

Doctorate of Creative Arts (Writing)

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Gabrielle Carey

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Introduction

Writers, at the outset of their projects, must do two things. They must choose a subject to write about and they must choose a genre to write in. In other words, they must choose the content (the what) and the form (the how). At least, this is the theory, the conventional wisdom. The truth is that in practice, topics and genre choose the writer, rather than the other way around. The same could be said of style, tone and voice — all integral aspects of writing. These essential tools of the craft are only developed after years of writing practice. And the particular and individual nature of each writer's style, tone and voice, rather than being developed deliberately to conform to a desired model, is something that is mysteriously and gradually revealed to the practitioner as she writes. A writer can no more *choose* her own voice and style than she can choose her own handwriting or signature. Indeed, a writer's style *is* her signature. It is this process of the gradual revelation of a writer's particular voice and style, as it develops in relation to a specific project, which I propose to illustrate in the following exegetical essay.

Part 1 charts the writer's quest to find a genuine signature, a true form. This part includes a discussion of choosing the genre in which to write and a consideration of the division between fiction and non-fiction. It goes on to explore in detail how the four individual essays that comprise *So Many Selves* were written and considers some of the themes that arise in each. The purpose of this part is to demonstrate that it is only through the practice that one can arrive at the theory. In other words, it is only through the practice of writing that a writer can discover her appropriate genre and her most suitable subject.

Part II examines the creative work, not in terms of content but in terms of form. The personal essay form is examined firstly by discussing how it is distinguished from the more formal essay. The specific features and characteristics of the personal essay form are then outlined. Part II ends with a discussion of the status

of the essay on the contemporary literary landscape and with observations of the place of the essay in contemporary Australian literature.

PART 1

Choosing a Genre — Fact or Fiction?

What is the difference, exactly, between fiction and non-fiction in this world of shifting and disputed realities? What is the difference between writing based on fact and writing based on imagination? Indeed, is factual writing any less imaginative than fiction writing?

In contemporary times the lines of division between fact and fiction have become more and more blurred. J.M. Coetzee's 2004 novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, is just one example of a writer pushing the boundaries. This book by a Nobel prize-winner was the subject of controversy among the critics. It was accused of being non-fiction masquerading as fiction and philosophy pretending to be storytelling. Jonathan Yardley, critic for the *Washington Post* described *Elizabeth Costello* as 'not a novel but an anti-novel'.¹ Perhaps one of the most confronting aspects of the novel was the fact that Coetzee took the principal fictional character and introduced her to, and created conversations with, real people at real events. One scene involved Paul West, a living writer, caused great offence to the person in question and was described by David Lodge as 'a startling transgression of literary protocol'.² But perhaps Coetzee was just doing what novels have always done — reshaping events and people from real life into fictional narratives. The difference was that in *Elizabeth Costello* he didn't always bother changing the names.

The conventional image of the fiction writer is of a person who sits in an attic dreaming up newborn characters out of their powerfully rich imaginations, characters that have little or nothing to do with the writer's everyday life. But the reality is that all writers take much of their material from real life, real experiences, real people. James Joyce himself claimed that he had no imagination,³ that all his writing was

¹ Quoted in Jennifer Szalai, 'Harvest of a Quiet Eye — J.M.Coetzee and the art of lucidity', *Harper's Magazine*, July 2004, p. 85.

² Quoted in Paul West, 'The Novelist and the Hangman — When horror invades protocol', *Harper's Magazine*, July 2004, p. 91.

³ Ellman, Richard. *James Joyce*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 661.

drawn from memory and the world around him. Richard Ellman, his biographer, writes, ‘He was never a creator *ex nihilo*; he recomposed what he remembered.’⁴ Ellman goes on to trace most of the characters from *Ulysses* back to actual people Joyce knew in Dublin. They were, admittedly, fashioned by Joyce’s pen, but not so much as to be beyond recognition. So if Joyce’s characters weren’t imagined, what does imaginary mean? What sort of imagination does a fiction writer actually have?

The example of Joyce’s *Ulysses* suggests that characters often, if not always, have their seed in *actual* people. The imaginative part comes in with an act of empathy —when the writer imagines thinking or feeling or talking as that person. The characters are convincing because the writer can enter into their worlds, their speech patterns, their thought processes — and then articulate them on paper. But the actual characters have been given to the writer rather than created; they have been provided, in large part, by reality, rather than forged within the writer’s imagination. When Joyce was asked, for example, ‘Why is Bloom portrayed as an Hungarian Jew?’ he answered famously, ‘Because he was.’⁵

The Nobel prize-winning writer Gabriel García Márquez, although regarded as a magical realist, insists that all his fiction is rooted in actual, not magical, reality. In an essay originally entitled ‘Fantasy and Artistic Creation in Latin America and the Caribbean’, Márquez wrote that ‘. . . nothing has ever occurred to me, nor have I been able to do anything, that is more awesome than reality itself. The most I’ve been able to do has been to alter that reality with poetic devices, but there’s not a single line in any of my books that doesn’t have its origin in actual fact.’⁶

Ricardo Quinones believes that this respect for reality was all part of the Modernists’ fundamental shift in approach and that Joyce’s response to the query about Leopold Bloom demonstrates ‘the Modernist predominant need . . . to establish a new orientation to reality’. According to Quinones this new orientation changed fiction writers from creators to compositors. (Compositors were those people traditionally responsible for arranging the type on the page in preparation for printing.) ‘In Modernism,’ says Quinones, ‘the writer has a new role of medium or amalgamator, who becomes less a creator and more a compositor who arranges ‘the various “givens” of experience.’⁷

⁴ Ellman, Richard. *James Joyce*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 364-65.

⁵ Quoted in Ricardo Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 122.

⁶ Márquez, Gabriel García, ‘Latin America’s Impossible Reality’, *Harper’s Magazine*, January, 1985, pp. 13-16.

⁷ Quinones, Ricardo. *Mapping Literary Modernism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, p. 122.

In other words, this new orientation to reality meant that the fiction writer was more a translator of reality, an arranger of experiences, rather than a creator of independent realities peopled with fantasy characters. This new relationship with reality has since been developed and expanded in more contemporary forms of literature. But the question remains whether any novels were ever composed of purely invented characters. The history of the novel teaches us that it often acts as a social document of the times —reflecting real places and events with characters often based on real people. Tolstoy based *Anna Karenina* on an actual suicide that took place near him and that he witnessed. Dickens based much of his work on what he observed, as did Jane Austen.

English critic James Wood states that, 'It is impossible to discuss the power of the novel without discussing the reality that fiction so powerfully discloses, which is why realism, in one form or another and often under different names, has been the novel's insistent preoccupation from the beginning of the form. Everything flows from the real . . . It is realism that *allows* surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on.'⁸

In this sense, perhaps the gap between fiction and non-fiction isn't quite as clear-cut as it was always thought to have been. Perhaps the categories of fiction and non-fiction are redundant.⁹ Non-fiction writers often use fiction techniques to tell their stories, while fiction writers are known to do factual research in order to write their novels. Indeed, the whole question of what really constitutes a fiction writer as opposed to a non-fiction writer could well be irrelevant. The fact is, as Woods states, that all writing draws on reality to a lesser or greater extent.

The advantage to writing non-fiction is that the characters are already provided. They have definite dimensions, definite presence and definite reality. Non-fiction is also where the plot is already crafted, where the storyline is already written, where the images need simply to be recalled from memory. Non-fiction also allows for a particular kind of complexity and subtlety not always possible in fiction. Fiction, or at least a large part of it, requires a particular shape and structure that conforms with particular conventions. These conventions include such things as the three-act structure, the need for conflict followed by resolution, and the development of characters and their motivations. For fiction to be satisfying, the reader needs to feel, by the end of the book, that the whole story has been revealed, that the crime has been

⁸ Wood, James. *The Broken Estate – Essays on Literature and Belief*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1999, p. xi.

⁹ It is interesting to note that while Chairman of the Australia Council, Donald Horne attempted to have the term 'Non-fiction' abolished and replaced with General Literature. He failed.

solved, that the lovers have been united. The self-contained, self-sealed world of fiction provides a finality and a closure not provided by reality. In other words, fiction imposes a shape, a structure, perhaps even a meaning on reality that lived reality doesn't inherently have.

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The Writer Chooses

After many years of reading fiction, the writer of this doctoral dissertation had become increasingly less convinced by the form. She blamed her disenchanting view of fiction, at least in part, on ten years of teaching creative writing in terms of techniques (character, setting, plot, structure, imagery, symbolism, metaphor, point of view, voice, tone). As a result, much of her reading of fiction had become just a series of moments of recognition of literary devices. She might admire how the writer had handled the devices — the slow revelation of a secret, the subtle building of a character, the clever resolution of a crisis — but in essence, they still seemed like devices.

Of course a work of wonderful fiction cannot be reduced to a set of devices — there is always something more, something indefinable, something mysteriously *true*. James Wood comments that, 'We respond, as readers of fiction, to a massive variety of realities. Yet in all fiction those moments when we are suddenly moved have to do with something we fumblingly call true or real.'¹⁰ The way to produce these moments, in fiction, was not something the writer believed could be taught in terms of techniques or literary devices. But in her experience as a tutor, that fact was not what the majority of my students wanted to hear.

'Tell us how it's done,' they demanded. 'We know that you know. Why can't you just tell us?'

The writer tried to tell them by encouraging them to read widely — contemporary literature as well as the classics. But in one postgraduate class, the frustration eventually led to complaints to the head of the School.

'She just makes us read texts and discuss them,' they complained. 'She's not teaching us techniques.'

So the following week the writer-as-lecturer went in with hand-outs, with dot points and a Powerpoint presentation. They were much happier.

¹⁰ Wood, James. *The Broken Estate – Essays on Literature and Belief*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1999, p. xi.

But the writer wasn't. For her, such an approach to writing and reading inevitably dulled the allure of fiction. Reducing every text down to techniques and devices meant that the fiction writer was eventually reduced to the level of a magician, a trickster, an illusionist. And once one has spent years studying how the tricks are done, once one knows how the woman is sawn in half (even though recognising techniques is not, clearly, the same as being able to practise them) the act is never quite so captivating again.

All this resulted in the writer's gradual inability to really trust and believe in the art of fiction. Much of what she read had begun to seem like nothing more than artifice. Admirable artifice perhaps, beautifully crafted artifice made from exquisitely wrought sentences, but artifice all the same. She yearned for something that was less formal, less conventional, less of a careful construction and more of a genuine exchange between writer and reader.

She turned, therefore, to non-fiction. Non-fiction was something she could believe in. She knew it was true because it had happened. She had seen it and lived it. Although she could still occasionally believe in other people's fiction, for some reason she couldn't believe in her own.

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The Making of ‘My Mother’s Brain’

Like so many of her earlier subjects, the non-fiction the writer found herself embarking on was not something that she had ever intended writing about. Indeed, it was something she simply found herself writing accidentally, against her better judgement — a story that almost seemed to be foisted on her by circumstance.

The story happened towards the end of 2002 when the writer’s mother suddenly became seriously ill with a brain tumour. The writer then found herself writing about her mother’s illness, almost without consciously deciding to, but rather as an automatic coping response. Yet as she continued to write and to spend more time with her mother, she realised that this was an opportunity to get to know her. At eighty years old the writer’s mother had always been a quiet, restrained presence in the writer’s life. The writer realised that if she didn’t find the time to get to know her mother now, she never would. Like all family stories, as she started to ask questions she began to unlock skeletons from cupboards and uncover tales she’d never heard.

The problems with writing this story were various. Firstly, like most of the writer’s published work, it was highly personal. This time, she was not only revealing herself but her mother. Although she loathed the idea of writing more autobiography, she found herself, yet again, indulging in writing about herself, her family, her life. The contemporary term for this is life writing, a category she generally steered away from as a reader and a genre she considered as little more than an extended excuse for self-indulgence. And yet, despite her misgivings, this story about her mother and her relationship with her was the one she felt compelled to write.

In the first draft the writer attempted to keep herself off the page as much as possible, hoping that there was some way to make the story not so obviously about her. But this wasn’t very convincing. ‘You need to develop your own character,’ her supervisor advised. ‘At present it is too neutral and wishy-washy.’ It was then she realised that there was no way out of it: she was writing yet another book that was, at least in part, about herself. What was wrong with her? Was she so utterly and completely narcissistic that she could find no other subject to write about? Why was it always her?

Rainer Maria Rilke’s idea about writing was that it is done out of necessity rather than choice. In his *Letters to a Young Poet* his advice to the young writer is this:

Nobody can counsel and help you. Nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading its roots in the deepest places of your heart; acknowledge to

yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied to you to write. This above all ask yourself in the middle of the night: *must* I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And . . . if you may meet this question with a strong and simple “I must”, then build your life according to this necessity.

Perhaps this lack of choice caused by necessity also extends to a writer’s subject matter.

Autobiographical writing is, at least in part, an attempt to understand and interpret the events of one’s life. According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, ‘We cannot but strive to give our lives meaning or substance, and . . .this means we understand ourselves inescapably in narrative.’¹¹ In order to find meaning, one needs to have a sense of a path, both of where one has come from and where one is going to. But people not only need to know their path, they need to be able to describe the journey. Taylor says:

We find the sense of life through articulating it. And moderns have become acutely aware of how much sense being there for us depends on our own powers of expression . . . Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate.¹²

Australian essayist John Hughes puts it another way. After a period of studying the connection between biography and literature he writes, ‘I came to the conclusion that the distinction between art and life is a false one. Tolstoy, in his own life and in the lives of his characters, makes it perfectly clear that art is already in life; that to ourselves at least, and also to others, we are narrative (that this, in the end, is all that the self can be).’¹³

Having been a storyteller all her life, the writer was well aware that finding a sense to life, as well as a sense of self, had always been dependent on her powers of expression, specifically on her ability to express herself in writing and her life experience in narrative. So when she found that her mother had a brain tumour and that her life was suddenly in the balance, she immediately turned to writing to make sense of it.

