

on essaying in the U.K.

# DIGRESSIONS

curated by

**ELIZABETH REEDER**

featuring

**CAROL MAVOR**

**JACQUES TESTARD**

**MAX PORTER**

with an afterword by

**KRISTEN KREIDER**



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## ESSAY PRESS LT SERIES

In the Essay Press Listening Tour series, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics, and artists, we hope to further envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

—ELIZABETH K. REEDER

What do we know about the essay?

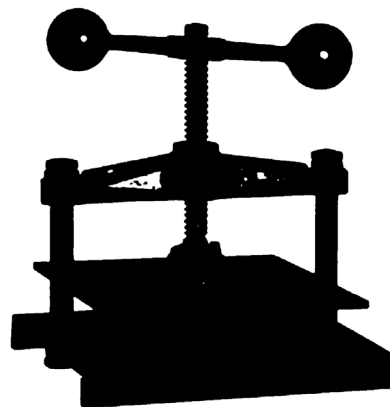
The essay travels. It disobeys boundaries, resists definitions, and is slippery, sly and infinitely adaptable. Hybrid and multiple, the essay can be the ultimate mash-up of novella, poem, philosophical treatise, art criticism, memoir, short story, index, marginalia, and it is often at its best when it plays, when it digresses.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis wrote that the essay “is restless...always a little too hungry or full...a little too thirsty.” Essays can also create restlessness, hunger and thirst in us as readers, as we pick up their dangerous little shards that are untranslatable and intended. For those of us who love the essay, each new essay we meet is an unfamiliar familiar, and that’s a large part of its charm and draw. In this often radically other form, we, as Lisa Robertson writes, “enter a relational contract with whatever material, accepting its fluency and swerve.” The proposition

of an essay might be its subject or form, but it will be its language and structure that provide entrance, even as we may need to learn how to read them.

So, why this Listening Tour?

I am a Chicagoan by birth and have lived in the U.K. most of my adult life. I teach creative writing at the University of Glasgow, travel widely, particularly in the north of Scotland, and I know the land, literature and people nearly as a native. And yet I still find that essays from North America are the ones that usually excite me the most. I have often wondered why this is. Even as I have read widely, even as I have questioned my own readings and assumptions, this preference has remained. Essays from the West side of the Atlantic have *seemed* to be more radically experimental, and they have appeared, to me, to disrupt more, entertain more, and, more recently, approach more dangerous, necessary subjects. Of course, essays know no boundaries, geographic or otherwise, and any understanding of the form must be informed by a broader context than this thin box of earth and water where my gaze has fallen. Our considerations must be cast much wider to the north and south and further east and west and deeper into more radical and experimental realms. But the trigger for these conversations

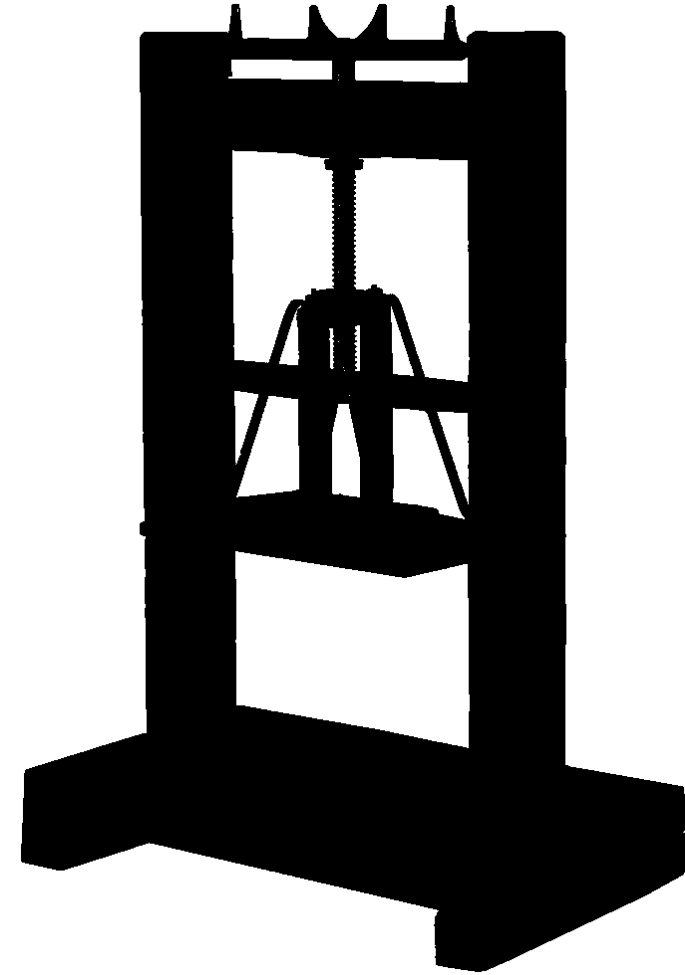


was personal: the U.S is the home of my birth and Scotland is the home of my choosing, and they are already in conversation linguistically, culturally, and historically. In some ways this listening, this tour, emerged from a place where I wondered whether my view of essaying was a subjective positioning or something that discussions would bear out.

And so this problematic, impossible question was what I approached the individuals in this book with: how is the essay and essay-publishing working in the U.K., and how does it differ from and crossover with essays and essay-publishing in other places, specifically the U.S.?

I had never met Jacques, Carol or Max before our conversations. So, although our conversations began with this awkward, impossible question, our conversations really began with a shared interest in and curiosity about the furtive hybridity of the essay, and with the wavering, elusive borders that continually contest or elude any generalities we might ascribe to the form. From there our conversations were wide-ranging, moving between triptychs, presidents, intimacy, Nobel Prizes, post-partum art, Barthes, war, pretention and death. These were conversations between relative strangers, with the essay providing both the entrance to and substance of our talks.

As you might expect, there are no answers here, but rather an attempt to press the palm of a hand to the unsummarizable body of the essay—an opportunity to capture the fleeting, often excessive and heightened movement of essays, and to listen to essayists, editors and publishers as they thought out loud about form and context, and tried to handle this slippery, digressive, cunning, non-genre genre.



# DIGRESSIONS

interview with  
**JACQUES TESTARD**

30 October 2015  
London, Fitzcarraldo Editions Offices

**Elizabeth K. Reeder:** Could you start by talking a bit about how you conceive of the essay, what you find fascinating about the essay?

**Jacques Testard:** I see the essay as a totally open genre of writing. It's incredibly difficult to define but there are unifying aspects to different types of essay that tell you that this is clearly an essay. Going back to Montaigne the essay is an attempt to talk about something, to tackle a subject. That can be done in quite a classical way. You mentioned you'd read Eula Biss in your email. It can also be done in a more radical way. It is difficult to pigeon-hole the essay form and that's what excites me about it—it's so broad and wide-ranging. You can have an essay about anything and bring in different forms and approaches on whatever topic with a different structure. I also think the slipperiness of the essay is something that is exciting and unusual in

today's publishing environment, where there's this focus on bigger books and fiction blockbusters. The essay is quieter, more meditative.

**EKR:** It tends to be a slower read.

**JT:** Yeah, exactly.

**EKR:** It's Adorno who said that the essay can go anywhere. Do anything. You're attempting to describe the thing we all struggle with when we try to define the essay—to move the definition away from the academic and dialectical, which I think about as more information conveyance, and into something that does wander.

How do you choose what essays to publish?

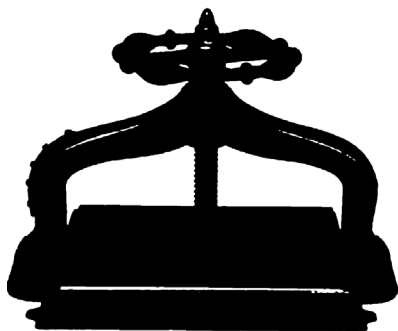
**JT:** It depends. I used to work at Notting Hill Editions, which both publishes out-of-print books or classics, and also commissions new works. Within those very broad parameters I had free range to commission things, and so I got in touch with writers I admired and whom I could get in touch with, like Deborah Levy, who had just been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. I wrote to her asking if she'd like to write an essay. *Things I Don't Want to Know* came about in response to George Orwell's "Why I

Write," in very loose terms. It's really a memoir about her childhood in South Africa. Similarly I wrote to Joshua Cohen, an American novelist, and he told me he'd been thinking about this project on the history of the attention span. Most of the time, I approach writers whose writing interests me and they'll come up with ideas.

