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*Heretical Voices*

*The reasons of the essay  
in modern and contemporary  
literature*

Edited by Paolo Bugliani

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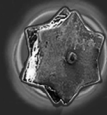
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# The Heresy of the Small: Jenny Diski's Disguised Essays

Lellida Marinelli

## Abstract

This paper explores a dimension of heresy in the essay tradition which I call the heresy of the small, arguing that the essay is heretical not despite but because of its apparent modesty and smallness as the meaning of the term '*essai*' expresses. I focus on two short essays by the recently deceased British writer Jenny Diski, who was a major contributor of the *London Review of Books* which provided a space for her writing that combined personal essays with review essays. "Being 50" and "A View from the Bed" exemplify Diski's heretical modesty because of the challenge they make to the patriarchal cultural orthodoxies of middle age and of being married "happily ever after", but also because they are distinguished by a conversational, modest tone, are written from small places of retreat such as bedrooms, are characterised by a mobile, shifting, persona, and work not by making assertions but by raising questions and launching flights of fancy. As such, they demonstrate the persistence, into the contemporary era, of traits we find in Montaigne (to whom Diski devoted a novel) and on through the long history of the essay.

I. In 1576 Montaigne had had a medal engraved with the image of a balance and the motto *Que scays-je?* This emblem best represents the modest essence of the *Essais*, and, by extension, of the essay as it continued to develop over time. Heresy is, as Adorno has claimed, an innate “law of the essay”<sup>1</sup>, but the heresy of the essay comes precisely from its being humble and modest on several levels.

As has often been recalled, the etymology of the word – from the French verb *essayer* and the Latin *exagium* – relates to the tentativeness of trying, inquiring, examining; and early commentators of Montaigne had noted how the title of his *oeuvre* did not feel superb or arrogant, but rather humble and modest<sup>2</sup>. In his chapter “*De l’incommodité de la grandeur*” – in Donald Frame’s translation, “Of the disadvantage of greatness” – Montaigne writes: “Since we cannot attain it, let us take our revenge by speaking ill of it. Yet it is not absolutely speaking ill of something to find some defects in it; there are some in all things”<sup>3</sup>. Montaigne practised modesty by taking a step back from this opening assertion, as to him, “to eschew greatness is a virtue”<sup>4</sup>. This way of leading his thinking is an example of how modesty and smallness are intrinsic to the essay both on the level of content, in this case, as well as on the level of the relationship between the essayist and their subject.

From Montaigne onwards, the essay has placed itself in opposition to the great genres of discourse and the standards of significance they assume – standards of significance which are closely correlated to norms of maturity and gender. Written in the context of domestic intimacy, in a conversational, sometimes playful tone, essays place questions in small

<sup>1</sup> Adorno (1984), p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> See Telle (1968), p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Montaigne (2003), p. 849.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.



spaces in order to “transgress the orthodoxy of thought”<sup>5</sup> of grander patriarchal and cultural fictions. In fact, as Lukács has noted drawing from Montaigne, the essayist is someone who “ironically adapts himself to this smallness — the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life — and even emphasises it with ironic modesty”<sup>6</sup>.

When it comes to identifying the defining features of the essay, or to attempting to locate it within the broader system of literature, the essay duly demonstrates its unsystematic and unruly nature.<sup>7</sup> It constantly slips in and out of the idea of genre as well as in and out of genres themselves, always modestly attempting to find its place and never fully reaching, as it were, a ‘maturity of status’. In this perspective, the idea of essayism aptly reflects a modal, active, “attitude to the form”<sup>8</sup> which underlines the tentative and hypothetical aspects of the essay as well as a “habit of thinking, writing and living that has definite boundaries”<sup>9</sup>. The “spontaneity” and “freedom from method”<sup>10</sup> that are attributed to the Montaignian essay are qualities that refuse to conform to the constraints and rules of genres and rhetoric, and which, as Warren Boutcher has shown, belong to a “much broader European tradition of various and miscellaneous writing that long preceded Montaigne, that included him, and that continued long after him”<sup>11</sup>. Within this framework, for example, the essay cannot be considered as a standalone genre. Its protean nature, as O.B.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Lukács (1974), pp. 9–10.

