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

Marine Aubry-Morici

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# Thinking Narratively



Between Novel-Essay and Narrative Essay

Edited by  
Massimo Fusillo, Gianluigi Simonetti  
and Lorenzo Marchese

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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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17 Anderson 1989, IX–X.

18 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.

<sup>28</sup> Nelson 2016.

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