by the calamity of his fate as a Holocaust victim.

In Sebald's text, this identification between Austerlitz, Lefeu, and Améry as victims of the Holocaust is further suggested by several explicit references to the Austrian writer's life. References to Fort Breendonk, the fortress where Améry was tortured by the Nazis, play an important role as a symbol which opens and closes Sebald's book. The fort is first mentioned in one of Austerlitz's many historical architectural digressions, where he attempts to construct a catalogue of the architectures of power, expressions of human violence which carry "the marks of pain which [...] trace countless fine lines through history".<sup>57</sup> Austerlitz's reflection focuses on the perverse logic that governs the construction of oversized buildings such as fortresses:

The last link in the chain was the fortress of Breendonk, said Austerlitz, a fort completed just before the outbreak of the First World War in which, within a few months, it proved completely useless for the defence of the city and the country. Such complexes of fortifications, said Austerlitz, [...] show us how, unlike birds, for instance, who keep building the same nest over thousands of years, we tend to forge ahead with our projects far beyond any reasonable bounds.<sup>58</sup>

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55 References to Wittgenstein's philosophy and his reception in the field of Neo – positivism are frequent in *Lefeu*, especially in the third chapter "Die Wörter und die Dinge" [*Words and Things*]. See Heidelberger – Leonard (2007, 683 – 685).

56 Sebald 2001, 60 and 2018, 56.

57 Sebald 2018, 16. *Austerlitz* offers descriptions of various buildings with direct or indirect connections to the Holocaust or other expressions of human violence, such as colonialism; apart from the concentration camp in Theresienstadt, these include train stations, the Great Library in Paris, and the Antwerp nocturama (Cowan, 2010). For a detailed analysis of the relationship between architecture and Nazism in the works of Sebald, Primo Levi, and Roberto Bolaño, see Cinquegrani (2018, 19 – 23).

58 Sebald 2018, 22 – 24.

After these considerations and his first encounter with Austerlitz, the narrator visits the fort himself, and describes the site as “a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence”, which he is “unable to connect with anything shaped by human civilization”.<sup>59</sup> During this visit, the narrator returns to the same locations described by Améry in his essay *The Torture*, part of the collection *At the Mind's Limits*.<sup>60</sup> As the narrator approaches the bunker where the Austrian writer had been tortured, his memory begins to waver:

Even now, when I try to remember [...], when I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk [...] the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.<sup>61</sup>

Sebald's writing is born precisely from this need to not forget the history of those who lived through the same experiences as Améry. In other words, his work emerges from both his faith in narrative as an effective means of transmitting these stories and his necessity to adhere as much as possible to the truth by establishing distance from the novel. In contrast to Améry, who camouflages as a character to convey his reflections in order to dissimulate the essay, Sebald dissimulates the novel, making himself known in the figure of the narrator-character and marking the distance that exists between himself and the other, the Holocaust victim. This is how Sebald enacts an “archaeological” search for the origins of suffering within a metaphysical vision of history.<sup>62</sup> Such a search shares a strong existential character with Améry's writings, even if it no longer displays a direct link to this earlier philosophical current, which nevertheless remains alive in Améry's “Roman-Essay”.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Sebald 2018, 25–26.

<sup>60</sup> In his retrospective account of his visit to the fortress of Breendonk, the narrator declares that he had only read Améry's book several years later (Sebald 2018, 33–34).

<sup>61</sup> Sebald 2018, 30–31.

<sup>62</sup> Sebald 2012c, 259–260; see also Niehaus/Öhlschläger 2006.

<sup>63</sup> Regarding the connection between philosophy and literature in contemporary novel – essays, Lorenzo Marchese (2018, 155–160) has referred to an “interrupted ménage” between the two spheres.

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Lorenzo Marchese

# On the Relationship between Novel-essay and Science-fiction

## 1 Science-Fiction and Philosophy

In this essay, we shall identify a strong yet still neglected connection that has developed in the last thirty years between the literary form of the novel-essay and the genre of science-fiction. Given that these forms arose from different traditions and with different purposes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, although they both aimed to give a philosophical view of the world through the means of narration, is there any way that they might share a bond? How, in the last fifty years, have they come to merge? Our preliminary assumption is that, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a philosophical handover occurred between novel-essay and science-fiction. The former – a syncretic literary form that “presents the organic fusion of two distinct forms, the novel and the essay”<sup>1</sup> (or, in other words, it combines narration and reflection through the entire text), including 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century masterpieces such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1865–1869), Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1943) or Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927)<sup>2</sup> – gradually lost its centrality in the contemporary literary landscape. Meanwhile, science fiction was starting to take the centre stage in that sector of the literary field which is more focused on giving a philosophical insight of the world through narration. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the hybridisation became noticeable, as we shall prove in the last part of this essay, by giving a short close reading of two selected novel-essays that draw from very specific science-fiction imagery (e.g., Gibson’s cyberpunk and Huxley’s dystopia) while still preserving an essayistic side: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, 1996 and Michel Houellebecq’s *Atomised*, 1998. However, first we need to go back to the origins of these two genres and briefly describe their main formal and thematic features, thus making clear their similarities and differences.

The novel-essay and science-fiction narratives arise, as we mentioned, within the same historical frame. Whether we take *The Man Without Qualities* as the cornerstone of the genre (Graziano 2013), or we accept Ercolino’s classification,

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1 Ercolino 2014b, XV.

2 On Proust’s novel as representative of a philosophically eclectic approach, see at least Fraisse (2013).

according to which the novel-essay begins with Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature* (1884),<sup>3</sup> or we agree with the opinion (Cavalloro 2016) that Tolstoy's and Dostoyevsky's mid-19<sup>th</sup> century novels were the founders of this genre, the novel-essay belongs to the history of the last two centuries and is emblematic of a culture in crisis questioning its own reasons and premises (Burrow 2000). Aside from its historical setting, we might define the novel – essay an example of prose literature alternating between narration and reflection. The methods used are essayistic inserts, dialogic elucubrations and speculative digressions that slow down, alter and disrupt the development of a story. It is worth noting that the term (*novel-essay* does not refer to a literary current or a trend established by writers, as mentioned by Philippe in his 1999 essay discussing the identity of a supposed “philosophical novel”<sup>4</sup> (a macro-concept including that of the novel-essay); rather, it is a retrospective definition accepted by critics and researchers with the sole purpose of pointing out that the modern form of the novel synthesises narrative with philosophy. As such, it is distinguished from several other literary forms of philosophy across the centuries; just to name a few, we have the 18<sup>th</sup> century “roman à thèse” (Voltaire's *Candide*, 1759), the non-narrative dialogues written in the wake of Plato (out of countless examples, we shall cite Petrarch's *Secretum*, 1347–1353, Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, 1632), Descartes' intellectual autobiography (*Discourse on the Method*, 1637), and Montesquieu's fictitious correspondence (*Persian Letters*, 1721).<sup>5</sup> Unlike science fiction, whose authors generally confined themselves within very specific commercial and formal boundaries (occasionally with pride, but more often with a slight, undefinable sense of inferiority), the novel-essay is nothing but a conceptualisation in retrospect.

The borders of science-fiction are as blurred as those of the novel-essay. Roger Luckhurst places the rise of science fiction in a cultural time of systemic crisis, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the technological modernisation of the West went hand in hand with established apocalyptic imagery. The new narrative worlds described by authors such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells offered an alternative version of reality that seemed to be both less unrealistic and harmonious

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3 Ercolino 2014b, XV–XIX.

4 “The notion of “philosophical novel” does not refer to an established category of literary studies. Similarly, the opposition between a traditional philosophical narrative and modern philosophical novel [that in the terms adopted in this intervention we might define as “novel – essay”] does not correspond to anything specific in literary history”. Philippe 1998, 1543. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of texts originally published in French and Italian are mine.

5 For a first orientation, see Heller (2012).

than those portrayed in the Modern Age utopias of Thomas More and Henri de Saint-Simon. In Luckhurst's words:

The period between 1870 and 1914 is a confusing, contradictory era, in which the West's accelerating modernity was haunted by fantasies of decline and fall. It looks like a period where European power reached its greatest imperial extent, but it was in fact giving birth to the American Century and a significant shift in power away from Europe. Reading, writing, and publishing in local ecologies like Britain underwent a complete transformation in a very short period of time, and the economic conditions for mass culture were a key part of this change.<sup>6</sup>

Science fiction is therefore a genre hosting authors with different paths, writing styles, cultural influences and ideologies. There are no formal features that might help us come up with a shared definition of science fiction, which means that a science fiction story can take any conceivable form. The distinguishing factor is another. Carlo Pagetti, one of the most acute readers of science fiction along with Kingsley Amis, stated the following:

Science-fiction is not a literary movement with a defined posture towards society, with its own formal and philosophical concept of the world – as it was for German Expressionism or for the “nouveau roman”. Every science-fiction writer has his own vision of the functions of language and art, as well as of the issues of society and our world. The distinguishing factor in science-fiction is the peculiar viewing angle of the world itself.<sup>7</sup>

A year before Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), arguably one of the greatest novel-essays ever written, science fiction made its first recognised appearance, although that was not its name yet (the term *science fiction* was coined simultaneously in 1915, in English by Hugo Gernsback and in Russian by Yacov Perelman). The French writer Jules Verne, born in 1828, made his debut in 1863 with the novel *Cinq semaines en ballon* (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*), in which a scientist named Ferguson travels through Africa in an aerostat. Thanks to the extraordinary success of the novel, Verne's publisher Hetzel signed a twenty-year contract with him. It was the beginning of a successful sci-fi production that would have enormous influence on the artistic imagery of Modernity. As one might deduce from *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, the scientific-technological evolutions that Verne represents in his works are very plausible. Through his narrative, he usually developed possible consequences of discoveries that had already been made. This made his stories quite realistic, especially when we compare them

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<sup>6</sup> Luckhurst 2019, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Pagetti 2012, 13–14.

with current science fiction. In a famous note from the 1930s Gramsci had already highlighted that:

Verne's adventures do not contain anything that is completely impossible: the "possibilities" available to Verne's heroes are greater than those that really exist at the time, but not too much greater, and, most importantly, they are not "out of line" with the successful scientific developments of the period. The play of imagination is not entirely "arbitrary". Wells and Poe are different precisely because the "arbitrary", to a very large extent, predominates in their work, even though the point of departure may be logical and grafted onto a concrete scientific reality.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, science fiction encourages one to identify, in the first place, because it assumes the existence of a scientific-technological factor (or even a mere alteration in the world) that humanity has yet to experience, and secondly, because it develops through narration the social and personal consequences of this experience. As stated by Crispin:

A *science-fiction story* "is one that presupposes a technology, or an effect of technology, or a disturbance in the natural order, such as humanity, up to the time of writing, has not in actual fact experienced".<sup>9</sup>

The above does not imply that science fiction relies only on Verne's conception of the genre. After him, countless writers have come to give science fiction a more complex inflection, sometimes pessimistic, and sometimes less plausible than Verne's. The dream of unprecedented scientific-technological progress carried the seeds of fear in the face of a threatening future, packed with posthuman perspectives, leading to what is nowadays mostly known as dystopian literature.<sup>10</sup> In 1894–1895, the *New Review* published a piece of prose by Herbert George Wells titled *The Time Machine*. The writing was presented as "Scientific Romance" and, although it was not the ancestor of time travel stories (such a definition is best suited for Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1889), it was the first to be presented not as a parody or a *reverie*, but as a "possible" alternative to reality with a patent dystopian twist (as shown in the division between Eloi and Morlocks). However, Wells' scientific verisimilitude was undeniably inferior to that found in Verne's stories, also due to the fact

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<sup>8</sup> Gramsci 2011, Third notebook §149, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Crispin 1955, 9.