<sup>7</sup> In her key text, Claire de Obaldia (1995), outlines the problematic nature of the definition of the essay. Indeterminacy, which is “germane” to the essay, is an aspect on which scholars agree and has become a trope of essay studies themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Dillon (2017), p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Dillon (2017), p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Boutcher (2020), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

Hardison famously described it, allows the essay to draw from other – more orthodox – genres, as well as to live “disguised”<sup>12</sup> under more contemporary nomenclatures for texts such as newspaper columns, autobiographical meditations, humorous pieces or review-essays.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a revival of the essay, but at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were few opportunities to publish essays as they have been defined thus far. One of those few opportunities was in the guise of review-essays in the *London Review of Books*, founded by Karl Miller and Mary-Kay Wilmers, both aware of how the tradition of essay-writing had developed and consolidated precisely in periodicals. It was Mary-Kay Wilmers, in fact, who introduced long-form essays – pieces in which book reviews are woven together with first person point of view and storytelling. As Elizabeth Day says in an article dedicated to the *LRB*,

the essay, usually penned by a leading author and often running to well over 10,000 words, with barely a concession to the fanciful modern desire for accompanying photographs or illustration, has become the *LRB*'s forte. These are the pieces that consistently challenge orthodoxy and take delight in a well-constructed argument; that dare to say things the rest of us might be thinking or that simply reveal something interesting or curious<sup>13</sup>.

One of the leading women writers of the *London Review of Books* was the late Jenny Diski (1947-2016) who was a prolific novelist and writer of nonfiction. This paper will focus on “Being 50”

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<sup>12</sup> Lopate (1984).

<sup>13</sup> Day (2014).

(1998) and “A View from the Bed” (1999) – two of her deceptively small and modest essays which challenge the behaviours associated with the common cultural fictions of, respectively, getting older and getting married. They were first published in unexpected places of tranquillity such as the *London Review of Books* and *The Guardian Weekend* in the late nineties. Later, they were published in *A View from the Bed and Other Observations* (2003) thus exemplifying Lopate’s idea of disguise, becoming journalistic pieces camouflaged in book form<sup>14</sup>. The particular form of both texts, deliberately modest both in tone and in scale, demonstrates the heresy of smallness which, passing via Virginia Woolf, can be traced back to Montaigne and unfolds in several ways.

The first heresy is a defiance of the orthodoxy of the written form and of the grandeur of academic discourse, as “Being 50” is a review of a book of anthropology. One of the features frequently ascribed to the essay is its “urbane, conversational manner”<sup>15</sup> which marks a rupture with impersonal, academic or scientific discourse. When William Hazlitt, one of the masters of the English essay, reflected on the use of a ‘familiar style’ in writing, he was also indirectly outlining the essence of essay-writing and stating how “to write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as anyone would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and

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<sup>14</sup> The statement “These articles appeared in the following publications”, (Diski (2008), p. 337) that immediately precedes the list of the texts in their respective first publications in magazines and newspapers, is a further signal of the disguise, or ambiguous editorial identity of the essay.

<sup>15</sup> Lopate (1995), p. xxiv.

choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes".<sup>16</sup> The best essayists – both classic and contemporary – deeply understand this. As Virginia Woolf also stated, the “significance” of the essay lies “[...]in the undoubted facility with which we write essays as though this were beyond all others our natural way of speaking”<sup>17</sup>. She underlined how the essay has an ease of expression akin to that of conversation, whose intimacy is far from the magniloquent exposure of grand theories. This conversational tone, especially associated with “personal essays”, makes a point of heresy against the orthodoxy of the written form.