Although the writer had to concede that this story was yet another story that involved herself and her relationships, she was determined not to fall into self-absorption. She didn’t want this story to be yet another personal confession under the

¹¹ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self – The Making of the Modern Identity*, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 51.

¹² Ibid. p. 18.

¹³ Hughes, John. *The Idea of Home*, Sydney, Giramondo, 2004, p. 191.

guise of memoir. Somehow she had to write this story from the first person point of view, and yet make it go beyond herself. In a sense she found herself and her mother difficult to separate. The writer's sense of self was largely invested in her feelings about her mother. In other words, the writer's 'I' was largely created by the 'she' that was her mother. So it was inevitable that while writing about 'her', the writer would simultaneously be writing about herself.

Finding the Voice/Persona

Vivian Gornick, in *The Situation and the Story — The Art of Personal Narrative*, advises that any writer attempting a personal narrative should 'keep the narrating self subordinated to the idea in hand'. In an anecdote that seemed particularly relevant to the writer, Gornick recounts her attempt to write a story about her own mother. To tell the tale, she says, 'I soon discovered, I had to find the right tone of voice; the one I habitually lived with wouldn't do at all. . .I needed to pull back — *way* back — from these people and these events to find a place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure. . .what I *didn't* see . . .was that this point of view could only emerge from a narrator who was me and at the same time not me.'¹⁴

This was the cardinal rule that the writer had to keep in mind: the narrator of this story had to be a self that was also not her self. Another self. Indeed, if technically the art of non-fiction is also the art of self-examination, then it would seem obvious that a whole new 'self', a whole new perspective, must be born in order that the old self can be seen from the outside. This would be the writer's ongoing challenge but also an idea that would develop into the new title for her collection of essays, and later a published book: *So Many Selves*.

The Idea

If the writer was to follow Gornick's advice about keeping the narrating self subordinated to the idea in hand, she would necessarily need to define what that idea was. In broad terms the idea was the concept and development of the self; more specifically it was about how the self is determined and shaped by family and cultural inheritance.

¹⁴ Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story — The Art of Personal Narrative*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001, p. 22.

This idea came to the writer as she was recording the story of her mother and gradually began to realise how much she had inherited from her — not just in eye colour and facial shape — but in terms of character traits, belief systems, habits and disposition. In other words, what the writer had inherited philosophically, ethically, morally and culturally. She had inherited, for example, her mother's sense of universal justice, her sense of moral responsibility, her sense of work and productivity. In other words, the self that the writer had created, or thought she had created — an independent, sovereign self — was in fact largely a self she had involuntarily inherited. It was this overwhelming sense of the power of cultural inheritance that led her to give the story its working title: 'Inheritance' (which was later changed to 'My Mother's Brain').

Gornick writes that every work of literature has both a situation and a story.

The situation is the context, circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.¹⁵

The story of the mother's illness and eventual recovery developed into the dramatic through-line or plot (what Gornick might call the situation). The writer used this structure to explore various topics such as the difficulties of deciding when and how to die, the question of euthanasia and the common problem among people of her generation — that of caring for elderly parents at the same time as young children. The deeper theme, or what Gornick might call the story, was that of identity and self.

As this deeper theme gradually evolved, the question of the self became more and more pertinent. The writer found that the concept of self and different selves was not only important in terms of developing a narrative voice, as Gornick had advised, but also as a theme within the actual narrative. At the narrative level there was her mother's historical self, the one that was becoming increasingly difficult to retrieve because of the memory loss resulting from the brain tumour, and that the writer was attempting to recreate. At the stylistic level, there was the writer's narrator self that had to be different, distanced, from the very personal self. And lastly, there was the self that she had thought was her own self, but increasingly realised was largely just a composition of aspects inherited from her parents, many of which they had inherited from *their* parents. These aspects included much more than just habits and beliefs. The writer was beginning to realise that her very way of perceiving the world, of *being* in the world, had been largely determined by her background, her family, and

¹⁵ Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story – The Art of Personal Narrative*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001, p. 13.

the social, political and religious contexts in which she had grown up. This realisation is what Gornick might call the insight or the thing one has come to say.

Themes: the concept of time as an example of cultural inheritance

One example of the cultural inheritance that she and her mother had in common and that the writer found recurring throughout the narrative was their peculiar sense of time. She found that both her mother and she were, to an extent, prisoners of their own oppressive concepts of time. They were both trapped by their watches, neurotic about punctuality, constantly worried about running late and about time running out. The writer blamed her own neurosis about time partly on a particular traumatic experience —that of being too late for her father's death. This had left her with a perpetual insecurity about being on time. But there were much wider cultural, philosophical and historical frameworks that determined her own, as well as her mother's, sense of time.

As suggested in the narrative, the writer and her mother were the products of a Protestant culture, characterised by industriousness, a strong work ethic, a respect for boundaries and neat, clear divisions and a strong sense of personal responsibility. As she researched the nature of Protestant culture she found that the modern Western sense of time was largely shaped by the rise of Protestantism and industrialisation.

Before industrialisation the majority of Western Europeans lived in rural villages, their lives dominated by the seasons. An average villager rose with the first light of day, worked in the fields, and retired soon after sunset. Time was open and limitless as the land around them. There was no need for clocks and watches. Days and weeks and months had their own rhythms determined by nature.

Jay Griffiths, in *Pip, Pip — A Sideways Look at Time*, suggests that cyclical, nature time changed dramatically in Britain in the 18th century with the advent of the Enclosure Acts. She draws a parallel between the new linear fences that transferred common land (the commons) to private land, and the previous cyclical sense of time that then developed into a new linear sense of time. This different attitude or concept of time, she argues, not only changed the way people lived, it changed their way of being in and perceiving the world. In other words, it changed consciousness.

Industrialisation and the widespread use of watches went hand in hand as the demand for punctuality and regularity at work could be made for the first time. Whereas before the Industrial Revolution, according to E.P. Thompson, people's

work patterns were constituted ‘of alternate bouts of intense labour and idleness’,²⁵ depending on the season and the weather, now men lost their control over their own work time. With the invention of the clock, of clocking-in systems, of time-sheets, time-keepers and time fines, workers became enslaved to clocks. The clock became a hated symbol of oppression among many workers. There were violent outbursts, particularly in textile districts, during the 1820s and 30s where workers smashed the clocks above factory gates.

But clocks can also be a source of comfort and security. During the writer’s mother’s illness, her watch was one of her few comforts. It was a constant among all the unpredictable and unforeseeable. Griffiths writes that ‘the clock can be a comforter because the regular tick-tock is like a mother’s heartbeat to the baby in the womb.’¹⁶ In a comment that seemed particularly relevant, Griffiths adds that ‘older people need that same parental comfort — age, after all, is a place of second childhood.’¹⁷

In the case of the writer’s mother, it was clear that she felt reassured by the large clock above the reception to the Neurosurgery Ward. Her post-surgery nightmares, a common result of prolonged anaesthetic, often involved the ward being invaded by looters who not only stole her cash (that she had hidden beneath her underwear) but also stole the hospital clock. In other words, she was robbed of both time and money.

‘My Mother’s Brain’ is concerned with the writer’s constant preoccupation with time, which manifests in her daily recourse to her diary and its never-accomplished *To Do* list. Her mother has a similar relationship with her diary, which dictated what she should do when and with whom. Both were dependent on these diaries for scheduling their lives. But of course there is more to it than maintaining a timetable.

After researching the Western development of the concept of time, particularly in relation to the rise of Protestantism, the writer realised that her obsession with ticking things off could be compared with the Puritan habit of conscience-accounting. The diary, historically speaking, had also been used as a kind of legitimisation. If called upon (for example, by a boss, a judge, or even God on the Day of Reckoning), the diarist could point to his/her diary to prove that he or she had lived lives crammed full with useful activities, good deeds and accomplishments. Diarists can show how they have progressed from day to day, how they have improved and bettered

²⁵ Quoted in Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip – A Sideways Look at Time*, London, HarperCollins, 1999, p. 156.

¹⁶ Griffiths, Jay. *Pip Pip – A Sideways Look at Time*, London, HarperCollins, 1999, p. 270.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

themselves. But probably the most important proof is that of being able to show that the diarist has spent his or her time *productively*.

This is a thoroughly Puritan approach. Griffith quotes the Puritan R. Baxter's *A Christian Directory* (London, 1673) which advised people that time was currency and therefore, as good Christians, we should 'use every minute of it as a most precious thing, and spend it wholly in the way of duty'.¹⁸

These facts about the Puritan or generally Protestant approach to time can appear, at first reading, as nothing more than vaguely interesting historical anecdotes, an overly lengthy digression that is unrelated to the writer, her mother, her story or any truly modern sense of self. But the point is that these facts, these thoughts and ideas — which can appear quite antiquated — are in many ways still current, still relevant. Although the writer was not a practising Puritan, it seemed that her attitude towards time and diary-keeping was essentially that. A reflection on her concept of time and her constant guilt over whether she had used her own time wholly in the way of duty, properly or improperly, seemed to imply that her attitude was largely, if unconsciously, formed by philosophies that were rooted in the 17th century.

She found herself feeling like a woman on a philosophical and cultural archaeological dig, unearthing old attitudes and philosophies that, although apparently antiquated and outdated, remained the foundations of the attitudes and philosophies of today. Just because she and her mother didn't identify as Puritans and weren't church-goers, for example, didn't mean that their Protestant heritage no longer had any influence over their thoughts and behaviour. Indeed, it seemed that in many ways they were making everyday decisions, such as how to spend time, that were based on inherited beliefs they were barely conscious of.

A related theme that arose in this discussion was the relationship between time and money. On the first page of the essay the writer's mother makes a comment about her CT scan — the neurological test that revealed the tumour — as being a complete waste of time and money. Later, as her mother's mind became more affected by the tumour, the writer observes that time and money become confused. As the elderly woman's life and therefore her time seemed to draw to an end, so she also began to believe that her money was petering out. Conceptually, it seemed that time and money were one and the same.

An investigation into this idea revealed that the powerful and enduring adage 'time is money' arose at the same time as the invention of the clock and the rise of capitalism. The phrase is attributed to Benjamin Franklin in 1748 but the equation of

¹⁸ Quoted in Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip – A Sideways Look at Time*, London, HarperCollins, 1999, p. 166.

time and money may have originated in Calvin's Geneva, which not only became the centre of watchmaking but also of banking and lending. In other words, using time to make money.

According to Griffiths, 'the equation of time and money was given spiritual backing by the Protestant church.'¹⁹ By the 21st century the concept is so completely ingrained that the two things, time and money, are literally the same. 'What began as a metaphor,' says Griffiths, 'has become invisible, pretending to the transparency of truth: time *is* money.'²⁰

It is these invisible metaphors by which people live their lives that the writer found fascinating. If most people comprehended reality through metaphors of which they were consciously unaware, how much of our behaviour is actually driven by images and ideas that have been subconsciously inherited from previous generations? The writer's mother had never actually *told* her daughter that time was money; if asked she would most probably deny she had any such belief. And yet, evidently the writer had absorbed this concept and lived her life accordingly. She had a horror of wasting time and felt a sense of self-approval on seeing her diary cram packed with activities that appeared to be utilising every last moment/cent of her time productively. Since her teenage years she had set goals for herself at the beginning of every year and then accounted for them at the end — congratulating herself on achievements and castigating herself about goals left unfulfilled. But if modern people lived their lives according to invisible metaphors, what did this mean for the autonomous self?

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in *Metaphors We Live By* that the conceptual system that determines the way people think and act in their everyday lives, a system of which individuals are not normally aware, is fundamentally metaphorical. 'In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious.'²¹

Lakoff and Johnson examine the metaphor 'time is money' and how the concept is reflected in language. The way people speak about time betrays the way they actually think; the words chosen to talk about money are the same words chosen to talk about time. Their examples include: 'You're *wasting* my time.' 'This gadget will *save* you hours.' 'You need to *budget* your time.' 'He's living on *borrowed* time.'

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Griffiths, Jay, *Pip Pip – A Sideways Look at Time*, London, HarperCollins, 1999, p. 167.

²¹ Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 3.

The way people use language, say Lakoff and Johnson, reflects their deep conceptual systems. So although the writer and her mother may not have been aware of their conceptual systems, it was clear that they both thought and talked about time as a metaphor for money.

As evidenced by the above discussions, while writing the story of illness in the family, the writer found herself inevitably wandering off on all sorts of tangents. These tangents led her into history, religion, philosophy, cultural studies. Often, she found that the story about her mother became just a springboard to investigate other, much larger, less personal stories. Parts of the narrative led to lengthy philosophical reflections on modern medical practice, on personality types, on cultural trends.

But how and why does a narrative about an elderly woman's brain tumour turn into a reflection on linguistic metaphors and unconscious conceptual systems? Shouldn't the writer just stick to the story? What was she writing anyway? Cultural criticism or family memoir? How relevant were all these digressions? If she did include ideas about invisible metaphors and the Protestant concept of time, what would it be that she was writing? Philosophy? Ficto-criticism? Was there a name for this melange of genres?

Again the writer was forced to ponder exactly what it was that she was writing. It was no longer simple autobiography or biography. There were aspects of history and philosophy, as well as memoir. But she hoped it was more than memoir in the same way that she hoped it was more than life writing. She was also hoping that some of her diversions into larger questions and bigger themes meant that her writing was more than self-indulgence. She clung to Gornick's advice about the need for a situation and a story, which could also be interpreted as a need for an idea as well as a narrative.