<sup>10</sup> For an introduction, see Claeys (2010).

that a rational explanation of time travel was impossible (and still is).<sup>11</sup> Despite Verne's several complaints about the lack of scientific evidence for Wells' hypothesis, the attractiveness and fantastic immersion of modern science fiction are owed much more to Wells than to Verne. In 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction, plausibility is less crucial than the creativeness of the alternate worlds built by authors. Impossible inventions, unlikely biological evolutions and uncertain scientific premises (which are sometimes altogether absent, as in Philip K. Dick's work) are accepted if they are functional to the conceptual effectiveness of a theory about the future.

This is an outline briefly reconstructing the parallel evolution of two literary forms, focusing exclusively on those long-term features that may help us determine the cross-pollination of the genres. Thus, while the early 20<sup>th</sup> century novel-essay displayed an impressive series of strictly realistic masterpieces (Hermann Broch's *Sleepwalkers*, Proust's and Musil's aforementioned works, sometimes oneiric, such as Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*), science fiction was flourishing on fanzines and crossing over into movies with several adaptations (from George Méliès' travels to the moon to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, 1927), thus enjoying a tremendous success with the general public, albeit counterbalanced by the enduring suspiciousness of highbrow readers. However, this popularity did not imply a lack of evolution. On the opposite, in the 1930s, a new novel by Aldous Huxley marked a changing process occurring in the genre since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which defines most of current-day science fiction. This is the drift from an optimistic and plausible science fiction towards a narrative with strong utopian, political and critical implications, that is used to intervene (polemically if necessary) in the public discourse. The starting point, ironically, is the visionary novel *Men Like Gods* (1923) by H.G. Wells. In this book, the English author depicted a world that Huxley found naïvely utopian and disturbing in its ingenuous linear beliefs, a "horror" to rebel against.<sup>12</sup> In response, *Brave New World* (1932), written between May and August 1931,<sup>13</sup> described the perverse consequences of a utopia made real (American Fordism and industrial assembly lines being the major historical references). On the one hand, utopia is essentially non-realistic and collectivist, going against individuals and restricting the freedom of citizens while tending to govern the supposedly unorthodox sides of human behaviour (for instance: any utopia that heavily disciplines any sexual misconduct); on the other hand, *Brave New World* tells us what would happen if a real person were intro-

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<sup>11</sup> The symbolic importance of time travels in science – fiction cannot be underestimated. On the utopian side of a large side of science – fiction, see Torres (2004).

<sup>12</sup> See Huxley's letter of May 18, 1931, to Mrs. Kethevan Roberts, in Smith 1969, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Meckier 1979, 1.

duced in an utopian dimension, and so will do many of the following dystopias of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, starting with George Orwell's *1984* (1949). In the second part of the book, Huxley introduces us to the case of John, born and raised in a reservation separated from the so-called civilised world (which is marked by eugenics, use of psychiatric drugs and a totalitarian society). Meeting this world for the first time as an adult, John quickly descends into madness and dies. This is nothing but a logical consequence of his experience of a realised utopia, as the quote opening the book, by the Russian philosopher Berdyaev, underlines:

Utopias seem to be much more realizable than we formerly believed them to be. Now we find ourselves presented with another alarming question: how do we prevent their definitive realization? ...Utopias are realizable. Life marches toward utopias. Perhaps a new century will begin, a century in which intellectuals and the cultivated class will dream of ways to evict utopias and return to a non-utopian society, less "perfect" and more free.<sup>14</sup>

Both in *Brave New World's* preface to 1946 edition and in *Brave New World Revisited* (the 1958 addendum to the novel with a thorough essayistic setting), Huxley insists on the philosophical implications of his counter-utopia and the possible achievement of the premises depicted in *Brave New World*. Following in Huxley's footsteps, in the next decades, science fiction became increasingly pessimistic, focused on a future that has no more visionary or comforting features, thereby moving away from the utopian tension offered in some of the major novel-essays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as *The Man Without Qualities'* "Millennial Kingdom" and the final hope for love in the ending of *The Magic Mountain*. Science fiction's definitive changeover occurred in the 1950s, which saw the publication of books such as Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950) and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and short stories such as Fredric Brown's *Sentry* (1954). All these writings depicted dystopian worlds and openly discussed ethical, sociological and political issues. As Malisa Kurtz correctly stated, they also introduced allegorical criticism against American conservatism and current McCarthyism, with a freedom of expression that was quite accepted in this genre of literature whereas it was severely repressed in highbrow literature:

Just as new publication formats were altering the face of SF, new authors were also reshaping the genre's thematic interests as they increasingly utilised SF conventions for political allegory and satire. In contrast to the technological orientation of early pulps such as *As-tounding*, stories published in *Galaxy* and *F&SF* used SF to critique the era's socio-political conservatism while warning of potential dystopian futures. *Galaxy* in particular became well known for its 'social science fiction'; that is, SF that concentrated on questions

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<sup>14</sup> Huxley 2013, 3.



about ethics, philosophy, and social change. From its very first issue the magazine claimed it was different from the ‘western’-style SF that transplanted frontier adventures into outer space.<sup>15</sup>

These are the same years that saw the debut of excellent science-fiction writers such as Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin and Arthur C. Clarke, who would flourish in the following decade, defined by critics as “science-fiction New Wave”. In the pulp magazine *New Worlds* (relaunched by Michael Moorcock in 1964), science fiction partially stopped following the genre literature footprints and started adopting Modernist rhetorical tools and narrative styles (stream of consciousness, non-linear narration, experimental time frames, etc.). Some features from the previous decade were also emphasized, including the socio-critical side of science fiction (to the point of merging with the American youth counterculture of the 1960s) and plausibility decreasing in favour of philosophical effectiveness. Dick’s and Le Guin’s paths are enlightening in this sense. *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) represented a planet (Gethen) inhabited by latent hermaphrodites due to genetic engineering, which allowed Le Guin to offer a paradoxical insight on sexual gender as a key factor for social distinctions. A year before that, Dick had inquired upon the boundaries of human nature and the meaning of life through narrative, by comparing what is human with what only seems to be human (namely, androids) in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheeps?*, not to mention the paranoid literary architectures in the novel *Time out of Joint*, a cornerstone of postmodern American literature. After Huxley, Dick is the most philosophical science-fiction writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape, as he cared to specify in an interview given to Frank C. Bertrand in January 1980:

Good SF tells a reader something he does not know about a possible world. Thus both the news(novel idea) and possible world (setting) are inventions by the author and not descriptions. Finally, SF makes what would otherwise be an intellectual abstraction concrete; it does this by locating the idea in a specific time and place, which requires the inventing of that time and place. Characters need not differ from characters in non-SF; it is what they encounter and must deal with that differ.<sup>16</sup>

Philip K. Dick’s speculative inclination was so visible that his stories sometimes seem to be a postmodern rewriting of the Platonic Allegory of the cave: what if the world we live in and take for “reality” is not the only one that exists? What if there is an unexpected gap in reality? This two-folded question obsessed not only this author, but also many science-fiction artists influenced by him,

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<sup>15</sup> Kurtz 2017, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Bertrand 1995, 44.

among whom are directors (*Matrix*, 1998), graphic novelists (*V for Vendetta*, 1982–1985) and TV series writers (*Black Mirror*, 2011–2019). In the same years when his major works were written, science fiction imagery started going beyond fiction and was adopted by proper philosophical debate. The “Brains-in-a-vat” 1981 hypothesis (Putnam 1981), investigating human solipsism and the concrete existence of something external to the Self, was clearly grounded in science fiction imagery, just like, in a different field of research, Slavoj Žižek’s political reflections starting from *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002; originally a quote from the 1998 movie *Matrix*). The possibilities of human reason, social paranoia, bioethics, climate change,<sup>17</sup> individual freedom and the (supposed) differences between what is human and what is not; nothing seems to elude the eye of science fiction, which has managed to hold a central place in recent philosophical debate.<sup>18</sup> As La Polla observed: “Science-fiction has become the exemplary, privileged expression of gnoseological and epistemological evolutions occurred throughout the last twenty-five years”.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, science fiction converts its philosophical premises into a mimetic representation, mostly lacking in essayistic sections, which is crucial for a yet to prove relationship with the novel-essay. However, an exception to this anti-essayistic nature of science fiction should be mentioned. Lem’s masterpiece *Solaris* (1961) described a close encounter of three astronauts with a mysterious extra-terrestrial “living ocean”. While the conspicuous considerations on several topics (such as Anthropocentrism and the supposed neutrality of science) were poured into the dialogues between the main character and Snaut<sup>20</sup> the approach to “Solaris” (the ocean), described in many passages of the novel, was not far from an intelligent, witty variation on academic writing, laying the foundation for an imaginary science, the so-called “Solaristics”:

For some time one popular view, eagerly disseminated by the press, was that the thinking ocean covering the whole of Solaris was a gigantic brain more advanced by millions of years than our own civilization, that it was some kind of “cosmic yogi,” a sage, omniscience incarnate, which had long ago grasped the futility of all action and for this reason was maintaining a categorical silence towards us. [...] These hypotheses resuscitated one of the most ancient of philosophical problems – the relationship between matter and consciousness. It took a fair amount of courage to lead the way, like du Haart, in attributing

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<sup>17</sup> See for an insight Iovino (2014).

