

## Putting the 'I' in the Middle: A Few Thoughts on the Modern Essay

During the 1960s there occurred a phenomenon which became known as the New Journalism. Many names were associated with it, including Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson. The writer foregrounded himself. He did not make any pretence to a dispassionate historical narrative, but instead said, 'Here I am, for better or for worse, right in the thick of things, with all my prejudices pretty much intact.' Dramatic presentation of one scene after another, with the writer's involvement clearly signalled, became the norm. Nothing has ever seemed quite the same since.

In *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, Norman Mailer strode through the events of his times, and described himself doing so in the third person. 'Mailer did this, Mailer thought that.' The device permitted not so much egomania as a curious objectivity. By not laying claim to objectivity, and by treating the self as one more subject to be examined and forensically described, a curious liberation appeared to be effected.

And yet how modern a device was this? This 'I' at the centre of things is, in one sense, the 'I' which has always occupied the centre of the essay. When Montaigne, who invented the modern essay as we know it, writes an essay, his qualification is effectively his utter lack of qualifications. He says that he starts from ignorance, and can do no other. Poking about inside the mental woodshed without preconceptions is what unspecialized essayists do. The more specialized and academic the essay becomes, the more it starts edging towards the monograph and the scholarly treatise. An essay in Montaigne's sense is by nature provisional. That is really what the word means. The French *essai* and *essayer* make the matter clearer.

## Myth, Metaphor and Science

Something is being tried. An attempt is being made. When we used to *assay* gold, we were using what was effectively the same word: we were testing the metal, to make sure it consisted of what it said it did. Proof quality precious metal showed that the metal had been tested and proven.

Montaigne makes a virtue of his lack of learning, his deficient expertise. He places at the centre of the world a particular 'I' whose very lack of specialized knowledge is his only qualification for writing, for testing the reality around him with intelligent scepticism, with a questioning which is untainted by either dogma or scholarship. In Auden's poem 'Montaigne', the poet writes, 'To doubt becomes a way of definition'. The poet's line is effectively pointing up the provisionality of the essay, the way it places reality in a parenthesis, a pair of brackets which will permit any manoeuvre of the mind within its mutual concavities. The essay lets the mind take itself for a walk, not knowing where exactly it will be going, or when precisely it is due back. The essay, unlike, say, the philosophical treatise, does not need to supply its foundational credentials before it gets started; it does not need to explain how it can know anything before it toys with the idea of asserting that it somehow does. It does not need to establish scholarly qualifications before arguing about scholarship, though it often helps if it gets the scholarship right. In Hazlitt's marvellous essays about Shakespeare, he frequently quotes the plays inaccurately. And yet, this is precisely where the strength of the essays comes from: Hazlitt was often quoting from memory. He was honeycombed with the works of Shakespeare. Had he not been so riddled in the language and characterisation of Shakespeare's works, he could not have written essays as inward with the texture of the plays. Academically this would be a problem: Hazlitt would be severely reprimanded these days for his misquotation. But his

## Putting the 'T' in the Middle

memorializing of Shakespeare (even including memorial contamination) is, essayistically speaking, magnificent.

It might help to think of the essay as a crux. This word, signifying any defining moment in a text or an argument, is also, of course, the Latin word for cross. So we have the sense of a vertical axis meeting a horizontal one. The vertical line is always that 'T' with which we started. The horizontal line might be any number of things - public affairs, a matter of principle, the history of science, a text in the canon, but the essay grows out of its encounter at a specific point with a personal obsession, personal experience, or an individual engagement with a text that might be available to all. Often the horizontal axis is something already in the public domain - a standard line of reasoning, or a particular body of work, so that the vertical axis becomes the individual negotiation of the matter presented to it. Anthony Rudolf's essay 'The Jew Etc.', published in the National Gallery's *Kitaj in the Aura of Cézanne*,<sup>1</sup> was the intellectual meeting point of a painter obsessed by writing and a writer obsessed by painting. If these were the vertical and horizontal axes of the essay, then the actual point of the crux was their joint obsession with the meaning of being Jewish in the contemporary world. Kitaj came to explore this topic ceaselessly in his painting, and Rudolf is still doing so in his writing.

We can look at another specific example, which is Gore Vidal's essay 'The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh'. This essay, collected in Vidal's book *The Last Empire*,<sup>2</sup> starts by recounting the public meaning of Timothy McVeigh, the man who was executed for blowing up the federal building

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Rudolf and Colin Wiggins, *Kitaj in the Aura of Cézanne and Other Masters* (London: National Gallery Company, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Gore Vidal, *The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2001* (2001; London: Abacus, 2002).

## Myth, Metaphor and Science

in Oklahoma City, killing 168 men, women and children. He was a right-wing zealot, who had effectively declared war on the United States of America, and all the citizens who lived there. That is our horizontal axis, though for McVeigh himself it was the vertical 'I'. Now comes Vidal's vertical axis, the 'I' in the middle of the essay.