**EKR:** So writers who were working in the essay form or cross-genre?

**JT:** Not necessarily, because Josh Cohen is primarily a novelist, but I knew he was capable of it—he also writes quite a lot of criticism. And Deborah Levy hadn't published an essay or any so-called nonfiction before *Things*. But any writer can write an essay—so long as they can write, they can attempt an essay. That's one of the interesting things. You can go to writers whose fiction writing you find interesting, and you can imagine them doing something intriguing in the essay form. With Fitzcarraldo Editions, it's carried on like that—people either come to me with ideas or I've gone after writers I admire, like Brian Dillon, and asked whether they'd write something.

**EKR:** I've read *Memory Theatre*, and Eula Biss (although in the Graywolf edition), and they both have what I might call



an intellectual heft. There's a weight of knowledge—and in very different ways. Critchley carries the weight of philosophy that drives his quite radical experimentation in forms. And Biss has such knowledge of everything that she's done on immunity when she writes that book. Is that part of how you choose the essays, that weighty knowledge that can be lightly held?

**JT:** Not necessarily. That's kind of the beauty of it. You can have someone like Eula Biss, who is a really excellent stylist, who comes from a poetry background, writes beautiful sentences, and has this depth of knowledge. And spends years researching. But then you can also have a more polemical essay or something rooted much more in personal experience. I'm about to publish a book by the co-editor of *Frieze* magazine, Dan Fox, called *Pretentiousness: Why it Matters*. It's quite a polemical title, but the book is really an exploration into what pretention has meant for him. He grew up in a small town in Oxfordshire, and it wasn't deemed cool to listen to David Bowie or read books as a teenager. Through music and literature he got interested in the world at large, and through this passion for the avant-garde and "pretentious" people trying out new things he then became an art critic and is now editor of one of the most interesting

cultural magazines out there, heading up their New York office.

**EKR:** Many of these essayists seem to belong to more than one place. One of the questions in the back of my mind, which I can't find a way to phrase to make it as complex as I think it is, is what are some of the differences between the essays written and published in the U.K. versus what is happening in North America. Do you think this duality, or belonging to more than one place, influences or helps to create essayists?

**JT:** That might be something you can apply to writers more broadly—to have that dual culture or alienation from the place where they live, or that slight step back. I feel like I have that a little bit because I'm totally French but grew up here in London by chance. And you're right that a lot of essayists also have that and are able to observe and have that critical distance. There are also some excellent essayists who are rooted in their very specific experience.

**EKR:** The experimentation in the U.K. that's in Simon Critchley's or Ali Smith's work, for instance, is more narrative experimentation that exists between nonfiction or essay and fiction. Versus in the States, where you see a lot more

crossover between nonfiction and poetry, and between image and text as well. You see some of that here, but it's more illustrative and traditional, rather than explored as a form in which we can use images in a radical way. I'm interested in those crossovers. Can you talk about hybridity and whether that impacts what the writer can do in the essay, and how that appeals to you?

**JT:** Do you mean how different forms or writing can seep into the essay? Or how poetry and the essay can come together?

**EKR:** And how that can be conceived. I'm thinking about *Heroines* by Kate Zambreno, or about Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. Nelson's book interweaves knowledge of art, criticism and philosophy with a driven personal narrative, and the way she's structured it (by binding the subject matter to the structure) is really important. She's exploring genders and sexualities, how to be both and neither, and considering roles that don't really have names (and how by naming them we limit them). And she allows greater interplay, for instance, by not having chapters. I find the books I'm most excited about in the essay form are really difficult to pin down into a synopsis, because as you

read them they create their own terms. So part of what I'm thinking is that the essay exists in context, which is a very Lyn Hejinian thing to say. You can only understand an essay, it only exists, in the context of the essay itself. So when I'm asking about the hybridity maybe that's what I'm asking: how do the very specific tenets the author chooses help frame that?

**JT:** Yes, because it is such an open form, each author can make up his or her own rules. Simon Critchley wanted to publish *Memory Theatre* as an essay, even though it's not an essay. It's also a novella, a history of philosophy, a memoir, and an homage to Frances Yates. All those things at once. There is this freedom in the form that you're maybe finding crossing over into fiction. Knausgaard has these big essayistic digressions in his books. And people like Ben Lerner perhaps use the novel form to convey ideas in the way an essayist might.

**EKR:** And that leads me into a question about how the novel form can be a way into essayistic engagement with ideas. I'm thinking of Max Porter's book, which is a novella, but Graywolf has called it an essay on grief, which then initiates that crossover reading. When you talk about Knausgaard's work, that's definitely a memoir, again with a sturdy narrative

drive. Which leads me to readership of the essay and how you appeal to readers. Can you describe to me what you think the readership of the essay is, and how pitching a more experimental form of essay might change that readership?

**JT:** I think asking a publisher about readership...basically if I knew what the readership was, or who they were, and how to reach them, then I would be a much more successful publisher than I am! The essay appeals to a serious, intellectual and engaged readership. I find that a lot of the books sell in art bookshops and galleries and museums. That could be because of the design, partly. And maybe because of the kinds of writers I'm publishing and will continue to publish. But this is a really tough question to answer. I have the platform of the *White Review* as a sort of base for the readership, and the people I see at events for the *White Review* and Fitzcarraldo tend to be under 40—people who work in the arts, academics, critics, people who work in publishing. I don't think there's a massive audience for these kinds of books, these books that have these hybrid forms, or experiment with language, or like *The Argonauts*, for example, which approach a very unusual topic with this grounding in critical theory. So I'm not really sure how to answer the question of readership.

**EKR:** I'm curious because I feel essays could have a broader readership. Essays have incredible potential—although I'm aware that even using the term "essay" means we can't get out from under the weight of what people perceive essays to be. Even when I talked to an editor at Bookworks, she asked me, "What exactly do you mean by essay?" And I said, "Kind of what you're doing, which is a form of art-essay." But she really didn't think of them in that way.

**JT:** I definitely think there's that potential. But thinking about it perhaps in more concrete terms: the British publishing world has been very adverse to the essay form. And this stems back to the '80s, when booksellers insisted that books all look the same so that they'd look nice on the shelves, and there was a pressure on publishers to bring out books of 360 pages, minimum, and smaller books got squeezed out of the equation. Whereas in France and Germany and in Italy, in particular, publishers continued to have these imprints that put out smaller books, essayistic books that important writers would publish between bigger projects. Notting Hill was founded on this premise that there was no one in the U.K. doing these shorter books, these long-form essays, and that there was in very simple terms a gap in the market and a thirst for

this kind of writing. The *London Review of Books* is one of the most widely read serious magazines in the country and people will read 15,000 words on Julian Assange—that could be a short book, for example.

**EKR:** In the U.S. a number of essayists (including Claudia Rankine, Maggie Nelson and Ta-Nehisi Coates) are dealing with difficult and dangerous things, and they often push at forms to do so. I'm wondering if you could talk about writers in the U.K. who might be using the essay to approach difficult topics or ideas.

**JT:** To be honest, I don't think there are as many exciting writers in the U.K. writing essays at the moment as there are in the U.S. There are people like James Meek, for example, who writes about politics and socioeconomics, and uses the essay form to do so. You mentioned Marina Warner, and her essay about leaving the University of Essex recently was fantastic. But I don't think there are the kind of writers tackling the difficult topics in that way, or inventing forms to do so. I think British writers are a step behind in this respect but hopefully catching up. But all the writers you mention are being read here, and are seen by writers of my generation

as the exciting writers to read. There's this excitement around the possibilities of this form. I think it's only a matter of time before we'll see more exciting stuff coming out of the U.K.

