

**The Prosification of Culture and the Creative Essay of the Twentieth Century: Questions on a Literary Genre / *A prosificação da cultura e o ensaio criativo do século XX: questões sobre um gênero literário***

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper proposes a dialogue between the theories regarding the hybrid and multifaceted essay genre, which prompts much discussion and attempts to systematize it, and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of culture prosification, which helps us understand the significant changes of the essay genre occurring during the twentieth century.

**KEYWORDS:** Essay; Literary Theory; Speech Genre; Prosification; Mikhail Bakhtin.

**RESUMO:**

*Este artigo propõe um diálogo entre as teorias sobre o ensaio, gênero híbrido e proteiforme que suscita variadas discussões e tentativas de sistematização, com a teoria de Mikhail Bakhtin, que em seus estudos sobre a prosificação da cultura nos auxilia a compreender as significativas mudanças do gênero ensaístico ocorridas ao longo do século XX.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Ensaio; Teoria Literária; Gêneros do discurso; Prosificação; Mikhail Bakhtin*

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The fate of literature as a whole is also the fate of essay writing, which, among all literary genres, is the one with the tendency to express maximum self-reflection, historical and technical conscience and a penchant to controversy and to the project.

*Alfonso Berardinelli<sup>1</sup>*

The essay, a mixed form by definition, placing itself between objective research and creativity, seem to be a literary genre destined to be perpetuated amongst the chaotic multiplication of writings nowadays. As a genre, however, the essay is, quoting Italian scholar Alfonso Berardinelli, one of the most expressive voices in the current studies regarding this theme; it is “maybe the most mutable and the most intangible of genres, the most exposed to the influence of all other genres, the most passive in its pride, the most impatient in its irresolution” (2002, p.17).<sup>2</sup>

Often defined as a discourse whose fundamental form is the unfinished, the fragmentary and the experimental, the essay is a ripe fruit mainly from times of crisis and writing hybridism. In fact, it may be considered an essential literary genre capable of offering a description of the historical and social contexts from which the literary genres are considered major.

The essay passed unscathed through the changes that shook the structures of other genres during the twentieth century, a notably critical and self-reflexive century regarding narrative production, which is largely characterized by stylistic formulas evidencing circularity between the production of theory and fiction. The genre seems to enjoy a lasting vitality and does not to suffer from the setbacks of the genres considered indefinite or intermediary, which are currently in a crisis, seemingly having depleted their creative and artistically renovating possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> TN. Direct quotes have been translated into English only when there is no publication of the work in English. In that case, the text in the original language will be provided as footnotes.

Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: “Il destino della letteratura è nel suo insieme anche il destino della saggistica: il quale, fra tutti i generi letterari, è quello in cui tende a esprimersi il massimo di autoriflessione, di consapevolezza storica e tecnica, di volontà polemica e progettuale” (p.20).

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: “il saggio, forse il più mutevole e inafferrabile dei generi. Il più esposto alle influenze di ogni altro genere, il più passivo nel suo orgoglio, il più impaziente nella sua irresolutezza”.

Considering this premise and aiming at contributing to an open debate, our goal is to propose a discussion on the theories of the essay genre in dialogue with Bakhtin's idea regarding the prosification of written culture. The Russian critic considers the Romanesque form as the greatest example of prose, allowing its renovation through the insertion of different styles of writing, such as observed in essays.

Ever since the essay was defined by Montaigne as a reflexive method underlying a text that contains an intimate connection between the way the author sees reality and the way he puts it in words rather than as an adopted form or literary category, it has been used by many great writers in innumerable canon and memorable works. It is noted by Berardinelli:

Which reader or scholar could deny that Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Leopardi's *Operette Morali*, Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* or Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* are masterpieces of Western literature? Everyone knows that Francesco De Sanctis, a literary critic, was, along Manzoni, Leopardi and Verga, one of the most important Italian writers in the nineteenth century. Moreover, what would be of European, Russian and American literature during the same period without great essay writers such as Tocqueville, Herzan, Sainte-Beuve, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Thoreau, Marx and Burckhardt? The formation of the middle-class "public sphere," without which the modern liberal-democratic states would be impossible, received its largest additions from essay writing and militant literature (2002, p.9-10).<sup>3</sup>