In the November 1998 issue of *Vanity Fair*, Vidal had written a piece about 'the shredding of our Bill of Rights'. McVeigh, in a Colorado prison at the time, read the piece, and then wrote Vidal a letter. The two corresponded, and it became evident to Vidal that the phenomenon of McVeigh was more complex and intriguing than he had imagined. The Oklahoma bombing took place on the anniversary of the killings at Waco, when a religious sect which called itself the Branch Davidians discovered that it had got on the wrong side of the lethal power of the American state. Here Vidal and McVeigh found themselves in agreement: the Waco siege showed federal agencies behaving in a manner beyond the law. McVeigh attended the Waco siege. He wanted to see what was going on. After he had witnessed the events there he was in no doubt that the US state was now out of control. And so Vidal's essay becomes an extended meditation on Timothy McVeigh and his dreadful protest against the antics of American domestic power. One form of murderous activity generates another. It is almost inconceivable that McVeigh acted alone in blowing up the federal building, but it suited the authorities to permit him to pretend that he had. His trial and execution allowed for that precious 'closure' so dear to politicians and state functionaries.

The Patriot Militias regard themselves as being at war with the US state. This was the world which McVeigh had entered, and it is a world sufficiently alien and threatening to most Americans to permit the immediate demonization of McVeigh. Vidal shows how his own attempts to think

## Putting the 'T' in the Middle

through the phenomenon of McVeigh and his actions were constantly thwarted by those who did not want any such 'thinking through' to occur. Given Vidal's own agenda in regard to the overweening American state, his interest in McVeigh looks suspiciously like solidarity. McVeigh even invites Vidal to his execution – surely one of the most prestigious invitations that can ever be extended, one moreover carrying no need to return the favour.

Vidal is a great essayist, but it could be objected that he is in a curiously privileged position, since he belonged to what is often called the 'Brahmin class' in America: those whose social position and contacts put them constantly in touch with figures elevated by power and prestige. Vidal can write about 'Camelot', the White House in the time of J. F. Kennedy, as an insider: he was there. He knew 'Jack' well. There are times when he seems to know everyone well. His vertical line can always call upon a wealth of personal experience and contacts. In his brilliant and hilarious essay on Howard Hughes, he starts by quoting his own father (a significant figure in the US aviation industry) as saying that Hughes was always a menace as a flyer.

So let us start from a humbler position. Here our vertical line is nothing but our own intelligence (Hazlitt, we should recall, did not begin from Vidal's eminent domain, though he managed to encounter some eminences as he went along). To write the essay that follows all you need is to read the newspaper, click on the Internet, and do some thinking:

### **Burning Books**

It looks as though we might be in for another great epoch of book burning. The smell of scorched paper is beginning to drift over continents. Last year a group of neo-Nazis in St

## Myth, Metaphor and Science

Paul, Minnesota, gathered in the inner city to consign copies of the *Talmud* and the *Communist Manifesto* to the flames. A sideshow, certainly, but one can't help thinking that it might be as much rehearsal as nostalgic re-enactment.

For those who stoke the flames, it is invariably regarded as a form of intellectual responsibility. When Peter Abelard was obliged to burn his own books before being closely confined in a convent, it was to help him repent of his errors. Half a millennium ago, the followers of Savonarola burned every Florentine copy of Ovid they could lay their hands on, since those engaged in such fleshly metamorphoses were deemed to be breaching Christian protocol. Three decades later the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstal, bought up, for burning (what else?), so many copies of Tyndale's English version of the Bible that he unwittingly financed many new editions. Robespierre wanted all the religious libraries to go up in flames, and found the time to make a serious start on the project himself. Fifty years ago in 1957 Wilhelm Reich died in prison in the USA. His employment of 'orgone accumulators' had rattled the administration, leading them to deposit six tons of the prophet's books and papers in a New York incinerator. And so it goes on. Outside sundry churches on the American continent, Harry Potter is being burnt even as we speak; guilty, apparently, of the promotion of necromancy.

Terence famously remarked that books have their fates (*habent sua fata libelli*), but the fate of certain books, their physical fate, still seems to be exemplary. In the special collection in Birmingham University Library there is a charred copy of the King James Bible. It still carries the faint whiff of a conflagration, even though the flames that ate into it were quenched over two hundred years ago. Inside its blue solander case it sits amidst the vellum bindings and the precious manuscripts, and when you take it out it almost falls apart in your hands. A not inconsiderable volume once, a large octavo, bound in rich calfskin with six raised spine bindings. But it has undoubtedly seen better days.

Not long ago I found myself holding this book and considering how it had once been in the hands of Joseph

## Putting the 'I' in the Middle

Priestley; it might even have belonged to him – no way of knowing. In any case the flames that almost consumed it two centuries back were directed at him and his friends; directed at the contents of his mind, not the contents of the good book which stood proxy that night for his person. The date was 1791; two years since the French Revolution, which Priestley had supported. That made him, in certain eyes, pro-French, and being pro-French inevitably meant that you were anti-Anglo-Saxon. What goes around comes around. The aroma of Freedom Fries was already drifting over Europe.

