

the secret self's personification. When we knock on her door, she opens to us, she is a presence in the doorway, she leads us from room to room; then why should we not call her "she"? She may be privately indifferent to us, but she is anything but unwelcoming. Above all, she is not a hidden principle or a thesis or a construct: she is *there*, a living voice. She takes us in.

Quarrel & Quandry: Essays, 2000

SARA LEVINE (1981–), director of the writing program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is a novelist, short story writer, and essayist who describes herself as “a big fan of a certain kind of littleness: essays the size of handkerchiefs, novels the length of nosebleeds, philosophies reduced to paragraphs, conclusions detached from tedious arguments, epics scribbled on the back of a hand, tall tales, but only in bare feet.” Widely known for her satiric novel *Treasure Island!!!*, which she refers to as “essayistic” by virtue of its being about “a mind in motion,” Levine wrote her doctoral dissertation on the nature of the essay and has also published three essays on the essay. Her reflections on the essay are especially concerned with the ways that essayists create an impression of themselves — a concern that is central to the following excerpt from “The Self on the Shelf.”

From “The Self on the Shelf”

Consider the academic article, to which self is nothing. You come to the academic article like dentist to tooth: to extract. You pilfer the bibliography, you fill up the file cards, you go for the gist and the rub and the fact. If the writer's style doesn't suit you, what do you care? You're not there to gain a better sense of who he is but a better sense of the discipline to which he contributes. He's a cog in the wheel, a pixie of a pixel, a thread in the fabric of the discipline's crotch.

But to the essay you come — you should come, I'm telling you — with the hope of confronting a particular person. In places the freshly painted person still shows cracks. An underdeveloped paragraph here, a broken sentence there. Still you surrender to the dream of personhood, you quicken the clusters of sound. You leave the essay feeling as if you have met somebody.

The worst thing an essayist can do is fail to make an impression.

What I want to do in this essay is talk about how an essayist makes an impression.

It is often supposed that essayists make great use of the first person singular and that an essayist may be spotted by the frequent flash of his "I." Joan Didion worries a bit about that "I" and its moral implications in the beginning of "Why I Write":

Of course I stole the title for this talk from George Orwell. One reason I stole it was that I like the sound of the words: *Why I Write*. There you have three short unambiguous words that share a sound, and the sound they share is this:

I
I
I

In many ways writing is this act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want with veils of subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives, with ellipses and evasions — with the whole manner of intimating rather than claiming, of alluding rather than stating — but there's no getting around the fact that setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space.

This passage sidles up to you like a salesperson in the perfume department, splashing you with candor. Writers are a tricky bunch; they seem to come in friendship but instead they come in force. To distinguish herself from the wily crowd, Didion gives the reader rhetoric as rhetoric. Thus: the sentence that warns of "subordinate clauses and qualifiers and tentative subjunctives" is followed by all of these; they are planted for the reader's enjoyment, like Easter eggs in the garden. The buried egotism of words like "Why" and "Write" is flung onto the page, and three paragraphs are indulgently cut from the sound. "I, I, I," says the essayist, with irony too big to store in the attic, and perhaps we think her crafty days are over, the deceit is done.

Or (why should we be fooled all of the time?) perhaps we notice that when Didion catalogues the tactics of the secret bully, she says nothing about pronominal tactics. See how the "I" disappears, as if into a large fur coat. First it becomes a "you": this may be Didion speaking to herself or Didion speaking to the reader. What matters is her choice to detach her-

self, through pronominal choice, from the person who is behaving badly in her sentence: "You can disguise its aggressiveness all you want," as if, until now, the naïve reader had been exhausting himself with deceptions. Next the "I" slips into the misty neutrality of "oneself," so it's not "my" thick and intimate body that gets into the reader's space, but the vapor of a more ethereal "one." Then a list of egotistic pronouns appears ("*listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*"), but these appear in italics and as dialogue — something other people say, so that Didion herself is distanced from the egotistic chant. In the last sentence, "setting words on paper" appears in the subject position, so that the actor is replaced by action. And finally, when the curtain comes down, no pronoun at all appears to take a bow, but "the writer" — a noun fresh out of the box to show that Didion does not speak of her self so much as her profession.