As aforementioned, regarding its broad conceptual definition, the essay encompasses several possibilities to the point that it may be understood as a category of thinking, as a "method" of relating to reality. It is a genre that places itself between non-fiction and fiction and does not submit to a fixed form. It is configured as a complex, dynamic and varied phenomenon whose discussion would require a space much larger than the one available herein. Therefore, it would be wise to limit the scope of the analysis

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: "Quale lettore o studioso potrebbe negare che *Il Principe* di Machiavelli, i *Saggi* di Montaigne, il *Dizionario filosofico* di Voltaire, le *Operette morali* di Leopardi, *La Gaia scienza* di Nietzsche o *Le pietre di Venezia* di Ruskin siano dei capolavori della letteratura occidentale? Tutti sanno che Francesco De Sanctis, un critico letterario, è con Manzoni, Leopardi e Verga, uno dei massimi scrittori dell'Ottocento italiano. E che cosa sarebbe la letteratura europea, russa e americana dello stesso periodo senza i grandi saggisti come Tocqueville, Herzan, Sainte-Beuve, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Thoreau, Marx, Burckhardt? La formazione della "sfera pubblica" borghese, senza la quale i moderni stati liberal democratici non sarebbero concepibili, ha ricevuto dall'attività saggistica e dalla pubblicistica militante il suo maggiore incremento".

to the essay form that interests us, that is, the one in which the essay creates a hybrid space between the poetic and the referential by means of a fragmentary form that references a whole universe of subjective, creative, and aesthetic representations.

When one thinks of the essay as a hybrid genre, dwelling between scientific and artistic writing, the reference to G. Lukacs becomes inevitable. In his celebrated work *Soul and Form* (1974),<sup>4</sup> he acknowledges for the first time the categorical and artistic value of essays. Although Lukacs did not disregard the essential characteristic of the essay as a critical and scientific text, he attributed an artistic value to it and analyzed it as a determined form, distinct from other forms of art. The essay writer would be, therefore, one capable of making the covered theme unique thanks to the form used and to the original perception through which s/he presents and enlightens her/his reflection.

According to Lukacs, the essay would be an art form distinct from poetry. As it establishes an entirely different connection with reality, essay writers surpass objective data and work through categories and abstractions. It is, for him, a type of writing that is not limited to the representation through images, but that uses those images to arrive at a deeper meaning, establishing new relations, unique and very personal perspectives that imbue a reflexive and speculative dimension to the subject discussed. In this crossroad between fiction and reflection, the essay supposedly brings elements of the author's thoughts that would provide the critique with a deeper assessment of the author himself/herself.

Although most scholars agree upon the hybrid, open and unsystematic nature of essays, there are controversies regarding its literary form. Theodor Adorno, in his work *The essay as form* (1954),<sup>5</sup> opposes Lukacs's ideas and separates genre and artistic form, but stresses that art is the essential matter for essay reflection. For the critic,

the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance (ADORNO, 1991, p.15).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> LUKACS, G. *Soul and Form*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> ADORNO, T.W. The Essay as Form. In: ADORNO, T.W. *Notes to Literature*. Translated from German by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. vol I.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 5.

Adorno acknowledges the essay as a particular form of critical assessment characterized by its free spirit and some degree of aesthetic autonomy to express perspectives regarding cultural constructs. Therefore, the essay for him does not claim totality as it “says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say” (1991, p.4).<sup>7</sup> In his analysis, the essay opposes the Cartesian principles of conceptual organization, systematization, induction and conclusion, stating that in “the essay as a form, the need makes itself felt unconsciously and atheoretically, to annul theoretically outdated claims to completeness and continuity” (ADORNO, 1991, p.16).<sup>8</sup>

According to Adorno, from the start, the essay thinks of the object in its peculiar multidimensionality. The essay writer’s field of action is the text with which he works, initially inside a self-referential and closed scope, which gradually broadens and multiplies suggestively and experimentally in such way that the object being analyzed is observed from different perspectives and is translated into works from a peculiar vantage point. According to Adorno:

The essay, however, is concerned with what is blind in its objects. It wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it (1991, p.23).<sup>9</sup>

Then, in essay writing there is a “fumbling intention” which conjoins with the consciousness of fallibility and transience. In this sense, the essay, according to Adorno, is opposed, with a “fumbling” and contradictory method, to discursive and systematic thinking which believes it can exhaust and encompass its object in its closed totality. Just like the fragment, a quintessentially open and unfinished literary genre, which requires the listener-reader to construct possible, and often inexhaustible, meanings, the essay reveals in its presentation a double movement of opening and closing. It is open because it reflects the lack of identity between thinking and object, and it is closed because it constitutes a work with composition, that is, with the expression of its content.

