

The recit

I would like to start by saying that I am not an academic or a genre theorist. I am a reader, a writer and was once a publisher of novellas. I must also add that I am obsessively passionate about the fiction that falls between the short story and the novel, that literary fiction of about 100 pages that you can read in a couple of days. In the past I have talked about the novella as the obvious genre that falls in that area. And yet within that space, there is a literary fiction that is often mistaken for a novella, a space that I think Italian Canadian writers might find worthwhile to explore, and that is the RECIT. [2]

[2a] In the summer of 2024, a publisher and friend of mine, Antonio D'Alfonso, who I am sure most of you know, was discussing *Bellecour*. [2b] He had edited and published this thin book of mine with Guernica Editions in 2005. [2c] I mentioned that it was there that my love for the novella as a genre began. He said, 'You did not write a novella, you wrote a recit.' In its most simple definition a **recit** is the French word for a **narrative**, and as a literary form I assumed that a **recit** was just another term for **novella**, that the two words were interchangeable. [2d] Antonio added, 'It is also a separate literary genre...' It sent me on a search.

[3] I started by looking for definitions of this genre. Here are three: [3a]

The Encyclopaedia Britannica calls the recit, 'A brief novel, usually with a simple narrative line... in which the first-person narrator reveals the inherent moral ambiguities of life by means of seemingly innocuous reminiscences.' [3b]

Literary critic Geoffrey Hartman describes it as, "a confessional narrative, a kind of dramatic monologue in prose ..." [3c]

Professor Andrée Mercier says, 'The recit designates narrative texts that are impossible to classify under the traditional genres of the short story or the novel.' She might have added, and the novella.

But, definitions can only go so far, you really have to experience the recit to understand it, and so I began reading. [4]

I spent the next year reading, researching and understanding **that** literary space. I distinguished the **recit** from the **roman court** in France, from the '**romanzi brevi**' in Italy,

and from the *novella*, in general. Although the novella has the same length as a recit, the classic novella has a specific three act play structure. You have an introduction, a conflict, and a resolution, where the conflict is resolved through a turn of events, a rising climax or an epiphany.

I focused on fiction that **did not have that structure**. I read or reread as many recits that I could, all around 100 pages long. What stood out in all of them was **the narration**. I saw patterns and similarities as well as differences and so to better understand them, I decided to group these recits into three categories. [5]

One group I called, **THE PERSONAL RECIT**, [5a] this recit can take the form of the journal, of a diary or of letter writing, much like the epistolary novel, OR, a combination of all three. I will give you a few examples of this type of recit [6]

Amélie Nothomb, born in 1967, is a Belgian Francophone, and a prolific author. Since the publication of her first recit in 1992 at the age of twenty-six, she has published a book a year. In *Life Form*, you have an epistolary-autobiographical recit. Melvin Mapple, a United States Army private, stationed in Baghdad, writes to Nothomb. Immediately you have the hallmark of the recit, where the author, narrator and protagonist are intermingled in one. Here is a sample of this narrative style, I quote: *'Dear Amelie Nothomb, thanks for your books, what do you want me to do with them? Melvin Maple...'* The narrator/author reflects, *'I thought it was a bit much, and then answers. 'Slightly annoyed, I wrote back... Dear Melvin Maple. Perhaps you can use them to balance a piece of furniture...or give them to a friend who has just learned to read.'* What follows is a series of correspondences between the two. Later, the soldier writes that he has coped with the trauma of combat, by gorging on food and now weighs 400 pounds. The narrative progresses through this letter writing interrupted by Nothomb personal observations on life. It is a mixture of the real (autobiography) and fiction (quite obvious from the story). It allows Nothomb to comment about authors and their fans, politics, war, trauma, and indirectly about her own struggles with bulimia and anorexia. The 4 or 5 recits of hers that I have read, although different from each other, all have the author in one way or the other insinuating herself in the narrative as **herself**.

[6a] Annie Ernaux is a French writer born in 1940. [6b] Here, she uses the diary/journal type. In these books we have short vignettes, keen, interesting observations, taken while on a train, a subway, in a mall, or in line at the cash register. They are snapshots of daily life which the author links to a passing thought, a social commentary, a news item, or an episode in her life. [6c.6d]

In *Things Seen*, translated by the Canadian Jonathan Kaplansky, in one vignette, the author/narrator writes about riding the subway, I quote, *'A voice sounds, 'I'm unemployed...'* the man is selling a charity newspaper that no one wants, *'just a bit of*

small change’ no one expresses interest, and as he leave he screams, *‘Have a great day and a good weekend.’* No one looks up. The irony of poor people does not count; it’s not a weapon, just an annoyance.’ You can see the blend of the observation and the commentary.

... She wrote 3 or 4 of similar books creating an interesting, sociological portray of French daily life over decades.

When one inquires about Recits, [6e,6f] André Gide always pop up and especially [6g,6h] ***Straight is the gate***. The recit is a simple narrative that veers and meanders around the purity of love and the author’s relationships. It is done through letter writing and journal entries as well as narrative reflections. Here you find the confessional tone of the first person narrative, through correspondence, mostly between him and Alissa the woman he loves, and through her diary entries. That format allows Gide to play with fiction and autobiography.