<sup>18</sup> An introduction is the scientific anthology Schneider (2016).

<sup>19</sup> La Polla 2018, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Lem 2014, 63–65.

consciousness to the ocean. This problem, which the methodologists over-hastily classified as metaphysical, smoldered beneath virtually every discussion and dispute.<sup>21</sup>

To sum up: after this short, parallel history of both the novel-essay and science-fiction, a brief list of some of their formal and thematic features is essential, because those features sometimes appear to be antithetical.

On the one hand, the novel-essay is:

- 1) Extremely essayistic
- 2) Tendentially slow-paced, impersonal, plausible and realistic
- 3) Against any genre cross-pollination; poor in cross-over potential to other media
- 4) Highbrow and not serial; intrinsically linked to one author alone

On the other hand, science fiction is:

- 1) Scarcely essayistic
- 2) Really fast, dramatic, devoid of gridlocks, often unlikely and tendentially unrealistic
- 3) Prone to any kind of genre cross-pollination; great potential for crossing over to other media since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century
- 4) Grounded in mass culture since its origins, serial, with low authorship

According to this list, science fiction has all the tools required to endure longer than the novel-essay, which is doomed to a slow extinction because of its intrinsic difficulty and its (scientific) elitism. Fortunately, recent literary history was less straightforward than a simple, pseudo-Darwinian predominance of the “stronger” narrative form (science-fiction). As a matter of fact, for a few decades, some essayistic novels of Western culture began borrowing important elements from science fiction style and imagery. Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) was patterned after Philip K. Dick’s novels *Time out of Joint* and *The Man in the High Castle*; this can be noticed in the typical paranoia of characters such as Tyrone Slothrop (who unconsciously detects missiles dropping due to his erections). Don De Lillo’s *White Noise* (1985) portrayed a dystopic world slightly divergent from ours, where everybody deals with toxic clouds and post-atomic dangers and is so afraid of death that they become addicted to drugs that should erase that fear (a clear reference to *Brave New World*’s “Soma”). Lastly, two crucial novel-essays of the 1990s, *Infinite Jest* and *Atomised*, share the same discursive setting, as they transplant an essayistic speech into a science-fictional nar-

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<sup>21</sup> Lem 2014, 21–22.

ration. Through a close reading of selected samples from the books, we shall now prove how a genre hybridisation actually occurred.

## 2 Wallace and Houellebecq

*Infinite Jest* is Wallace's best known and most successful novel, and the last one to be published while the author was alive. It was written over a long period of time between the late 1980s and 1994. Although it has been variously defined as "maximalist novel",<sup>22</sup> masterpiece of "hysterical realism",<sup>23</sup> postmodern and or even risen from the ashes of postmodernism, *Infinite Jest* is above all a complex novel-essay. In fact, it features endless essayistic diversions facing for the first time some of the main issues in Wallace's mature poetics, such as depression, loneliness and social alienation in American society, and drug, alcohol and sex addictions. Among the wider topics introduced in a whirling narration, a primary role is played by the ambiguous power of media entertainment, able to appease the minds of the viewers while causing them to atrophy into a slow and horrible death. On the other hand, it is figuratively summarised by the imaginary and mesmerising short movie *Infinite Jest* shot by James Orin Incandenza. Any reader wishing to determine a visible split between story and essay in *Infinite jest* would be easily mistaken. The narration is constantly intertwined with a more speculative element, which makes the pages of the book appear frenetic and chaotic on. While introducing the group of Boston Anonymous Alcoholics, Wallace does not just describe the meeting practices and the processes of reintegration into society, but he also underpins his description with crucial considerations on the alcoholics' questioned free will and loss of faith in a capitalist democracy. Moreover, the narrative-essayistic discourse is enlivened by the recurrent appeal to the rhetorical trope of the apostrophe. Wallace frequently relies on a "you-narrative" that involves the reader in the matter and prevents him from an impartial approach to what he is reading:

Boston AA is like AA nowhere else on this planet. Just like AA everyplace else, Boston AA is divided into numerous individual AA Groups, and each Group has its particular Group name like the Reality Group or the Allston Group or the Clean and Sober Group, and each Group holds its regular meeting once a week [...] and you figure you'd better Hang In in this Boston AA where older guys who seem to be less damaged – or at least less flummoxed by their damage – will tell you in terse simple imperative clauses exactly what to do,

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<sup>22</sup> Ercolino 2014a.

<sup>23</sup> Wood 2000.

and where and when to do it (though never How or Why); and at this point you've started to have an almost classic sort of Blind Faith in the older guys, a Blind Faith in them born not of zealotry or even belief but just of a chilled conviction that you have no faith whatsoever left in yourself; 135 and now if the older guys say Jump you ask them to hold their hand at the desired height, and now they've got you, and you're free.<sup>24</sup>

Another example is the notion of depression as a somehow ironically privileged condition of the rich, cultured inhabitants of *Infinite Jest's* Western world. We see a mixture of thoughts in the third-person singular addressed to Hal (one of the main characters), self-deprecations in the first-person plural, and apostrophes, all used with the purpose of shaking the reader out of the emotional neutrality that Wallace finds extremely similar to internal emptiness and sums up as "anhedonia". After all, Wallace's first goal in fiction was, as he declared while he was completing the novel in a famous interview with Larry McCaffery, to describe "what it is to be a fucking human being".<sup>25</sup> A partial and non-neutral approach to essay-writing is just a logical consequence of this attitude, for he aims to write about a *particular* human experience and its emotional implications, without the presumption of drawing general laws from the telling of stories.

It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of Weltschmerz, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip – and keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. Forget so-called peer-pressure. It's more like peer-hunger. No? We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young.<sup>26</sup>

Wallace's essayism never indulges in an impersonal form and is not juxtaposed to narration, as if anti-narrative abstraction was an aseptic, negative tendency, an inclination to beware. A piece of evidence can be found in the terms picked to describe the killing videotape named *Infinite Jest*: "Technically gorgeous, the Work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic towardness – no narrative movement toward a

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<sup>24</sup> Wallace 2011, 351.

<sup>25</sup> McCaffery 2012, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace 2011, 694.

real story; no emotional movement toward an audience”.<sup>27</sup> Besides, if we take the beginning of the story, when Hal scores an interview with the college commission and subsequently has a breakdown, Wallace here points out the separation between Hal’s robotic, idiotic, quasi-autistic side and Hal as a human being, describing it through his monstrous academic outputs. As the commission states:

The incongruity between Admissions’s hand- and face-color is almost wild. ‘– verbal scores that are just quite a bit closer to zero than we’re comfortable with, as against a secondary-school transcript from the institution where both your mother and her brother are administrators –’ reading directly out of the sheaf inside his arms’ ellipse – ‘that this past year, yes, has fallen off a bit, but by the word I mean “fallen off” to outstanding from three previous years of frankly incredible.’ ‘Off the charts.’ [...] ‘Then there is before us the matter of not the required two but nine separate application essays, some of which of nearly monograph-length, each without exception being –’ different sheet – ‘the adjective various evaluators used was quote “stellar” –’ Dir. of Comp.: ‘I made in my assessment deliberate use of lapidary and effete.’ ‘– but in areas and with titles, I’m sure you recall quite well, Hal: “Neoclassical Assumptions in Contemporary Prescriptive Grammar,” “The Implications of Post-Fourier Transformations for a Holographically Mimetic Cinema,” “The Emergence of Heroic Stasis in Broadcast Entertainment” –’ ““Montague Grammar and the Semantics of Physical Modality”?” “A Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass”?” ““Tertiary Symbolism in Justinian Erotica”?” Now showing broad expanses of recessed gum. ‘Suffice to say that there’s some frank and candid concern about the recipient of these unfortunate test scores, though perhaps explainable test scores, being these essays’ sole individual author.’.<sup>28</sup>

Since his debut, Wallace has always been hostile to minimalism in the style of Raymond Carver and privileged postmodernist, maximalist writers like Pynchon, Barth and Barthelme, as proven by *The Broom of the System* (1987) and *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989). However, *Infinite Jest* represents a significant shift toward the unrealistic side of narrative. Even if we did not consider killing videotapes, rollerblading terrorists and characters with supernatural powers (all elements which coexist with realist, even rough, details), the science-fictional framework is evident when we look at both the plot and the setting. The story is set in an undefined future Boston (although it has been claimed, due to close-reading of the main events, that most of it could take place around 2009) and tells the intricate stories of the Incandenza brothers (especially Hal, trained in ETA, a tennis academy resembling some sort of concentration camp) and Don Gately, a former drug addict working at a rehab house named Ennet House (also quite prison-like). In this universe, the US merged with Canada and Mexico giving rise to a

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<sup>27</sup> Wallace 2011, 740.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace 2011, 6–7.

trans-national state named ONAN, whilst the north side of the country is an enormous dumpster known as the “Great concavity”. The blatant dystopian features shape the idea of a world by exacerbating some flaws of our present in order to better depict it. We are referring to compulsory entertainment, perverse worship for professional and sportive excellence, and, most importantly, strict segregation between high-profile, residential areas and underdeveloped yet inhabited dumping areas. This last element was already present in Philip K. Dick’s depiction of an irreconcilable contradiction between a world of extreme wellness and a drifting one that springs into being as a direct consequence<sup>29</sup> (the same issue being more recently at the core of DeLillo’s *Underworld*, published in 1997). However, what debt is actually owed to science fiction? In some cases, the dystopian impression can be seen from an explicit intertextual reference to the universe of *Infinite Jest*, where people have traded their personal freedom for a false sense of well-being brought on by drugs, capitalist self-realisation and numbing entertainment. In his last appearance in the novel, Hal’s big brother O.J. (a former college football player) is tortured with cockroaches, which he dreads:

Mlle. Luria P--- , who disdained the subtler aspects of technical interviews and had lobbied simply to be given a pair of rubber gloves and two or three minutes alone with the Subject’s testicles (and who was not really Swiss), had predicted accurately what the Subject’s response would be when the speaker’s screen was withdrawn and the sewer roaches began pouring blackly and shinily through, and as the Subject splayed itself against the tumbler’s glass and pressed its face so flat against the absurd glass’s side that the face changed from green to stark white, and, much muffled, shrieked at them ‘Do it to her! Do it to her!’ Luria P--- inclined her head and rolled her eyes at the A.F.R. leader, whom she had long regarded as something of a ham.<sup>30</sup>

The scene clearly echoes the ending of Orwell’s *1984*, when Winston, tortured in Room 101 with his biggest fear (rats), betrays Julia, his partner in the resistance against Big Brother: “Do it to Julia! Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don’t care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me”.<sup>31</sup> At times, the influence is more subtle, yet still strong. The unusual choice to name months after commercial sponsors (“Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment”, “Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad”) reflects the undisputed dominance of mega-corporations on everyday life; this creation has at least a precedent in a science fiction novel of the 1980s, as Tom Bissell recently suggested in a review

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<sup>29</sup> Such a contradiction can be seen at least in *Time out of Joint* and *Ubik* (1969); see for further investigation Cuozzo (2016), 99–103.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace 2011, 972.