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<sup>7</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 5.

Therefore, although he disagrees with the essay's artistic character proposed by Lukacs, Adorno agrees that the essay unites subjectivity with rational and critical capacity in such a way that, although reflexive, it may present certain creativity due to being a fragmentary and discontinuous form, thus open to new forms of textual construction. However, his ideas regarding the open and closed nature of essays prevents him from carefully assessing the changes in tone and the related potentials as artistic matter.

The informative, descriptive, expository and reflexive nature of essays takes us once again to Montaigne's work, essential for the studies of this genre. However, as seen previously, Montaigne uses the term *Essais* not to conceptualize a new literary category, but rather to point to the reflexive method of his writings. With his work, he confers on the form of the essay a sense of intimacy and familiarity, giving it the definitive form of presenting one's ideas in a non-orthodox way, which is imbued with a subjective perspective of the facts, including those from everyday life.

According to scholar Maria Ferrecchia, the essay as conceptualized by Montaigne has affinities with fragments and dialogues; however, its dialogical nature is a result from the self-reflection process of one who, reflecting upon himself/herself, works to place his/her identity into perspective. Therefore, Montaigne's dialogue is, in fact, a monologue in which the presence of imaginary interlocutors may not be observed. This confirms the notions of sincerity and truth that are essential to him.

Although Montaigne did not assume the presence of a dialogue or an immediate reader and wrote his reflections as a monologue, we could think with Vološinov that

Countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word. It stands to reason, then, that the word is the most sensitive *index of social changes*, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems (1973, p.19; emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup>

Then, his text presents a personal selection of concepts that express “the conflicting ideas and attitudes in his culture” (GODOY, J.; WATT, I., 1963, p.340),<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R.Titunik. University of Michigan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> GODOY, J.; WATT, I. The Consequences of Literacy. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, v. 5, n. 3, pp.304-345, Apr. 1963. Available at: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/177651>>. Access on: 21 mar 2015.

giving prose an “interindividual character,” the fundamental characteristic of an artistic-prosaic genre that, just like the novel, has a

literary language of a people with a highly developed art of prose, especially if it is novelistic prose with a rich and tension-filled verbal-ideological history, is in fact an organized microcosm that reflects the macrocosm not only of national heteroglossia, but of European heteroglossia as well (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p.295).<sup>12</sup>

The plural nature of Montaigne’s essayist language expresses itself, as noted by A. Berardinelli, through the sincerity, the subjective perspective, the perception of the occasional data and concrete singularity, the dilettantism and the lack of specialization, the creation of theories and the intellectual and dialectic acuteness, which exclude the systematic spirit. Hence, it is through the free construction of the written word encompassing different tones of prosaic language that the essay genre takes shape. According to Berardinelli, this genre “presents itself as destination” both in the work of Montaigne and in the work of Kierkegaard, considered the inventors and founders of a genre, dedicating themselves completely to it and transforming it in a “suggesting and unmistakable,” “plural and mutable” form. Berardinelli notes that Montaigne writes what comes to mind and “makes his own ignorance and lack of talent the starting and ending points... making himself the true and only hero and the true and only truth” (BERARDINELLI, 2000, p.19).<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, on the other hand, “obsessed with the absolute and the concrete,” still in the words of the Italian critic, tries to evoke a sense of truth in the instability of existence. We should note, however, that both start from the word in language as “half someone else’s” and “socially charged” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p.293)<sup>14</sup> to endow it accent and intention, “adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p.293).<sup>15</sup>

Berardinelli considers that the soul of a genre that blossoms in the current days lies in the essays of Montaigne and Kierkegaard. In fact, in the twentieth century, the

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<sup>12</sup> Discourse in the Novel. In BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981a. pp.269-422.

<sup>13</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: “fa della propria ignoranza e della propria mancanza di talenti speciali il suo punto di partenza e di arrivo... facendo di se stesso il proprio solo eroe e la sola verità”.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 12.

essay became one of the forms of critical presentation in which the free exercise of reflection is embodied in the construction itself. In it, the critical and reflexive procedures unite, opening a space in which subject and object mirror and construct each other in a dialogic and dialectic relationship. In the essay, understanding and being sensitive walk hand in hand as imagination and subjective spontaneity are not excluded from the scientific aspect, but incorporated to the process of constructing knowledge. The critical aspect of the essay is a result of a thinking that reflects itself and does not allow itself to be bound by concepts and absolute truths, moving according to the contradictory and sinuous rhythm intrinsic to its matter.