**EKR:** I wonder if the essay battles with this need to be really clear as it's holding a space. You were talking about readership of the essay being more arts-based, more intellectual (that's the wrong term), slower reading, people who are more into that. For instance, I love ambiguity, and my favorite essayists are the ones who leave me a lot of room, who do amazing things with language and don't close possibilities off, and maybe don't even make up their mind—or who change their mind during the essay, maybe contradict themselves. I'm aware that this sort of intentional ambiguity and multiplicity can be a bit frustrating to some people, and part of what I'm wondering is whether my conception of the essay has an inherently smaller readership.

**JT:** Just to carry on what I was saying earlier: there's possibly an explanation why there's a boom in the U.S. and not here. There's a much bigger market. Publishers are able to pay more for books. Graywolf doesn't have masses of money, but can still pay more than I can pay or Notting Hill Editions can pay. There are a



lot of creative-writing programmes where writers can teach. Those jobs come with obligations, but also give writers freedom to write whatever they want to write rather than to write to sell.

**EKR:** And a lot more smaller presses.

**JT:** And here it's much more difficult. That perhaps has something to do with it.

**EKR:** I find that a lot of my questions are about a broader readership and a bigger market, and I'm not sure that I actually believe that that's the most important thing about the essay. Saying that I am also really pleased when someone like Svetlana Alexievich (winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, who will be published by Fitzcarraldo Editions), who is actually doing essays, receives the recognition for it, and her success indicates that nonfiction exploration is working or occasionally hits a zeitgeist or readers respond to it the way you want them to respond to it.

**JT:** The thing about her is that people say she's completely unknown in the English language, but her previous book, *Voices from Chernobyl*, won the National Book Critics Circle award in 2006. In every country in Europe she's been big news

for a long time. I read her in French a couple years ago, the book I'm publishing, and that sold 120,000 copies in its first six months in France.

**EKR:** Again, we're just a bit behind...

**JT:** Exactly. As always, the English-speaking publishing world is reluctant to publish the most important writers around the world if they're not Spanish-speaking or sometimes French-speaking—the two languages that tend to get translated more than others. She's been big news everywhere else and I don't think it came as a surprise in other countries that she won the Nobel. Another thing that's very good about her having won, is that she's the first winner picked under the new committee's President, Sara Danius, and it's the first nonfiction Nobel since Winston Churchill in 1953. Hopefully we'll see more of them...

**EKR:** I read that and thought it was a joke.

**JT:** It's insane. And she's only the fourteenth woman ever. Did you know that?

**EKR:** I did.

**JT:** Which is ridiculous. So it's a good time to be experimenting with form in this way,

as she does and many other writers do. Have you read the piece by Philip Gourevitch in the *New Yorker*, last year, before the Nobel was announced, where he said nonfiction needs a Nobel? He goes on to say that ultimately literature is just a fancy word for writing, whether it's fiction or nonfiction. Hopefully it's the beginning of these borders being broken down at the highest levels of the establishment.

**EKR:** That's true. The Nobel announcement is interesting because it came out in the same week that Obama was interviewed by...

**JT:** By Marilynne Robinson.

**EKR:** And then he talked about how novels, how the ambiguity in novels, actually taught him how to deal with complex ethical questions. And allowed him to sit there and weigh both sides. Nonfiction does that too, but I still think that the nonfiction most people read is biographies or about information-conveyance: I'm going to read this book to get this information. Those things weigh really nicely together: that she's won the Nobel Prize for a nonfiction book, and he's touting for the novel

and fiction to allow you to actually answer questions in the real world.

Translation seems to be a strength of yours. Do you plan to do more translations, in terms of Fitzcarraldo?

**JT:** Absolutely. There's a book I publish next week on the psychopathology of addiction, called *Nicotine*, by German writer Gregor Hens—Will Self's German translator. It's a meditation on the addiction to nicotine and the habit that being a smoker induces, and how to break that habit. There's also a very personal streak, because he goes back to his childhood, growing up in a smoker's family and smoking his first cigarette at seven. There's quite a lot of things I'm looking at to translate. We'll be doing more English-language authors too: I found out yesterday that I'll get to publish Ben Lerner's next book, which is called *The Hatred of Poetry*.

**EKR:** An essay?

**JT:** Yes. *The Hatred of Poetry* is the first book in a new essay list that FSG are launching in June. It's a list that Mitzi Angel started to put together, but she's just moved back to the U.K. to become publisher at Faber and Faber. And Coffee

House Press are also starting to publish essays as well. So the pretentiousness book, that I'm doing here—they'll do the U.S. edition. So more publishers are seeing the potential of this form and finding it exciting.

**EKR:** Thank you very much, Jacques.



## interview with **CAROL MAVOR**

*12 November 2015  
University of Glasgow*

**Elizabeth K. Reeder:** Welcome Carol, very pleased to have you here after last night's fantastic event.

**Carol Mavor:** Thanks to your students and colleagues.

**EKR:** And to your film and the silence. We talked about the way that everyone was so close in the room, and that shared experience of the film was amazing. And I liked hearing the baby gurgle on the side.

**CM:** I was happy she stayed.

**EKR:** Your film has added to my consideration of your work and how I'm thinking about the essay, and I've asked you to be part of a conversation because I'd read *Black and Blue*, and then I read *Blue Mythologies* and *Reading Boyishly*, and the way you construct your work seems unique in so many ways. I'm here

to see if there's a difference between essaying in the States and essaying in the U.K., both in context and in publishing. I think it may be an impossible question.

**CM:** Yeah, good, I think so too.

**EKR:** It might even be the wrong question. I was thinking about you yesterday and how you do art, writing, photography, theory, practice, history, performance, and you have all of these in your writing, and so in terms of the medium you use, you're crossing over among so many. You also have strong rooting in Barthes, and in Freud, and you have a strong sense of gender and all those themes you use and that you come back to and repeat in your work as well. I'm thinking of those aspects as the medium that you draw from and you often use, but I'm also thinking in terms of audience.

I'm going to try to be specific to texts a decent amount, but I'm going to start with a question: as you are all these things...

**CM:** One can only hope...

**EKR:** I'm thinking you are. And there's a sense of who we are as we continue to develop as makers and artists. Linked to that, I'm wondering about how you think about your audience and what sort of

expectations you want to set up for them. If your work crosses so many media and your audience might come from all these different disciplines, how do you want them to meet your work?

**CM:** How do I want them to come to it? Maybe I'll start with how I think about my audience as I write, because I do think about specific individuals when I'm writing. I started writing a lot about Lewis Carroll because he was a writer and photographer. But truthfully, I always thought about Lewis Carroll as one of my audience members when I was writing, and this is how I think about history. How would my audience (historical figures from the past as well as today's readers) react to my work? Not that I'm necessarily trying to please them, but I think I'm trying to be fair to them or considerate. And I also think about Amy Ruth Buchanan, who was my student and has designed so many of my books, and she really is a perfect critical reader, as well as a very supportive reader. When I'm writing, I picture Amy on my shoulder and how the text might look to her, or how she would object. And in almost all my books I can think of something that she has said that has helped me. For example, when I wrote my girl book, *Becoming*, about a Victorian woman, Clementina Hawarden, who took beautiful photographs of her many daughters in her South Kensington

home, Amy talked about how wonderful it would be to have a mother look at you that way and photograph you that way and the beauty of that. So that was a turning point for me—to think about what it was like to have a mother look at daughters with that kind of eroticism and sensuality.

I think my readers are often people who make art and write themselves. I also think about my teachers and a whole range of people who would have a lot of criticism: from the art historian to the historian to writers like yourself to artists. You had mentioned yesterday accessibility and writing. One of the first writers to really inspire me was Luce Irigaray. When reading an essay like "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other," I would have a sense of what it meant, but there was so much I didn't understand. Yet I was satisfied in reading it. The poetics of her language provides a kind of accessibility that also has theory and the material body embedded in it. I try to write like that. It's a tall order. I also try to write or think about the way in which Roland Barthes writes, who also layers history and theory and literature and language and the personal. Let's also try to talk about how I use the personal, which is what I think I'm most celebrated for and most criticized for at once.

**EKR:** I enjoy how you talked about how you write towards Lewis Carroll, almost as if he's someone you have a collaboration with. Perhaps you can talk a bit about other mentorship you have had.