I guess I should make it clear that I admire Didion for her modulation of pronouns. She comes off as a fair person, and ultimately what matters, in an essay, is how the essayist comes off. If she is not fair — or rather, if her skillful oscillation of pronouns encourages us to think she is more fair than she is, that is unfortunate for her as a thinker and for us as readers: but it is not something over which we should tear our hair. She need not be fair, just, balanced, or dispassionate; as an essayist she need not even be reliable. What matters (and how frightening it is to say this) is how all the linguistic choices — such as where to use "you" and where to use "I," or how closely to set a formal term like "tentative subjunctives" alongside an informal word like "bully" — what matters is how these linguistic choices combine to make a self of interest. A thoroughly egotistic persona, whose self-absorption might be measured, say, by her inability to modulate pronouns, by her refusal to flex her puny point of view, will fail to create the illusion of an intelligent, complex, dynamic self, one who can look inward and outward. Because even though the essayist's self is a fiction, we want it to be a complex fiction, with thoughts as well as second thoughts, a psyche that catches fire occasionally; a self that moves. If the essayist refuses to move, and usually, as Phillip Lopate explains, the direction we want him to move is downwards —

So often the "plot" of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty.

— then we deem him lousy. When Didion slides between pronouns, she does not move down, but she moves something. Above I rallied meta-

phors in order to describe this, saying she gets into a coat, goes into the mist, suggesting that the "I" disappears. On second thought (essayists *do* have second thoughts) what's important is not that the "I" disappears but that it moves at all. Imagine the page as a stage, every pronominal shift an exit or an entrance.

In a book I am looking at (this is hardly an understatement; the prose is dense and I tend to read a page or two, then place it on my desk and give it a long, ill-natured stare), the author says: "the essay is definable neither by what it says nor . . . by how it says what it says. . . . [W]hat is crucial is *that* the essay says: utterance for the sake of utterance — 'voicing.'"

This is not the usual view. The essay has long been understood to be a prolix genre, and ever since Montaigne, it has been understood to allow free choice of topic: "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me." But to say it doesn't matter *how* the essay says what it says is to unscrew the legs from the essayist's table. It is style that allows the essayist to make a self, to make, as I said, an impression. The essayist Scott Russell Sanders famously puts it like this: the essay is "a haven for the private idiosyncratic voice in an era of anonymous babble." That seems right, although when you think a minute you see that the essayist writes his private voice *for* the public, so perhaps private isn't the word for it at all. Edward Hoagland suggests: "the style of the essay has a 'nap' to it, a combination of personality and originality and energetic loose ends that stand up like the nap on a piece of wool and can't be brushed flat." This description is lovely, and yet what *makes* the nap — and why when the essay is made of words are we talking about wool anyway? Well, we are talking about wool because we are on the page of an essayist; he has no obligation to make us a textbook of technique. But suppose you and I want to understand how an essayist makes an impression; suppose you and I (who have become conscious of pronouns) want to think more clinically about how the textual heart beats?

Essayists do not have "more" style than anyone else, but as a group, when compared to other groups of prose writers they tend to be more interested in style-as-deviance. *How* they say it can often be answered, "Differently." Neither of these concepts (style, style-as-deviance) has any meaning outside of a historical context, obviously. If an entire generation of essayists grows up reading *The White Album* and imitates it, the sense that Joan Didion's style is suitably idiosyncratic will disappear. (One can

see this principle at work in Joan Didion's prose. She has stopped writing like Joan Didion, who wrote like Ernest Hemingway, and now writes like Henry James.)

In 1994, Stanley Elkin published a piece in *Harper's Magazine* narrating a brief episode of madness caused by an overdose of prednisone. He called the essay "Out of One's Tree" — the pronoun an ironic choice, since it's not a generalizable "one" who goes bonkers, nor a well-mannered "one" who screams "Lick my dick!" to one's son who has just entered the room.

Stanley Elkin is the biggest egotist of an essayist in town. He will be our experimental animal. How to summarize Elkin's style?

We might start by identifying him with the colloquial side of the family — those familiar essayists — since he writes without the formal elegance of, say, Baldwin, or Vidal. Elkin ain't constricted by the rules of formal composition. He begins his sentences with "Because" and "Which." He signals his points long before they come in: "It's like this," he says; "It's this"; "Suppose we do this." He writes "ain't." *He uses italics*, whereas other writers rely on syntax or the reader's intelligence to get the emphasis across.

Colloquial is misleading, though. Elkin disobeys conventional prescriptions about writing, and can be friendly when he wants to ("Gee, I haven't told you," he writes), but unlike other colloquial essayists (Sam Pickering, for example, or Scott Russell Sanders) he is rhetorically overblown and flashy. I have it from a book called *Anything Can Happen* that an editor once struck a few clauses from Elkin's manuscript on the principle that "less is more." How Elkin objected! "I believe more is more," he told an interviewer. "Less is less, fat is fat, thin thin, enough is enough." I think he changed editors.

His rhetorical repertoire is too large to catalogue, but I will run off a few of the trends here.

Whole phrases — commonplaces — are yoked into playing the role of adjective or noun. Here he is, insulting Fred Astaire: "So take *that*, Fred Astaire . . . take that and *that* on your fey, heel-toe, heel-toe bearings in your smug, noli-me-tangere aloofness and look-ma-no-hands gravity denials." And, coincidentally, here he is insulting the Mona Lisa: "See her there in her cat-who-ate-the-canaries, her smug repose and babushka of hair like a face on a buck."