At times the writer worried whether the ideas might be intruding too much on the narrative and whether the insights or the thing she 'had come to say', in the Gornick sense, was overwhelming the storytelling drive. For example, while researching the concept of time in Western civilisation she had felt tempted to digress into a history of the influence of Protestantism on modern consciousness. She realised, however, that although this research was relevant, much of it could not be included in the story if the tale was to maintain any kind of narrative impetus. The issue then, would always be one of balance between the story and the ideas, the emotional and the intellectual strands of the narrative.

The Making of 'Mexican Masks'

Next the writer set to work on a story called 'Mexican Masks'. 'Mexican Masks' was written relatively quickly and seemed to be a much easier process than the countless drafts she had worked on while writing 'My Mother's Brain'. In fact, 'Mexican Masks' only went through three thorough drafts. This is perhaps because, while writing 'My Mother's Brain', she had actually discovered her own particular genre, her own form and style, although at that point she was still unable to identify what that was exactly.

In 'Mexican Masks' she again found herself telling a personal story in order to explore larger themes. Some of these themes were a continuation of the themes raised in 'My Mother's Brain'. One such theme was the nature of self. By reflecting on her own personal relationship with a Mexican man, and the difficulties of cross-cultural marriage, the writer was also able to reflect and compare the Western Anglo-Saxon concept of self to the Mexican concept of self. The question explored in this essay is whether the notion of self, particularly the notion of individual selfhood, and the ideal of the real, authentic self, is a specifically Western concept.

The idea of a specifically Western concept of self is, of course, a difficult one to define. What is clear, however, is that the self in modern society is a topic of much discussion and debate. There is talk about the loss of self, the searching for the self, self-discovery, self-improvement and self-revelation. There is also a huge industry known as self-help. But why does the self need so much help? What is the problem exactly?

There is some disagreement about the problem of the self in Western culture. On the one hand people warn, prophetically, about the loss of the self and the death of the individual. On the other, contemporary culture seems more obsessed with the self than ever. Self-fulfilment, self-love and self-determination are the catch phrases of the day. So what's happening? Is the modern individual losing herself or finding herself? Is he self-obsessed or self-diminishing? Or perhaps people are both, simultaneously.

Much has been written about the me generation. In the 1970s, Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*,²² was severely critical of what he saw as a selfish and self-interested younger generation. Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*²³ and *The Minimal Self*²⁴ also argued that the individualism of self-

²² Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind – how higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987.

²³ Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism – American life in an*

fulfillment was a negative development that would eventually undermine any concern for greater issues — political, historical or religious. These writers complained about the narrow self-centredness of contemporary culture. The self had become over-inflated, over-important, and threatened the well-being of the greater community.

On the other hand, there is the argument that what has become central, over-inflated and over-important, isn't the self at all, but something much less substantial. This argument posits that rather than living in a time of self-focus, the current era is in fact a time of *diminishing* selfhood. As early as 1962, Wylie Sypher argued that one of the dominant themes of modern literature was a tendency towards non-identity.²⁵

One contemporary writer who believes the contemporary era is an age of waning selfhood is the American novelist and essayist Jonathan Franzen. He believes this has come about largely as a result of capitalism and mass production:

I think the whole American theoretical conversation about the loss of individuality and an age of the mass is about a feeling that so much of how we are defined nowadays, so much of the way we spend our time, is not internal, distinctive, contemplative, but is created by the interactions with the corporations where we make money and by the products that we buy. Things. There is this notion that one is perpetually being sold, and that you can achieve coolness by buying x,y and z products. Never mind that it's the same coolness that ten million other people are achieving. It seems to me that that is an aspect of life that has been killed. There is no longer the possibility of being an individual in those areas of life. Which is to say that there is a sort of fugitive nature to the individual.²⁶

So which argument is right? Is our current society self-obsessed and selfish or self-less? Are people more individualistic than ever or actually less capable of being true individuals? And if the self has been lost, how can it be rediscovered?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor believes that the modern age is defined by a simultaneous move towards and away from subjectivism. If that's true, then perhaps both arguments are right. Although Taylor agrees with the critics of the me generation, arguing, as Franzen does, that the culture of self-fulfillment has actually led to 'new modes of conformity' among people who are 'striving to be

age of diminishing expectations, New York, Norton, 1978.

²⁴ Lasch, Christopher. *The Minimal Self – psychic survival in troubled times*, London, Pan Books, 1985.

²⁵ Sypher, Wylie. *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art*, New York, Vintage, 1962.

²⁶ Carey, Gabrielle. *Interview with Jonathan Franzen*, HEAT 6, New Series, 2003, p. 186.

themselves',²⁷ he also believes there is some genuine moral force behind the contemporary search for self-fulfillment and the authentic self. He argues, like many others, that the modern era is characterised by a sense of meaninglessness and alienation, and that part of this movement towards authenticity is an attempt to re-establish meaning in a world that has largely lost all previously accepted moral and ethical frameworks. This moral ideal of authenticity is also demonstrated by contemporary Australian memoirs such as Caroline Jones' *An Authentic Life*.²⁸

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Once upon a time there was a society in which the difficulty of defining the self, knowing who you were, what your identity was, what your role was and how one fitted in, wasn't so great. Once upon a time society had meaningful structures that everyone accepted; once, not that long ago, one such structure that almost everyone accepted was that of religious meaning. If they didn't, they accepted the structures of the village, or at least, the family. Within these structures people found ways to define themselves. These structures gave them identity, a sense of place, of belonging, of being part of a greater whole that had some kind of unity. This unifying principle — whether it was based on religion or on agricultural cycles or on community rituals — gave the individuals within that community a sense of place and purpose and shared meaning.

Now, for better or worse, those structures of meaning, in particular the religious structures, have all but collapsed. Society has fragmented into smaller cells, some of which may find shared ways of meaning, but there is little wider sense of shared meaning. Citizenship, community, family, church — these structures may have meaning for some, but for many they have lost any lasting significance, or at least lost their status as sources for ultimate meaning. 'The only real resource that many of us have against that meaninglessness, now that the church and the village and the family and even the natural world can't provide us with as much context as before,' writes ecologist Bill McKibben, 'is our individual selves. We have to, somehow, produce all that context for ourselves; that's what modern life is about. There's no use moaning about it; it may well be better than what came before. In any event, it's who we are,

²⁷ Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 15.

²⁸ Jones, Caroline. *An Authentic Life – finding meaning and spirituality in everyday life*, Sydney, ABC Books, 1998.

where we are, how we are, what we are, why we are. We've got to answer those questions pretty much on our own.'²⁹

The fact that institutions such as family and church have lost their authority as resources for meaning does not signify that individuals have given up on meaning. It simply demonstrates that, in the process of freeing themselves of what have been considered as oppressive and inadequate institutions, people have left themselves pretty much out in the cold. After discarding the maps and compasses relied on by previous generations to find a way through the apparent chaos of existence, they now have to survey the landscape alone. After rejecting the traditional structures individuals are left alone with only their individuality to provide meaningful answers. Hence the unprecedented pressure on the self in modern culture.

Any reflection on the self is also a reflection on identity. 'Identity crisis' is a common phrase, almost a cliché. Doubts about the self abound. And the self-help industry has grown to service these doubts. But is this a purely modern, First World dilemma of the privileged white middle and upper classes? Is it peculiar to this particular historical period?

Charles Taylor argues that 'talk about identity in the modern sense would have been incomprehensible to our forebears of a couple of centuries ago.'³⁰ He believes that identity is largely defined by moral orientation so that in an age when there were few doubts about moral and spiritual orientation, there were no identity crises, in the modern sense. If that is the case, perhaps people began to doubt themselves only when they began to doubt God. Does modern self-doubt, in that case, essentially rise from a loss of religious faith? Is the loss of the belief in the self related to the loss of belief in God?

Certainly, in a rural Mexican village, faith in God provides a kind of ontological security that seems to have largely vanished from the developed nations. However, having said that, it is also obvious that such security is rooted in a stability of class, of belief, of social attitudes that could also be described as stagnation. While faith can create a society with notably less existential angst, it can also foster a kind of social stasis where conventions and traditions remain unchallenged. (The role of women in rural Mexican society is one such example of a tradition that, despite the emancipation of women in many parts of the world, remains largely unquestioned.) The rural Mexican stable sense of self, therefore, may be largely a reflection of the stability imposed by the socially determined and economically rigid village lifestyle.

²⁹ McKibben, Bill. *Enough – Engineering and the End of Human Nature*, London, Bloomsbury, 2003, p. 10.

³⁰ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self – The Making of the Modern Identity*, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 28.

The freedom to break these rigid conventions, as has happened in developed societies, has undoubtedly led to a freer, looser, less determined society. Now that wealth and position are not fixed from birth, our possible social roles are much more mobile and open to change, choice and sudden seismic shifts. But as our bonds have loosened so has our sense of identity. It was this comparison between the sense of identity experienced in an almost pre-industrial rural village of the Third World and that experienced in the urban culture of the Western First World that the writer wanted to examine in 'Mexican Masks'.

An examination of identity in any context is an abstract and difficult task. One way of making the topic approachable is by using a concrete symbol for identity, in this case the traditional mask used in Mexico for fiestas and ceremonies. The Western obsession with searching for the real self or the authentic self — often manifested in the desire to reveal and uncover some aspect of the self previously unknown — is compared in the essay with the Mexican practice of making and wearing masks, which protects the self and yet simultaneously allows a formal way for a person to express selves other than the self normally presented to society on a day-to-day basis.

By using her own personal experience of living in a Mexican village for several years, the writer tries to demonstrate that a First World, white, urban sense of self is profoundly different to that of a Third World, non-white, rural, uneducated sense of self. The crisis of the self in the West, as described briefly above, did not seem to exist in the village that the writer had inhabited. This is perhaps because the frameworks and structures of meaning referred to by McKibben were still in place. Indeed, the attitude towards the deepest sense of self in a Mexican village, as far as the writer observed, was not one of exposé, exploitation and revelation, as is the practice in developed countries, and particularly in North America, but rather, the attitude was one of preservation and privacy. The centuries-old tradition of using masks in fiestas also seemed to indicate an acceptance of mutable identity rather than a belief in some fixed or ultimately 'real' identity. This idea of a variety of selves as opposed to the single, unified and continuous self, was in keeping with the title chosen for the collection of pieces: *So Many Selves*.

The Making of ‘Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity’

At the suggestion of her academic supervisor, the writer embarked on another essay.

‘Why not write an essay on celebrity?’ he asked. ‘Everyone’s interested in that.’

‘I’ll try,’ she said, somewhat dispiritedly, doubting that she had anything much to say on the topic. Then she went home, wrote five thousand words on the abstract phenomenon of celebrity, and dutifully delivered the document. Dry and boring, it was the kind of paper one gives at a conference on popular culture, and that’s exactly what she proceeded to do.

And then she realised. This essay on celebrity wasn’t working because it was missing the concrete. It needed more than the *idea* of celebrity; it needed some solid, concrete story of the *reality* of celebrity: anecdotes, experiences, real-life accounts. In other words, she would never be able to write about celebrity without writing about her own personal experience of it. Indeed, this was the very reason her supervisor had suggested the topic in the first place — precisely because she *did* have a genuine experience of celebrity. The problem was that this meant sitting down and remembering things that she had spent a long time deliberately trying to forget. For her, the media attention caused by her first co-authored book, *Puberty Blues*, which had led her to a brief period of celebrity, had not been a source of enjoyment. In fact, by the time the media frenzy came to a close she had felt like someone suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Recalling and writing about that period of her life was not easy. At first she faltered badly. The voice sounded bitter, the tone wasn’t right. She had almost decided to give up altogether when another writer convinced her that the subject was important and worth pursuing.

The first major problem was the research material, the bulk of which lay in a dusty old cardboard box in the writer’s garage. This was a box that, for more than twenty years, she’d been too scared to go near, and yet too sentimental to throw out. In that box, there was the embroidered, sky-blue, silk-covered diary of 1975 that her mother had brought back from China; the small 1976 school diary stolen from her big sister (if it was hers, it had to be cool); there was the slightly larger 1977 denim-coloured hardback, bulging with old letters attached by rusting paperclips; and then there were the far more serious foolscap size diaries of ’78, ’79 and ’80, every one of them teeming with anecdotes and bursting with confessions; every entry the result of a daily release from a far-too-intense teenager; a young woman who falls in love too easily and too often; who is full of passions and prejudices, whose theories and

thoughts about the world around her seem so portentous that she feels compelled to write them down in detail every night before bed.

She had carried these teenage diaries with her from house to house, from country to country, like a Pandora's box, like a chalice or a trophy that might turn to dust, or even salt, if she ever tried looking back, if she ever dared to remember. She was terrified of this treasure because of the pain and loss that was enshrined inside, and mortified at the mere thought of re-living it by reading over that adolescent handwriting of decades ago. When she finally found the courage to open those mildewed pages within which she had hidden impassioned love letters as well as old, typewritten scraps of manuscripts, she discovered something that she hadn't expected. On reading her daily reflections of those tumultuous years, she was surprised and delighted to find that her long-locked past wasn't all pain and angst after all; it was actually a treasury of wild tales about two extraordinary young women, and an even more extraordinary friendship. What she had believed to be a dead weight of loss and misery was actually leaping with energy and absurdity, with laughter and affection. Her wasted youth hadn't been wasted after all. And the friendship that had left such a sour taste had in fact, for many years, been full of sweetness.

This piece of work grew from being a relatively brief analysis of celebrity to a short memoir. The success of the essay lies in the personal, confessional tone —hence the title 'Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity' — combined with a more objective analysis of the phenomenon of celebrity and what it can do to the sense of self. The essay examines what writer and essayist Caryl Phillips has described as 'performative bondage'³¹ — where a person who leads a public life of some sort, be that on the stage, the screen or the page, finds themselves trapped in a persona partly created by themselves and partly by their audience. Because they are committed professionals, they are impelled to go on performing, but to what extent should they allow their audiences to determine the type or style of performance?