This was also the great epoch of the isolation of the elements; the breaking down of matter into its atomic constituents. As John Dalton put it: 'I should apprehend there are a considerable number of what may properly be called *elementary* particles, which can never be *metamorphosed* one into another.' It seemed that you couldn't get any further down into matter than an atom. Now we know better. But Priestley had isolated oxygen, even if he did insist on still calling it dephlogisticated air. He was working out how things could burn in the first place – most things, even volumes of sacred writ.

So the burning of books does have a hallowed history. As a critique of the latest treatise, it is evidently an unsubtle technique, but its popularity nevertheless persists. Einstein's work was thrown into the bonfire volume by volume in the 1930s. Those eminent scientific sceptics, the Waffen SS, argued that since Einstein was Jewish, his theories regarding relativity and the photoelectric effect were racially contaminated and therefore untrue: QED. A similar logic must have applied to Freud: his writings were publicly burnt on the Opernplatz in Berlin in 1933. He had peered into the Aryan soul and found it wanting. The state of souls and the burning of books have been intimately linked through the ages: books had traditionally been burnt at the stake, along with whatever heretics had penned them.

Occasionally the burning was not *pro* superstition but *contra*: so in 1527, outside the Münster at Basel, Paracelsus added to the merry student auto-da-fé his copy of Avicenna's

## Myth, Metaphor and Science

medical textbook. He reckoned its effect on the minds of the young was deleterious, and he was right, as it happens. Regarding the advancement of medicine his gesture can be applauded, even if from a bibliographic perspective it left something to be desired. Twenty years ago, Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was burned in the streets of Bradford and Bolton by diligent Muslims who believed its words were evil. Book burners tend to be deeply untroubled by any qualms that they might be mistaken. Nor are they necessarily committed to close reading of anything other than their one chosen book. Unceasing repetition, of course, is not necessarily the same thing as close reading. There is even a specialized form of this activity: the burning of a manuscript before it can turn into a burnable book. At 50 Albemarle Street in 1824 the publisher John Murray burned Byron's *Memoirs*, without first reading them.

Heine warned us that wherever you start by burning books, you will end up burning people. His own books shared the fate of Freud's in Berlin in 1933. Ten years later his prediction had come true: people were being turned into smoke in his homeland, for what would now be called purposes of homeland security. Books have their fates, and they often augur the fates of the people who wrote them. We'd best keep a close eye on the flames. On bad days I sometimes think I can still catch a whiff on the wind of that charred Bible in the Special Collection at Birmingham.

No expert knowledge was needed to write this essay; all of the information contained in it is in the public domain. The vertical line of the essayist's activity consists of pulling it all together and shaping it into a coherent intellectual itinerary, though he did have his own experience with the burnt Bible in Birmingham. The essay is evidently not scholarly, and its chatty tone indicates that it is aimed at the press; but the placing of that vertical 'I' is crucial to it.

## Putting the 'I' in the Middle

This pattern of personalization has, if anything, grown more pronounced. Books which would certainly not have 'turned personal' a few decades ago, do so now. Stephen Greenblatt's *Learning to Curse*<sup>3</sup> and Janna Levin's *How the Universe Got Its Spots*<sup>4</sup> both intertwine the personal with the impersonal matter under discussion, in one case Elizabethan literature and ideology, and in the other the formation of the universe. It is as though the vertical 'I' provides the spine which holds the body of discourse together in both books. After the initial shock of unexpected personalization, both texts soon start to feel entirely natural.

The genres of writing are shifting to accommodate the technique, but we should remember that the technique itself has been around for a long time. It was Montaigne's technique, which is where we came in, and it was also George Orwell's. The first sentence of the latter's essay 'England, Your England', written in 1941, was this: 'As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.' That certainly introduces us to the vertical 'I'. It also introduces us to the hook.

'The hook' is actually a journalistic concept, but it is one which no writer, certainly no essay writer, can afford to forget. Let us make the distinction as clear as possible. Here is the beginning of a piece of writing about violence and statistics. First the opening with no hook: 'Statistics recently released by the government have shown that random acts of violence are increasing. Last year there was a 22% rise in what the report calls "unprovoked actions resulting in damage to property or human injury"'. That's

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Janna Levin, *How The Universe Got Its Spots: Diary of a Finite Time in a Finite Space* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

## Myth, Metaphor and Science

how you start without a hook. And here would be the start once the hook is put in:

You are driving along the road, listening to the radio. Despite the cataclysms reported on the news, you have no particular reason to suspect that violence is heading your way. It is, though. In twenty seconds time a lump of concrete will be dropped from the bridge which you are approaching. The two 12-year-old boys who are balancing the ragged piece of masonry on the parapet do not know you, and have nothing against you. All the same, they will feel a sense of success if the concrete smashes your windscreen and sends your car careering out of control off the road.

After that we can start to talk about the statistics. A hook is another way of describing the necessity for a vivid opening to any piece of writing. If the piece of writing is an essay, then the hook can be either the horizontal axis - some matter of public concern - or the vertical 'I' that provides the personal dimension. Soon enough the two will have to meet. Then we will have the crossing point which all vivid essays explore.