Syntactically, he furnishes obstacles (embedded clauses, parentheti-

cal remarks, displacement of heavy material to the left of the sentence) that make the would-be-speeding reader slow down or — as some readers point out — give up; you can't fly your eye over Elkin and expect to get the kernel of sense. There is no kernel; in fact the whole over-the-topness of Elkin's style (you read too much of him and you begin to create your own hyphenated monsters) suggests an eschewal of the ordinary, including an eschewal of the practice of reducing works to their basic point. He will not be reduced — but more on that later.

Elkin's style is associative, meaning he says a word and then the next word seems to come of it. "From the echo of one word is born another word," to borrow a phrase from Woolf.

He also uses cliché, but most of the time it acts as a solid backdrop against which he can perform his fabulously patterned language. For example, in his foreword to the second edition of *Criers & Kibitzers*, *Kibitzers & Criers*, he suggests his stories have stood "the test, as the saying goes, of time." Another writer might have said, "as the saying goes, the test of time," or "the test of time, as the saying goes," or avoided the cliché altogether. Elkin disrupts the cliché by marking it as such right in its middle. In this same essay you see him unbuckle the phrase "this ain't much" by inserting "of course" in between the "ain't" and "much." The attentive reader wonders, why would he do that? Does anyone *really* speak like this? This answer ain't, "of course," scientific — it's probably based on my own speech habits — but I'd say nobody speaks like this; when Elkin imitates a colloquial style, his colloquial style is hyper-literary, over-the-top. He works for a kind of chumminess (which he achieves, by the way, through interjection — "oh, say" — and parenthetical address — "we're talking very fragile book years, mind") but he doesn't aim for realism, because he associates verisimilitude with an easy kind of writing: too clear, too passive, too sedate. In realism, he says, "style is instructed not to make waves but merely to tag along." Realism, of course, has its own rhetoric, just as Montaigne's spontaneous style has its wardrobe planned out the night before. But for Elkin what matters is that the reader should tag along and that his — Stanley Elkin's — linguistic efforts should be appreciated as such. Not language as a medium to express a character's dilemma, but language as itself, showing what language can do.

Elkin doesn't want you to get used to Elkin; his reputation as a "serious" writer depends upon your inability to skim his page. Although he's intent on keeping you in his service, he also flatters you with a familiar ad-

dress (we're talking . . . book years, mind") and undercuts his syntactical demands by dropping in, from time to time, a startlingly easy, comforting lexical item ("doggie years"), as if to say, "see, I'm a regular old person like you," or "I'm not as sophisticated as I appear" — or maybe, on the other hand, "I'm more sophisticated than you even knew; see how fearlessly I move between high and low diction; the rules of formal composition never scared *me*."

And then there is the simile. Not unusual for an Elkin sentence to be packed with two or three — in some there are six or seven. No object stands alone in Elkin's world; it can always be likened to something else. Even concepts have cousins who smell the same, or sound the same, who resemble them in attitude, history, shape.

And in listing the following, I feel as if I'm pulling down the author's underwear, revealing this — his secret — his favorite syntactic shape:

all the little humiliations of purchase [on shopping]
all the battering-rammed intent of obsession [on character]
all the comfy, invisible bondages of flesh [on women's underwear]
all the purring sacreds of biology [on singing to a girl].

Why "all the blank of blank"? It isn't just slang he's slinging (although he is; and when I was a teenager we talked like this, too). He's making some attempt at community, or if that's too sentimental a word, some attempt at unity; just as he finds things like other things, he finds, or, through a twist of language, makes, trends out of singularity. He wants to encompass as much as he can, and through these *all's* he suggests that there is some great collective mass out there that was waiting to be named. You thought you were the only one uncomfortable shopping? Or: you thought it was just your corset that was uncomfortable? He sweeps people, things, thoughts together. And this democratic spirit is strange to the literary landscape, or seems strange to me because I am coming off a long study of Nabokov. In one of his novels, Nabokov suggests: "what the artist perceives is, primarily, the *difference* between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblance."

Briefly, that's how Elkin makes an impression, that's how he makes a persona, period, and we can see that there is a motion involved in all this (just as there is motion involved in the way Didion juggles her pronouns). Elkin's linguistic invention does not simply refuse cliché but makes use of it, plays with it for a while and *then* takes aim. In general, the essayist's

strategies suggest a mind that is working dialectically with the dominant culture. Anxious to distinguish itself from disciplinary dialects — the stock phrases of English, say, or philosophy — anxious to avoid all the commonplaces of popular expression, the essayist shuttles back and forth between linguistic registers.

Southern Humanities Review, 2000