The second heresy is against the fixity of reality and exposes the artificiality, and thus the fiction, of social behaviours. One of the first to express such cultural relativism was undoubtedly Montaigne. Setting aside the specificities of the criticism that contemporary anthropologists may have applied to Montaigne, it is still to be noted that his thoughts reveal an awareness of the fact that different peoples reciprocally think through culture. In his chapter “Of customs”, for instance, he wrote: “Habituation puts to sleep the eye of our judgement. Barbarians are no more marvellous to us than we are to them”<sup>18</sup>. While he conjures judgement and reason, his thinking reveals the acknowledgement of the presence of culture which blinds our perception of others as

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<sup>16</sup> Hazlitt (1930), p. 242.

<sup>17</sup> Woolf (2009), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Montaigne (2003), p. 96.

well as of ourselves. The essay has always lent itself naturally to the comment and critique of social behaviours, and since Montaigne, many essayists have touched upon these topics. Another example is Virginia Woolf's "On Being Ill", which is a different take on this topos of the essay and exposes the faulty thinking of the society of her time in relation to how illness is perceived. There is a rebellion against the Cartesian separation between mind and body, which is carried through wry humour, wisdom and imagery<sup>19</sup>. She comments on how "the public would say that a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot; they would complain that there was no love in it – wrongly however, for illness often takes on the disguise of love, and plays the same odd tricks"<sup>20</sup>. She proves that public wrong by engaging with modest spaces which are the environment where heretical thoughts can be born out of the seeds of questions and fertilised by way of imaginative literary devices.

And the third heresy, which encapsulates the previous two, is the challenging of the imposing egotistic male singular "I" through the deployment of multiple essayistic personae. *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Woolf's most significant essay, confronts the grandeur of all-male academia and academic discourse 'proper', by using imaginative devices which would traditionally belong to fiction. Her audience and later her readers, are told she was sitting on the banks of a river, likely on her own, when she started questioning the meaning of the phrase 'women and

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<sup>19</sup> Popova (2019).

<sup>20</sup> Woolf (2009), p. 102.

fiction'. The 'story' is set in Oxbridge and deploys fictional characters such as Shakespeare's sister. The other element, which is a significant feature of essay-writing, is the distinctive use of the first person, which is necessary to convey the intimacy mentioned above. Woolf, however, multiplies her essayistic persona: "[h]ere then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Charmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance) sitting on the banks of a river [...] lost in thought"<sup>21</sup>. All these possible Marys reflect an "I" [which] is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being"<sup>22</sup>. Feminist scholar Toril Moi argues that what Elaine Showalter defined as 'impersonality', "springs", instead, "from the fact that Woolf's use of many different personae to voice the narrative I results in frequently recurring shifts and changes of subject position, leaving the critic no single unified position but a multiplicity of perspectives to grapple with"<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, the fluidity of such a plurality of female I's contributes to the "conversational surface"<sup>24</sup> of the text and can be considered as a heresy against the imposing, 'realistic', masculine egotistic I<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf (2016), p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Moi (1985), pp. 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> The use of the first person in the essay on the one hand serves the purpose of creating a conversational, personal closeness, and on the other, aided by the multiplication of the speaking subject into several fragmented fictional selves, provides a heretical stance against academic impersonality, as well as against the narrator of realist "materialist" writers Woolf was against. See, for instance, Tuzyline, J. (1993). In this edited collection, the curators highlight how women essayists of different ages and languages consciously play with the speaking subject of their text in order to represent the diverse complexity of a woman's writerly self.