The essay argues that the power of marketing and image-making in the modern media is such that the subject of publicity and public attention can often feel oppressed by the persona they feel forced to maintain. Indeed, that the persona can eventually become more powerful, even more real, than the person herself.

The power of brand names such as Nike and Coke is so pervasive that the brand and what it represents has become much more important than the product itself. In other words, in the case of Nike clothing for example, the quality of the T-shirt, the fabric and the style, are less important than the words printed across the front. It is what the T-shirt *symbolises* and *suggests* that often attracts the buyer first, rather than

³¹ Phillips, Caryl. *Dancing in the Dark*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2005, p. 6.

its use as a practical piece of clothing. Naomi Klein explores this phenomenon in her book *No Logo*.³²

The same can apply to people in the public sphere, particularly those referred to as celebrities or personalities. The label that has been created to represent that person becomes more valuable than the work produced by the person. The effect of this phenomenon on literary culture has been to elevate the image over the word, or the work. How a writer looks, how she presents herself, how well she can perform in public — at writers' festivals, book-readings or publicity interviews—is all much more important than it ever was. Indeed, the cult of the personality or celebrity writer is commonplace.

It is perhaps a little banal and obvious to point out the number of books now written (or ghostwritten) by people who aren't writers. In *The Information* Martin Amis satirises this trend when he describes an author arriving at the office of a London literary agent: 'He was surrounded by well-known novelists; but they were novelists who were well known for something else. Well known for newscasting, cliff-scaling, acting, cooking, dress-designing, javelin-throwing and being related to the Queen.'³³ In other words, books by celebrities rather than writers, people who win publishing contracts on the basis of their renown rather than their writing talents.

This could all be viewed as a quirky cultural trend if the effects on the publishing industry weren't so disastrous. At the 2005 Frankfurt Book Fair, the main talking point, according to ABC Books publisher, Stuart Neal, was Eric Clapton's autobiography. Random House UK and USA joined financial forces to offer Clapton a whopping two million pounds. It has been argued that these enormous advances take resources away from what publishers should be doing: fostering, promoting and marketing literature. If the old diaries of an aging rock star are dominating the world's most important publishing event, it would seem that the appetite for celebrity authors has reached a fever pitch of ridiculous proportions.

As a result of this development, writers realise that if they want to be published, they need to be more than just writers. Publishers would like them to be Personalities. When questioned some years ago about the idea of promoting authors as though they were film stars, Bob Sessions, head of Penguin, didn't hesitate. He explained that it was a very competitive market and that as publishers were competing with film studios, the promotion strategies needed to be the same.

But writers are not like film stars because, generally speaking, they are not, by nature, public people. Writers normally choose to write precisely because it allows

³² Klein, Naomi. *No Logo—taking aim at brand bullies*, New York, Picador, 1999.

³³ Amis, Martin. *The Information*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 126.

them to hide away and stay out of view. They want to be the seers but not the seen. And yet, after deliberately choosing a profession that requires solitude, writers often find themselves compelled to perform in public. And if they lack aptitude they are encouraged to attend courses on public speaking and self-promotion. And all the while publicists drop hints that it might also be a good idea to learn how to apply make-up.

In an essay on celebrity, American writer Joseph Epstein reminds the reader just how recent this development of the writer-celebrity is.

‘Writers are supposed to be aristocrats of the spirit, not promoters, hustlers, salesmen for their own work. Securing a larger audience for their work was not thought to be their problem. “Fit audience, though few,” in John Milton’s phrase, was all right, so long as the few were the most artistically alert, or aesthetically fit, few. Picture, I ask you, Lord Byron, Count Tolstoy, Charles Baudelaire at a lectern at Barnes&Noble, C-Span camera turned on, flogging (wonderful word!) their own books. Impossible!’³⁴

Some, especially younger writers, obediently dance to the tune because they know no better and their brand-new publishing deal, as far as they’re concerned, is the beginning of a long and wonderful career. If these young writers manage to survive the first-book syndrome — and many don’t — they are then on their way to becoming a name. Establishing yourself as a name is essential if you’re going to stay relevant to the publishing industry. How a name is achieved exactly is a rather mysterious process. It involves a lot of marketing, numerous photo opportunities and what the advertising industry calls creating a U.S.P., also known as brand essence. (U.S.P. stands for Unique Selling Point and is integral to establishing brand recognition. Getting and keeping a name as a writer is pretty much the same process as branding. Indeed, writers are sometimes referred to, not just as names, but as brand names.)

Branding is not the same as advertising. As Naomi Klein has pointed out in her book *No Logo*, in the 1980s marketing people realised that although companies might manufacture products — books in the case of publishers — what consumers buy are brands. ‘The brand is about presenting products not as commodities but as meaning brokers; the brand as experience, as lifestyle. . . as a way of life, an attitude, a set of values . . . an idea.’ Therefore, the Napoleon chain of cosmetic shops aren’t just cosmetic shops, they’re concept stores. And Nike isn’t just a sports company; it’s a mission, says Nike CEO ‘to enhance people’s lives through sports and fitness’.³⁵

³⁴ Epstein, Joseph. ‘Celebrity Culture’, *The Hedgehog Review*. Vol. 7. Issue 1. March, 2005.

³⁵ Klein, Naomi. *No Logo – taking aim at brand bullies*, New York, Picador, 1999, p. 23.

It is clear, however, than even when an author manages to achieve brand-name status, the performance doesn't stop. The publishers and publicists and agents then apply the pressure to maintain the name. A writer does this by 'keeping up her profile'.

Profile is hugely important in publishing. The greatest compliment people can give a writer is that she has a high profile. Conversely, if someone describes a writer as having a low profile, it is immediately implied that she is failing in some essential way. Keeping up the profile is not exactly a full-time occupation but it's certainly a serious part-time one. It requires getting into the newspapers at least a few times a year, preferably with a photo, regular spots on radio and as many other appearances in public as possible. When it comes to keeping up a profile, even the smallest public engagements are better, authors are told, than none. This often involves going to schools to talk to children or public libraries to talk to old ladies — anything to get the writer out there and circulating because if she's going to maintain that name, or keep any kind of cache, she has to learn to network.

Once a writer has a name she has brand power. And the value of that name can and is quantified, depending on how it is used. The same applies to the acting and film industry, where name is arguably even more important. One anecdote that illustrates this tells of an Australian actress whose surname was often misspelled in media articles, which meant that she was confused with another well-known actress. This meant that her brand power was not only decreased but helped to lend legitimacy to a rival brand. A bit like Vegemite being referred to as Marmite. Not much of an issue for most people, but for the brand-makers, it is everything.

'You've got to understand,' says Anne Britten, previously head of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. 'Her name is everything she's got. It's worth, say, a hundred thousand dollars. And every time it's misused, as far as she's concerned, it's devalued and she's losing money on her investment.'³⁶

Of course whether you are or are not a name is extremely arbitrary. Linda Jaivin, for example, may be a name within a very small literary circle in Sydney. But in New York she's a nobody. Alice Munro is a name in Canada and the U.S.A. but in Australia she is still largely unknown. Luca Zingaretti, the actor in the TV series *Inspector Montalbano* has a huge reputation in Italy (as has the author of the crime novels the series is based on) but in Australia Zingaretti is only known to a small SBS-viewing audience. Barry McGovern is legendary in Dublin as a theatre actor, and almost a complete unknown in England. Your status as a name depends completely on your location.

³⁶ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, June 16, 2006.

Some of the above observations about celebrity, particularly within the literary culture, were written as part of the writer's first draft of an essay on celebrity. Later, as the style and form of the essay changed from a more abstract appraisal of the celebrity culture to a specific story based on personal experience, she omitted much of the general commentary and replaced it with real-life anecdotes.

In this way 'Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity' grew from a 5,000 word essay to a 30,000 word memoir. But it was, she hoped, more than memoir. She wanted the piece to comment meaningfully on the culture of celebrity, not just to tell a personal tale of disillusionment. She hoped that her reflections on and interpretations of celebrity culture would mean that the piece would transcend the usually shallow first-person confessional. And she was also hoping that a memoir written more than two decades after the event would necessarily involve a level of detached maturity and therefore offer some insights.

After completing 'Confessions', the writer considered her production of work so far, a work that her supervisor described as an 'intellectual memoir'. As much as anything, the pieces she had written traced the development of her thinking about the world and about herself. However, there seemed to be a part of this trajectory that was missing. She had a memoir from her teenage years, ('Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity'), a memoir from her thirties ('Mexican Masks') and a memoir from her forties ('My Mother's Brain'). But those extremely important years — the period of early to mid-twenties — wasn't represented. So she set to work on the fourth essay called 'A Reluctant Novice'.

The Making of ‘A Reluctant Novice’

‘A Reluctant Novice’ is mostly set in Ireland, a country the writer first visited at the age of twenty-four, and that had a great influence on her literary, intellectual and spiritual development. This essay differs from the others because it has less of a concrete narrative. Whereas the other essays have a strong narrative through-line based on one very central and important relationship with a friend, a husband, a mother, ‘A Reluctant Novice’ is more about the relationship with ideas. It is therefore more abstract and philosophical.

If ‘Confessions’ was one of the most difficult things the writer had ever written, ‘A Reluctant Novice’, was definitely *the* most difficult. In it she wanted to discuss things that, in a contemporary, secular society, are often extremely difficult to discuss — topics such as religion, spirituality and the relationship between prayer and poetry. The difficulty was doing this without sounding preachy, righteous, new age or pious. This essay is perhaps the least successful of the four, and yet it seemed such an important part of the writer’s intellectual and spiritual development that she felt compelled to include an account of it in the collection.

‘A Reluctant Novice’ deals with some of the themes already touched on in the other essays. One such theme was the concept of dualism. In other words, the constant oppositions such as mind/body, flesh/spirit, emotion/intellect, spiritual/physical. Dualism is defined by *The New Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a theory or system of thought that regards a domain of reality in terms of two independent principles, especially mind and matter’.³⁷ It represents a way of seeing the world that is largely rooted in Christian theology, encouraging a view in terms of opposites such as sin/grace, heaven/hell, divine/devil.

One of the more pervasive and destructive aspects of dualism is the opposition between the ideal and the real or actual. This is demonstrated very early in ‘A Reluctant Novice’ when the writer travels to meet a well-known author, Alan Sillitoe, whom she had idealised, not just as an accomplished author of many books, but as a noble and heroic individual. Unfortunately the reality of the man Sillitoe did not agree with her idealised version. But instead of questioning her own habit of idealising, she felt deeply disappointed by the person she had for years wanted to meet. She had expected him to be a pure example of literary nobility but instead had found he was just as human, just as fallen, as any other individual. For a while she found his foibles unforgivable. They completely overshadowed his previous generosity and his massive

³⁷ *The New Oxford English Dictionary*, 1998, p. 569.

achievements as a writer. She didn't understand that his failings were an integral part of his greatness.

It is, of course, a characteristic of youth that they tend to idealise. As John Hughes says, 'Perhaps the young are always drawn to the unattainable, and purity — intellectual, spiritual, physical—like all absolutes, has its own erotic appeal.'³⁸ However, in 'A Reluctant Novice' the writer wanted to suggest that the habit of idealising isn't really healthy, that in fact idealisation leads to a rejection of humanity rather than loving acceptance. Vicki Mahaffey, in her book, *States of Desire*, suggests that idealisation (of the self or of the other) leads to an impulse to discard the darker half, which in turn results in 'a *halving* of experience'.³⁹ Experience is halved because by only accepting the lighter side, one is also only accepting half of life and half of what makes up humanity.

The idea of human perfection as opposed to flawed, fallen humanity is what led to the topic of James Joyce. Although Joyce may be a reference point in the essays previously written, it was in 'A Reluctant Novice' that the essayist attempt to explore more fully one of Joyce's central themes. That theme is *felix culpa* — variously interpreted as happy fall or blessed sin. The idea is that, instead of rejecting all that is sinful in oneself and others, one should in fact rejoice in fallenness and understand that it is precisely this condition that makes one truly human.

'A Reluctant Novice' considers the implications of *felix culpa* in contrast to the more conventional, dualistic interpretation of existence. As a way of demonstrating this idea the story is told of how the narrator mistakenly fell in love with what she thought was a mysterious piano player. In the end her vision of the perfect musician turns out to be a pianola.

Another major theme of the essay collection in general and of 'A Reluctant Novice' in particular is the question of belief. 'Confessions' is a story of two young women who develop very different belief systems. 'My Mother's Brain' tackles beliefs about life and death, euthanasia and suicide. 'Mexican Masks' compares different beliefs about the nature of self and 'A Reluctant Novice', attempts to discuss the most difficult question of all: the question of religious belief.

In intellectual and academic circles in Australia, the question of religious belief is not often discussed. In fact, the question of beliefs of any kind is increasingly difficult to debate. And yet most people need to build some sort of belief system to live by, even if those beliefs are as simple as 'I love my family'. A belief in that love is necessary for the family's survival.

³⁸ Hughes, John. *The Idea of Home*, Giramondo, Sydney, 2004, p. 157.

³⁹ Mahaffey, Vicki. *States of Desire: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, and the Irish Experiment*, New York. Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 206.

The problem of belief in the 21st century was accentuated for the writer when her son came home one afternoon with a peculiarly difficult homework task. It was a list of questions that the eight-year-old pupil was under instructions to ask of parents, friends, relatives and neighbours. The list went like this:

How would you describe a belief?

What are your beliefs?

Does your belief have a symbol?

How does your belief affect your life?

How does your belief affect other people?

Needless to say, most of the boy's interviewees, including his mother, were flummoxed. Being typical 21st century urban dwellers, those interviewed could neither define belief, nor state a comprehensible set of beliefs, nor indicate, in any concrete way, how that belief affected their, or other people's lives. And if they couldn't work out the answers, how did the Year 3 primary school teacher expect her young student to report back on belief?