I grouped others under what I called: **THE TRADITIONAL RECIT [7]**

[7a] Anain Nin said, *‘We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect.’* [7b] It applies especially here. In these recit we have the author/narrator/protagonist revisiting events or relationships from the past, interpreting and reinterpreting them. Sometimes called **Autosociobiographie**, they blend a sociological commentary with fiction and autobiography. Here are three examples. [8]

Ernaux is best known for this type of recit. In them, she examines the process of writing while writing, mixing authorial examination with autobiographical content. Regarding the process, she says *“But what is the point of writing if not to unearth things... something that emerges from the creases when a story is unfolded, and can help us understand events that occur and the things we do.”*

In *Shame/La honte* published in 1997, you find a narrative revisiting one year in Ernaux’ life when she was 12 years old, when she discovers the shame that comes with being part of a socio economic class, a poor working class and not part of the wealthy one. The author writes about the art of writing these recits. In **Shame, she narrates**, *‘My overriding concern is to find the words I would use to describe myself and the world around me... but the woman of 1995 can never go back to being the little girl of 1952... With the immensity of time stretching ahead of her. We have no true memory of ourselves.’*

And there we have the autobiography and fiction forced to intermingle openly.

Later in the recit, the author writes from the eyes of the present, Ernaux as a narrator/protagonist. *‘I stare at the two photographs until my mind goes blank, as if looking at them long enough might allow me to slip into the head and body of the little girl*

who one day was there... ' and even later the author/narrator slips into being the protagonist of the past, the 12 year-old girl, while she writes in the present tense. 'Walking back from town, as soon as we catch sight of the grocery store... my mother says... ' The author/narrator/protagonist blend into one, while the recit moves from present to the past and back.

Ernaux wrote many other recits like this one, exploring every facet of her life and the society around her.

[LEAVE THE SLIDE ON THE SCREEN, turn to screen and point at Handke]

Very much like Ernaux, Peter Handke, an Austrian writer born in 1942, wrote the recit, *A sorrow beyond dreams*, published in 1972. It was prompted by his mother's suicide, and in there he reflects on her life, lived through the Nazi period. It is the adult child re-examining the relationship with the parent and trying to understand it with the knowledge of being older and maybe wiser. *The left-handed woman* is another example.

More contemporary, there is Nathalie Petrowski, a French-born Canadian journalist and writer living in Quebec, born in 1954. In *La vie de ma mère* written in 2023. The author/narrator/protagonist learns of the death of her mother and embarks on a journey of discovery but not before finishing her radio broadcast; which is a great way to start the recit. She, like the others, interrupts the flow of the narrative with observation about the writing process and about reassessing the past. [9]

The third category that I called, **THE NEW RECIT, [9a]** has roots in the nouveau roman and the *nouvelle vague* in French cinema, think Godard, think Beckett and his plays. Here, the style of the narration, the non-linear time movement, the lack of narrative arc, sparse dialogue, the repetition of words, scenes, movements, all declare the arrival of the new novel, of the new recit, of a new way of arranging narration. And the man who was first called a *nouveau romancier* was Allan Robbe-Grillet. [10]

Robbe-Grillet was born in 1922 and died in 2008. A French writer and filmmaker, better known for his *Last Year at Marienbad*.

The recit, *Jealousy*, written in 1957, is extraordinary but quite a difficult read.

Here we have a jealous husband, silently observing the interactions between his wife named only as A... and a neighbour, Franck. The narrator's presence is only ever implied. In this recit, the narrator continually replays his observations and suspicions in a non-linear sequence, by revisiting and repeating scenes.

He describe meticulously a scene as it happens, before it happens and after it happens but mixing and scrambling the sequence, and then repeating them in a different order. It is the mind working, unfiltered, and brilliantly done. The unnamed narrator describes his

suspicious cinematically, for example the narrator/husband says: *‘The space between A...’s left hand and Frank’s right hand is approximately two inches.’*

And again, *‘She rests her arm on the chair and bends over Frank, so close that their heads almost touch.’* There is no real proof that his wife is cheating on him. They are observations, blank of emotions, where the narrator/protagonist acts as a malevolent camera stalking his wife.

A critic said that, *‘The reader must slowly piece together the story and the emotional experience of jealousy, a method that resembles the experience of psychoanalysis ... Timelines and plots are fractured.’*

This is the best example I have ever read of a writer attempting to put into words how the mind views and interprets without narrative filters. It doesn’t always work as in some of his other recits.

