

**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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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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<sup>19</sup> Shklovsky 1984, 190.

<sup>20</sup> 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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