It appears that many people are unwilling or at least wary of expressing definite beliefs. This could be partly because they are afraid of being wrong and partly because they are aware of the complexity of life — of the extreme difficulty of stating a belief that cannot, in some way, be challenged. Expression of definite beliefs is also exacerbated by the difficulty of believing in anything absolutely because postmodernity has made it clear that there are no absolutes. Furthermore, because the contemporary era is the the age of irony, even when a person makes a tentative attempt at stating a belief, she tends to do so with a little caveat, or some implied small print, a kind of escape clause — which means that, even while a person is expressing beliefs she is, at the same time, disowning them.

The writer's first response to her son's homework was to go to the dictionary. Define a belief. Get out the good old Oxford. 'A belief is something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held opinion or conviction.'⁴⁰ But this reliance on dictionaries to supply answers is also part of the confusion that characterises contemporary times. Dictionaries are about definitions, not about meaning or truth. According to philosopher John Ralston Saul, this is a modern development. He claims that dictionaries used to be passionate arguments about truth and that 'modern dictionaries should again become arenas of debate'.⁴¹

The writer's second response was to run to a literary text. This had always been her way of dealing with difficult questions. Seek refuge in literature, in story, in

⁴⁰ *The New Oxford English Dictionary*, 1998.

⁴¹ Saul, John Ralston. *The Doubter's Dictionary*, Toronto, Penguin, 1994, p.105.

quotations from other more erudite, educated, intelligent writers. Whereas a conventional Christian might go to the Bible, her sacred scriptures had always been fiction and poetry. The particular text that came to mind was J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*. This book had been the subject of a lot of disagreement, even controversy. It is a book brimming over with beliefs but in the end, refuses to endorse any belief, giving the impression that, as Wallace Stevens suggests, the modern era is 'an age of disbelief'.⁴²

To summarise briefly: the final chapter of Coetzee's book sees the main character, an Australian writer named Elizabeth Costello, stranded in a kind of refugee camp, waiting to get through the gate. The gate, the reader assumes, is the gate of heaven. But before she can pass through, she must write a statement of beliefs.

'Before I pass through I must make a statement,' she repeats. 'A statement of what?'

'Belief. What you believe.'

'Belief. Is that all? Not a statement of faith? What if I do not believe? What if I am not a believer?'

Costello argues for a moment but the guard on duty is unmoved.

'Write the statement as required,' he says. 'Bring it back when it is completed.'⁴³

Elizabeth eventually hands in a statement but it is rejected. She tries again and is then put before a tribunal to plead her case. When Elizabeth is pressed about her beliefs, instead of presenting her revised statement, she reminisces about growing up in Australia, recalling her fondness for the frogs in a nearby riverbed. 'I believe in those little frogs,' she says.

Costello's belief in frogs is interpreted by the English critic James Wood as 'religious in a pagan sense'.⁴⁴ Another interpretation is that Costello believes in the frogs because they are believable — and they are believable because they are noisy, they are alive, slimy, croaky, solid, physical, breathing. They are not abstractions.

⁴² Stevens, Wallace. 'Two or Three Ideas', *Opus Posthumous*, Rev.ed, Milton J. Bates (ed.), New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1989, p. 259.

⁴³ Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2003, pp. 194-195.

⁴⁴ Woods, James. 'A Frog's Life', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 25, No. 20, 23 October, 2003.

Perhaps her objection to stating a set of beliefs, in any conventional way, is that a belief is an abstraction. And abstractions are not life, not reality.

This is also part of the difficulty that educated moderns have when it comes to stating a belief. Being so keenly aware of the distance between words and reality also means being aware of the distance between abstractions and actuality. Belief is one thing but behaviour is another. A person can say that she believes in love and kindness, but what meaning do these words have if that belief is not embodied, not enacted, not expressed in some other way than just verbally?

The distance between religious beliefs and religious behaviour is perhaps the most obvious example. An individual can say he believes in Christian principles such as charity and compassion, which may lead to him behaving in certain ways. But another individual, one of the millions of American fundamentalists for example, can also endorse Christian principles, which lead them to behave in very different ways. What do their ostensibly common beliefs amount to? A lot of words, a lot of abstractions. A statement of belief is just that, then — a statement.

Perhaps what Coetzee is trying to get at is that if a belief is truly embodied it shouldn't need any supporting statement. In an earlier chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee states: 'The knowledge we have is not abstract . . . but embodied.'⁴⁵ True knowledge, he seems to be saying, is embodied knowledge. True knowledge comes from experience; from firm, worldly, day-to-day, external experience, rather than internal philosophising and reasoning. A belief is truly held only when the internal is reflected by the external, when the dualistic idea of outer and inner worlds as separate is finally eradicated and the bond between the two is re-established.

Writers from many different times and places would agree. 'After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this,' said Thomas Hardy: 'Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience. . . The road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.'⁴⁶ For James Joyce, to write realistically, to write truly, to reflect the whatness of being was enough of a belief (because both ethics and aesthetics were imbedded in this process). To represent the world was to celebrate the world. Truth-to-life in the artistic sense meant truth-to-life in the moral sense and perhaps, also, in the religious sense. This also seems to be Elizabeth Costello's understanding as she

⁴⁵ Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2003, p. 217.

⁴⁶ Quoted in John Paterson. *The Novel as Faith – the gospel according to James, Hardy, Conrad, Joyce, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf*, Boston, Gambit, 1973, p. 45.

stands before the tribunal and, instead of making a statement of belief, recounts her life experience. Instead of philosophy, she offers narrative.

‘What I believe,’ she reads in a firm voice, like a child doing a recitation. ‘I was born in the city of Melbourne, but spent part of my childhood in rural Victoria, in a region of climatic extremes: of scorching droughts followed by torrential rains that swelled the rivers with the carcasses of drowned animals . . . when the waters subsided . . . I am speaking of the waters of one river in particular now, the Dulgannon, acres of mud were left behind. At night you would hear the belling of tens of thousands of little frogs rejoicing in the largesse of the heavens. . . What do I believe? I believe in those little frogs. . . They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them.’⁴⁷

Belief, therefore, according to Costello, is beside the point. Frogs exist whether people believe in them or not. If God exists, then He exists whether humans believe in Him or not.

At the end of the book Elizabeth is still lingering in her half-way house, waiting and hoping, like Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, that she will eventually pass through the gate. By the last page, she is feeling a little desperate and approaches the gatekeeper in an attempt to extract some information about who gets through and who doesn’t. ‘Do you see many people like me,’ she asks, ‘people in my situation?’ At length the gatekeeper answers, ‘All the time,’ he says. ‘We see people like you all the time.’⁴⁸

Coetzee’s ending is clever, funny and beautifully written, yet deeply unsettling. What does Coetzee mean by this? Why has he chosen this as the last line of his most impassioned and philosophical of books? A number of critics — of great intellect and experience — have attempted to analyse Coetzee’s meaning and intention in the book and particularly in this last chapter. James Wood called it confessional and highly religious.⁴⁹ David Lodge finds it ambiguous, only describing *Elizabeth Costello* as a novel ‘for want of a better word’.⁵⁰ But an Australian reviewer, Anthony Uhlmann, believes that the book reflects the modern condition — that is, our anxiety about the absence of certainty and our inability to examine and

⁴⁷ Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2003, pp. 216-217.

⁴⁸ Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*, London, Secker & Warburg, 2003.

⁴⁹ Wood, James. ‘A Frog’s Life’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 25, no. 20, October 23, 2003.

⁵⁰ Lodge, David. ‘Disturbing the Peace’, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol.50, No.18, November 20, 2003.

express truths which now seem forever just out of reach.⁵¹ In other words, the key theme of *Elizabeth Costello* is belief and its failure.

Perhaps Coetzee is simply doing the job that Stendhal believed was the work of the writer in society — to hold up a mirror not just to the physical world, but to the culture's psychic state of being. Coetzee is showing modern individuals as they are — uncertain, anxious, unable to state a comprehensible set of beliefs and yet still psychically bound to the image of heaven's gate, still keen to make the effort to get through that gate and still keen to be judged as having lived moral and ethical existences.

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Despite Coetzee's obvious intelligence and literary brilliance, the experience of reading *Elizabeth Costello* can be unfulfilling. The reader is left on a threshold, along with Elizabeth Costello, in a state of anxious waiting and wondering.

On the question of belief, Joyce is just as difficult to pin down as Coetzee. Joyce wasn't known for articulating firm beliefs in his lifetime — he was areligious and apolitical. Scholars from around the world have argued for years about the nature of Joyce's philosophy of life, or if indeed he had one. At the 2004 Sydney Writers' Festival, Joycean scholar Daniel Ferrer gave a talk about the *Finnegans Wake* notebooks, which he had been studying for more than a decade. In the question and answer session that followed, Ferrer commented that he had combed these notebooks searching for Joyce's beliefs, or at least a philosophy or system that might explain his approach to writing — some kind of secret Da Vinci code — but there was nothing definitive to be found.

And yet it is hard to believe that Joyce was really devoid of all beliefs. If one reads through Joyce's works, with a particular focus on Stephen Dedalus, often considered to be a reflection of the young Joyce, one will find a young man who is passionate and searching for truth. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is full of postulating and theorising, brimming over with earnest efforts at replacing religious systems with aesthetic systems. But at the same time as all this philosophising, there is a sense of Joyce's humour, Joyce's irony. So even while putting forward alternative belief systems, Joyce seems to be making fun of them, doubting them. There is a particularly good example of this in *Ulysses* where Stephen firmly argues his personal theory about Shakespeare. Yet when someone asks him afterwards if he really

⁵¹ Uhlmann, Anthony. 'Something old, something new', *Australian Financial Review*, Review section, February 6, 2004.

believes in his Shakespeare theory, he promptly says no.⁵² Does this mean that he has just been playing intellectual games or is Joyce again being prophetic by previewing the cool individual of contemporary times who is completely cynical about holding a belief any kind?

In an effort to answer this question, the writer emailed her favourite Joyce scholar, Vicki Mahaffey of the University of Pennsylvania, for her view.

‘In my opinion, people misread this all the time,’ she wrote. ‘What it really means, I think, is that belief is one of those trick words that, like love, can mean two opposite things. What Stephen is denying is the spirit in which they ask him the question, which could be paraphrased [as] "do you BUY your own theory." [The answer is] No, because he doesn't buy things - because this is like defining love in terms of possession. Moreover, true belief (or "faith") isn't about buying things either, it's about remaining open to possibilities. So by denying that he believes his own theory, Stephen is actually performing the other, more spiritual meaning of belief — which is faith as an orientation toward openness; an openness of mind and heart.’⁵³

Perhaps Mahaffey had hit on the heart of the issue. Words are always layered with meanings. Belief, she had said, is one of those very tricky words that can mean many things. But if the focus is the spiritual meaning of the word, then belief is what human beings *are* — how one behaves, how one thinks, the way one does things — an *orientation* rather than fixed position, a way of being rather than a formulated abstraction articulated in words. Her words were reminiscent of another comment from an Irish Joycean scholar, Mark Patrick Hederman. He believed Joyce was trying to encourage, above all, ‘not a different way of thinking, or even writing, but a different way of being’.⁵⁴

If one accepts this challenge — that the spiritual meaning of belief is a way of being that involves a kind of faith of openness, then perhaps the uncertainty that characterises contemporary times (and is reflected in *Elizabeth Costello*) may be something that one has to learn to live with. Not because uncertainty is ideal — it clearly isn't comfortable — but because its opposite, certainty, is positively dangerous. Certainty too easily lends itself to bigotry, racism, egotism, righteousness and violence. Only certainty can allow the kinds of terrorism experienced in the world today, both on the part of President Bush and of Islamic extremists. If one

⁵² Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, Oxford University World Classics edn., Jeri Johnson (ed), 1993, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 205. (First published Paris, Shakespeare and Company, 1922.)

⁵³ Personal email to Gabrielle Carey from Vicki Mahaffey, dated September 7, 2004.

⁵⁴ Personal interview with Mark Patrick Hederman, Glenstal Abbey, Ireland. June 25, 2004.

retains openness then one may never have the comfort of certainty because one will be open to other people, other opinions, to the other.

What is particularly interesting about Mahaffey's concept of faith as openness is how reminiscent it is of the Christian concept of grace. A description of grace in Christian terms emphasises the quality of openness to God's influence. In reference to a definition of grace, Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has stated that, 'The human being is, by intellect and will, open to transcendence and the ordinary person, if open enough, can experience a transcendence that can intuit the presence of the infinite, the indefinable and ineffable . . . the holy mystery, which is somehow the explanation of all.'⁵⁵ In other words, a state of openness, or grace, is the key to experienced faith, to embodied belief.

Among other things, 'A Reluctant Novice' explores the need to believe as well as the difficulty of belief. In it the writer traces her own attraction to Catholicism, her experience of a monastic Benedictine community as well as discussions with people who have dedicated their lives to a religious faith. By the end, while maintaining a respect for, and perhaps even a little envy of those who feel the certainty of God's existence, she retains her doubt. But she hopes that it is a doubt that is open to further discussion rather than a cynical sneering at the religious impulse, which seems to be so deeply imbedded in some sections of the Australian intelligentsia. It is also a doubt that is shared by so many that one might even describe it as shared faith. Indeed, American novelist Jonathan Franzen has described literature as 'the church of doubt'.

It's not the only church but I think that the good books are about doubt rather than certainty. Essentially doubt, theologically speaking, can be seen as the negation of religion but it can also be seen as the confirmation. If faith were easy—if you could just check in and wear it on your car-key chain, why not have it? It's a pleasant attribute. It accessorises your life if you can do it that easily. The whole point is that it goes against everything your reason is telling you. The whole point is you're never going to really figure out what the truth is. So I think faith, properly conceived, whether it's a religious faith or the kind of faith I dance around as a writer, is about struggle. It's not about arriving some place. It's about process.⁵⁶

The process of faith or belief, Franzen seems to be saying, is about becoming and being, rather than dogma or professions of faith. Perhaps this was also what

⁵⁵ *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Joseph A. Komonchak (ed.), Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1990.

