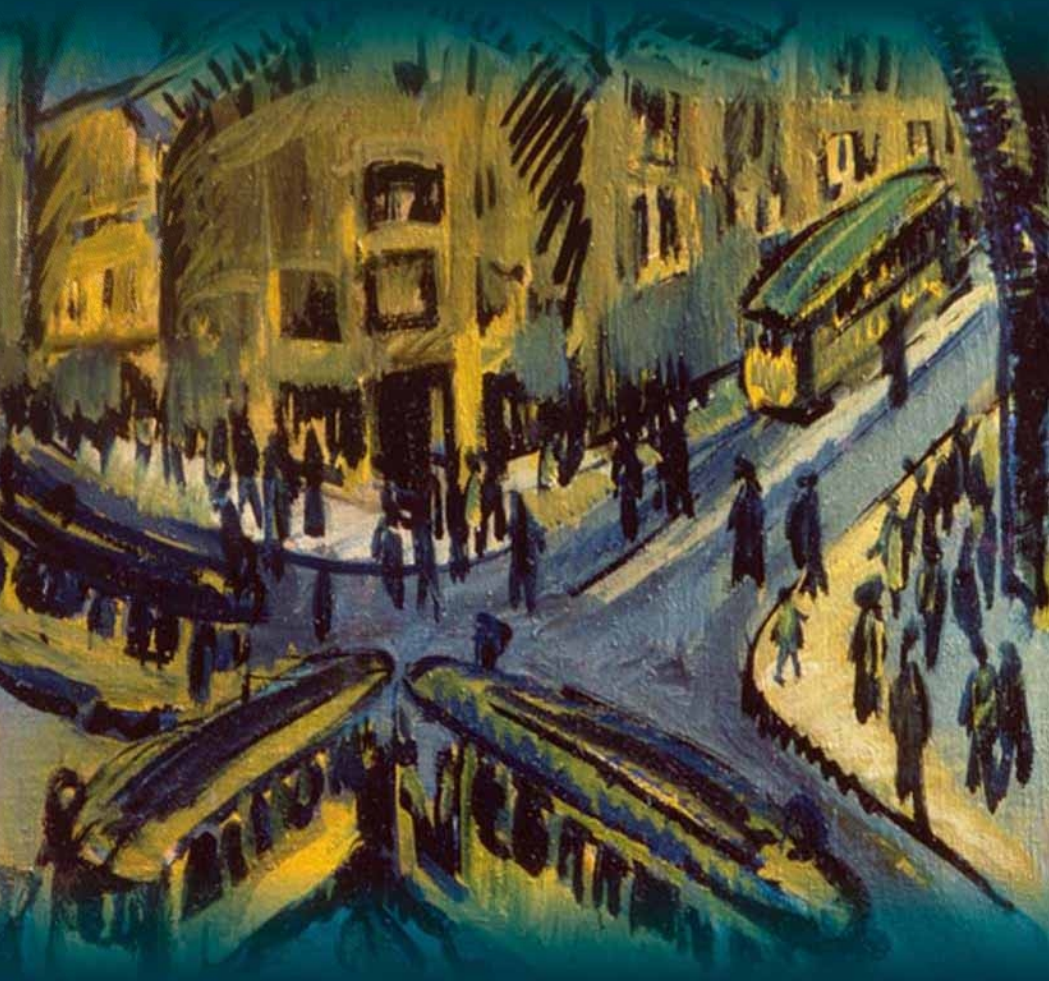


STUDIES IN EUROPEAN CULTURE AND HISTORY

# THE NOVEL-ESSAY, 1884-1947



Stefano Ercolino



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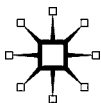
*The Novel-Essay, 1884–1947*  
by Stefano Ercolino

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THE NOVEL-ESSAY, 1884-1947

STEFANO ERCOLINO

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For Elvira



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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Note on the Quoted Texts</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	
The Novel-Essay, 1884–1947	xv
One	
1. Beyond Naturalist Aesthetics	1
2. The Critique of Modern Rationality	12
3. The Emergence of the Novel-Essay	28
Two	
1. A Morphological Changeover	35
2. Mimicry	48
3. Dialectical Strains	54
Three	
1. Philosophical Mimesis	79
2. Totality and the Grand Style	103
3. The Tear of History	114
Four	
Form and Ideology	133
<i>Notes</i>	149
<i>Works Cited</i>	167
<i>Index</i>	183

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## NOTE ON THE QUOTED TEXTS

In this study, although I have always tried to utilize the existing translations of texts written in languages other than English, I have often had to modify such translations on the basis of a constant and close comparison with the originals.