Upon seeking to systematize the concepts regarding the determination of the form of the essay genre, Maria Ferrecchia (2000) individualizes two prominent categories visibly marked by one literary component: The *creative essay*, in which the intellectual and artistic personality of the writer converts any situation in reflexive expression, and the *critical essay*, in which a theme, or author, is examined inside a literary field that does not remove, however, the scientific and intellectual seriousness of the critic. In the individualization of these two categories of the essay, Ferrecchia conceptualizes autonomous forms which, according to her, should be recognized as a genre due to its artistic nature – forms which not only contain art, but that are art – due to the literary component present in them.

The distinction between the two categories of essay, although subtle, would be represented, according to the scholar, by the interest that creates them (personal experiences, cultural data, works of art); however, it is the form, that is, the method of translating an occasional theme in images, metaphors, associative sequences, and descriptive sequences through writing that places them in the same level (FERRECCHIA, 2000, p.52). Therefore, it would be difficult for some writers to separate the critic from the artist. However, according to Ferrecchia, it is important to consider that the essay always reaches a very peculiar and original result, in which even the most common objects may be transposed to a literary level, presenting themselves to the reader

as an extraordinary encounter, either due to being crystalized in cultural data or due to being renovated by the use of ekphrases and metaphors, and, in the most fortuitous cases, due to the union of aesthetic data and

poetic suggestion, not always easy to be achieved inside the cultural and biographic structure of the writer (2000, p.52).<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the essay as a proteiform phenomenon can unite its varied characteristics into a common denominator: the literary essence, being refined, composed of classical forms and rich in imagery and poetry. Still according to Ferrecchia,

The true essay writer, regardless of the field of knowledge taken as subject matter, in the intellectual discipline that is inherent to him, always reaches a literary result: there is no essay writing in the absence of a true vocation for the written word and of a sense of responsibility related to the written language and its deepest value (2000, p.100).<sup>17</sup>

We can observe that, to Ferrecchia, the concept of genre is not conditioned by binding rules, but rather is a “space indicative of typologies” in which similar forms fit, interpreted under the light of the artist’s singularity and of his time. As she points out, several contemporary scholars see in essay writing a source of literature, close to the tradition founded by Montaigne, regardless of its being a strictly scientific and academic essay or a more idiosyncratic one.

When writing about creative essays, Ferrecchia defends that the literary component, which legitimizes the genre as a form, is strictly related to the deeply cultured and scholarly nature of the author and his quality as a writer. The writer is seen as a sagacious and versatile intellectual, capable of associating different disciplines, which not always are his field of expertise. This, on the one hand, exposes him to accusations of dilettantism and anti-scientism and, on the other, grants him extreme compositional and stylistic freedom.

As may be noted, the essay is an extremely heterogeneous literary genre and this characteristic is mainly due to the inconstant behavior of the writer, a “visionary of thinking and a dialectician of metaphors,” which makes the essay, according to Alfonso Berardinelli, “the genre of blending and contamination.” Although he conducted a very

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<sup>16</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: “[...] come un incontro straordinario, o perché cristallizzati nel dato culturale o perché rinnovati a ragione di ekphrafis e metafore, e nei casi più felici, grazie alla congiunzione di dato estético e sugestione poética, non sempre facile da realizzarsi, all’interno della compagine culturale e biografica del saggista”.

<sup>17</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: “Il vero autore di saggi, qualunque luogo del sapere scelga di saggiare, nel rigore intellettuale che gli è proprio, giunge sempre lì dove ha sede la letteratura; non c’è saggismo in assenza di un’autentica vocazione alla scrittura e del senso di responsabilità legato alla parola e al suo valore profondo”.

original and complex study regarding this theme, the Italian critic also acknowledges the difficulties of standardizing the analysis of essays and of developing a theory of the essay form, capable of “making visible the autonomous and specific existence of this literary genre, which is still very undervalued and left in the shadow of theoretical activity” (BERARDINELLI, 2002, p.49).<sup>18</sup>