⁵⁶ Carey, Gabrielle. *Interview with Jonathan Franzen*, HEAT 6, New Series, 2003, p. 193.

Coetzee meant when he left his discussion of belief on a threshold. James Joyce was equally suspicious of any kind of catechism.

‘For what we are about to believe,’⁵⁷ Joyce parodied the traditional Christian grace recited before meals. But as always, his parodies have multiple meanings. One meaning might be that life is a continual discovery, a continual struggle with faith as well as a kind of continuing threshold upon which revelations and beliefs, as yet unseen and not understood, are nevertheless about to be.

After reaching a final draft of ‘A Reluctant Novice’, although the writer felt confident that the four essays would combine to make up a worthwhile manuscript, she was still struggling to define exactly in what genre she had been writing. The problem of definition worried her until right to the end of the period devoted to completing the creative component of the doctorate. It was only then that she discovered, thanks to a writer friend, a perfect description of what she’d been trying to do for the previous three years. At last she could answer that question, ‘What is it *exactly* that you’re writing?’ She wasn’t a fiction writer or even a non-fiction writer, in the conventional sense. Neither was she a memoirist or a short story writer. She was a personal essayist.

‘The only way, I think, to learn to write short stories is to write them, and then try to discover what you have done,’ wrote Flannery O’Connor.⁵⁸ The same can be applied to any genre. And this is how the writer discovered how to write a personal essay. She wrote one, then another, then another and another. And then she looked back over them and discovered what she had done.

After all that work, and all those years, she had to agree with V.S. Naipaul, that ‘lucky is the writer who has found his or her true form’.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*, London, Penguin, 1992, p. 7. (First published London, Faber and Faber, 1939.)

⁵⁸ O’Connor, Flannery, *Mystery and Manners – Occasional Prose*, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (eds) , New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969, p 102.

⁵⁹ Quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, W.W. Norton, 1997, p. 13.

PART II

The Personal Essay

The invention of the modern essay form is generally attributed to Michel de Montaigne, who published the first two books of his *Essais*, known as Book One, in 1580. Upon the success of Book One, composed of short, somewhat formal pieces of reflection, Montaigne grew more confident and his later essays were longer, less formal and more personal. Montaigne's aim, as Phillip Lopate comments in his anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, was 'to put before the public a full verbal portrait of himself'.⁶⁰ It was, continues Lopate, 'as if the self were a new continent, and Montaigne its first explorer'.⁶¹ Or as William Hazlitt says in his essay on Montaigne, 'He may be said to have been the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man.'⁶² He was therefore not only the inventor of the essay, but also the first personal essayist.

Since Montaigne's times, the essay has developed into several different forms. Broadly speaking, firstly there is the essay as taught to high school and university students, which is intended to develop into the scholarly or academic essay. Secondly, there is the less formal and more accessible essay, what could be described as the journalistic essay, published in magazines and newspapers, often about topics of public interest or dealing with some aspect of current affairs. And thirdly, there is the personal essay, also referred to as the familiar essay.

A conventional essay, as taught in high schools and universities, is impersonal, objective and generally aims to argue and prove a point or a thesis of some kind. Students being taught to write an essay will be told that the essayist should never use the personal pronoun 'I' and that all statements must be supported by verifiable evidence. The basic template for an essay, the student is instructed, is the three-part structure—introduction, where the question or thesis is posed; body, where the question or thesis is argued; and conclusion, where the answer is finally and convincingly stated.

The journalistic essay is freer in form and style than the academic essay. Although the writer may be clearly of a particular opinion, this type of essay will also often avoid the personal pronoun and aim for some sense of objectivity. The subject is usually topical and current-affairs related and the focus of these essays is often to

⁶⁰ Lopate, Phillip (ed.), *The Art of the Personal Essay – An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, New York, Anchor Books, 1994, p. 43.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Hazlitt, William. 'On the Periodical Essayists' in *Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, P.P Howe (ed.), Centenary Edition, Vol. 6., London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1931, p. 92.

reach some kind of conclusion or statement regarding issues that are public and/or political. For example, detention centres are unhealthy for children or logging Tasmania is an environmental disaster.

It could be argued that a journalistic essay is not an essay in the true sense of the Montaigne tradition. Much of what is given the name essay in newspapers might be better described as political or social comment. It is written quickly, often in response to a topical issue, and intended for immediate consumption (followed, perhaps, by immediate disposal). Of a true essay, publisher and editor Ivor Indyk says, 'There is something about the way that things are described which leaves their significance slightly inconclusive and allows them to resonate and that's the literary quality that you don't necessarily get in journalistic articles.'⁶³

Generally speaking, essays are often exercises in critical thinking. The essayist observes closely and in detail and then she judges and interprets and analyses. Here again the personal essay differs. Where the academic essay, for example, might consider critically a work of literature, and a journalistic essay considers critically a topic of public interest, a personal essayist not only reads critically and looks at her world with a critic's eyes but also interprets her own life experience critically. In this way a personal essay becomes far less formal, far more subjective and, more often than not, seeks to explore the many sides to a question, rather than to prove a definitive answer or to arrive at a conclusion.

This is not to say that the personal essayist is morally indecisive or beyond making judgements. As Georg Lukács wrote, 'The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict . . . but the process of judging.'⁶⁴ The difference, however, between the process of judging (or critiquing) in a personal essay, and that of a more conventional essay, is that the personal essayist is not afraid to reveal his own prejudices and personal experiences as part of the reasoning process. This ability is crucial to the reflective as well as the self-reflective nature of the personal essay. Above all, it is the subjectivity of the personal essay, and the sharing of the essayist's thoughts and feelings and experiences with the reader, that makes the personal essay what it is. Indeed, as Lopate remarks in his introduction, 'The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy.'⁶⁵

Another difference between the academic essayist and the personal essayist is that the academic essayist reads and studies, formulates thoughts and arguments and then lastly writes up the preceding process. In contrast, the personal essayist seeks

⁶³ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

⁶⁴ Lukács, Georg. 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock, London, Merlin Press, 1974, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Lopate, Phillip. Introduction, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate, (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxiii.

wisdom not exclusively *from* what is written and read but rather *through* the process of writing and past experience. As essayist Joan Didion wrote: 'I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.'⁶⁶ In the process of uncovering her own mysterious consciousness, the essayist hopes to reveal something of human consciousness as a whole. This continues the tradition of Montaigne who stated that 'Every man has within himself the entire human condition.'⁶⁷

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American essayist Joseph Epstein describes the personal essay as 'the freest form in all of literature'.⁶⁸ It can venture into any territory — science, religion, history, popular culture and, more often than not, philosophy. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to define exactly what constitutes a personal essay. Nevertheless, the following is an attempt to outline some of the features commonly found in the personal essay.

Accidental Philosophy

One of the most obvious characteristics of a personal essay is its tendency to philosophise. Lopate quotes Spanish philosopher Eduardo Nicol as describing the essay 'as almost literature and almost philosophy'.⁶⁹ Indeed, Michel Montaigne once called himself an accidental philosopher. The difference between a real philosopher and an accidental philosopher is not only training and academic background. It is a question of style and content. Whereas the academic essayist will formally cite other authorities in order to back up his assertions, the personal essayist will refer to previous thinkers far more casually and informally. Whereas the academic essayist is rarely allowed to cite her own personal experience as an example, the personal essayist won't be shy about exploiting her own life and own experience as a basis from which to philosophise.

⁶⁶ Joan Didion, 'Why I Write', *The New York Times Magazine*, December 5, 1976.

⁶⁷ Quoted in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate, (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxiii.

⁶⁸ Epstein, Joseph. 'The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery', *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, Norton, 1997, p 11.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxxvii.

These different approaches to the essay throw up the inevitable question of value and merit. Is the personal essay less valuable, less credible than the academic essay precisely because of its personal content? Should the personal essay be accepted into the academy? Is the essay in Australia floundering because the people who are best placed to do it—scholars and academics—are writing according to prohibitions from their own institutions, which invariably disapprove of any reference to the personal? This all depends on how a genuine essay and genuine philosophy is defined. If Lukács' assessment of Plato is correct and if Plato is the greatest essayist who ever lived because 'he was the one who wrested everything from life as it unfolded before his eyes and who therefore needed no mediating medium; the one who was able to connect his questions, the most profound questions ever asked, with *life as lived*',⁷⁰ then it would seem necessary to allow aspects of the personal back into the definitions of the genuine essay and genuine philosophy.

Despite the personal essayist's lack of formal training in philosophy, an application of philosophy to a life as lived is what she is above all attempting to achieve. Or, to put it another way, the personal essayist, by the process of writing, hopes to develop a philosophy, or a system of beliefs perhaps, that has arisen from personal experience, from feelings, from intuition, from disappointments, from embodied knowledge, *as well as* from knowledge gleaned by reading and study.

This tendency for the personal essay to stray into philosophy explained why much of *So Many Selves* not only drifted into philosophical reflection but also led to the reading and quoting of practising philosophers, in particular Charles Taylor and his book *Sources of the Self — the Making of the Modern Identity*. Taylor's book seemed particularly pertinent to the general subject—the self—as well as the title of the collection *So Many Selves*.

Reflection

The philosophical tendency of the personal essay exemplifies another characteristic that distinguishes it from the journalistic or academic essay and that is the quality of reflection, which is perhaps the quintessential characteristic of a true essay. A personal essay often involves an unhurried reflection on a topic, a situation, an idea, an experience. Unlike other essayists, a personal essayist will take an experience and reflect on it at length, looking at it from all sides, interpreting it, not just intellectually, but emotionally. It is precisely this ability to reflect in detail and at

⁷⁰ Lukács, Georg. 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock, London, Merlin Press, 1974, p. 13.

length that distinguishes the personal essay from the more concise and often much briefer journalistic essay or the more formal and structured academic essay.

Form and Structure

The essay form has its source in the French word *essai*, which means attempt, try, trial, or testing out — an attitude towards writing and ideas which inevitably leads to a less rigid and more experimental structure. As a result of this attitude, the personal essay is not afraid to go down paths that lead nowhere, to explore tangents, to wander round in cul-de-sacs or even linger a while in a dead-end. Indeed, Montaigne, the inventor of the personal essay, has been described by writer Phyllis Rose, as ‘the man who elevated organic form over inherited structures and first made art by letting one thing lead to another’.⁷¹ This open-ended, exploratory approach inevitably leads to a much less rigorous form, often resulting in a somewhat rambling structure. Indeed, the identity of the essayist as an idle rambler was taken up by Samuel Johnson when he gave titles to his essay series: *The Idler* and *The Rambler*.

In some ways the essay is *essentially* a peripatetic or ambulatory form, comments Graham Good in *The Observing Self — Rediscovering the Essay*. ‘The mixture of self-preoccupation and observation, the role of chance in providing sights and encounters, the ease of changing pace, direction and goal, make walking the perfect analog of essaying.’⁷²

This lack of structure can, however, also be a problem. As Lukács says, ‘Fortunately for us, the modern essay does not always have to speak of books or poets; but this freedom makes the essay even more problematic. It stands too high, it sees and connects too many things. . .’⁷³

It was precisely this connecting of too many things that became problematic throughout the writing of the essays that comprised *So Many Selves*. While writing *My Mother’s Brain* for example, the writer was very tempted to research and record facts about the human brain in relation to her mother’s tumour. She found herself reading tomes written by neuroscientists and investigating the debate over genetic determination. For a while a brief outline of this debate between physicists and biologists actually did become part of the manuscript, but later it was cut as it was too

⁷¹ Quoted in ‘The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery’, Joseph Epstein in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, Norton, 1997, p. 15.

⁷² Good, Graham. Preface, *The Observing Self — Rediscovering the Essay*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. xii.

⁷³ Lukács, Georg. ‘On the Nature and Form of the Essay’, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock, London, Merlin Press, 1974, p. 13.

technical and too much of a digression. The essay may be the freest of all forms, but it is still necessary to maintain a continuity of tone as well as establish some sort of structure to a piece of work, even if that structure *appears* to the reader to be structureless. Referring to the personal essay, Lopate says, ‘Their supposed formlessness is more a strategy to disarm the reader with the appearance of unstudied spontaneity than a reality of composition.’⁷⁴

In this way the essayist learned that, although the essay is inherently rambling and digressive, it also needs to strive for some sense of completeness or unity. As Indyk has noted, ‘When you’ve finished it, you’ve got to have a sense that it’s complete even in its incompleteness.’⁷⁵

Style

The style of the personal essay, as mentioned above, is informal rather than formal, subjective rather than objective. It is conversational and familiar, even intimate. While the more formal sort of essayist may see this style as a shortcoming, even as a sign of intellectual and stylistic laziness, William Hazlitt, the great English essayist, disagrees. Hazlitt opens his short essay ‘On Familiar Style’ with the statement: ‘It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may say, purity of expression.’⁷⁶

Hazlitt goes on to describe the familiar style as ‘one which any one would speak in common conversation and that which doesn’t use pedantic and oratorical flourishes.’⁷⁷ In other words, the style of the personal essay is conversational, or as Joseph Epstein points out in his introduction to *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, it is ‘a natural style’.⁷⁸

Personal essayists choose this style deliberately in order to put their audience at ease and to some extent lessen the authority of the author, making the relationship between reader and writer a more equal, personal and intimate one. In the essays that comprise *So Many Selves*, the essayist chose to write in a style that she hoped was

⁷⁴ Lopate, Phillip. Introduction, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxxviii.