**CM:** I had a really strong exciting education, which I talk about often. And I still hold those comments I got from some of my professors. I saved the little scraps of paper. For example, the first essay I wrote for my PhD was for Hayden White and James Clifford on Roland Barthes's essay: "The Photographic Message." For that paper, which I'm sure was terrible, Hayden White wrote at the bottom: "Beautifully written." And that comment still moves me, because I didn't know that was OK—to try to write something beautiful. About an essay on the artist Patricia Paterson, James Clifford once told me, "Carol, not everything connects," and yet I think everything does connect, but how can I make that work? Hayden White also asked me, "When you do visual description as analysis, why isn't it just pure assertion?" I still don't know the answer to this.

**EKR:** When our class read *Reading Boyishly* the captions below the images came up quite strongly, and the readings of the images were very specific, and they were part and parcel in a very concrete way of how you then talked about things.

Some readers wanted more space around the images. So that's a really interesting question about visual description as assertion.

One of the considerations about the essay in the U.K., as we've talked about, is all the mediums that can go into the essay. Essays in the U.K. use narrative and fiction and tend towards the more familiar essay style. When they play and are more radical, they're using more fictional elements. I'm thinking about Ali Smith's *Artful* and Simon Critchley's *Memory Theatre*. They take things that they know (so some of it's personal), but also theory and criticism, and they apply these through a fictional narrator, et cetera.

You do something different. Can you talk to me about your use of the personal in your work?

**CM:** I'm very interested in the way Barthes uses the intimate. Which I think is different than the personal. This isn't my idea. In the obituary that the translator, writer and poet Richard Howard wrote for Roland Barthes, he noted that Barthes was often intimate but never personal. And I thought about that a lot with Barthes. For instance you can find the intimacy of homoeroticism in all of his books, but you could also miss it. I know that I am personal, often; I try to always be intimate. I think the personal, and especially the intimate, can

help people to understand where you're coming from as a writer, and what your experiences are, and I hope it's a way to open up the work to more general audiences.

I think the place I am most personal is in *Black and Blue*. And how do I use my own personal experience without it becoming self-indulgent? It's a fine line. One way Barthes does it is that whenever he gets so personal that it might be too much, he puts it in brackets. So he's writing between those two voices. And so I use a lot of brackets.

**EKR:** You do.

**CM:** I once had a reader's report that said, "Only Barthes can play Barthes." But of course that only made me want to be Barthes more.

But you brought up something interesting about working between the personal and the essay in the U.K. For me it's more between genres. So, for instance, I have an essay coming out in the *Women's History Journal*, and they were sort of fighting about whether to include my essay because it was so experimental. I want to write to historians. I want to talk to them. But I don't want to change the way I'm writing. That has come up a lot in my career. Although now a lot less now

than it used to. And I wonder: *Don't I provoke anyone anymore?*

**EKR:** Or you have a body of work where you've built up your own definitions and your own knowledge base, so people understand what you're doing more, because you're building on the things you've done before, so that provocative nature is assumed.

Actually, I had "provocation" on the top of my list of questions, particularly in relation to *Reading Boyishly*. Because you have this quite radical notion of gender, and it's also very reifying of other elements of gender. Within the class we felt that we wanted more of the strength of the femininity. We wondered about the differences between the maternal and the nurturing. I relate it to the film where the binaries you're using are constantly surprising, shifting. And that's something you do: you constantly change; you're creating your own narrow narrative. Some people met this with resistance. One of my students, responding to others who resisted going where you took them, said, "Oh, I just read it like a work of art and it was easy." Basically, she gave herself over to it.

Maybe I'd like you to talk a bit about gender, in the context of provocation, and what and how you

are attempting, essaying, in terms of gender.

**CM:** I'm actually going to start backwards a bit, with "provoke." One thing I've experienced in my work is that sometimes you don't know what you're doing, but people help you figure it out. Marina Warner has been really helpful to me and I hadn't met her and she wrote a wonderful review in the *TLS* of my first book, *Pleasures Taken*. She wrote: "She means to provoke. And she succeeds." And I realized that I do mean to provoke. But I want to be loved too!

Then in terms of *Reading Boyishly*, it provokes with length. You just have to fall into it. I like to think that it's a writerly project (another term of Barthes's). I want my readers to dream along with me in that book. I like the idea that your student read it like a work of art. *Reading Boyishly* ends with Chantal Akerman and her response to Marcel Proust and the effect his writing has had on her. I would describe Akerman's films as very pulled back and handsome; they cut into this issue of gender. And *Reading Boyishly* is so much about the maternal and its fleshiness and how complex it is, so this had to be a long book. I also think of it as a pleasurable book. But after that I wrote *Black and Blue*, about race and the bombing of Hiroshima, which I tried to

make as short as I could, because I felt that a sad book couldn't sustain that length. Of course you asked me about gender. I'm leaving it for last. I'm thinking: *How do I answer this?* I was a student of Donna Haraway, and one of the first things she said was, "I don't believe in gender." And I almost want to say that to you and end the conversation there. It's a comment I think about all the time. How can you not believe in gender? Can I, in a sense, not believe in gender and be excessively feminine and excessively over the top with gender? So that might be one response.

**EKR:** Provocation could be seen as a form of passion. You didn't get a neutral response, and people were really engaged with the language and images and what you were trying to do. And it's a provocation—it's a kind of love, an intellectual engagement. Using the word "intimate" to describe the writing indicates an intellectual and emotional closeness to the text, but that's not necessarily a general response.

**CM:** It's not confessional. Although there is that in the work.

**EKR:** But the response is an intimate one and an individual one in terms of the reader. Maggie Nelson describes them as the "many-gendered mothers

of my heart.” And so there’s the sense that nurturing and generosity can be perceived to have a gender in a way, and why not use that to reify a problematic role, and motherhood is so often problematized.

**CM:** I certainly want to see motherhood far beyond biologism. How can we think about nurturance and the maternal in other ways that are not dependent on gender? So the boys and the boyish men in my books are often nurturing. It was D. W. Winnicott who said that the words “care” and “cure” are really close.

**EKR:** The ideas of care and cure—you linked these back to the idea of reading, and this takes us back to when you were talking about Chantal Akerman last night, and that idea of motherhood not only passes through gender but also through time. You talked about her almost as if she’s mothering Proust.

I’m also interested in talking about excess, in particular about the language that you use. And that change and shift that happens through the mixture of big statements and then these incredible allegorical references. You build metaphor. There’s repetition, coming back to the phrases. You’re building up and also altering as you build them up. Can you talk about what you’re hoping this will do within the work?

**CM:** I do start in the middle of things. I might try to write a beginning but I do write all around. It doesn’t come easily, and I’m trying to make those patterns and echoes. I vary all of that excess with short statements, so that the excessive statements can be tolerated. Or read. To give the relief of short sentences or easy sentences.

**EKR:** I wonder about the expectations set by the text and about how you are using that knowledge. It doesn’t quite fall into the sense of what you expect that knowledge to do, and there is the conflation of autobiographical and fictional texts and reading them almost in the same way and then interchanging them.

**CM:** But Proust’s novel is a novel like no other in terms of its use of history and the autobiographical. So there I think it stands apart. People don’t know how to talk about the narrator, the author in Proust. As well as Barthes’s book *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Of interest here is the fact that Proust was Barthes’s beloved author. So for me there’s a kind of chain. It’s not just about the personal. You want it to be more than that.

**EKR:** There’s something often leveled more at women writers when they do the personal. Like Eula Biss’s *On*

*Immunity*, in which there’s a lightly held autobiographical narrative of how she’s trying to make a decision about whether or not to inoculate her son, but overall the book presents a well-researched discussion of herd immunity, the pharmaceutical industry, and inoculation. When it was reviewed in the *Guardian*, there was a big picture of Eula Biss. I don’t know if she was holding her son, but it completely feminized her, and the book became only about one mother’s decision about her son. I was really disappointed—that was how they decided to represent the book. Why did they do that? But then it goes back to this idea of motherhood as limited. It felt as if they wanted to take away the intellectual heft from what she’d written.

One of the things your books have is this intellectual and emotional weight. Very much rooted in your own individual reading, how you’re carrying all those people and all those texts and then how you churn them.