<sup>31</sup> Orwell 1961, 236.

for the twenty-year anniversary of *Infinite Jest*'s publication.<sup>32</sup> William Gibson's debut book *Neuromancer* (1984) belongs to cyberpunk literature, a sub-genre defined by a total lack of essayism as well as a sophisticated plot. Gibson's story introduced us to a futuristic world foreshadowing the World Wide Web and cybernetically upgraded people subject to massive alienation. Yet, rather than describing this world, Gibson hints at it with a mixture of pure action and a hectic succession of dialogues, fights and visions. The nature of a shapeless corporate power ion is totalitarian and pervasive, constituting a possible pattern for *Infinite Jest*:

Power, in Case's world, meant corporate power. The zaibatsus, the multinationals that shaped the course of human history, had transcended old barriers. Viewed as organisms, they had attained a kind of immortality. You couldn't kill a zaibatsu by assassinating a dozen key executives; there were others waiting to step up the ladder, assume the vacated position, access the vast banks of corporate memory. But Tessier-Ashpool wasn't like that, and he sensed the difference in the death of its founder. T-A was an atavism, a clan.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the analogy does not end here. Going beyond Bissell's remarks, both Case (*Neuromancer*'s hero) and Hal are former child prodigies. Once ultra-performing, they are now drug addicts, prematurely burned out by a competitive system they cannot break away from:

CASE WAS TWENTY-FOUR. At twenty-two, he'd been a cowboy, a rustler, one of the best in the Sprawl. He'd been trained by the best, by McCoy Pauley and Bobby Quine, legends in the biz. He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix.<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes, the reprises are almost literal and prove an effective impact of Gibson's science-fictional vision on Wallace's dystopian setting. In these two excerpts, Case and Hal merge themselves into a non-space in order to erase their consciousness, because being too aware in this future is a painful condemnation and daze is the cure. When Case enters cyberspace, he nullifies his own individuality to reach ecstasy:

"Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Un-

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<sup>32</sup> Bissell 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Gibson 2000, 196.

<sup>34</sup> Gibson 2000, 9.



thinkable complexity. *Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind*, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. . . .” [...] He closed his eyes. Found the ridged face of the power stud. And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information. Please, he prayed, now [...] And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face.<sup>35</sup>

Something similar seems to happen to Hal, although not in cyberspace but in a private dimension that erases everything that identifies a proper human being in exchange for happiness:

Saying this is bad is like saying traffic is bad, or health-care surtaxes, or the hazards of annular fusion: nobody but Ludditic granola-crunching freaks would call bad what no one can imagine being without. But so very much private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home. A *floating no-space world* of personal spectation. Whole new millennial era, under Gentle and Lace-Forché. Total freedom, privacy, choice.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, science fiction (mostly cyberpunk) is one of the main genres to inquire when exploring *Infinite Jest*'s imagery and ideologies; for Wallace, it is the privileged language used to convert his concerns about the future into a mimetic representation. The last confirmation comes from an essay by Wallace. In a 1990 review of the experimental novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) by Markson – a novel where the unnamed female protagonist, isolated in a desert and hostile world, embodies Wittgenstein's language theories sketched in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) – Wallace expressed his deep admiration for this book, stating that its greatest quality is the ability to convey abstract issues with a figurative narration, creating a possible fictional world and discussing it by means of a “philosophical sci-fi”.<sup>37</sup>

Also due to his scientific background (he earned an Agricultural Science degree in France), Houellebecq has always been a huge reader of masscult literature, especially fantasy and science fiction. He made his literary debut with the essay *H. P. Lovecraft. Against the World, Against Life* (1991), a homage to an anti-realistic author who pioneered fantastic narrative; in *In the Presence of Schopenhauer*, he stated that Lovecraft had been a major influence in his youth in the realm of science fiction. Later, his first narrative work *Whatever* (1994), albeit

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<sup>35</sup> Gibson 2000, 51–52. Our emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> Wallace 2011, 620. Our emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Wallace 2013, 85.

a novel-essay with a strictly realistic approach,<sup>38</sup> winked at science-fictional imagery. The same topic (the decline and fall of the Western world at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is brought up in his following novel, *Atomised*. One of the biggest differences from *Whatever* lies in the central role played by a possible future where human cloning is practiced. In the 1990s, due to the “Dolly experiment” (1996) where scientists cloned a sheep that survived to adult life, cloning became a very topical issue, and Houellebecq took it as the keystone of *Atomised*. Nevertheless, the novel’s atmosphere is science fictional since the very beginning, before the cloning issue is introduced. For instance, let us look at how one of the twin characters is introduced:

Djerzinski felt like a character in a science-fiction film he had seen at university: the last man on earth after every other living thing had been wiped out. A post-apocalyptic wasteland.<sup>39</sup>

Michel Djerzinski, the rational, almost emotionless biologist who will lay the ground for the mass process of human cloning yet to come, is one of the two brothers whose stories form the core of *Atomised*. The other brother is Bruno Clément, his opposite in many ways; he is an extremely frustrated sex addict, almost an extension of the side character Tisserand in *Whatever*. Due to Djerzinski’s discoveries in the field of cloning, after his suicide mankind finds a way to create a new race of super-humans free from the fear of death and potentially flawless. Right before the complete extinction of the “old” human species, the new one decides to recall in the first-person plural (for individualities do not matter anymore) Bruno and Michel’s lives, to pay tribute to their unsuccessful yet honourable venture. Basically, the cloning idea gives us a perspective on estrangement that helps us look at humans “from the outside” in as neutral a way as possible. The impersonal “we-narrative” voice,<sup>40</sup> attributable to the super-human storytellers, shows up occasionally to annotate the story and indulge in essayistic digressions; true encyclopaedic insights, sometimes balanced, sometimes heavily sarcastic, recur in the whole of Houellebecq’s prose and have contributed to give it an aura of “complex plainness”.<sup>41</sup> Below is an example that, starting from some expositional thoughts on Bohr and modern physics, progressively focuses on Djerzinski’s workplace:

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<sup>38</sup> Allow me to refer to Marchese 2018, 155–159.

<sup>39</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 13.

<sup>40</sup> For an overview of we – narratives, see Bekhta (2017).

<sup>41</sup> Sturli 2020, 51–75.

The Institute of Physics, which Bohr founded in Copenhagen in 1919, welcomed the cream of young European physicists. Heisenberg, Pauli and Born served their apprenticeships there. [...] Nothing comparable had happened since the days of the Greek philosophers. It was in this extraordinary environment, between 1925 and 1927, that the basic premises of the Copenhagen Interpretation – which called into question established concepts of space, time and causality – were developed. Djerzinski had singularly failed to foster such an environment around him. The atmosphere in his research facility was like an office, no better, no worse.<sup>42</sup>

In other passages, Houellebecq's essayism deepens and describes usual aspects of life as if they were re-discovered for the first time after a long oblivion. The scientific language used in these sequences sharply breaks into narration (unlike in Wallace) and creates a gap between the "we-narrator" (essay-form) and the human characters (novel-essence). It is the case of Djerzinski's introduction:

Metaphysical mutations – that is to say radical, global transformations in the values to which the majority subscribe – are rare in the history of humanity. The rise of Christianity might be cited as an example. Once a metaphysical mutation has arisen, it tends to move inexorably towards its logical conclusion. Heedlessly, it sweeps away economic and political systems, ethical considerations and social structures.<sup>43</sup>

And it also occurs when Houellebecq portrays Janine Ceccaldi, Bruno and Michel's carefree hippie mother:

Janine Ceccaldi, on the other hand, belongs to a different and dispiriting class of individuals we can call precursors. Ideally adapted to their time and social status on the one hand, they are anxious that their tendency to adopt new customs, or proselytise ideas still regarded as marginal might make them appear 'above themselves'. Precursors, therefore, require a more detailed study – especially as their lives are often tortuous or confused. They are, however, merely catalysts – generally of some form of social breakdown – without the power to stamp their authority on change; which role is the preserve of revolutionaries and prophets. From an early age, it was clear to Martin and Geneviève Ceccaldi that their daughter was extraordinarily intelligent – at least as brilliant as her father.<sup>44</sup>

It is worth observing that the distant perspective on the 1990s somehow reverses what we might call classical science fiction. Science fiction writers usually create worlds full of unbelievable technological and scientific discoveries, but their inhabitants experience all these wonders as if they were normal (which they are, in their estranged perspective). The characters of authors such as Heinlein, Asimov

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<sup>42</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 15–16.