There are many others who write in that format. **[11]**

No introduction needed for Albert Camus. *The fall*’s narration is the reverse of *Jealousy*. It is a one-sided monologue, almost a fictionalized essay. The first person, mostly invisible, narrator approaches a stranger and recounts his life story. He gives a social commentary about the human condition, often with humour and absurdity, making an argument for the existential life. The listener, a proxy for the reader, mostly just listens and when he speaks, we are never shown the words spoken, only the narrator’s response. There is no drama, no arc, no character, a minimalist setting, no real dialogue, a very flat style and playing with what is real and what is fiction on multi-levels. As the narrator says at one point, *‘Il est bien difficile de démêler le vrai du faux dans ce que je raconte.’*

Simona Vinci, born in Milano in 1970 is an author of 8 books. In *Stanza 411* written in 2006, Vinci writes about an ordinary love story, full of lust and passion, delivered in a type of stream of consciousness. The narrative moves in a non-linear format from scenes to scenes, narrated in a controlled language, which can appear at times cold and cruel even when describing her passion, it is non-judgemental language that allows the reader to make up their own mind. She starts the recit by writing, *‘Questo scritto ti dispiacera da subito. Dall’inizio provocherà in te irritazione. Ti disturberà.’* Which is what most of these recits do, **‘Disturbano’**.

The Canadians **[11a] [11b] [11c] [11d]** Hubert Aquin and Patrick Sénécal also wrote recits in this format.

[12]

All these recits have shared characteristics and unifying elements.

The recit shares a common length with the novella, **with most at 100 pages.**

The time frame, often nonlinear, mixes the past with the present.

The themes singularly ponder on the human condition in a stark, honest and brutal fashion. There is a strong reliance on the first person narration and authorial intrusion, with no narrative arc.

The recit can be metatextual and include self-referential elements, as Professor **Pivato** explains, ‘**Showing the conscious activity of the novelist at work**’.

If you are interested in knowing more about the recit, there are many academic and intellectual critics. [13]

Two French philosophers and intellectuals that stand out are Georges Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot. Very cerebral critics. Their best known recits are: From Bataille. *The Story of the Eye* published in 1928, with crazy sexuality. From Blanchot: *Thomas the obscure*, incompressible, full of contradictory images, almost fictionalized poetry, written in 1941.

[13a,13b] Read them if you want, they are quite strange, but when it comes to those recits, Sartre said, ‘What does it add to our human condition except that these authors need some deep psychoanalysis.’ I agree with him.

Closer to home we have many Quebecois academics that have researched, taught and written about the literary recit. [13c,13d,13e]

I like Professor Andrée Mercier of Laval University who did quite a thorough analysis of the recit in an article called, ‘Poétique du récit contemporain: négation du genre ou émergence d’un sous-genre’.

[14] I would encourage established or new Italian Canadian writers of fiction to drop the narrative arc, explore writing the recit, **and join the family of recit writers**. [15] Which brings me back to *Bellecour*. [15a] This is the how and why, twenty years after its first printing, I came to agree with Antonio D’Alfonso that *Bellecour* is a recit and therefore the word *recit* regained its rightful place on the cover of *Bellecour*. [15c] [16]

Thank you.

RECIT WRITERS AND THEIR RECIT

1. **ANDRÉ GIDE**, Straight is the gate/ la porte étroite, The immoralist

2. **ALBERT CAMUS**, The fall/ la chute, L'étranger

3. **ANNIE ERNAUX**, Shame/ l'honte, Things seen/ Vie extérieur

Exteriors (1993)... Covering 1985 to 1992. Societal, political and economic observations

Look at the lights, my love/ Regarde les lumière mon amour (2014)... Brief observations in 1992 written *Do what they say or else* (2022) *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien* (1977)... *A Girl's Story* (2020) / *Memoire d'une fille, La place*

4. **AMÉLIE NOTHOMB**, Life Form, fear and trembling, Thirst, PROPER NAMES

5. **PETER HANDKE**, A sorrow beyond dreams, the left handed woman, The afternoon of a writer

6. **HUBERT AQUIN**, The invention of death

7. **CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN**, The Yellow wallpaper

8. **NATALIA GINSBURG**, Valentino

9. **SIMONA VINCI** Stanza 411

10. **SIMONETTA GREGGIO**, Etoile, l'ours

11. **LUCE D'ERAMO**, Finche la testa viva

12. **CATHERINE PERRIN**, Une femme discrete

13. **NATHALIE PETROWSKI**, La vie de ma mère

14. **GEORGE BATAILLE**, The story of the eye

15. **MAURICE BLANCHOT**, Thomas the obscure and folie d'un jour

16. **ANDREA BAJANI**, L'anniversario

17. **MARIE-CLAIRE BLAIS**, Mad Shadows

18. **GRAZIA DELEDDA**, Mother/ Madre

19. **GÉRARD BESSETTE**, Not for every eye/Le libraire

20. **ERRI DE LUCA**, Three horses

21. **ABDELKADER DJEMAI**, La dernière nuit de l'émir : récit

22. **ANTONIO TABUCCHI**, Requiem

23. **ELIO VITTORINI**, In Sicily/ Conversazione in Sicilia

24. **BRUNO SCHULZ**, The Street of Crocodile

25. **ALLAN ROBBE-GRILLET**, Jealousy/ Jalousie, Labyrinth