Therefore, in perfect alignment with its oxymoronic nature, the essay derives its force not from majestic places, but rather from small, private spaces where imagination – one of its most powerful tools – is fostered. Using a mixture of forms, the essay counters the orthodoxy of the structure of genres and for this reason essayists are able to see the artifice of culture. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that themes such as the relationship between truth and fiction, or youth, death and ageing, on which Montaigne and Hazlitt<sup>26</sup> wrote, for example, are touched upon in “Being 50” and “A View from the Bed”. Diski wrote of this heretical modesty in *Apology for the Woman Writing* (2008), her novel about Montaigne and his relationship with his first editor Marie de Gournay:

Far from fine thoughts clothed in grand rhetoric coming at elegant intervals to him when he settled to his study in the tower, his mind, presented with the endless possibilities of everything and anything, with limitless words, limitless but disorderly thoughts, with the rest of its time alone with itself, was attacked by a blank, black nightmare, a shapeless nothing that was in itself a monstrous form and threatened him with madness. [...] He wrote neat little arguments about grand subjects, pro and con, well scattered with classical references, while his head pounded with the dreadful emptiness, the deadly vacuity that was no longer being

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<sup>26</sup> See for example Montaigne (2003) “That we should not be deemed happy till after our death” or in “To philosophize is to learn how to die”; or Hazlitt (1995) “On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth”.

kept at bay by a busy life. Gradually, through the nothing, he edged towards something. Small, seemingly ridiculous forays beyond the proper rhetoric led him there<sup>27</sup>.

This passage in *Apology for the Woman Writing* perfectly captures the force of the heresy of smallness which also permeates Diski's essays<sup>28</sup>.

II. "Being 50, Review of *Welcome to Middle Age! (and Other Cultural Fictions)*, ed. by Richard Shweder, Chicago 1998", in *A View from the Bed* (2003), is an example of the aforementioned disguise in action. This piece, in fact, had originally been published with the title "Diski at Fifty" in the *London Review of Books* series Diary, in October 1998. The two formats signal two different genres: the diary – marked by the personal, first person narrative – and the book review blended with the review-essay, which can still be personal, but needs to present a comment and an evaluation of someone else's work. Diski begins the piece by questioning her own perception of being fifty by building a tension between her 'self-in-1998' and a presumed memory of her nine-year-old self thinking about what it would mean to reach the age of fifty. She writes of the impossibility of such act of imagination, and, only after several paragraphs,

<sup>27</sup> Diski (2003), pp. 11–12.

<sup>28</sup> If, as the following paragraphs will show, traces of the *Essais'* heretical modesty can be found in "A View from the Bed" and "Being 50" which were written in the late nineties, the novel *Apology for the Woman Writing* (2008) overtly testifies Diski's interest in Montaigne. For this novel, in fact, she carried out historical research and provided references, as well as an author's note.



she seamlessly introduces the text she is reviewing – a collection of ethnographic essays: “It is, as Richard Shweder and the other anthropologists insist in the coyly named collection of ethnographic essays *Welcome to Middle Age!*, a ‘cultural fiction’. Faced with the label, I find it hard not to wonder what use such a designation could be”<sup>29</sup>.

Through this doubled *persona* Diski discusses the difficulty for a young girl of imagining what it could be like to be old; a flight of the mind makes her relate that age with death, and, interestingly, when nine-year-old Diski imagines herself dead she sees the body of a child, not that of her older self. The act of associating the age of fifty with being old, instead, forces her to imagine someone else’s body, while in the extratextual world Jenny Diski publishing the piece is actually fifty years old. Already, this play of *personae* is making us question the perception of age. It is not surprising, though, that it is also her “own present inability, aged 50, to imagine what it is like to be 50”<sup>30</sup>, a phrase that comes just a few lines above her introduction of the book’s title. The contrast between her “own present inability”, and the unavoidable act of wondering what the phrase “cultural fiction” means – which becomes the hinge which moves the rest of the piece forward – is perfectly aligned with the moving spirit of the essay’s paradoxicality, not necessarily being tied to one hypothesis to defend. Middle age, as the subtitle of the reviewed book claims, is a cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Diski (2003), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

fiction. And Diski uses a device of fiction, the story of herself at the age of nine, describing the details of the dark room and the colour of her blanket to create the world where her ‘character’ lives: “I’m nine years old, in bed, in the dark. The detail in the room is perfectly clear. I am lying on my back. I have a greeny-gold quilted eiderdown covering me. I have just calculated that I will be 50 years old in 1997”<sup>31</sup>.