Despite the extreme complexity of creating a theory for a sinuous form such as the essay and of trying to systematize a genre so open and experimental, the studies of “speech genres” carried out by M. Bakhtin allow us to establish a dialogue with the theories of essay writing in order to better understand this literary form. For that reason, however, we must highlight the idea of the Russian scholar regarding the difference between poetic and prosaic genres, which has to do with daily life, with its rich array of multi-stylistic “contaminations,” allowing a great discursive variety and mobility for the written prose. In fact, Bakhtin opposes the importance of poetics in the classical world to the prosification phenomenon in the modern world’s written culture, which is responsible for the birth of hybrid discursive genres. However, as emphasized by Irene Machado,

far from fostering a mere opposition between prose and poetry, as may seem likely at a glance, prose opens up the possibility of constructing a coherent theoretical system with the cultural production of a significant stage for Western civilization.

To Mikhail Bakhtin *the prosification of written culture may be considered a highly transgressive process, destabilizing a cultural order that seemed unshakable*. It is the institution of a discursive arena where it is possible to discuss ideas and develop perspectives regarding the world, which includes emerging cultural codes (2005, p.154, emphasis added).<sup>19</sup>

Although the Russian scholar’s main goal is the study of the novel from the processes of stylization and the parody of classical genres, we emphasize that his theory focuses upon the prosaic text and its discursive alterations, which renew and change

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<sup>18</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Italian: “rendere visibile l’esistenza autonoma e specifica di questo genere letterario ancora così misconosciuto, così lasciato in ombra dall’attività teorica”.

<sup>19</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Portuguese: “longe de incentivar uma mera oposição entre prosa e poesia, como pode parecer à primeira vista, a prosaica abre a possibilidade de constituir um sistema teórico coerente com a produção cultural de um estágio significativo da civilização ocidental.

Para Mikhail Bakhtin a prosificação da cultura letrada pode ser considerada um processo altamente transgressor, de desestabilização de uma ordem cultural que parecia inabalável. Trata-se da instauração de um campo de luta, da arena discursiva onde é possível se discutir ideias e construir pontos de vista sobre o mundo, inclusive com códigos culturais emergentes”.

literary genres, “in a highly transgressive process” mirroring the cultural crises and inducing a rupture with the canonical models, fostering the restructuring of artistic expression forms. He observes, in fact, that “the process of realizing the aesthetic object, i.e., of realizing the artistic task in its essence, is a process of consistently transforming a linguistically and compositionally conceived verbal whole into the architectonic whole of an aesthetically consummated event” (BAKHTIN, 1990a, p.297).<sup>20</sup>

The American critics Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, in an important study entitled *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990), coined the term “prosaics,” which encompasses both prose as a literary form as opposed to poetics and prose as “a form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the ‘prosaic’” (1990, p.15).<sup>21</sup> To the scholars, the Bakhtinian idea changes “our approach to all literary genres, both poetic and prosaic” (p.16).<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the notion of the Russian critic opens space for the evaluation of new forms of expression in prose, both artistic and critic, and does not discard the possibility of intersection between them.

As aforementioned, in the prosaic production in the twentieth century, the essay ventures into the novel and takes an important role of self-commentary as an extra-literary way to conceptually read and translate artistic experiences. In turn, the reader is always asked to reapply meaning to the literary forms inserted in the voices of daily life, occasionally imbued of a critical reflection from the author, demanding more and more of the reader’s active participation in regard to the understanding of the text’s underlying structures and meanings.

As a result, in opposition to the “death of the author,” a notion defended by Roland Barthes, several literary proposals from the twentieth century tended towards conceptually reading and translating artistic experiences as the author’s voice. Thus, they established a dialogue between the artistic work and the resulting aesthetic object in order to present it to the reader, who is more frequently summoned to the task of attributing aesthetic and literary meaning.

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<sup>20</sup> The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art. In BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov; supplement translated by Kenneth Brostrom. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990a. pp.257-326.

<sup>21</sup> MORSON, G. S.; EMERSON, C. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 21.

As emphasized by Berardinelli (2000), in the case of modern novel in which material and narrative time tend to be dissociated and fragmented, the essay becomes a necessary tool to reconstruct and reinvent the elementary data of a narrative that loses its linear and progressive nature and starts organizing itself within concentric circles (BERARDINELLI, 2000, p.26). Therefore, it would not be superfluous to briefly take the novel into consideration and observe the zones of interconnection with other narrative forms in order to reflect upon the essay.