<sup>43</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 26.

and Philip K. Dick are not shocked by the experience of living in an unrealistic world because that is their only reality, and one of the biggest pleasures in the text lies in the shift between our realistic viewpoint and theirs. With Houellebecq, the opposite happens; our “real” and plausible world appears unbelievable, while the posthuman future seems to be far more logical and efficient than our own civilisation. It could not be otherwise, for according to Houellebecq, our society is doomed and does not deserve anything but to disappear. In Houellebecq’s view, its very existence is non-sensical and the clones just share this opinion in their essayistic speeches. The narrators expose this failure as a matter of fact, also insisting on the fall of humanistic and anthropocentric knowledge. Philosophy finds itself in the dock:

In Djerzinski’s time, *philosophy was generally considered to be of no practical significance*, to have been stripped of its purpose. Nevertheless, the values to which a majority subscribe at any given time determine society’s economic and political structures and social mores.<sup>45</sup>

The global ridicule inspired by the works of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze, after decades of reverence, far from leaving the field clear for new ideas, simply heaped contempt on all those who were active in ‘human sciences’. *The rise to dominance of the scientific community in many fields of thought became inevitable.*<sup>46</sup>

Having become useless, philosophy is replaced by STEM (physics and biology above all), which, along with a well-planned promotional campaign, contributes to lead mankind to the next step. Therefore, fictional science succeeds to convert human history in utopia, since the implementation of cloning technology manages to repopulate the Earth with a new species.<sup>47</sup> If we look deeper, utopia is the culmination of *Atomised*. Houellebecq explicitly refers to Huxley but, at the same time, he overturns the premises of his model. As we saw in the previous paragraphs, Huxley’s *Brave New World* purported show the negative consequences of a utopia made real, for when early 20<sup>th</sup> century technological progress suggested the real possibility of making the world better, adverse implications were less intuitive, yet still existed. However, Houellebecq does not share Huxley’s mistrust in some kind of progress, mostly because the prospect of erasing human desires through drugs and disciplining individual freedom seems like a tempting process to the French writer. Removing from human life what strictly makes it such is essential to a nihilistic happiness that Houellebecq’s characters actually

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<sup>45</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 4. Our emphasis.

<sup>46</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 376. Our emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 376–379.

pursue. What was scary and undesirable in Huxley becomes, unironically, a desirable horizon here:

When Bruno arrived at about nine o'clock, he had already had a couple of drinks and was eager to talk philosophy. 'I've always been struck by how accurate Huxley was in *Brave New World*,' he began before he had even sat down. 'It's phenomenal when you think he wrote it in 1932. Everything that's happened since simply brings us closer to the social model he described. [...] The society Huxley describes in *Brave New World* is happy; tragedy and extremes of human emotion have disappeared. Sexual liberation has come to stay – everything favours instant gratification. Oh, there are little moments of depression, of sadness or doubt, but they're easily dealt with using advances in antidepressants. "One cubic centimetre cures ten gloomy sentiments." This is exactly the sort of world we are trying to create, this is the world we want to live in [...] Any philosopher, not just Buddhist or Christian, but any philosopher worthy of the name knows that, in itself, desire – unlike pleasure – is a source of suffering, pain and hatred. The Utopian solution – from Plato to Huxley by way of Fourier – is to do away with desire and the suffering it causes by satisfying it immediately. The opposite is true of the sex-and-shopping society we live in, where desire is marshalled and organised and blown up out of all proportion.<sup>48</sup>

As we can see, Houellebecq's novel-essay, in his own words, is a vibrant protest against desire and striving for life. Science fiction devices can help remove desire from our perspective, so that *Atomised* – far from offering a dystopian viewpoint in deference to the dominant line of 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction (with Huxley and Wells in the lead) – provides a paradoxical, apathetic utopia in the age of its impossibility.<sup>49</sup>

### 3 Impossible Alternatives

In conclusion, how does the comparison above introduced complement the parallel depiction of novel-essay and science fiction from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1990s? Two philosophical-narrative forms, each developing specific formal and thematic features, repeatedly intertwined in the last decades. Through the examples of Wallace and Houellebecq we can see a particular outcome of this hybridisation, one where the novel-essay incorporates elements from concurrent science fiction (whereas the opposite case, meaning a properly essayistic science fiction, is not familiar to us so far, with the partial exception of *Solaris*). According to this interpretation, the contemporary novel-essay obtained several bene-

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<sup>48</sup> Houellebecq 2011, 186–187, 191–192.

<sup>49</sup> In this regard see the classical study by Jacoby (1999). For a recent re – discussion of the decline of hope for utopia, see Kumar (2010).

fits from this merging, such as a faster storytelling pace, greater accessibility to readers not inclined towards philosophy, and, above all, more effectiveness in the mimetic representation of the speculative ideas sketched in the story. It is one thing to simply state that entertainment dulls our consciousness; recounting this via the creation of a potentially lethal videotape and describing its consequences on the characters is quite another. The assertion that mankind has come to an end is way stronger once we support it with a (fictional, yet realistic) clear depiction of how a new pseudo-human species will replace a former one that does not deserve to prosper anymore. Science-fictional narrative is the source used to give a piece of evidence to the challenging and thought-provoking views expressed by the authors. A certain measure of unrealism becomes thereby essential to push the novel-essay beyond its former borders, even if it implies losing plausibility. For instance, it is undisputable that Hal Incandenza's psychology appears superficial as compared to the vast, almost endless inner dimension of Ulrich in *The Man without Qualities*, while Michel Djerzinski and Bruno Clément are quite inscrutable in comparison with the overflowing inner discourse of the nameless narrator of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.<sup>50</sup> A possible explanation for this pattern could lie in a recurring issue of realism that incidentally has always affected science fiction as a whole. When a writer portrays characters who are immersed in a strictly realistic environment, he can describe their conditions and consequences relying on his real-world experience. In a partially unrealistic situation, where characters undergo the effects of imaginary and out-of-reality phenomena, the identification process at work in strictly realist narrative cannot be entirely accomplished. Consequently, science fiction characters (and contemporary novel-essay characters as well) sometimes end up having a schematic psychology; Michel and Hal occasionally seem to have unlikely behaviours and thoughts because their context is not entirely our own.

One last question concerns the dystopian twist of the contemporary novel-essays we have discussed. As already mentioned in the first paragraph, it is widely recognised that the "realist" novel-essay (in Musil, Mann, Broch) retained a desire for utopia, counterbalanced by a yearn for a lost totality.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the early novel-essay reprocessed some aspects of modern utopian literature, de-

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**50** It could be argued that a huge difference lies not only in the influence from science – fiction, but in the point of view chosen to narrate. Proust's novels are set in first person singular, while *Atomised* is told from the estranged perspective of posthuman narrators: a factor that prevents the reader from penetrating Bruno and Michel's inner self too often. Nevertheless, some sort of psychic "opacity" recurs even in first person contemporary novel – essays such as DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) or Francesco Pecoraro's *La vita in tempo di pace* (2013).

**51** Magris 1999, 4 – 9.

veloping them through extended storytelling. In fact, utopia was originally an anti-narrative form, rather close to the forms of treatise and dialogue, as in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602). In Wallace and Houellebecq, differently from Musil and his colleagues, the science-fictional suggestion opens to a full distrust of the future portrayed in the novels, just as if there were no alternatives to an impending catastrophe. In the footsteps of Fisher's famous quote, for the contemporary novel-essay "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism".<sup>52</sup> *Infinite Jest* and *Atomised* emphasise the dystopian side of their fictional universes, thus reinforcing the inexorability of their hypothesis; while utopia offers a radical alternative to the current state of the world, dystopia shows us how the world will become if we keep on behaving in the exact same way as we are now. Dystopia is the unrealistic representation of what the real world would become if mankind was deprived of any possibility to choose for itself. German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno pointed this out (with a touch of strong criticism) when discussing Huxley's *Brave New World* in his 1942 essay *Huxley and Utopia*. After accusing the British writer of "empty schematism", he highlighted the perspectival flattening of his dystopia. In Adorno's words:

Because the transformation of men is not subject to calculation and evades the anticipating imagination, it is replaced by a caricature of the men of today, in the ancient and much abused manner of satire. The fiction of the future bows before the omnipotence of the present; that which does not yet exist is made comic through its resemblance to that which already is, like the gods in Offenbach operettas. The image of the most remote is replaced by a vision of that which is closest to hand, seen through inverted binoculars.<sup>53</sup>

Without addressing Adorno's distrust of science fiction, his consideration of dystopia as fiction about the "omnipotence of the present" is still solid. Verne's fantastic travels around the world, as well as his optimistic euphoria about technology making people stronger and happier, are, to speak in science-fictional terms, light years away. The branch of the contemporary novel-essay borrowing from science fiction imagery and style is on the contrary disheartening and unable to get past a systematic disbelief in future. Furthermore, it puts readers in a double bind. For the novel-essay, our world is the worst of all possible worlds, but there is not truth out of it, neither literary nor philosophical.

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<sup>52</sup> Fisher 2009, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Adorno 1997, 62.

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Marine Aubry-Morici

# The Essayification of Narrative Forms in the 21st Century: a Comparative Study

At a 2016 conference in Paris,<sup>1</sup> one of the most promising Italian authors born in the 1970s, Giorgio Vasta, shared his unexpected passion for amateur homemade lighting. He said he felt that any everyday object could be turned into a light. Making lamps from different objects is also the main character's favourite hobby in one of his short stories, entitled "Quadro". The narrator and his once girlfriend are breaking up; while they are dividing the furniture, she says:

You know you should make a job out of it? [...] Lamps, she pointed out. It's something you like; you can see a lamp in everything. You could design them, make them, and then sell them. [...] You are obsessed by light.<sup>2</sup>

We can use this anecdote as a metaphor for the way many contemporary writers such as David Foster Wallace, Joan Didion, Emmanuel Carrère, Philippe Forest, and Maggie Nelson select an object to cast light on the reality around them. We shall call this process "essayification of everything".

The expression was first used in a paper by Christy Wampole published in *The New York Times* in 2013. By *essayification*, she meant a way of seeing in any object the possibility of triggering meaning. She also pointed out that the literature of our time is seeing the proliferation of a new genre of essayism. She wrote, "It seems that, even in the proliferation of new forms of writing and communication before us, the essay has become a talisman of our times". In this paper, we will look at how both the metaphor and the expression can help us to better understand the evolutions of the novel-essay as a literary genre in the 21st century. Hence, we will start with a few considerations about hybrid forms, which will help us get a better grasp on what the term narrative essay means today.

Firstly, essayism is a major element in early twenty-first century literature closely related to the increasingly popular literary trend toward the production of hybrid texts since 2000. In our opinion, essayism is the best term to handle the generic contamination between narrative and essay usually referred to as "narrative essay". This major phenomenon in the current literary landscape

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1 INALCO conference, "Situation des écrivains, aujourd'hui, dans le monde," 4th October 2016.