⁷⁵ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

⁷⁶ Hazlitt, William, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, P.P Howe (ed.), Centenary Edition, Vol. 8., London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1931, p. 242.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Epstein, Joseph, ‘The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery’ in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, Norton, 1997, p 19.

easy to read for an average reader, without being dumbed down. She liked to think that she was writing in the tradition of Charmain Clift who, in a letter to her London literary agent, wrote: 'I have been making my own sneaky little revolutions [. . .] by writing essays for the weekly presses to be read by people who don't know an essay from a form-guide, but absolutely love it.'⁷⁹

Voice

The intimate, conversational and natural style of the personal essay obviously relies heavily on tone and voice. For the reader to trust such an intimate style, the narrator's voice needs to be honest and candid. 'The struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the personal essay,' says Lopate.⁸⁰ E.B. White confirms this: 'There is one thing the essayist cannot do — he cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time.'⁸¹ It is the honesty and candour that often leads to the confessional tone of the personal essay. (This harks back to origins even older than Montaigne, suggesting that Saint Augustine of Hippo may have been the true first personal essayist when he wrote *Confessions*.)

The confessional voice was obviously a characteristic of all the essays, perhaps in particular 'Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity'. A good personal essay, however, should not simply be a confessional or a psychological striptease or an intellectual bare-all. There must be a careful balance between what is revealed and what remains unrevealed. Revelations and disclosure should be measured out as skillfully as clues in a good crime novel. (And as the mystery of the personal essay is, at bottom, the self, in a sense, the case should always remain unsolved.)

The personal essayist has to be honest but without falling into self-abandonment. She must know how to conserve some of herself, at the same time as offering herself up for contemplation. This requires a voice that, while retaining honesty, is not exactly the same as the voice of the actual author. The author is required to craft a voice that is genuine but also retains enough detachment, not only to avoid complete emotional nakedness, but to be able to observe accurately. In other words, the essayist's critical faculty must be applied equally to her subject, her world, her experiences and above all, to her self. This requires a distanced self-reflexiveness

⁷⁹ Clift, Charmain. *Selected Essays*, Nadia Wheatley (ed.), Sydney, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 10.

⁸⁰ Lopate, Phillip. Introduction, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate, (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxv.

⁸¹ White, E.B. Foreword, *Essays of E.B.White*, New York, Harper and Row, 1977, p. viii.

and an ability to discern the difference between a dignified honesty and naked, unwanted intimacy.

Tone

Because of its reflective nature, the essayist is frequently looking back on something in retrospect, on something lost, for example. This tendency often means that the tone of a personal essay is melancholic. This was certainly the case with 'Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity'. It was a meditation on a lost childhood friendship that attempted to capture some of the joy of that friendship but was also, necessarily, a tale of loss and sadness.

Ivor Indyk suggests that it may be the melancholic tone of the essay that has prevented it from finding its distinct form in Australia. Although melancholy is far from absent from the Australian psyche, the Australian style of melancholy, says Indyk, is a silent one. 'Instead of articulating our melancholy, the Australian character turns inward and taciturn. Take Lawson's characters, for example. When they get melancholy they stop speaking. Or start drinking.'⁸² Is melancholy perhaps perceived as a sign of weakness in Australia? As self-indulgence? Maybe Australians recoil from the idea of writing out their melancholia because they wouldn't want to conceive of themselves as whingers.

Content

Related to the intimate and confessional voice of the personal essay, is the content, which is often autobiographical. The personal essayist relies on personal experience, as much as research, to explore and comment on a topic. This approach means that the essayist prefers, at least as a starting point, the concrete and the specific, as opposed to the abstract and general. Being focussed on the concrete and specific means that the essayist is not afraid of contemplating the small and the ordinary. The great English essayist, Charles Lamb, for example, wrote an essay on teacups⁸³ and G.K. Chesterton wrote an essay called 'On Eyebrows'⁸⁴. The fact that

⁸² Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

⁸³ Lamb, Charles. 'On China' in *Essays of Elia & Last Essays of Elia*, Vol. 1, London, J.M.Dent, 1929, pp. 287-291. (Originally published 1823.)

⁸⁴ Chesterton, G.K. 'On Eyebrows' in *All I Survey*, London, Methuen, 1933, pp. 209-213.

the essay deals with the small and ordinary, however, doesn't mean it has to be small and ordinary itself. One of the capacities of the essay is to elevate the ordinary to the extraordinary. A contemporary example of this might be David Foster Wallace's highly personal essay 'Consider the Lobster'.

At first glance, an essay devoted to contemplating the lobster might be construed as something extremely lightweight and even frivolous. Wallace, however, manages to elevate the topic into a profoundly intellectual reflection on the nature of pain and the ethics of our carnivorous culture. He begins by describing the Maine Lobster Festival in the U.S.A. The description is concrete and visceral. He gives details of the event, the number of attendees, the thousands of pounds of lobster consumed, and the variations of lobster offerings. He describes how lobster is caught and then the various ways of preparation. As part of this description he brings up the topic that will go on to preoccupy him for most of the remainder of the essay. 'A detail so obvious that most recipes don't even bother to mention it is that each lobster is supposed to be alive when you put it in the kettle.'⁸⁵ He then moves on to the question he will attempt to answer: 'Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?'⁸⁶

In order to fully explore this difficult question Wallace investigates the lobster's nervous system and its ability to register pain. Citing ethicists, philosophers and animal liberationists, he goes on to discuss the nature of pain and suffering and the comparative moral importance of humans and animals.

His essay exemplifies the personal essay's ability to draw grand ideas out of small, concrete objects in a reader-friendly way. As Indyk says, 'In order to maintain the sense of conversation between essayist and reader, the big ideas have to be in the object. They can't be too detachable from them. They have to sort of leap out like a jack-in-the-box when you least expect it. Suddenly there's got to be a big idea in that little thing.'⁸⁷

Wallace's essay is a wonderful example of big ideas springing from little things. 'Consider the Lobster' also exemplifies the role of the personal feelings and responses of the essayist and illustrates how subjectivity, rather than the objectivity of a more conventional essay, can help to expand a topic and add more to the conversation between reader and writer. In contrast to the more formal essayist's detached appraisal of a topic, the personal essayist's work relies on his wholehearted involvement in the subject. Wallace demonstrates this while addressing the question

⁸⁵ Wallace, David Foster. 'Consider the Lobster' in *Consider the Lobster*, London, Abacus, 2005, p. 242.

⁸⁶ Wallace, David Foster. 'Consider the Lobster' in *Consider the Lobster*, London, Abacus, 2005, p. 243.

⁸⁷ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

of the morality of boiling lobsters alive. Not only does he research the lobster's capacity to feel pain but also describes, in detail, his own response to the experience of watching lobsters in captivity before being boiled alive, monitoring his own feelings and thoughts with confronting honesty:

In any event, at the MLF, standing by the bubbling tanks outside the World's Largest Lobster Cooker, watching the fresh-caught lobsters pile over one another, wave their hobbled claws impotently, huddle in the rear corners, or scabble frantically back from the glass as you approach, it is difficult not to sense that they're unhappy, or frightened, even if it's some rudimentary version of these feelings . . . and, again, why does rudimentariness even enter into it? Why is a primitive, inarticulate form of suffering less urgent or uncomfortable for the person who's helping to inflict it by paying for the food it results in?⁸⁸

In this way, an article commissioned by *Gourmet* and ostensibly about the Maine Lobster Festival, develops into a highly wrought moral and ethical discussion and stands as a brilliant example of what a personal essay can achieve. Wallace's piece is simultaneously entertaining, informative, provocative, even disturbing, and ends with a series of uncomfortable yet urgent questions directed at *Gourmet* readers:

How much do you think about the (possible) moral status and (probable) physical suffering of the animals involved? If so, what ethical convictions have you worked out that permit you not just to eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands (since of course refined *enjoyment*, rather than mere ingestion, is the whole point of gastronomy)? If, on the other hand, you'll have no truck with confusions or convictions and regard stuff like the previous paragraph as just so much fatuous navel-gazing, what makes it feel truly okay, inside, to just dismiss the whole thing out of hand?⁸⁹

As Wallace's essay so beautifully demonstrates, when investigating a subject, even something as seemingly insignificant as the lobster, the personal essayist simultaneously interrogates and investigates the self — the inner world — as much as the outer. This is explained by Graham Good, when writing about Hazlitt: 'Hazlitt's topics are varied, but the constant central element is the experience of the individual self, not defined in the abstract but through relationships: with nature, with other

⁸⁸ Wallace, David Foster. 'Consider the Lobster' in *Consider the Lobster*, London, Abacus, 2005, p. 252.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 254.

individuals, with society, with art and literature.⁹⁰ Even with lobsters. But it is this subject, this choice of content — the experience of the self — which also presents the personal essayist with her biggest problem — the problem of self-absorption.

The (problem of) self as subject

In most literature the author aims to keep a certain distance from the reader. In the novel in particular, the author maintains a certain impersonality or invisibility. In the case of the personal essay, however, success relies precisely on the sense of the person in the author being present. To be successful, the personal essayist must play the role of a guiding, thinking, mature person, as someone who has achieved a sort of intellectual and emotional wholeness. But this bold presentation of the self can also lead to problems.

In a section titled ‘The Problem of Egotism’, Lopate confronts this ever-present problem for the personal essayist. ‘Most people are brought up to think it is impolite to talk much about themselves; in academic papers, scholars are discouraged from using the first person singular.’⁹¹ The subjectivity of the personal essay is, however, impossible to escape. As Epstein says, ‘Whatever the ostensible subject of a personal essay, at bottom the true subject is the author of the essay. . .all claims to objectivity are dropped at the outset, all masks removed, and the essayist proceeds with shameless subjectivity.’⁹²

Many personal essayists have had to struggle with this problem of shameless subjectivity and how to justify it. The essential justification is a belief that in writing about oneself, the writer is also, in a sense, writing about all human experience. Or, as Montaigne put it, ‘Every man has within himself the entire human condition.’⁹³ Lopate ends his discussion on the problem of egotism with another version of this justification: ‘The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel

⁹⁰ Good, Graham. Preface, *The Observing Self – Rediscovering the Essay*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. x.

⁹¹ Lopate, Phillip. Introduction, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxvxi.

⁹² Epstein, Joseph. ‘The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery’, *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, Norton, 1997, p 18.

⁹³ Quoted in Introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate, (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxiii.

a little less lonely and freakish.’⁹⁴ Epstein agrees and also refers to the trick of the personal essay. ‘The trick of the personal essay — I call it a trick, but I really think true magic is entailed — is to make the particular experience of the essayist part of the universal experience.’⁹⁵

In other words, the personal essay might appear, superficially, as nothing more than a personal story, but the essayist’s aim is to go from the specific to the general, from the particular to the universal, from the concrete to the abstract, from the visceral to the intellectual, from the feeling to the idea, from the exterior to the interior, from the extremely small and domestic to the global. Perhaps this oscillating between worlds — what Morag Fraser refers to as a ‘zig-zag between self and subject’⁹⁶ — is the key to a successful personal essay, allowing the reader to see the connections between one person’s individual experience and the human condition as a whole.

Probably the most obvious zig-zag feature of the personal essay is the way it oscillates between the public and the private. The personal essayist, like the poet, shares her most private experiences in the public arena of publication. Indeed, it is notable that two of Australia’s most well-regarded poets — Les Murray and David Malouf — are also essayists. The relationship between the essay and poetry was clear to Walter Murdoch, who could perhaps be described as the father of the Australian essay. He believed that ‘the essay is to prose what the lyric is to poetry; it is intensely personal.’⁹⁷ This is why the personal essay is also sometimes described as the lyrical essay.

‘In a sense, that’s what poetry’s all about,’ says Indyk. ‘It’s a training ground for the presenting of the self and private emotion in that public kind of way, in a way that can be shared. I think that’s the most difficult thing to manage in a personal essay — that kind of public intimacy. It’s got to be done in a way that’s not mawkish, not sentimental, not bragging. It’s somehow got to be controlled and distanced.’⁹⁸

In an essay entitled ‘Into the Quotidian’, poet John Burnside also comments on the paradoxical private-public nature of writing poetry. This is the paradox of poetry: the private event that illumines the poet’s world is re-created and re-navigated

⁹⁴ Lopate, Phillip. Introduction, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate, (ed.), New York, Anchor, 1995, p. xxxi.

⁹⁵ Epstein, Joseph. ‘The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery’, in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*. Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, Norton, 1997, p. 22.

⁹⁶ Fraser, Morag. Introduction, *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays*, Morag Fraser (ed.), Sydney, Allen&Unwin, 1998, p. 4.

⁹⁷ Quoted in *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, Imre Salusinszky (ed.), Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

privately by the reader, but the medium by which the event must be conveyed is a public one.’⁹⁹

The paradox of poetry, which is also the paradox of the personal essay, is actually reflective of the paradox of the self. The self, it seems, simultaneously longs for public presentation at the same time as it longs for privacy. In a recent paper given by novelist Amanda Lohrey, she said ‘The most intuitive and hence the wisest of the revisionist psychoanalysts, Donald Winnicott, wrote that it was the irreducible paradox of the self that it wanted simultaneously to be both hidden and yet found. “The self seeks to be acknowledged and validated by the object,” he wrote, “but at the same time needs to protect an interior realm of freedom,” i.e. non-compliance with the object or, as we would say as textual scholars, closure. It follows from this that some part of the self must remain ultimately unknowable.’¹⁰⁰

It was this unknowable aspect of the self that had become one of the ideas discussed both in ‘Confessions of a Teenage Celebrity’ and ‘Mexican Masks’. Although the personal essay may be preoccupied with the self as subject, a good personal essayist is also aware that the self is not something that can, or ever should be, completely disclosed. ‘Mexican Masks’ reflects on the fact that the self-discovery and self-improvement industries so prevalent in Western culture create the impression of the possibility of complete self-knowledge. The essayist suggests that this is not only an illusion, but perhaps not even desirable.