The idea of dissociation and fragmentation emphasized by Berardinelli complements, in a way, Bakhtin's statement that modern novel "is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted" (BAKHTIN, 1981b, p.3).<sup>23</sup> He claims that, "In each epoch certain speech genres set the tone for the development of literary language. And these speech genres are not only secondary (literary, commentarial, and scientific), but also primary (certain types of oral dialogue – [...] such as familiar, [...], philosophical, and so on)" (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.65).<sup>24</sup> They characterize the concrete utterances of verbal interaction. According to him,

The prose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents; prose art finds discourse in this state and subjects it to the dynamic unity of its own style (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p.331).<sup>25</sup>

In the twentieth century, novel writing increasingly became "the expression of the Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language," because the novel takes on the notion of pluridiscursivity, marked by "a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world" (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p.366-367).<sup>26</sup> This provides narrative forms with the interpenetration of voices and cultural viewpoints.

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<sup>23</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel. In BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981b. pp.3-40.

<sup>24</sup> BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of Speech Genres. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee and Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. pp.60-102.

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 12.

Therefore, the novel, the novel-essay, or the creative essay (types of secondary discourse) present the assimilation of extraliterary utterances (either primary or secondary) and promote the creation of genres and styles. “This leads to a more or less fundamental restructuring and renewal of speech genres” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.66).<sup>27</sup>

When Bakhtin analyzes the modern novel, he reaches the fundamental concepts of his theory, such as “chronotope” (BAKHTIN, 1981c)<sup>28</sup> and “extraposition” (BAKHTIN, 1990b)<sup>29</sup> related to the space-time dimension of the production and reception of the work of art. Then, it is based on the definition of speech genres that Bakhtin creates the essential concepts for his dialogic theory. Irene Machado points out that Bakhtin, by means of his analyses of chronotopes, shows that

The [prosaic] genre in the dialogism theory is inserted in culture. Related to it, it manifests itself as “creative memory,” encompassing not only the great achievements of the civilizations, but also the significant discoveries regarding mankind and its actions in time and space (2005, p.159).<sup>30</sup>

Hence, we reach the conclusion that the Russian scholar assesses the prosaic genre in its potential to renew culture through an ever-changing discursive apparatus. Clark and Holquist, in their book *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984), observe that, according to the Russian scholar, a genre “embodies a historically specific idea of what it means to be human” (1984, p.275)<sup>31</sup> and that his assessment of the novel (his personal hero) proposes “an extremely plastic and historically sensitive concept of genres and their interactions” (1984, p.276).<sup>32</sup> Additionally, they point that

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<sup>27</sup> See footnote 24.

<sup>28</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics. In BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981c. pp.84-258.

<sup>29</sup> BAKHTIN, M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov; supplement translated by Kenneth Brostrom. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990b. pp.4-256.

<sup>30</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Portuguese: “O gênero [prosaico] na teoria do dialogismo, está inserido na cultura, em relação a qual se manifesta como “memória criativa” (sic) onde estão depositados não só as grandes conquistas das civilizações, como também as descobertas significativas sobre os homens e suas ações no tempo e no espaço”.

<sup>31</sup> CLARK, K.; HOLQUIST, M. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 29.

Bakhtin assigns the term “novel” to whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limits of the system as inadequate, imposed, or arbitrary. Literary systems are comprised of canons, and ‘novelization’ is fundamentally anticanonical. The work that realizes polyphony insists on a dialogue between texts that a given system admits as literature and those texts that are excluded from such a definition. The novel is a kind of epistemological outlaw, a Robin Hood of texts. Because the fundamental features of any culture are inscribed in its texts, not only in its literary texts but in its legal and religious ones as well, ‘novelness’ can work to undermine the official or high culture of any society (CLARK; HOLQUIST, 1984, p.276).<sup>33</sup>

The critics emphasize the idea that the Bakhtinian theory privileges the “highly transgressive” character of the prosification of written culture (cf. MACHADO, 2005, p.154) and expands the concept of novel to all prosaic forms that challenge the canon and insert new forms in the set of the “verbal-ideological life of the nation” (BAKHTIN, 1981a, p.273)<sup>34</sup> in order to rupture the stylistic and monologic context in which art was bound. Therefore, both the novel and other forms of prose that dialogue with this open and free style find a fertile ground to broaden the artistic form.