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of texts originally published in French, German, and Italian are mine. With regard to Russian texts, instead, I have to thank Mara Smortchkova for her help.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Novel-Essay, 1884–1947**

This study focuses on French, Austrian, and German nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction and culture, in order to define the features of a literary genre, the novel-essay, the significance of which, for the history of the novel and for modern culture, has been largely underestimated.

The novel-essay presents the organic fusion of two distinct forms, the novel and the essay. As a genre it emerged in France, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and reached its highest formal complexity in Austria and Germany, during the interwar period. I frame the emergence of the novel-essay within the ideological crisis, which fell upon the epistemological and symbolic apparatus of modernity in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and which culminated following the disasters first of World War I and subsequently of World War II. In this sense, I theorize the novel-essay as the symbolic form of the *crisis* of modernity.

The principal authors discussed in this book, on the background of the general history of the Western novel in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, are Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Émile Zola, Joris-Karl Huysmans, August Strindberg, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, and Hermann Broch.

When one seeks to define the identity of a literary genre and to outline both its history and its theory, critical discontent on a number of questions is to be expected. For instance, one might ask why have other authors, whose texts seem to fit well with the theoretical and historical hypothesis at issue, not been considered as well. This study could also be exposed to such criticism, of course, since this is a partisan essay, with no encyclopedic pretensions. Nonetheless, I believe that the textual corpus upon which I base my discussion of



the novel-essay is highly illustrative and particularly consistent with the idea of literary form that underlies my inquiry: literary form as a “problem solving mechanism[s]” (Moretti, *The Way* 243), that is, literary form as a signifying structure that emerges in order to answer, on the aesthetic plane, specific symbolic needs posed by history.

The book is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, focusing on Huysmans’s novel *Against Nature*, I identify the moment in which Zolian naturalism reached its irreversible exhaustion and the emergence of the novel-essay as a morphologically and symbolically coherent form. I highlight, then, how the hybrid, utopian aesthetics of “spiritualist naturalism” and “rational mysticism,” respectively, outlined by Huysmans in *Là-Bas* and by Strindberg in *Inferno*, were attempts at challenging the standard account of Cartesian rationality—that “distinctions-oriented rationality” (Luhmann 23) broadly investigated by Niklas Luhmann and Bruno Latour—which was responsible for the metaphysical and the epistemological architecture of the modern world. The attack that the novel-essay launched at the basic criterion of the symbolic *poiesis* of modernity helps to emphasize the eminently critical character of the novel-essay and to introduce a new theory of literary forms, in the light of the philosophical concept of “emergence.” According to this emergentist theory, the novel-essay emerged upon preexisting components, or features, belonging to other subvenient forms—the novel and the essay—components that were reorganized in a morphologically and symbolically coherent shape within the new supervenient form, the novel-essay. In this sense, the critical character of the modern essay (variously emphasized by the three major theoreticians of the form: Georg Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Bense) was “absorbed” by the novel-essay, which in turn became itself a critical form.

In the second chapter, I explore some morphological implications deriving from my emergentist theory of literary forms vis-à-vis the abundance of essayistic inserts in free indirect style, such as those found in Huysmans’s novels (and the novel-essay in general), and also in relation to the characteristic indeterminateness of the essay as a genre, in the light of the concept of “mimicry” taken from evolutionary biology. I then set a comparison between the novel-essay and the Bildungsroman, focusing on the “Notice” of Huysmans’s *Against Nature* and Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*. I argue that a morphological changeover occurred between these two