⁹⁹ Burnside, John. ‘Into the Quotidian’, *Harper’s Magazine*, May 2006, p. 32.

¹⁰⁰ Lohrey, Amanda. Transcript of an unpublished paper given on the subject of new writing at the conference, *Transforming Cultures*, University of Technology, Sydney, March 2003.

The contemporary status of the essay and the essayist

In the *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein refers to the Hungarian critic Georg Lukács, who made the prediction that the essay was likely to be the reigning form of the modern age.¹⁰¹ Epstein suggests that behind Lukács' prophecy was the notion that the essay, with its tentativeness and its sceptical spirit, was really 'the ideal form for those times when people were less certain about matters that were once thought fundamental and fixed'.¹⁰² Theodor Adorno also believed that the essay was 'well suited to the modern spirit because it recoils from the violence in dogma'.¹⁰³ 'The essay,' Epstein agrees, 'is the ideal form for ages of transition and uncertain values.'¹⁰⁴

(Uncertainty, as opposed to dogma, is a principle exemplified by James Joyce. In her introduction to *Ulysses*, Jeri Johnson states that *Ulysses* repeatedly reminds us 'that certitude aligns itself with bigotry, racial hatred, blind nationalism, egotism, violence.'¹⁰⁵ Uncertainty, doubt, irony and scepticism might also be considered as features of postmodernism, which *The New Oxford English Dictionary* defines as 'having at its heart a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies.'¹⁰⁶)

Despite Lukács' conviction, however, the essay has not achieved the status he predicted. Graham Good states that 'The essay . . . has remained the invisible genre in literature, commonly used but rarely analysed in itself.'¹⁰⁷ Many others have commented that, rather than being the reigning form, in the late twentieth century the essay has actually become the least desirable and the least marketable of the genres. Indeed, the word essay is avoided wherever possible. Robert Atwan, series editor of *The Best American Essays*, goes as far as saying that even as recently as 1990, the term essay was 'culturally taboo'.¹⁰⁸ This meant that much good work that could be

¹⁰¹ Epstein, Joseph. 'The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery', in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein (ed.), New York, Norton, 1997, p. 14.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to Literature*, Volume One, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Epstein, Joseph. 'The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery', in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, Joseph Epstein, (ed.), New York, Norton, 1972, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, Jeri. Introduction, *Ulysses* by James Joyce, Jeri Johnson (ed.), Oxford University World Classics edn., 1993, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. xxx.

¹⁰⁶ *The New Oxford English Dictionary*, 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Good, Graham. Preface, *The Observing Self – Rediscovering the Essay*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. ix.

¹⁰⁸ Atwan, Robert. Foreword, *The Best American Essays 2005*, Susan

defined as essays actually went disguised as memoir or life-writing or under the general banner of non-fiction. This fashion was so pervasive that one American writer, Wilfred Sheed, gave his collection the ironic title of *Essays in Disguise*.¹⁰⁹

One reason why the word essay remains unpopular, says Atwan, is because 'it is too closely associated in most people's minds with the dreaded classroom assignment'.¹¹⁰ It was this bad association that put off the public. For publishers, however, the put-off was the leisurely, reflective, ruminative style of the essay. In 1985, when Atwan began work on the first issue of *The Best American Essays*, he states that veteran editors of the time habitually referred to essay writing as 'thumb sucking'.¹¹¹

For writers of essays the problem is also status. In the literary world, the essayist is often regarded as the poor cousin of the real writer. A real writer is first and foremost a novelist, secondly a non-fiction writer and lastly an essayist.

In a 2003 article in *Harper's Magazine*, editor Christina Nehring lamented the low esteem into which the essay has fallen. Nehring writes, 'Speaking broadly, non-fiction writers today are taken to be botched fiction writers. . . Today, every writer both rash and dogged enough to toil in the groves of non-fiction has had a version of this conversation: 'You're a writer!' says the smiling face. 'What do you write?' Slight hesitation. 'Novels?' comes the anticipated reply. 'Stories? Screenplays?. . . Poems?' . . . Only after this golden list has been tinkled off can you muster your reply: 'Essays?' you offer. A cloud passes over the face before you. . . 'Hey,' says your kindly interlocutor, 'I'll bet you could write a novel if you *tried*.'¹¹²

Joseph Epstein also comments that, 'Until recently, the prestige of the essay was much lower than that of the novel.' Despite this, however, when Atwan established *The Best American Essays* series back in 1985, he believed that this long-neglected genre was in the process of being revitalized¹¹³ and hoped that the newly-established series might contribute to that revitalisation.

Orlean (ed.), New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2005, p. ix.

¹⁰⁹ Sheed, Wilfred. *Essays in Disguise*, New York, Knopf, 1990.

¹¹⁰ Atwan, Robert. Foreword, *The Best American Essays 2005*, Susan Orlean (ed.), New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2005, p. ix.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Nehring, Christina. 'Our Essays, Ourselves', *Harper's Magazine*, May 2003, p.81.

¹¹³ Robert Atwan, Foreword, *The Best American Essays 2005*, Susan Orlean (ed.), New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2005 p. ix.

The Australian Context

The American literary landscape, where the essay has enjoyed long periods when it has flourished is, of course, very different to the Australian. ‘The history of the essay in Australia,’ says Peter Craven in his introduction to *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, ‘is a funny thing.’¹¹⁴ He goes on to comment that ‘it is one of the fat paradoxes of Australian life that we are more likely to attend to the literary history (or any kind of history) of Britain or America than we are to our own, if only because, as larger societies, they are better at making themselves known.’¹¹⁵ Australian essayists, he claims, seem ‘obscured under cabbage leaves’.¹¹⁶ He goes on to comment that, ‘One of the complexities about our recognition of the quality of the non-fiction and essayistic writing we produce is that our failings are probably more to do with structure (or its absence) than anything else. In that respect what we back off from — if we do — in the country’s cultural life tends to be the inconsistency of the product.’¹¹⁷

The structure that Craven refers to presumably means the publication structure. The association between the periodical and essay writing has a long history. Indeed, they develop in English literature at around the same time in the eighteenth century. This tradition of periodicals also developed strongly in the U.S.A. *Harper’s Magazine*, for example, was founded in 1850. Over the years, *Harper’s* as well *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, to name just a few, have fostered and promoted the essay. In Australia, however, such a tradition of periodical culture does not exist. *The Bulletin* may have had some ideas of being such a periodical but these days it is rarely an avenue for lengthy, high-quality essay writing. The mainstream newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and *The Australian* do sometimes publish essays in the weekend supplements, but invariably under the name of feature articles, rather than essay. The possible exception might be the *Review* section of the *Australian Financial Review*. Even in this case however, the essays are generally imported and reprinted from English or American magazines. Rarely is an essay by an Australian writer featured.

¹¹⁴ Craven, Peter. Introduction, *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, Peter Craven (ed.), Melbourne, Black Inc, 2003, p. ix.

¹¹⁵ Craven, Peter. Introduction, *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, Peter Craven (ed.), Melbourne, Black Inc, 2003, p. x.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Craven, Peter. Introduction, *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, Peter Craven (ed.), Melbourne, Black Inc, 2003, p. xii.

Even when Australian writers do manage to publish their essays in Australian mainstream newspapers, a practice that has recently become more noticeable in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, the word length is severely limited. Unlike American periodicals, where an essay can run to six or even ten thousand words, Australian newspapers generally have an upper limit of one thousand words, or perhaps two thousand, in special circumstances. The style and type of essay is also an issue. Although the occasional journalistic essay may make it into Australian publications, the long, reflective personal essays, as described above, almost never appear. Publishing of essays, under the name of essay, and at length, is therefore left up to a number of small, independent literary publications such as *HEAT*, *Griffith Review*, *Meanjin*, *Quadrant*, *Overland*, *Southerly* and *Australian Quarterly Essay*.

Commercial book publishers remain generally unenthusiastic about marketing essays. In mainstream publishing, a proposal for a book of essays would be looked upon less favourably than a proposal for fiction or non-fiction of the more conventional kind. It was perhaps in response to the lack of interest by mainstream trade publishers that *The Best Australian Essays* series was started by an independent publisher, Black Inc., in 1998. In the inaugural edition, Peter Craven wrote that, 'In large part it is our cultural structures which are to blame'¹¹⁸ for Australia's weak support of the essay. And in the 2004 edition, the new editor, Robert Dessaix claimed that he was 'surprised by how rare the traditional form [of the essay] had become in Australia' and continued to lament that in our overly loud era 'the gentle voice of the traditional essay has been almost drowned out.'¹¹⁹

Publishing trends and a lack of a periodical culture doesn't explain completely, however, why the essay in Australia has not flourished. Publisher and editor Ivor Indyk believes the reason why the essay in America is so strong and in Australia so weak lies, at least in part, with our very different attitudes towards authority.

'An essay is like a conversation. The person leading the conversation is the essayist and unless you give that person the authority to lead, to record their impressions and interpret them, and unless you accept those interpretations, then it's simply not going to work. I think Americans have a much easier relationship with authority than we do, being the most powerful nation in the world. So it's easier for an intellectual to feel that they are speaking from a position of power than an intellectual in this country.'¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Craven, Peter. Introduction, *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, Peter Craven (ed.), Melbourne, Black Inc, 2003, p. x.

¹¹⁹ Dessaix, Robert. Introduction, *The Best Australian Essays 2004*, Robert Dessaix (ed.), Melbourne, Black Inc, 2004, p. vii.

¹²⁰ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

Another explanation might be related to the Australian reluctance to reflect. ‘We’re famous for our lack of reflection,’ says Indyk. ‘This was an observation that was made last century a lot. We’re not easy with it because it’s about ideas. We’re apparently a very empirical people — ironical and sceptical. And that might explain, at least in part, why there hasn’t been a great essay tradition in Australia.’¹²¹

The irony in this hypothesis is that the essay is the ideal form for scepticism. And because it remains close to the concrete, instead of striving for abstract truths, it would seem well suited to an empirical people. The problem may still be, therefore, a problem of confidence. For an essayist to be able to write confidently about her experiences and thoughts she must first believe in the value of her own experience and thinking. Perhaps Australians still believe, somehow, that they are not at the cultural centre and therefore their reflections are not as valuable or interesting as those written by essayists in New York or London.

If the traditional essay is rare in Australia, the personal essay is presumably even rarer. Indeed, the term personal essay seems to have barely registered on the Australian literary landscape. Nevertheless, when Dessaix confesses his ‘predilection for the less resolute, less scholarly, less cerebral kind of composition’,¹²² he could almost be referring specifically to the personal, rather than the traditional essay. Dessaix prefers this kind of essay because it can ‘express with astonishing transparency the very quality of our own everyday engagement with the world.’¹²³ It is this personal identification between the reader and the writer that is at the heart of a good personal essay.

Although there has been some publicity about the resurgence of the essay in Australia, Imre Salusinszky believes that ‘talk of a renaissance in the essay might be premature’. He believes that although there are more outlets for essays, ‘many of them seem almost chary of the poor middlebrow reader and his or her attitudes and interests as the hardcore academic journals.’¹²⁴

This seems to suggest that many essayists, as Mark Davis has accused, are simply involved in a closed and exclusive conversation between highbrow readers, that they are speaking to a select group rather than seeking to establish common ground. He criticises recent essay collections for failing to reflect on contemporary issues such as biotechnology and the Human Genome Project, and accuses the writers

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Dessaix, Robert. Introduction, *The Best Australian Essays 2004*, Robert Dessaix (ed.), Melbourne, Black Inc, 2004, p. vii.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Salusinszky, Imre. Introduction, *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, Imre Salusinszky (ed.), Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 4.

of attempting to save, not the essay tradition, but rather, 'a small and dwindling clique' of 'literary coteries'.¹²⁵

Ivor Indyk agrees that in order for the essay to have primacy in our literary culture it needs to create common ground. 'What's needed is a certain confidence and common ground so a writer can be sure that their experiences are relevant to others.'¹²⁶

It is, of course, difficult to define exactly what material could be considered as relevant to the middlebrow reader or creating common ground as opposed to creating closed conversations among literary and/or academic coteries. Perhaps the personal essay might well be the genre that could act as a bridge between middle- and lowbrow readers, as well as between literary, academic and leisure readers.

Imre Salusinszky, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, states that while making the editorial decision about what essays to include in his anthology, he 'favoured essays in which the essayist tells us something that she or he has learned, not from books but from experience'.¹²⁷ This would seem to indicate a preference, similar to Dessaix's, for the personal essay over the more traditional essay. In this sense, it seems that both editors are aware of the need to communicate with the 'poor middlebrow reader'. Both have shown a preference for the personal, rather than the objective or academic tone, perhaps in recognition of the importance and special place of the personal essay in contemporary Australia. It is of interest also that neither editor uses the descriptor 'personal'. Perhaps the time has come to put together a collection under the title 'Best Australian Personal Essays'.

'We're talking about a form that's just coming into its own,' says Indyk. 'I often think that Australia is on the threshold. It's just ticking over and about to become a more interesting place, more dynamic. It's frozen now but one feels that it can't stay frozen for much longer. Social pressures are building up and the ice will have to break. It's precisely at that moment that people will want to know about other people instead of being scared of them.'¹²⁸

The essay will then, presumably, be able to join them in a common conversation.

¹²⁵ Davis, Mark. 'Assaying the Essay – Fear and Loathing in the Literary Coteries', *Overland* 1999.156, p. 4.

¹²⁶ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

¹²⁷ Salusinszky, Imre. Introduction, *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, Imre Salusinszky (ed.), Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 4.

¹²⁸ Interview with Gabrielle Carey, April 4, 2006.

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