2 Vasta 2014.

should be reconciled, first and foremost, with a more general context of hybridisation between fiction and non-fiction, which has caused the crisis of existing categories, and therefore critics, as well as publishers, booksellers, and librarians. We can understand why, so far, there has been reluctance to apply the label essay to texts with strong reflective and personal content presented in a narrative or even fictional way. The literary essay, based on the long literary tradition that started with Montaigne's *Essays*, used to think, meditate, comment, and speculate, but not tell stories or invent anything. This was the case until the 20th century, but now it does so. For example, the Spanish writer Rosa Montero alternates short essays on the powers of writing and imagination in her best-seller *La loca de la casa* (2003). She collects a considerable number of anecdotes about writers, from Goethe to Tolstoy, but she also includes an autobiographical piece that she rewrites several times over the course of the book, each time with a different ending, thus preventing the reader from determining its real version.<sup>3</sup>

A brief cross-linguistic terminological comparison is in order. Our problem is reinforced by the fact that the term *essay* is used in English-speaking countries also to refer to academic or journalistic writing exercises, which have little to do with either literature or the form of the essay as it was practiced by Montaigne. In Italy, a progressive drift of the category gradually became fixed, after Debenedetti's and Berardinelli's theorisations, by which *essay* ("saggio") came to refer mostly to art or literary criticism. In this context, it seemed more cautious to use composite expressions to refer to books tending toward abnormally high levels of both meditation and introspection, like Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2016), Emmanuel Carrère's *Yoga* (2020), and so on. For example, Italians use the expression "narrative essay" (*saggio narrativo*)<sup>4</sup> or the English *personal essay*<sup>5</sup>, whereas the French prefer "autobiographical essay" ("essai autobiographique") or use a phrasal description "between personal narrative and essay". Although the English-speaking world seems more comfortable with the idea that narrative could be nonfictional as well as fictional and uses the umbrella term "memoir" for books combining critical theory and autobiography, it doesn't change the fact that, to many, it seems inconceivable to designate those texts by simply as "essays" without adding another term or a corrective adjective.

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<sup>3</sup> The publisher also emphasised the hybridity and mixture of the book. The back cover of the original Spanish edition reads, "Este libro es una novela, un ensayo, una autobiografía." Critics and publishers face the same difficulties when having to provide definitions.

<sup>4</sup> Marchese 2019, 79–109.

<sup>5</sup> Donnarumma 2014, 151.

The length of this new essayism also raises a naming issue. An essay is seen as a rather short piece of writing, so we frequently encounter the expression “book-length essay” to distinguish it from “essays” intended as collections of short pieces of writings on different topics. To sum up, the term “essay” on its own seems to be reserved for scientists and works without any literary ambition or short texts about literature or society. However, leaving aside the twists and turns of these preliminary precautions, we will now address the real questions raised by the return of essayism, intended as deep and personal explorations of universal themes within narrative forms. But all these sinuous precautions make impossible to address the real questions raised by the return of essayism, intended as deep and personal explorations of universal themes, within the narrative forms.

Paradoxically, such explorations aim at drowning out the essayistic dimension of the text, denying their own essence, as if the text could not be recognised to really belong to the essay genre, and should instead be labelled, most of the time, as a “chaotic mixture” or an “Unidentified Literary Object”.<sup>6</sup> We reject this approach for two reasons. The first is that essayistic writing cannot be confused with the simple and neutral presentation of an intellectual discourse, which should rather be called a “treatise”; this will be discussed below. The second reason is that exploring the problem of hybridity in terms of generic elasticity means wondering how much speculative thinking a narrative text can support before it becomes an essay. Even supposing that we knew where to draw a line in the continuum, it is impossible to determine to what extent these forms can hold up before they become essays.

We shall now turn our attention to what essayism stands for and why it is intrinsically linked to storytelling and narrativity. Firstly, as we mentioned, semantic overlaps hide and drown the original nature of essayism. The word “essayism” was coined by Robert Musil in *The Man Without Qualities* to describe the protagonist’s “haphazard, paralysing, disarming manner against logical systematisation”.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, essayism is an individual attitude before being a genre. To understand its essence, we need to go back to its inventor, Montaigne, who set the matrix for this writing practice which has spread to the present day. Instead of seeing the essay as a genre, let us consider essayism as an experimental attitude; we will follow the proposal of Irène Langlet, author of the impressive landmark study on essay theory in the 20th century *L’abeille et la balance, Penser l’essai* (2015). According to Langlet “to think of the essay as a genre is necessarily

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, <https://entropymag.org/the-argonauts-by-maggie-nelson/>

<sup>7</sup> Musil 1982, 301.

to think of essayism as a mode, a mental attitude". We will now briefly compare the basic characteristics of Montaigne's *Essays* to how they are found in the hypermodern writings of the contemporary authors we have mentioned so far.<sup>8</sup> Montaigne's writing comes from spontaneous thinking ("à sauts et à gambades") and has no actual method of investigation. T. W. Adorno highlighted and analysed in depth the non-systematicity of the essay, i.e., rejection of the scientific method, stating that "discontinuity is essential to the essay" and "proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically". Essayists do not present themselves as experts on the subjects they are addressing; in fact, the opposite is true. Thus, for example, Philippe Forest begins his book on quantum physics, *Le chat de Schrödinger* (2013), by asking scientists for forgiveness in his dedication to them.<sup>9</sup> In the same way, David Foster Wallace begins his essay "Some remarks on Kafka's funniness from which probably not enough gas been removed" by announcing his lack of expertise in the field.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the above, how could the essay find its coherence in discontinuity while claiming to propose a thought and a vision of the world, if not to deliver knowledge? From Montaigne's *Essays* onwards, subjectivity and narrativity are the two central elements of essayism that allow the narrative essay to find its cohesion. In essays, thought is not presented as knowledge to be applied in an organised manner, but as "thought in the making", that is, a narrative. For example, Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and Roberto Calasso's *La folie Baudelaire* by (2008) provide an illustration of an idea captured as it unfolds in time under the guise of a path. In the essay, the 'I' tends to stage its own reasoning and records its trials and tribulations as much as its results. Philippe Forest, for instance, claims serendipity as his guiding principle in essay writing, quoting Picasso: "Quand je lis un livre sur la physique d'Einstein auquel je ne comprends rien, ça ne fait rien : ça me fera comprendre autre chose." This is the reason why Angenot notes that the essay-meditation narrates "a thought in the making, in search of a conceptualisation, caught in the gangue of experience, sometimes stammering, sometimes dazzling".<sup>11</sup> Only the narration of thought makes it possible to render the various logical passages at hand as well as the wanderings. Montaigne thus provides a literary model for many writers, which Carrère

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<sup>8</sup> No longer trying to bind Proteus, according to Langlet and Patrick Née, in the volume *Le Quatrième genre : l'essai* (2018), "It might be possible thus to see it [the essay] as a matrix of meaning production that can touch on any subject."

<sup>9</sup> "Aux scientifiques. Avec toutes mes excuses" is Philippe Forest's dedication in *Le chat de Schrödinger*, Gallimard, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace 2005, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Angenot 1982, 47.

makes clear in *Yoga*, expressing his admiration for Montaigne's method (or non-method), by quoting him explicitly: "to follow such an errant allure as that of our spirit".<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the narrativity of the *Essais* has long been emphasised by experts; by quoting Montaigne's famous phrase "I do not teach, I relate",<sup>13</sup> we can easily acknowledge how essayism understood as didacticism is a misunderstanding, and how close it is to narrative, including in its origins.

If essayistic writing is not strict autobiography, which may explain a life through retrospective narrative, it certainly revolves around a single organising body, the "I" that tells a story about him or herself. The whole discourse is organised around a subjective reflexivity as both a method of investigating and describing reality in the first person singular. This means that there is no real reason for the expression "personal essay" or mentioning the "memoir" genre when talking about essays, though contemporary readers and critics still feel a need to underline their subjective and autobiographical dimension.

In essayism, narrativity and subjectivity go hand in hand and feed each other. Essayism engages an interactional relationship between the self of the essayist and his or her various objects of investigation. This leads to a reciprocal characterisation<sup>14</sup> where the essay is the site of a laboratory of the self and self-narration, as it alternates between the timeless expression of abstract thought and the narrative taken from the experience of thought in the making. Maggie Nelson makes this explicit in *Bluets*, whose subject is the colour blue, by pointing out from the outset that blue has gone from a simple cultural interest to a personal obsession: "Then (...) *it became somehow personal*".<sup>15</sup> This is exactly why Montaigne wrote, "I have not made my book more than my book has made me".<sup>16</sup> This being the case, why do we feel the need to call these books "narrative essays" or "memoirs" or "personal essays" instead of just "essays"? Are they not deep and personal explorations of universal themes? Can we not hear the confessional voice of personal narrative exactly as Montaigne did in his time?

The question of terminology might appear rather trivial if it did not allow us to shed light on an interesting aspect of the nature of narrativity in the essay. Firstly, expressions like *personal essay* or *essai autobiographique* answer the need to include the narrative dimension. The addition of *personal* creates a semantic halo effect that evokes a possible autobiographical dimension, which,

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<sup>12</sup> Carrère 2020, 85.

<sup>13</sup> Montaigne 1968, III, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Good 1988, 21–22.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson 2009, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Montaigne 1968, II, 18.

in an admittedly imprecise but salient way, justifies the presence of narration understood as self-narration. Ultimately, the expression *personal essay* implies a semantic cross-over, a permutation between narrativity and subjectivity, as one is replaced by the other. The notion of subjectivity seems to be added to justify the presence of narrativity. When we look at it this way, the expressions *saggio narrativo*, *narrative essay*, and *essai narratif* seem more satisfactory, considering that the misuse of the term *essay* to refer to anything from an article to a student essay can no longer account for the richness of the genre and its inclusion in narrative forms.

Secondly, we usually think of “essay” and “non-fiction” as equivalent terms, especially in Italy and in English-speaking countries. We have gotten into the habit of using the word “essay” to mean “non-fiction” and “not invented” and even to make sure that the story is not invented. This has little to do with the original nature of the essay. In 1989, Chris Anderson had warned of this potential confusion, stressing the essential difference between the two:

We also need to distinguish between at least two kinds of writings that fit underneath the larger notion of literary nonfiction [...] the essay is reflective and exploratory and essentially personal. Its purpose is not to convey information, although it may do that as well, but rather to tell the story of the author’s thinking and experience. Journalism, or the new journalism, is informative rather than reflective; its main purpose is to convey information, although it may certainly use autobiography as a perspective and device for conveying that information.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, when we speak of “essayification,” we must include the multitude of writings in which an “I” seeks to make sense of the world using both narrative and personal reflection as tools.