Embedded, in a sense, within a review, is the theme of the relationship between fiction and truth, between imagination and reality. “Presumably”, Diski writes, “everything cultural is a fiction by definition, and come to that everything natural is fiction too since it is named as such and viewed always by acculturated eyes”<sup>32</sup>. Both in line with and playing with the discipline of anthropology, which discusses the questions of culture and the processes that shape peoples’ customs and behaviours, Diski underlines how cultural and natural elements are intrinsically products of the human mind, as the system of naming and cataloguing is an arbitrary act of language. What is customary and therefore deemed acceptable is a practice and a perception. In addition, the almost fleeting reference to “acculturated eyes”, suffices to evoke the debate upon colonial practices in the broader sense.

Interestingly, to the anthropologist Richard Shweder, fictional does not equate with unreal or

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<sup>31</sup> Diski (2003), p. 13. This is the incipit of the essay which creates a perfect setting, and where the “clear detail” in opposition to the darkness of the room reveals the oxymoronic and absurd nature of the thought on ageing she will say to have had.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

false, but rather it indicates the constructed nature of things and concepts – in an “affirmative Post-Modern sense”<sup>33</sup>, which Diski comments with a parenthetical “(oh dear)”. This little comment is a clear indication of the assertiveness of Diski’s conversational distancing from written academic discourse. Much could be inferred from such an elliptical, and yet so significantly ironic phrase – almost implying how the term postmodern has become a cure-all disavowal of responsibility from the burden of having to acknowledge that any work of the mind is artificial, and therefore arbitrary.

The aim of the book is to present alternative narratives of ageing through the description of other cultures’ representation of life stages that diverge from the western narrative of decline. These different representations, Diski warns, cannot be “slip[ped] on like a kimono”<sup>34</sup>; there seems to be no escape into ‘the way things are’. With her ironic but still assertive tone, Diski argues that within this narrative of decline “the end is getting closer faster, and the end is foreordained”<sup>35</sup>, regardless of a positive attitude and the benefits that may come with maturity. Nonetheless, the question of “*How* is one supposed to be 50?”<sup>36</sup> remains. 50 is, as Sarah Falcus writes, a liminal age<sup>37</sup> which brings to the fore issues that are deeply connected with feminism and with how an aged woman is seen and perceived in western

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*; Shweder (1998), p.x.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Falcus (2013), p.18.

society. Because “consumer culture is quintessentially youth culture”<sup>38</sup>, ageing is felt more strongly on women than men. According to Gullette, “[a]ge is becoming an overriding constructor of difference and an alarmingly ubiquitous focus of subjectivity throughout the life course. Age is the new kind of difference that makes a difference”<sup>39</sup>. Montaigne, for example, exposes the frailties of reaching a similar age, criticising the law for setting “us to work too late”<sup>40</sup>. In Marie de Gournay’s time, as well as in Woolf’s time, this question implied taking into consideration a woman’s dependence on a man’s finances in order to respectably reach a mature age and be in charge of a household. Diski’s question, though, points to another aspect of this cultural fiction, which is related to the perception of oneself imposed by fashion.

Clothing and fashion, which Hazlitt described as “a sort of conventional badge, or understood passport into select circles, which must still be varying”<sup>41</sup> are, indeed, arbitrary customs. Towards the end of the piece, Diski carries out her own ethnographic fieldwork experiment by going to a shop that sells cheap floral synthetic clothes; the aim is to try some of the clothes and see if they could somehow turn her into what western, English 1998<sup>42</sup> society assumes

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<sup>38</sup> Twigg (2004), p. 61 in Falcus (2013), p.19.