**CM:** My editor said, “All your books are about mother.” And I hadn’t realized that. Which seems crazy. I do try to keep to everything that is challenging, so that I can’t just write one kind of book. After all that excess of *Reading Boyishly* I needed to think darkly. And it

was really hard for me to write *Black and Blue*. But good for me to go there.

**EKR:** I believe absolutely in the essay as this incredibly challenging form in which we can approach complicated difficult issues with a method that can meet the reader and the audience in various ways. It’s about this knowledge you hold and share, as well as the knowledge that is then created by readers and what they’re bringing to the text. The essayists I’m most passionate about—such as Anne Carson, whose “Short Talk on the Mona Lisa” is all about how we make, how we are consumed by thirst; Claudia Rankine on race; Rebecca Solnit on just about anything—address these complicated issues. And I think this conversation project is about the hope of the essay, about what we can do and how we can bring it to the surface, and can see that this is something that’s possible. Whether or not the word “essay” is the right word. It’s so bound in a very limited description, the detail of which is academic. But can we bring it to the surface and bring it to the next generations, and to our generation, and say: “What can you do with it?”

**CM:** I love thinking about the essay with you, because you think about it in such rich and complex ways. For me, Barthes, of course, because that was what he was, of

course, a great essayist. And an equivalent at the same time in the U.S. was Susan Sontag. They both loved each other, not surprisingly. I don't know what to say about that, except I realize after talking to you how much I've gotten out of the idea of the essay through Barthes—for my own work and my own writing. And it's because he did write essays. He didn't write academic books or literary criticism. He suffered from that some. He's not one of the big players.

**EKR:** And part of the essay geek in me, one of the reasons I read essays, is understanding how they do what they do. And with Barthes it's how he opens up the texts. That's what the best essays do. They tie you up in knots and change how you look at the world, experience the world—because you understand that the construction of the text is so very flexible when in talented hands. There's an uneasiness and a real difficulty with some of the texts I like the most. There are discussions that need to be brought more to the surface, like in *Citizen*, your *Black and Blue*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, in terms of race and gender. The independence referendum here, for example, was about the possibility of believing a country can be small and yet very powerful and more diverse. So is there something in the essay that might allow people to really discuss

this more and differently, beyond the journalistic “I believe this is what being Scottish could be”? Might the essay allow for greater diversity of content and form around culture and identity? Also how can images and texts work together, and how could they work more in a digital age—not just as references or illustrations, but by transforming how what we read can play on us and how we can change meanings and readings? So these are some of the possibilities of where we can go with the essay.

**CM:** As you were speaking, I was thinking about, and I admire, how you see the essay or how you can define or find a place for it. I think I'm a bit more confused about it in terms of my own writing and interest in narrative and telling stories. I think it's the essay and the novel I want together. Or this idea of the novelesque. Increasingly my writing is moving towards the novel.

**EKR:** That's where you're headed.

**CM:** That doesn't mean there aren't be going to be elements of the essay in it. I want to know how far I can push some of these ideas.

**EKR:** It's a useful crossover. I'm thinking of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which is Kurt Vonnegut's war book, and how he wants

to talk about the horrors of war but he can't do that in nonfiction. It just doesn't allow that. So he basically creates a time-traveling narrative, which then becomes his book about the bombing of Dresden.

**CM:** That's what *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (the most beautiful film in the world) does, because it's about the unrepresentable possible annihilation of the entire world. It's also about love, and love is also unrepresentable, because it just gets corny when you try to talk about it. I'm interested in how that film gets at the unrepresentable of the most terrifying thing you can imagine.

**EKR:** Yesterday you talked about the opposites shimmering. About those things existing together. I asked a long question about the spaces around a text. And one of my students spoke about the vacuum in the middle of the binaries.

**CM:** I like the idea of the vacuum as a place that sucks very violently and makes movement, and that's what I want to do with those blank spaces.

**EKR:** Part of it is that it's inherent that those in-between spaces hold both, and that in your work you don't talk as much about those spaces which are created, but you allow them space to exist.

**CM:** That's a nice way of putting it. In the best of worlds I would hope that would happen. You have to believe in readers and believe enough in your text that they can figure out what you're trying to say.

**EKR:** Absolutely. I think that's a good place to end. Thank you very much, Carol.

**CM:** Thank you.

interview with  
**MAX PORTER**

11 December 2015  
London, Granta offices

**Elizabeth K. Reeder:** I find that the essays I love or the essayists I love are almost all from the States, and I was curious about that. So it made me ask the question, which is maybe an impossible question: how do essays and how does essaying different in the U.S. and U.K.?

**Max Porter:** What is your own book about?

**EKR:** It's a collection of hybrid essays on living grief with integrated images and design. Think of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and how some of those images are essential to the reading of the text.

**MP:** I couldn't get *Citizen* through here.

**EKR:** Why?

**MP:** It was partly it had pictures in it and we don't really do that. That was more like stumbling block fifteen for me. It was

more: *What is it? Is there a readership for it here?* It's an extraordinary book. The hinge moment in it, where it packs its greatest punch, is that Zinedine Zidane passage where you have the images and the fan quotes and the dialogue... it's an absolutely extraordinary piece of assemblage.

**EKR:** She makes us have to work but everything is right there, and she's built up that skill through the book.

**MP:** It's a physical invitation. It's like participation theatre—you're actually being invited into the physical space of the page to do the work.

**EKR:** You'll know this, but it was shortlisted in the States for both critical writing and in poetry—but it's only winning in poetry, which I find interesting. Maybe we could make this a part of the conversation, which is this idea of...

**MP:** The limitations of the cultural-industry framework.

**EKR:** Yeah.

**MP:** We have had moments of our culture here where you think you are making headway, and publishers kid

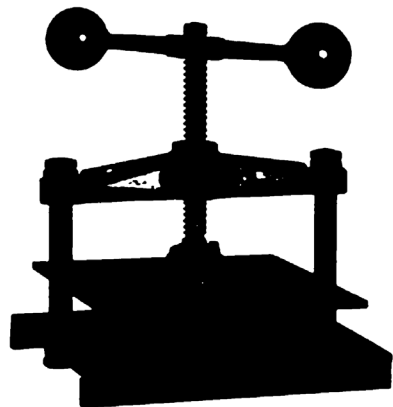
themselves that the readership is moving at the same pace as the production, and I don't know if it is. Sebald represented a major shift here. Not a week goes by when we don't talk at some point in this building about what image and text was in Sebald, and whether we want to do that, and the problems and limitations and opportunities. So yeah.

**EKR:** For me it is exactly these questions we're already asking. For Sebald people often take his images as read.

**MP:** They're a different game. They're offering you a different way of engaging.

**EKR:** Let's start with you as a writer. How did you find *Crow*? What made you write the book you have written?

**MP:** An impatience with the novel. And with clichés about grief. Actually I don't mind cliché, but I don't like uninvestigated cliché. It's also about time restraint. I think writers, especially female writers, aren't encouraged ever to talk about the atmosphere and environment in which they create work. I'm thinking about people like Mary Kelly and her "Post-Partum Document," which is an incredible piece of conceptual work built around the birth of her child, where she used



soiled nappies and things as part of it. An extraordinary thing.

Part of my training is in feminism and psychoanalysis. I'm into the showing of the scaffold, and so I wanted to write something that was more appropriate to the chaotic mental processes of grieving, but that also would visibly show my impatience with any one singular choice. I mean, prose to me just wasn't the appropriate vehicle, nor was poetry, and I'm not a poet so I had to find something in between. It started with my desire to do the lateral relationship as a character, and I've been really interested in sibling relationships and again that started psychoanalytically. I was really interested in the book *Siblings* by Juliet Mitchell. The idea is simple but she does it in a very clever way, which is that the vertical axis of "your mum and dad fuck you up" is actually true, but not perhaps as generative (certainly analytically, but also socially and culturally) as your colleagues and your friends and your peers and your siblings. And that's as close as it gets to memoir: the memory of my brother and I sharing stories about the death of my dad. And so I started to make things up and that felt good. You've read it so you know: the number three is the thing.