What singular type of narrativity does the narrative essay involve? It is certainly not the case that essayism uses narrativity in the same way as the novel does, and neither does the novel-essay, which is a major difference. Stefano Ercolino, who devoted an important study to this genre in the 19th and 20th century, argued:

the essay slackens the flow of narration. The insertion of nonnarrative, atemporal form, the essay, into a fundamentally narrative and temporal one, the novel, slows down the unravelling of the plot, obstructing the narrative flow. It produces an effect of suspension, dilation, rarefaction, and in some cases, even of an explosion of the plot.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson 1989, IX–X.

<sup>18</sup> Ercolino 2014, 38.



In hyper-contemporary essayism, discourse does not slow the narrative down, rather, it acts as its engine. It would be interesting to explore whether it is a difference in nature or an evolution of the genre; we would lean towards the first hypothesis. Much more than a narrative break or an incursion into a story that would otherwise follow its course, to the point where the former could be easily removed without affecting the plot in any way, essayism as a mode is indeed the driving force of narrative essays. This is the fundamental difference between an essayistic passage in a novel, of which Vincent Ferré lists all the characteristics,<sup>19</sup> and the essayism of a narrative essay.

The first reason for this is that the essay involves a temporal mode of thought. The object of the essay is not the self, but a subjective thought inscribed in a temporality. “Not the self, but the self-thinking”, summarises Alfred Kazin.<sup>20</sup> As Emmanuel Carrère put it in *Yoga* “Puisqu’il faut commencer quelque part”<sup>21</sup> (because we need to start somewhere), when he or she starts his or her book, the essayist’s thought is also put into narrative: Carrère chooses to begin his book with the account of his stay during a meditation course. However, Carrère’s account is not simply his story, but precisely the story of the book he is (or was) trying to write about yoga and meditation (the “petit livre souriant et subtil sur le yoga”). The metanarrative dimension is central here and forms the narrative device of the book, just as it did in *L’Adversaire* (2000), which can be seen as an essay on lies and, above all, credulity. We should indeed be able to recall that the first chapters of the book are about how the book was made possible. Are we reading Carrère’s actual book or the book he would have liked to write? A non-existent book, the book that Carrère would have written? It seems that the reader only has access to Carrère’s writing diary, and thus to his reflection on the act of writing such a story: which is the whole plot of his narrative essay. The plot of such narrative essays is contained in a quest for truth led by an “I”, the honest exploration of a subject through subjectivity. Therefore, it coincides with the goal of the truth-seeking self.

This means that narrativity does not rely exclusively on the narration of content, the “storytelling dynamics”.<sup>22</sup> Although it might do so, narrativity can also be found at a more general level, and not only in the way of popular science publications. In narrative essays, true content cannot be separated from the quest for it. In fact, narrativity allows the writer to tell of the constant mutation of subject and object of which Socrates speaks in the *Theaetetus*; not only does

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<sup>19</sup> Ferré 2013, 82–83.

<sup>20</sup> Kazin 1961, 169.

<sup>21</sup> Carrère 2020, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Marchese 2018.

the object change, but so does the observer as observation progresses. The formula for the so-called narrative essay could therefore be: “I tell the elusive truth that I am seeking, that my changing ’I’ is seeking”. Indeed, the overlap between quest and content is entirely fictional; and how could it be otherwise, given that “thought is faster than the pen”, as Jules Renard noted? However, it always appears as a sincere quest; “Ceci est un livre de bonne foi, lecteur” is the first line of Montaigne’s *Essays*. The fact that the author will try, fail, and try again guarantees that they are sincere. All essayistic writers attribute a cognitive purpose to literature and take us down that road with them. They rely on meditation and personal experience to construct meaning and make their way through the meaninglessness of the world.

This personal search can provide a powerful engine for an epic of truth; the essay must stage its own search for truth. According to Adorno’s definition, the essay not being systematic is a positive quality, not a flaw.<sup>23</sup> This lack of a systemic approach has indeed enormous potential, which the narrative essay knows how to use. In Adorno’s “negative dialectics”, knowledge is non-identical; it is the awareness of the impossibility for the subject to coincide with the object in the act of knowing. Therefore, narrativity is erratic, the expression of the “loss of totality” is almost a textual strategy. From this, we can understand the countless itinerant essays. Itinerancy acts as a *dispositio* for thought and its path, allowing it to unfold in its own time. It can be fictional, as in the case of Calasso’s book, or real, mimicking the writing of reporting, as in David Foster Wallace’s *A supposedly fun thing I’ll never do again*. In Italy, publishing house Laterza created *Contromano*, an entire collection of essayistic texts based on the principle of itinerancy and reporting. The collection includes important texts such as *Spaesamento* by Giorgio Vasta (2010), in which the author returns to his hometown, Palermo, with a fresh eye and a sense of estrangement, and *Hotel a Zero Stelle* by Pincio (2011), in which an imaginary hotel welcomes a famous writer in each room (Jack Kerouac, Georges Orwell, Pier Paolo Pasolini), an umbrella story to describe each writer’s relationship to imposture cast as a mosaic of short biographies.

At any rate, the best heuristic moments in narrative essays are often a-temporal, such as can be epiphanies, allegories, brief biographies, recollections, and anamorphoses, as in the example of Roquentin’s blinding revelation in Sartre’s *La Nausée*. Based on the above, it can be said that the narrative essay is in continuity with the novel-essay. Indeed, the narrative essay does not believe that narratives can tell the truth; on the contrary, it does not trust them, and denounces them

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<sup>23</sup> Adorno 1984, 159.

as misleading fabrications. It is no coincidence that the opening sentence in Joan Didion's *The White Album* is "We tell ourselves stories in order to live". If telling a story is suspect, we have no choice but to look at how stories are made from a panoramic perspective, looking down on a variegated landscape of fictions, each more seductive than the last. Many writers are adopting a constructivist vein in response to the proliferation of fiction in the public sphere, such as in advertising, political storytelling, and social media self-promotion; essayists now aim to deconstruct their mechanisms and traverse their layers. They are interested in major anthropological objects, whether they belong to the sphere of belief or the global history of cultural representations. On the one hand, Carrère tackles faith in *Le Royaume* (2014) and credulity in *L'Adversaire* (2006), while Tommaso Pincio also tackles the latter in *Gli Alieni*, a book about UFOs. On the other hand, books like Adam Gopnik's *Winter* (2011) and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* (2009) give a cultural and social history to the experience of a season or colour. This vein of essayism can be considered a "non-scholarly version" of representational constructivism.<sup>24</sup> A heir to the sceptic tradition as much as it is a child of the age of simulacra, hyper-contemporary essayism may flourish in this semi-mockery of the weight of representations and the imaginary in our lives. Both Carrère and Pincio look with irony at the credulity of their contemporaries and attribute it precisely to the power of narrative and storytelling. However, their works reveal their full poetic potential without giving in to cynicism, as do instead those by Gopnik and Nelson. In sum, we can say that narrative essays use narrativity as an umbrella story as well as an epic engine and a device for critical or sceptical thinking.

So far, we have discussed the essayification of literature, that is, the increase in narrative texts led by an 'I' who mixes its personal reflections with accounts of its experiences and eclectic erudition. However, we would like to take this expression a step further and consider essayification on the scale of the literary genre, envisaging the essay as a virus or, using a less banal metaphor, a magic potion that transforms the nature of the texts it touches. Firstly, we may recall that the etymology of "essayism" refers to testing, "wisening" the pliability of an idea. Contemporary essayism does this to existing narrative forms. In 1989, O.B. Hardison explained in a paper titled "Binding Proteus" how impossible it was to chase the infinite forms that the essay could take, like the Proteus of mythology, who is everywhere and can take any form, yet always remains himself. In its place, we would like to use the figure of Circe, the expert user of phil-

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24 "Pour le Royaume (...) tu t'attaques à une histoire qui est largement plus connue. Carrère : Oui (...) L'histoire de Jésus a été racontée cent mille fois? Ce n'est pas elle le sujet du livre, mais les variations de ce qui a été raconté dans les Actes des Apôtres." (Demanze/Rabaté 2018, 18).

tres that cause metamorphosis in her victims. What if contemporary essayism were not itself proteiform, but changed the essence of other narrative forms? The essayism of the extreme contemporary is presented as a combinatory form of writing that mimics the forms of other genres (biography, autofiction, investigation, etc.). By combining discursive prose with the powers of narration, or even of the imaginary, these new types of essays form an *ars combinatoria*, as Max Bense claimed, also because they recombine literary genres, whose heuristic force becomes the pivot around which they are organized.<sup>25</sup>

Our last point will consider the essayification of everything by turning away from literary genres and toward the objects considered in essays – which was the meaning of Wampole’s original expression. What is the focus of the narrative essay? On the surface, it appears to take interest in everything, including quite trivial matters. Joan Didion takes up the question of grief in *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Carrère makes depression and meditation the main subjects of *Yoga*, but David Foster Wallace discusses tennis just as much as he does lobsters. This is because the subjects of narrative essays may be deep and serious as well as topical; the literary form may be as lyrical as it is prosaic.

This can lead to contrasting reactions. Italian writer Walter Siti read Wampole’s article and expressed his concern in the daily newspaper *La Repubblica* that “the new children of Montaigne” might fall into “protagonism”, for which Facebook might serve as a model, where anyone can discuss anything, share his or her opinions, and be applauded by anyone.<sup>26</sup> He believes that storytelling (Bakhtinian “novelisation”) is being replaced by essayification, understood as the speech of a rambling “jack of all trades” as found in social media. He fears a “meditative deficiency” caused by mixing together “the particular and the general”. He hopes that Montaigne’s and Kierkegaard’s models could still provide paradigms for profound writing. He concentrates on the problem of the narrative essay and the essay in general, which, in his view, must always be accompanied by noble high-quality examples to be defined and distinguished from other types of discourse, including journalism and social media.

However, essayists’ interest in the banal and prosaic cannot be denied; for instance, Montaigne did not hesitate to write often about his digestion. This is the challenge of the essayist according to Adorno:

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<sup>25</sup> Bense 1947.