<sup>39</sup> Gullette (2004), p. 35, in Falcus (2013), p.19.

<sup>40</sup> Montaigne (2003), p. 289.

<sup>41</sup> Hazlitt (2005), p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> In her article on “Addressing Age in Michèle Robert’s *Reader, I Married Him*” (2011), Sarah Falcus provides a very useful overview of how the issue of ageing has been addressed in feminist criticism. She notices how the connection gender and ageing was starting to gain more attention precisely in the nineties.

being middle aged looks like: “It was my intention to go in and try on some of these clothes, to see if I would be transformed into somebody appropriately ‘50’, but I couldn’t get through the door”<sup>43</sup>. With the insertion of a magical element, this passage points towards another act of heresy: the unmasking of the artificiality of culture and of narratives such as “middle age”. Her literary, storytelling mind inserts a magical element in the form of questions on herself, which self-reflexively probe the deeper workings of her mind. There are too many variables and

the truths are too relative for a simple, satisfactory definition of middle age. [...] Time, of course, is another cultural fiction, but from one end of the planet to the other, for each individual, it comes to an end. And no, I am not better at imagining my own death than I was at nine. A memo, then, for myself at the moment of death<sup>44</sup>.

This strong closing sentence leaves the line of reasoning open; there is no fixed conclusion as to what it means to be 50, the only possible answer being a relative, personal perspective as suggested by the original title “Diski at Fifty”.

“A View from the Bed”, the essay opening the collection, was first published for *The Guardian Weekend* on May 22 1999 with the title “Hop to it”<sup>45</sup>. In this essay Diski is alone in her bed unable to sleep and finds a frog squatting in a corner of her room,

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<sup>43</sup> Diski (2008), p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> Diski (1999).

an overt playful reference to the popular imagery of the prince transformed into a frog deriving from the traditional folktale of “The Frog Prince”. Lying in bed like Woolf in “On Being Ill”, Diski unleashes her writerly imagination. From the privacy of a small space, seeing the frog leads to questioning the internalised patriarchal narrative of heterosexual marriage as a happy ending.

The essay begins: “It isn’t often that I wake up in the early hours of the morning to find a happy ending squatting in the corner of my bedroom”<sup>46</sup>. Differently from “Being 50”, where Diski divides the *personae* in two characters, so to speak, in this essay the speaking I is unvaried. The use of the first person is perhaps one of the first elements of the essay and of ‘essayistic thought’, the self being the starting point for the investigation on any topic. This allows Diski to create a sense of narration and of narrative cohesion. In fact, it is possible to read the *dénouement* of the anecdotes told by the narrating I as a story. It is clearly a literary device, where such an I could be interpreted as a narrator. On the other hand, one must take into account that these selves are not purely fictional narrators; in Guido Gallerani’s terms, there is an “essayistic form of the self”<sup>47</sup> which also serves as a nonfictional marker of the discourse. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the fluctuation between a fictional and a nonfictional, essayistic I is the signal of the peculiar tension

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<sup>46</sup> Diski (2003), p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Gallerani (2019), p. 191.

between “immanence and transcendence”<sup>48</sup> which are balanced around experience. However, it must be said that the speaking I differs from that of autobiography, as autobiography lacks the reflection, contemplation and meditation that is instead one of the intended outcomes of the essay<sup>49</sup>. Such displacement of the self may be found precisely in those moments when the fictional, textual element intrudes into a plausible nonfictional moment. Namely, in a space between the conversational, intimate anecdote on not having slept and the insertion of the metatextual, metaphorical happy ending upon which the reader stumbles. A close look at the first sentence will show how the essayistic and storytelling are two entities that should not be, and are not, disconnected: they find common ground in Diski’s deeply literary prose and style. In her opening line, it is possible to grasp an echo of Proust’s famous opening in *Swann’s Way*<sup>50</sup>, where the narrator is also in bed and, as his thoughts keep him awake, he imagines being the subject of the book he is reading. In a very small space Diski’s essay also interacts with the idea of the altered state between sleep and being awake, which is, therefore, productive for both novelistic and essayistic imagination.