In the twentieth century, as previously emphasized, reflection and critique charged into the territories of artistic creation, and several writers chose the essay as a form of breaking the barriers of art, inserting questions between experience and literary representation or even between the wanderings of one’s life and the art text.

The renewal of prosaic weaving was proposed mainly by authors who defended the freedom of art; its creative nature always requires different forms of expression or new “combinations,” as Calvino would say, in order to establish unprecedented relations amongst author, text and reader. In a famous lecture from 1967 *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, he expresses his restlessness before the act of writing.

Written literature is born already laden with the task of consecration, of supporting the established order of things. This is a load that it discards extremely slowly, in the course of millennia, becoming in the process a private thing, enabling poets and writers to express their own personal troubles and raise them to the level of consciousness. Literature gets to this point, I would add, by means of combinatorial games that at a certain moment become charged with preconscious subject matter, and at last find a voice for these. And it is by the road to freedom opened up

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<sup>33</sup> See footnote 29.

<sup>34</sup> See footnote 12.

by literature that humanity achieved the critical spirit, and transmitted it to collective thought and culture (CALVINO, 1986, pp.24-25).<sup>35</sup>

Calvino, one of the most important Italian authors from the twentieth century, aware of this path, slowly transitioned from novel writing to essays, reaching the maturity of the novel-essay form in his last work (*Mr. Palomar*, 1983).<sup>36</sup> Therefore, when he starts, in the beginning of his maturity, to “transform the dynamics of the narrative in the stillness of description, directing his production to an essay prose that is the peak of his ethical and formal research” (IOZZI-KLEIN, 2004, p.60),<sup>37</sup> Calvino points towards the changes of style and prosaic genres in the twentieth century. Such changes, however, may lack a deeper study seeking to systematize the pathways of literary art in their process of hybridization of oral and written forms, between reflection and fiction, between the representation of the voices of *others* and the voice of the author.

Among the several discussions regarding the renewal process of the literary genres, it is worth emphasizing, once again, Bakhtin’s studies on the long history of culture prosification, which helps us to better understand new narrative forms as well as all experimentations of prose, including the novel-essay and the creative essay.

Morson and Emerson note that “in ages when novels predominate, they ‘novelize’ or ‘prosify’ other genres” (1990, p.304),<sup>38</sup> acting directly over the change and renewal of such genres. In fact, Bakhtin emphasizes that, when the novel is the predominant genre of a culture, “All literature is then caught up in the process of ‘becoming,’ and in a special kind of ‘generic criticism’” (BAKHTIN, 1981b, p.5).<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, literary prose as predominant form allows, aside from the “novel’s creative ascendancy” (BAKHTIN, 1981b, p.6),<sup>40</sup> other open forms of prosified culture. Among those, the essay is the one that keeps its characteristic as a hybrid genre – at the same time creative and reflexive – a genre used by basically all great writers.

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<sup>35</sup> CALVINO, I. *Cybernetics and Ghosts. The Uses of Literature*. Translated by Patrick Creagh. San Diego-New York-London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986.

<sup>36</sup> CALVINO, I. *Mr. Palomar*. Translated from the Italian by William Weaver. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1983.

<sup>37</sup> Excerpt translated from the original in Portuguese: “transformar a dinâmica da narrativa na imobilidade da descrição, direcionando sua produção para a prosa ensaística que aparece como ponto culminante de sua pesquisa ética e formal”.

<sup>38</sup> See footnote 21.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 23.

<sup>40</sup> See footnote 23.

This prosaic form, of a very free and personal style, allows important changes in the essay as a genre, elevating it to a privileged form in literary writing as, to put it in Bakhtin's words, "Where there is style there is genre. The transfer of style from one genre to another not only alters the way a style sounds, under conditions of a genre unnatural to it, but also violates or renews the given genre" (1986, p.66).<sup>41</sup>

In the modern society, as stated by Berardinelli, as a genre the essay is omnipresent despite being always in the shadows. It was never the target of a destructive fury, nor of a true identity crisis, having freedom of expression as a hallmark. Freedom is the key element for the renewal of writing and for the statement of any literary genre. This is thanks to this literary channel that humanity, as pointed by Italo Calvino, reaches a critical spirit in order to leave it as a legacy to culture and collective thinking.

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<sup>41</sup> See footnote 24.

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