novel genres. Through such a changeover, the novel-essay qualified itself as the literary form deputed to carry the literary discourse on modernity forward. However, whereas the Bildungsroman, according to Franco Moretti's definition, was the symbolic form of modernity (*The Way* 5), the novel-essay presented itself as the symbolic form of the crisis of modernity. I reflect, indeed, on the fundamental effect produced by the insertion of the essay into the novel, consisting in a drastic slowing down of narrative time. I interpret such a peculiar feature of the novel-essay as the aesthetic response that the novel gave to the increasing pressure of historical time in the last quarter of the nineteenth century—the age of “abundance” as Stephen Kern named it (9)—an epoch in which one witnessed not only the greatest economic expansion and cultural development of the modern era, but also the first huge modern economic crisis, the Great Depression of 1873–1896, a crisis of overproduction. Finally, I lay out a comparative in-depth examination of Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in a first attempt to outline a (partial and tendentious) morphology of the European and the Russian novel between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, and to define the borders of the novel-essay as a genre. My conclusion is that, from a morphological point of view, the unfinished tragic polyphony of Dostoevsky's fiction makes the latter unassimilable to the novel-essay, which presents, on the contrary, a closed dialectical structure.

In the third chapter, I discuss Musil's *The Man without Qualities* in relation to the Musilian concept of “essayism.” In the wake of Latour's reflection and Mark Freed's recent systematization, I view Musil's essayism as a fundamentally “nonmodern” and dereifying category of thinking, which I date back to the dawn of modernity—to Michel de Montaigne's Renaissance and the epistemological skepticism of his *Essays*, interpreted by Stephen Toulmin as being essentially opposed to René Descartes's dogmatic search for certain foundations that constituted the backbone of Western rationality and the symbolic organization of modernity. Musil's glimpse of an alternative, early version of modernity was a contradictory, impossible attempt at revitalizing the dream of modernity in a world that, after World War I, had broken into pieces. In this regard, I discuss the characteristic interplay between narration and concept in the novel-essay, which in the textual corpus of this study is manifested

to the highest degree in *The Man without Qualities* and in Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*. Such interplay is the most tangible sign of the synthetic and totalizing ambition of the novel-essay. In its organic articulation of thinking and narration, the novel-essay reunited, in a symbolically functional way, what Plato had long before separated in *The Republic*—philosophy and mimesis—thus laying the foundations for Western aesthetics. Furthermore, it is my concern to underline the novel-essay's proximity to the Western tradition of *philosophical mimesis*, a literary vein in which the interaction between narration and concept is tight, while highlighting, however, the particular rank that the novel-essay occupies within such a tradition. In this regard, I examine Voltaire's *Candide*, Honoré de Balzac's *Séraphita*, Zola's *Doctor Pascal*, Proust's *Swann's Way* and *Time Regained*, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, in order to demonstrate the substantial morphological and rhetorical extraneousness of the novel-essay to these texts. I then proceed to discuss the totalizing ambition of the novel-essay in the wake of the conceptual dualism envisaged by Friedrich Nietzsche between "decadence" and "grand style," on the background of the historical trauma produced by the fall of the Austro-Hungarian and the German empires after World War I. I conclude by completing the (partial and tendentious) comparative morphology, started in the previous chapter, of the Russian and the European novel between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, approximating the novel-essay to the form of the historical novel. In particular, I take into consideration Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Broch's "polyhistorical" novel-essay, *The Sleepwalkers*, highlighting their peculiar morphological features in order to stress the distance of Tolstoy's masterpiece from the form of the novel-essay and the substantial unassimilability of the European and the Russian aesthetic systems between the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries.