<sup>26</sup> Siti 2013.

the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal (...) In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth.<sup>27</sup>

However, its literary and narrative means is metadiscourse. If we can consider the initial question of *The Argonauts*<sup>28</sup> – the social conformity of motherhood – as both a serious question of philosophy or the social sciences and the subject of her memoir, we should also consider that the real object of Maggie Nelson's book, is about whether the personal experience of motherhood is a legitimate pursuit worthy of literary investigation. Indeed, essay writers always have a double argument. While everything in the text is intricate and constantly commented on, if we look closely, we will always find both the subject and its paradigm of knowledge. We began this paper by quoting Giorgio Vasta on his relationship with homemade lamps. T. W. Adorno chose this epigraph by Goethe for "The Essay as Form": "Destined, to see the illuminated, not the light." The object of new essayism is a prism; truth is considered as oblique. It does not bear on the object; it uses it to illuminate. This is what narrative essayism tries not only to explain, but also to relate and narrate.

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<sup>27</sup> Adorno 1984, 159.

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Francesco Pecoraro

## The Trunk and the Branches

I have always admired authors like Jack London, Louis Stevenson, Joseph Conrad, whose stories I cyclically read and reread, magically fascinating, fluid, profound, which imply a subtext that goes in many directions, and yet is clearly focused on the situation they are describing. Without smudges, unnecessary digressions, without the writer's ego being minimally perceived beyond the choice of topic and style. I mention them, but like them, better or not, interesting, cultured, literally successful, there are many others. Their purpose is apparently only to tell a story. That very pure story that produces plots, twists, fiction, which I do not see myself able to do.

When I sit at my pc with the intention of moving forward with the text on which I am “working” – I put this word in quotation marks because, although I respect and share the idea that writing is a job and I myself am forced to experience moments of pure work as I reach the final stages, I generally refuse to force myself back to the desk if I do not feel the (inner and mysterious) urge to write – when I am working on a text, as I was saying, inference and digression tend to dominate over what the main narrative trunk should be. Therefore, I continually need to find and reinforce it and possibly make it coherent with itself, in the face of all the para-narrative material, that is, almost non-fiction, which immediately appears and begins to grow, clinging to the initial project. Because of this, it continually tends to get lost as I carry it forward and to diminish its meaning in my eyes, to de-motivate itself as a plot/story and re-motivate itself incessantly as a para-essay, but also wavering and doubtful to the point of having to search for its legitimation only in the narrative context. The story leans on the essay and the essay on the story, but never in a symmetrical and balanced way, so the page oscillates and constantly hesitates between the two forms, without fully embracing either of them, except for short sections.

This is what I mean when I affirm that I am incapable of producing true fiction, that is, narrative constructions conceived with know-how and skill, that is, coherent, significant, passionate, engaging, clear. Even when I manage to plan a story – which happens very rarely because I can't, I really can't, imagine a story from start to finish, only excerpts, initial or central situations come to mind –, even when I have a working direction, even an apparently complete line-up, I am unable to follow it with determination, to manage it, because I am continually presented with bifurcations that lead me astray and then more bifurcations that lead me even further away from the straight narrative path. Added to this

are continuous essay props that are continually almost building themselves in support of the whole.

And so, a continuous unfinished sensation is implemented, of a building without a real delimitation, neither structure, nor margins, nor a real reason for being, in the face of other things I could/would like to write about which continually come to my mind, both in relation to the themes of the text I am working on and what is happening around me. Like when I couldn't keep out of what I was writing the Facts of Charlie Hebdo and the stronger and more devastating ones – *inwardly* devastating to me, if that wording makes any sense – of the Bataclan. In these cases, I can't help myself and let them enter the book in the form of emotion/reflection produced on the spot by necessity, even if detached from the context, which I then delete, but never completely. The actuality that marks me always leaves traces in the writing like fragments of alien DNA, so it also continually marks the text, which is never completely detached from the historical time in which it was written, from the readings I am doing, more or less open and formalised, that is, incentivising or disincentivising that which after all is only tension towards expressive freedom. It is as if in the unfolding of a film appear lightning clips of the news of the time in which it was shot, frames that may not be clearly perceptible, but present nonetheless.

But outside the constant influence of Present History – that is, of the actuality in which our existence is immersed –, almost always after having written a few pages, in addition to old written and rewritten themes that continually recur in the new, as if I had never managed to exhaust them and leave them behind, I already find myself where I would not like to be and yet very interested in the new paths taken in the rhythm that the writing part of my mind imposes on me. Interested to the point of not wanting to go back immediately to walk and structure the main trunk, I want instead to allow myself to proceed a little longer in what seems to be a digression and likely a new tunnel, a new excavation that follows a vein about which I want to say something at all costs. This is how I often end up going astray, and what turns out to be a kind of style may be just the attempt to keep together a multiplicity of themes, often not very compatible with each other, and the narrative rhythm that I try to impress on the text.

I began in 2007 with a book of short stories of which only the first one was carefully designed, although the ending remained uncertain – more violent/less violent – until the last moment. All the others, except one, had almost built themselves from a basic starting point. And at that time my narrative situations were very tied to bundles of personal emotions that asked to be expressed at all costs, in a more or less straightforward and incisive way. I had been holding on to too many things for too long, I felt it was time to say something, even though I didn't quite know what, and I thought I could do it by writing short stories. An



underlying state of mind, linked to a painful but temporary condition, such as being mobbed at my workplace at the time, produced texts imbued, from the first to the last, with the same mood, thus giving the reader the feeling that *that* was my view of the world, while it was just a phase of my life.

I had never thought about being a writer and I didn't even think about it when I was writing my first book. Unlike many of my colleagues, in my life, I have tried in every way to establish myself in another profession, without ever succeeding fully and, in the first, very difficult times, barely getting my daily bread from it. Into writing I *slipped* almost without realising it, without thinking about it, without possessing the specific culture, releasing words on the keyboard of a computer that wasn't mine, on a black screen with green letters, assembled in I don't know what shed on Via Tiburtina in the Rome of the early 80s.

And yet at that time I was able to imagine stories. Indeed, I had built my own pan – narrative theory of writing. Continuously writing for work and with great effort, bureaucratic letters – I loved doing it, it took me whole mornings to compose them in perfect bureaucratic language – technical reports, official opinions, notes for politicians, I was convinced that everything that is written is therefore the same narrative. Even today, I believe that things are rather like this, and that the topic or the story does not count so much, that is, in short, as the *content*, as the quality of the narration, that is, of the text, that is, of the fabric of words that we are able to put together.

But my stories had a limit, a kind of thematic wall beyond which they could not go, and which consisted of failure, the idea of failure and the narration of failure. Of defeat. Of a death wish. Of course, it was about *my* failure, *my* death wish. And each character did and suffered and said and thought things that concerned me, that concerned my life up to there, that is, up to the border of the territory where my aspiration to something *other than writing* reigned. Beyond that border there was another life, completely different from the previous one, that is, from the one in which I was immersed in architecture – a cultural capsule in itself, closed to the outside, but at that time open to any extra-disciplinary flux, from cultural anthropology to thermodynamics – and during which I had written only technical reports and read books for pure pleasure or disciplinary duty, without knowing how to deepen and study almost anything related to literature.

This ignorance allowed me, at least at the beginning, a total dis-inhibition: writing was writing, and it was important in and of itself, even if I could easily give it the form of a story. I was bloated with things to say like a stuffed squid. It was as if I could no longer hold back my need to *report* indirectly, i. e., not directly in an auto-biographical way, facts & moods of my life up to then, which I considered – and still consider – bankrupt with respect to my initial intentions. It

was a question of unconsciously *avenging* the sufferings caused by the drift of the initial trajectory that I had tried to set for myself. And to do it through writing. Strange procedure: not action, not reacting, not taking actual revenge, but *reporting*, narrating similar yet imaginary situations. Nothing more naïve. It was as if I wanted to say: look, things are not as you think or as the books you normally read tell you, everything is subtly, silently, more ruthless and terrible than it appears to us.

But this ability – absolutely incomparable to that of my literary models – to give narrative or better, fictional form to the contents that came to my mind, gradually diminished, to give way to the formless, the metastatic, to a proceeding by bubbles that burst gradually in my hands, without me ever being able to fully extract the contents. The eagerness to *speak out*, to denounce life itself, was prevailing over every other instance, even formal ones. I wrote to *say*, narration and fiction were, only for a short time, tools of saying, because soon I began to just say, without mediation, without listening to those who rightly told me that mine was a product without rhyme or reason, magmatic, lumpy, difficult to follow and above all without a story. I wasn't listening, but the woodworm of being wrong was digging its tunnels.

As a self-taught person, it took me a while to understand something that even children know, and that is that writing is only one of the forms of narration we have, since there are audio and verbal-visual narratives, and then theatrical, poetic ones, political, legal, procedural, musical, etc., each with its own theories, plus several general theories of the historical forms of the narrative itself. I understood that in these first twenty years of the century the non-verbal narrative forms were taking over, they had surrounded us, they were knocking insistently on the doors of our receptive abilities, including technical ones, proposing ever more sophisticated, elaborate, professional materials. Expensive, beautiful, and fatally repetitive.

Stories upon stories with more stories inside. Stories already seen and heard in other forms, divided into genres, organised in short, long, very long form. Events stacked with other events, typologies with other typologies inside, a continuous re-elaboration of the already seen of the already said of the already read of the already heard, up to the next point of change, in which the old paradigms suddenly crash under the force of something, technique or person, that shakes what has already been seen by making its override or even rotten fruits fall to the ground, reinvigorating dry branches, making unexpected grafts, and so on.

The more the presence of these narrative materials increased, the more I became unable to produce my own, original and meaningful. I don't know if my inability to invent stories is actually a consequence on me of the redundancy of events that saturates the space of contemporary communication. The fact

is that in recent years it had increased, to the point that by now I didn't even try to invent stories, and the maximum amount of fiction I could put into a book concerned the personal story of a narrating self that actually talks about something else. So, not long ago I made a clean sweep of my vague and all-encompassing writing projects and nailed myself to the desk to start over, purely and simply, to narrate invented stories but, at least in my intentions, well rooted in the "real"<sup>1</sup> world of things and people. Hoping to minimise any deviation/budding/branching from the main trunk, but already knowing that I will not succeed.

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<sup>1</sup> I am writing the word "real" in quotation marks to indicate the conventional meaning of something that "really and concretely exists" according to the Treccani definition.



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