**EKR:** Can you talk a bit about triptych?

**MP:** I've been interested in triptychs forever. I knew I needed something really heavy in the middle. I knew it couldn't just be heavy as in a very loud crow with bad language, but it had to be textually heavy. Hence the critical homage: I wasn't just going to write Ted Hughes's *Crow*; I wanted someone who knew he had been Hughes's *Crow* but had been other things, could think a little bit about those anxieties.

With a writer I particularly like, Anne Carson, when she's really good, she probably gets as close to the movement between the poetry and the visible translation and the shards of essay as I've seen. It's not so much that I like those things—I like the movement.

**EKR:** And how she opens up that space.

**MP:** That relational thing is what I wanted to do, to move from, as it were, the pure fairytale world of childhood imagination to the exactitude of what good essay writing about loss brings.

**EKR:** Did you have the idea of an essay in your head when you were writing it?

**MP:** More I had those kind of fragments, more footnotes, that clarification bibliographically and etymologically that runs underneath a text. Saying to

your reader that this exact thing is what I'm talking about. Part of that (and I'm not ashamed of this, but perhaps we encourage people to be ashamed of this) is the celebration of the joke of influence. The joke of saturation. Why do we pretend there's any original thought and every text isn't loaded up with previous texts? So I wanted the sense that *Crow* could say that all I'm doing here is re-arranging the architecture of your family to allow you to use stories in a potentially healing way. His medicine is storytelling.

**EKR:** There's a great bit of healing cruelty when *Crow* tells the boys to tell him stories (and he has promised to bring their mother back if they do), and then he's like no, she's not coming back. I'm not doing it. Which is lovely.

**MP:** Which is very much the author's final note. That these stories are just inventions that served my purpose while I was creating them.

**EKR:** You said that the triptych preceded the writing of this book. Can you talk to me about how you've thought of it?

**MP:** I suppose from studying art history and wondering always what was so tantalizing about...again the interactive

thing. I had a profound experience of art, as Ben Lerner would call it, in front of the huge Francis Bacon triptych of George Dyer dying. He's on the loo in one panel. And then he's falling.

**EKR:** It's striking.

**MP:** I was 11 years old and my mum had left me and she came back two hours later and I was still there. She thought: *What's happened to you?* And I was like, I cannot figure this out: I've gone in and been really close to it; I've come back; I've gone left to right. I cannot understand why it's impacted me this way. I recognized it was something in the arrangement of the number three, the movement of the panels that was unfixing me somehow, unmooring me.

I suppose I got very into grids, into people like Louise Bourgeois and Eve Hesse and the use of the grid. The use of the organic shape that floats across a geometric grid. *Crow* spills across our attempts to impose order on things—either with time or with morals or whatever we're imposing.

And then I suppose, I'm someone who has all sorts of things swimming around the whole time and I need a structure to work on. Even when I'm editing something, I lay things out in a way that makes me feel I'm in control of the



whole before I can get in with the mess. So I had this very clear visualization of three bowls and how they were approximately weighted: one with childhood, one with grief, one with the crow, and I felt such relief. It was extraordinary. I speak to writers about this all the time—that moment when they're like, oh, now I can write it.

**EKR:** That makes me think of the fire triangle and how any fire needs a balance of fuel, oxygen and heat/ignition in order to burn. For instance, if you starve a fire of oxygen it goes out. And that's how it felt to me. The triptych is an area of interest, as my third novel is all about fire and has three narrators. Another narrative triangle I think of is in the *Ballad of the Sad Café*, by Carson McCullers, where each character looks at his/her beloved and yet is the beloved of another. It's a failed love triangle and that tension creates the story. And it's not the same as a pairing, or a diptych.

**MP:** No, not at all.

**EKR:** Maybe that's why it's an unmooring. And I get that from your book—it's not a settled book, despite the closure at the end.

**MP:** It's also interesting, with someone like Flannery O'Connor, how you have

shapes emerging from characters. The number three is always the most efficient at allowing the uncanny—the thing the writer can't fake. I don't know if I ever thought about the benefits of three. But I thought about the rules of three.

**EKR:** What are those?

**MP:** I'm thinking of *The Vegetarian*, the Korean novel I published last year. That's a triptych. It has this middle section that has this sort of erotic thing going on, where he paints flowers on the naked body of a woman. In a way you have this almost schlocky central bit that then makes the spareness and mental trauma of the other two sections really stand up. But other people discussed the book in terms of this extraordinary erotic centerpiece to its introduction and epilogue. And that's not how I visualized it at all. But this made me realize how visual I am.

My triangle was art, music and writing. Growing up I felt this incredible tension among the three. When I was doing one I would miss the other. I felt an inadequacy whenever I settled at one. Even before I had an intention to write *The Feathers*, I knew it would need to be something that was effectively more like a composition including all those elements. So it was much more like a collage.

I make Joseph Cornell boxes. They're not as good as his boxes. But I can see that I'm never going to write three-hundred-page novels. I'm going to build other forms and piece things together.

**EKR:** I didn't think of your book as a collage.

**MP:** Did you not?

**EKR:** Not necessarily. Because I felt that I knew where I was. And collage can often displace time and space more. Although Cornell is a really good example, because his work is so meticulous. It looks so random then you read the whole thing together and everything coalesces.

**MP:** That's really encouraging. The reader shouldn't think of it as collage, but that was how I had to think of it in order to build it. The editing process was a question of going back in and adjusting the volume of the different components so that the three parts worked as a whole. Which hadn't been my concern when building it. I wanted all my things in it.

**EKR:** It's published by Faber and Faber, which is a nice touch, because that's

where Hughes was published. How did you think about "the reader" as you were writing? Who has the reader ended up being?

**MP:** I didn't think of it at all. I just didn't want to think about publishability or anything. That's my main anxiety now. People ask me whether I'm going to do anything else, and I'm not so interested in that. I'm interested in whether I can recreate those conditions. I was utterly undistracted by worldly things and just in it.

**EKR:** That's a lovely place to be.

**MP:** The reader has turned out to be really pleasingly broad. Some very serious Ted Hughes scholars have liked it. I get nice emails from very very literary novelists who I thought would think that it was gimmicky or insubstantial and they don't. They think it's heavy and long enough and big enough. Someone said to me that they couldn't think of more of a book. Which was an especially lovely thing to say about a fifteen-thousand-word fragmentary thing. So I love that. The nicest thing for me has been these people on YouTube and things, book bloggers, who do these roundups *I've read this and this* and always get mine out last, and they say: "And this...I don't know what to say about this." And some of them have never read *Crow*

and some are huge Crow fans. I never dared hope that I'd pull that off: to get someone who's never read Hughes to enjoy it as much as someone who has. As a bookseller, when you pick your hand-sell title, there's no reason that, if the book is right and good enough, you can't sell it to the Lady So-and-So, and to the builder who has come in for his crime novel. I'd really hoped that'd be my book.

I'm all about the pleasure and I'm an arch sentimentalist and I wanted a simple story that would carry you through. I wanted to give Crow this sense of him rolling something around his palate—as we do as a reader. I wanted this brotherly sense that crows are good at mucking in. I wanted the thing itself to hop. I looked at crows a lot and thought it would be possible to write something that moves, endlessly moves in the way the crow does.

**EKR:** Yes, the thing itself becomes the movement.

Lydia Davis has been called an “essayist in storywriter's drag,” and we've been talking about Anne Carson, whose essays are often poems, and whose poems are essays. You're also a publisher, so how do you talk about your work, and about some of the work you publish, which is neither and both? And how helpful are these distinctions?

**MP:** They're not helpful. I do think this is a U.K.-specific problem, and I think it is better in America. Graywolf, Rankine, for instance, offers a good example of how to resist the naming of things. My book has done surprisingly well in the U.K., because they didn't know where to put it and so they put it on the front table. By hiding things, we're making it very hard for people to find interesting stuff. Because we're taking one copy of something and putting it in Literary Criticism in the back, where no one is going to find it.