The fourth chapter of this study is, instead, a sort of "gran coda" centered on Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. Following the evolution of the musical aesthetics of the protagonist, the fictitious German composer Adrian Leverkühn, I depict the novel-essay as a genre caught up in the fatal "dialectic of enlightenment" described by Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Critical of the mystifications of modern ideology, ultimately the novel-essay was not able to elude them. The

institutionalization of the critical gesture operated by the novel-essay within the literary domain as the only possible act of resistance in a Europe devastated by the folly of Nazism and by the violence of World War II was nothing but the umpteenth mythicizing operation performed by a dying modern ideology, still felt by the novel as an inescapable second nature. The postmodern, with an urge to answer the exhaustion of literary language cogently anticipated by *Doctor Faustus*, would react to this ideological dead end with a radical ideological and aesthetic deregulation, which would bring the novel far from the symbolic and morphological tracks trodden by the novel-essay. Together with that of modernity, also the time of the novel-essay ran out.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1. Beyond Naturalist Aesthetics

There were many things Zola couldn't understand; first the need I felt to open the windows, to escape from an environment in which I was suffocating; then the desire that took hold of me to shake off preconceived ideas, to break the novel's limitations, to bring in art, science and history, in short, to no longer use this literary form except as a frame in which to introduce more serious work. For me, the thing that struck me above all at that period was to do away with the traditional plot, even to get rid of love and women, to concentrate the ray of light on a single character, to do something new at any price. (Huysmans, "Preface" 249)

Thus, wrote Joris-Karl Huysmans in the 1903 Preface to *Against Nature*. Twenty years earlier, after the publication of *Against Nature*, Huysmans spent a few days in Médan. He recounted how one afternoon, during a walk in the countryside, Zola, with "a black look in his eyes," reproached him over his novel, holding that he had struck a "terrible blow" against naturalism and that "no kind of literature was possible in a genre exhausted by a single book," and invited him to backtrack, to study manners ("Preface" 249).<sup>1</sup> True, perhaps, "there were many things Zola couldn't understand."

The novel-essay rose from the exhaustion of naturalist aesthetics, which was drastically challenged in Huysmans's and Strindberg's novels. As we will see, the estrangement of the novel-essay from naturalism was theorized in an explicit way in Huysmans's *Là-Bas* and Strindberg's *Inferno*, but it was primarily in *Against Nature* that a tear in literary history took place, a rupture that would reveal crucial for the aesthetics of the novel.

In a passage of *Les romanciers naturalistes*, Zola clearly identified the three fundamental features of the naturalist novel:

The first characteristic of the naturalist novel, of which *Madame Bovary* is the prototype, is the exact reproduction of life [*la reproduction exacte de la vie*], the absence of any romanesque element. The composition of the oeuvre consists only in the choice of some scenes and in a certain harmonic order of developments. The scenes are the first that come to hand: only, the author has accurately selected and balanced them, so as to make a monument of art and science of his work. It is the exact picture of life, reproduced in a frame of admirable workmanship. Therefore, any extraordinary invention is banned. You no longer meet children branded at their birth, then lost, to be found again at the denouement. You no longer have furniture with false bottom drawers, documents that serve, at the right time, to save the innocent persecuted. Even a plot, of any kind, no matter how simple, is missing. The novel proceeds uniformly, narrating things as they happen day by day, without surprise, at most giving a cue for a news story. And when it is finished, it is as if you had just left the street to come in home.

Where the difference [between Balzac and Flaubert] is clearer, it is in the second characteristic of the naturalist novel. Fatally, the novelist kills the heroes, if he only accepts the ordinary course of common existence [*le train ordinaire de l'existence commune*]. By heroes, I mean the characters enlarged beyond measure [*grandis outre mesure*], the puppets turned into colossi. [...] On the contrary, men grow smaller and fall into their line, when your only concern is to write a true, meditated oeuvre, which is the faithful verbal process of any adventure. [...] The beauty of the oeuvre does not reside in the enlargement of a character, which stops to be a miser, a gourmand, a debauched, to become greed, gluttony, lust themselves. It is, instead, in the unquestionable truth of the human document, in the absolute reality of paintings in which every detail occupies its own place and nothing more than that place.

I shall insist, finally, on a third characteristic. The naturalist novelist wants to completely disappear behind the action he narrates. He is the hidden director of the play. He never shows himself in the folds of a sentence. You do not hear him laughing or crying with his characters, nor does he allow himself to judge their actions. This apparent indifference is precisely the most distinctive feature. You would look in vain for an ending, a moral, a lesson of any kind gathered from facts. (502–4)

The quality of the aforementioned synthesis is worth the long quotation. The attack on the romanesque and on the plot, the death of the