**EKR:** And essays in particular are a problem, because people talk about what essays are *about*, rather than what they *are*. You don't get whole sections of literary or experimental work. For example, Robert Macfarlane writes about landscape and his books go in the Nature section. It means you can't go into a bookstore thinking: *I want to read a really fantastic book of essays. I don't really care what they're about, but I want to be excited by the form and the writing.*

**MP:** That comes from the basic binary distinction between fiction and nonfiction, which is fundamental and also...

**EKR:** Unhelpful.

**MP:** There are some basic differences between essays in America and the U.K. that we've not done enough to challenge. The major difference is the number of outlets. The number of places essays can be written and published is tiny in this country. Think of Hazlitt and his contemporaries, with their high standards of engagement. And the novelists were the same: the great eighteenth-century novelists wrote long and big because they knew their reader could handle huge structural undercurrents and satire right up against romance.

I think in a way this has to do with the relationship between academic and trade publishing being a little too brittle or inflexible in this country. Whereas in America you get more of a flow between them, and there's less of an urge to put consumers into either trade or academic categories. The idea that I might buy Juliet Mitchell's book on *Siblings* in the same way as I might buy Jo Nesbo flummoxes the Random House machine.

**EKR:** They clearly don't get us as human beings. A Saturday-morning versus a Monday-night read—there's a different thing you might be looking for.

I think there's also an issue with academia being more stiff-lipped. I work at University of Glasgow and witness this

disjuncture between what people think an academic essay is and what a literary essay is. It's a fight to create an understanding of how these two things contain similar knowledge but conveyed differently.

**MP:** Perhaps there's a sort of anti-intellectualism at work. If there isn't narrative, it's just ideas and that's just deemed exclusionary or so rarified as to not welcome in. Do you see what I mean?

**EKR:** Yeah.

**MP:** It's back into the preserve of...it's a bit like the poetry world. Is Jorie Graham elitist because of the sheer amount of thinking she puts into each line? I don't think so. But I never let anyone tell me how to read poetry or what poetry to read. I read it on my own terms. Poetry has fought for its own space.

**EKR:** Something about expectation matters here too. In a classic essay, readers don't mind having to work for that knowledge. My sense is that it's information-based and they expect that. But if you attempt experimentation with the form or structure, people don't know what to do with that. And they're like: What are you trying to say to me? What is this about?

Have you read Anne Carson's "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent"? She does a beautiful job being untranslatable in an essay about untranslatability. You have to work really hard, and she does things like transition subjects and ideas mid-paragraph. So if you close-read it and mark it up you're like oh, that's where she's moved. So that classic structure by which people locate themselves is missing.

**MP:** Exactly. Which is utterly thrilling to a certain number of people and immediately off-putting to others.

**EKR:** And then is that elitist? I wonder if the things that thrill me so much about the essay (and I'd hope this isn't the case) only appeal to a certain number of people.

**MP:** When you were talking I was thinking about this idea of experimentalism in the novel somehow being a permission-giver for other forms. Ali Smith is an example of an incredible person who has mounted various challenges in her books. You feel the audience receptivity to those challenges and yet, without themes of sexuality or mother-daughter relationships or engagement with art, they would not wash. Think of some greats like Alice Oswald's *Memorial* or Christopher Logue's *War Music* and how if they weren't about

war, they wouldn't be as effective. Do you see what I mean? It's the subject that coats the pill of experimentalism. And the essay, as you say, if it doesn't have the narrative subject, if it's not about the loss of...Rebecca Solnit is amazing about this, about why, in *The Faraway Nearby*, she didn't explicitly write about her illness. Even though people were desperate to say "This is your illness memoir," she's like: no, this is my story memoir; this is my growing up memoir or my letting go memoir or whatever it is. She went right up to that point and then just went round it, because the critical currents that she's interested in untangling aren't the thing. People here were somewhat outraged, asking: "What is this?" Some of that language was used in reviews to dislike that book in this country.

Have you read Denise Riley's *Time Lived Without its Flow*?

**EKR:** She's on my list.

**MP:** God. God. If I had read that while I was writing my book. There are two books I've now found that, if I had read while I was writing, I probably would have binned it. One of them was Agota Kristof's *The Notebook*, published by CB Editions. The other is Denise Riley's *Time Lived without its Flow*, published by Capsule Editions. You have to read it.

It sounds like it's for you. It's so clever. It's about the death of her son and it's so precise as to be almost nauseating. Yet it bends into poetry, an uncommonly good analysis of Emily Dickinson, and these funny mantra-like desires to go into the sort of vulgarity of common experience. It's electrifyingly good. And it's fifteen pages long.

**EKR:** It sounds like it's completely up my street.

**MP:** Right up your street. And in terms of your question about publishing, I have to pick my battles. I fought and fought for my Korean atrocity novel, *Human Acts*. And we will possibly not even sell two thousand copies. But I'll be damned if we're not going to do it. Because it's work of the utmost importance. I can only do a couple of them a year because we have a budget and we have to sell some books.

**EKR:** Last week Lucy Luck, the literary agent, spoke to our students and said that Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* had come across her desk and she'd said "No" to it. Then she said a lovely thing: "Yeah, but I probably wouldn't have sold it as well as the person who ended up with it sold it."

**MP:** Exactly.

**EKR:** It makes perfect sense: a piece has to get into the right hands, at the right time, and that's exactly as it needs to be.

**MP:** Lucy and me are friends, and we have a nice relationship. She sends me something, and I'll prioritise it because it will be good since it's from Lucy. And I phone the following morning, usually first thing in the morning, and she always just answers the phone and says, "OK, tell me." And I'm allowed to have these discussions with her in ways that I'm not really allowed to have these discussions further down the line, when I'm fighting for something. The thing gets stripped of nuance the further towards the shop it gets. That's perhaps a problem for the essay. My colleague and I have talked and we can't think of a book of literary essays from the States that has worked here, let alone the lyric essay. The closest things have been those rare books that tease one readership out of another. For instance, Adam Foulds's *The Broken Word*, about the Mau Mau uprising, which is a poem novella, but it's also effectively an essay. Or Christopher Reid's book about grief.

**EKR:** Part of me thinks we're almost at the edge of something. In the States, there is an urgency with some of these

issues. Although a lot of the same issues exist here (they differ, too). We're in the midst of political and class-based tensions here, and major questions of national identity, indeed questions of what nation or which nations we are. I'm thinking of Scottish Independence and all the debates that proceeded the referendum and now the muted fallout. Perhaps these issues don't lend themselves as much to the experimental form—but that's really loose thinking. I think you're absolutely right. The shorter form of essay offers such flexibility for a writer, but impacts or limits readership.

**MP:** So that's what I think about the wider landscape. I would like to write some short pieces, to get some of the things that are bothering me out, and I don't want to have to write my next book for Faber. I don't want them to write me a check and to feel that pressure. I'd like to have some opportunities. I might want to collaborate with a painter. I might want to write a libretto. And it's very difficult in this country.

The main challenge for me is the shrinking of the world. Penguin and Random House and university bureaucracy and all those things clutter up the space. And simplifying the situation so much that the opportunity to be nimble is within a writer's head, as well as in an acquisition...

**EKR:** I agree. These periods when you've fought for focused creative time should be when you're nimble. But it seems now that when you've fought for the time to write or to study, that the (fiscal, commercial, bureaucratic) reality is being pressed really quickly upon us.

**MP:** The cuts are going to have their visible impact in two to three years' time and all the bursaries will disappear. Also there's this very strongly gendered thing, visible and invisible, especially in institutions, so that the lyric and confessional (and even, I fear, the non-literal, the conceptual) are women's work, while the men are getting on with the "real" and supposed "big" stuff that secures them their professorships, and all the other work is deemed marginal.

That's always been the case, and is worrying now for so many different reasons. There's a trickle-down effect. Can the educator resist being disheartened enough, and inspire a generation after her?

**EKR:** You hope so.

**MP:** I believe in it.

**EKR:** You still can teach books by Nelson, Rankine, Solnit, Zambreno, and you can see students coming to know that other

things are possible. With these authors and their writing, some of the power is in the construction of it, a bit less visible—it gives you loads of space as a reader.

**MP:** I want that, and there's got to be something that *Granta* (the magazine) can do.

**EKR:** I agree

**MP:** I see such encouraging things in universities, with cross-departmental collaborations. And funny projects that don't necessarily have an end in sight, which are more discursive. I wish we could have a bit more of that.

I burnt up one of my free passes when I started here. You know Ben Marcus's *Age of Wire and String*? It's a brilliant experimental book he wrote in the '90s. It was out of print and we bought the rights. At the same time, a friend of mine, an artist, was privately, in her spare time, illustrating *The Age of Wire and String* with these extraordinary post-nuclear handbook schematic things. So it seemed obvious to do an illustrated edition. The conversations we had were extraordinary. They were basically saying, "So you want to take something that is unpublishable and make it more undesirable?"

And sure enough it didn't sell. But I'm so so so so proud of it. And the responses we got were so encouraging in the way they polluted our usual expectations of reception. Illustration students said they didn't know mainstream publishers would have their stuff illustrated. Journalists said, "I've been asked to review this book and I've never been asked to review anything experimental." You know. Just making something happen. I think that has to be the responsibility of the independents.

**EKR:** I wonder about the questions you need to ask. In part (and this might be a different life), I'd love to curate something like this. How do you ask the question to encourage this quality of work? It has to be open-frame; it can't be subject-based. Each person will have his/her own obsessions. Like when you were talking about the triptych and how everything was weighted. Everyone has to get to that. The most successful essays create their own context, and that's why they're hard to talk about. You actually talk about it really well. How you get people to do that?

**MP:** It's the same as what goes on in one's own head when one sets out to write something: to have the parameters of one's own ambition in your sight lines, as well as keeping enough open to surprise oneself.

If I had a free year, a blank year, I'd go and find people who are doing really interesting things in their field and ask: "What's the ghost on your shoulder asking you to do?" So many of them would find it's the essay. People combining their professional expertise with their storytelling capabilities, that's where interesting work will come about.

**EKR:** The best works always leads back to their source material. You do that in *Crow*. I loved the Winnicott line. It was your character's way of saying he was trying to be a better dad, but he doesn't say that. It was obvious and oblique at the same time. People who are really exploring something specific that they want to communicate will produce the best work.

**MP:** We shouldn't underestimate the capabilities of more than one type of communication within a single narrative.

**EKR:** Yes. Exactly.

In terms of diverse types of communication, what are you thinking about the digital possibilities of the essay form? Not only in terms of hyperlink, but in terms of the crossovers between sound and image, and movement and image and text? To my mind, art writing often doesn't consider the writing enough, and so the images take hold and abstraction

and obscurity happens and the words are just afterthoughts, often only partially interrogated. But there is potential there and in the digital realm that's not being realized.

**MP:** In almost every book I publish, I allow my authors to try something. Something similar happened with Rebecca Solnit's running essay. And Mark Roland, the philosopher, has these funny notebooks about discovered manuscripts—and they all have to go at the back of the ebook. There doesn't seem to be away around it, which seems mad and such a violation.

I think there's the possibilities of multi-media now: the opportunity of this dialogue between what people are doing in 140 characters and what people are doing in books. Like Olivia Laing and what she's doing in the space between her reviewing, her book writing, and her engagement with the arts as a journalist. There's a new strand of performed professional writing, particularly by women, that's finally taking up the challenges of *A Room of One's Own* in relation to their chosen forms, the tools available to them, and the challenges to the reader. Something like: "I will talk about my wages, and talk about my children, and about my difficulty in traveling from one part of the country to another where I'm paid to do that thing." I really like that, am

excited by that. Without the bluster and anger of the white feminist on Twitter, we couldn't have gotten to that slightly more reflective space we're at now.

**EKR:** That's true.

**MP:** My dream is that we'd see as many essay collections as we see short stories. Then we could frame the challenge as we have with short stories. We should all do better. We should try more. We should think about festivals and book clubs and all the sorts of things we were doing to get people to read short stories a bit more.

**EKR:** That's a lovely way to think of it. With the short story we don't think you need to do *this* in a short story. Each story is exactly its own beast. Have you read *Man V. Nature* by Diane Cook?

**MP:** Yeah, I loved it.

**EKR:** It's great. She does that thing where the stories are all fraught and belong together.

**MP:** "Girl on Girl" is just an astonishing good story. That's the thing. If I was seeing an essay collection that did what her work does, I'd publish it in a flash. That amount of movement, that

style across the whole, that character and swagger.

**EKR:** That slight othering of the world.

**MP:** Yeah. The attention to detail. She does what you said Anne Carson does so well: sweeping the rug out from underneath you.

**EKR:** Indeed. It's been lovely talking with you.

**MP:** It's fascinating. We never have these discussions as often as we should.

## AFTERWORD

### The Work of the Essay

—KRISTEN KREIDER

Our Listening Tour began with a question: “What do we know about the essay?” The essay, we are told, is less a thing to be defined than a movement, an inclination, a continual digression. A cunning and constant oscillation. A protean shift between the acts of thinking, writing and reading whereby we come both to know and un-know. The essay, we are told, is a relational contract. It knows no boundaries, geographic, or otherwise. Any understanding of the form must always be in relation to its context and, I would add, its content. Knowing this about the essay, we encounter the problem, the impossibility, of this further question—the one that initiates our tour: “How is the essay and essay-publishing working in the U.K., and how does it differ from and crossover with essays and essay-publishing in other places, specifically the U.S.?”

What I like about this question is that it puts the essay to work. Steering us gently away from the seductive, poetic

ontology of the essay, it ventures into the pragmatics of the essay. For me, the question of how the essay and essay-publishing work across different contexts suggests further questions: how is the essay working and who is it working for? Who is the essay’s public and how does this hybrid, changeable, often personal and thinking form do work in this public sphere?

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the inter-relationship between three terms: *form*, *figure*, and *rhythm*. And I am grateful to a woman, an artist and researcher named Irina Bucan, who introduced me to the following quote from the poet Cecilia Vicuña as a way of thinking about my interest in the relation between these terms: “A **word** is a **non-place** for the encounter to take ‘place.’” So, I have been thinking a lot lately about how, and where, these three terms—*form*, *figure*, and *rhythm*—can encounter one another. And I think the essay is just such a place. But the question remains: if the essay is a place where *form*, *figure*, and *rhythm* can encounter one another, then to what effect? In other words, what kind of work is being done here, and for whom?

I was particularly intrigued when, at one point in the conversations we are privy to on our Listening Tour, Elizabeth Reeder says: “I believe absolutely in the

essay as this incredibly challenging form in which we can approach complicated difficult issues with a method that can meet the reader and the audience in various ways.” Later: “Might the essay allow for greater diversity of content and form around culture and identity?” What this says to me is that the contemporary essay can be a way of working with complexity, with contradiction and with difficulty in a way that has the potential not to cover these over, like Roland Barthes’s take on myth, but to expose them even further through its very fabric, through its act of fabrication. The essay, as I see it, can become a place of encounter between politics, representation, and the singularity of being—a place that the reader, coming to the essay, then encounters. In this encounter, some work is being done: the work that all aesthetics is capable of doing within our political imaginary.

All of which brings us back to the imperative behind the Listening Tour: the question of publication and of the public where the essay is doing its work and, with it, the comparison between the U.S. and U.K. context and the visibility of the essay in each. Is the essay, and complicated forms like it, becoming more or less necessary in our current social and political climate?

On 15 October, 2016 (two days ago, as I write this), Angus Robertson made his

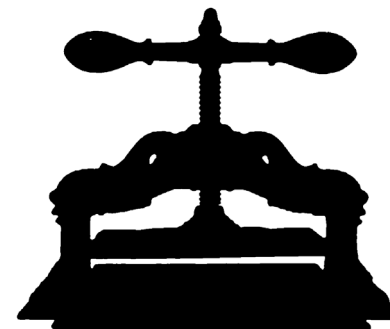


first major speech as Nicola Sturgeon's newly elected second in command of the Scottish National Party. "It is a disgrace that race and religious hate crime has increased in some parts of the U.K. by over 40 per cent. Let us be clear—those politicians who fuel a climate of xenophobia with their damaging policies and reckless words must accept their share of responsibility for this." There is a time and a place for clear, straight political talking. And there is a time and a place for nuanced, complicated, challenging, and complex poetical speech. The question that this Listening Tour seems to raise is whether or not there is access to this speaking as well as a public able and willing to listen.

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