In using the litotes “It isn’t often that I wake up [...]” – Diski is using a negation that implies the action seldom happens, and contrasts with the assertiveness of the present tense. This leads the reader to wonder whether this event has happened

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<sup>48</sup> Atkins (2005), p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>50</sup> Proust (1966), p. 1.

or not. This also creates a distance from the more traditional past tense of storytelling and fables, which – in every culture – constitute one of the main orthodoxies through which cultural expectations are construed. The phrase “a happy ending squatting in the corner” anticipates what the piece is going to be about. Happy endings usually belong to fairy tales and romances where the prince and the princess “live happily ever after”. Here, happy endings are personified and are “squatting” in her room. This is a stumbling block upon which a reader cannot but stop, and the sentence quoted above, is immediately followed by a brief digression on her telling the reader about how her sensitivity to noise habitually hinders her sleep. She slightly steps back from this description of the ordinary to say: “Occasionally a dream that would have been a perfect novel rouses me, before disappearing round the corner of my mind”<sup>51</sup>. She has let us into the private space of her room, where, she says, these noises interrupt her creative imagination, fully at work in dreaming. Soon after, at the end of this paragraph, we find out that there is a “frog repeatedly hurling itself against the skirting board”<sup>52</sup>. By way of juxtaposition of the two images the reader is able to make the connection between the happy ending and the frog. Just after writing of dreams Diski claims that in life she wants to be realistic and not superstitious, but by so doing, life would also be dull: “the perfectly mundane existence that I strive for and attain can occasionally seem a

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<sup>51</sup> Diski (2003), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.



little flat, a bit lacking in absurdity”<sup>53</sup>. Therefore in the life of a creative mind a little absurdity is essential otherwise it would not be possible to write a piece on a frog that is a catalyst to questioning the patriarchal narrative of the idea of a happy ending for a woman to be that of finding a prince charming.

The darkness of her bedroom unveils the sceptic, questioning I who exposes her thoughts to the reader: “Rationalist though I may be in the bright daylight hours, now here I was with a small amphibian in my bedroom, offering me the opportunity of a lifetime. I was trembling on the very brink of living happily ever after”<sup>54</sup>. Humorously describing a moment when “the frog and I gazed frankly into each other’s eyes and saw the possibility of eternity in our respective limpid pools”<sup>55</sup>. Just like Woolf in her essay “Why” she is “struck by a series of troubling questions”<sup>56</sup>. She concludes:

Handsome princes were all very well in fairy stories, but I was in the middle of a good night’s sleep, the sheets were clean and crisp, I had the whole expanse of the bed all to myself. Did I actually want it messed up by some prince I didn’t know from Adam? Did I want to live happily ever after, or would I rather have the bed to myself for the rest of the night? Would he get up and go or demand breakfast and small talk the next morning – to nothing of ever after? It only took a moment’s thought.

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<sup>53</sup> Diski (2003), p. 4

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

I carried my little frog out to the garden and wished it godspeed as I released it. So much for fairy tales<sup>57</sup>.

As she is about to kiss the frog, questions arise, and the answer is only implicitly given. The grammatical form of the question can also be read as a metaphor for the essay itself, which often probes broader issues by way of apparently trivial experiences or situations. “The little twisted sign that comes at the end of a question”, as Virginia Woolf described it, “has a way of making the rich writhe”<sup>58</sup>. As she puts it, questions “have a way of picking their asking place with care. They shrivel up in an atmosphere of power, prosperity and timeworn stone. They slink away to less favoured, less flourishing quarters where people [...] have nothing to lose”<sup>59</sup>. The modesty of such a place is twofold. It is both the destination of the essay, the place where it is published, but also the place in which it is written, which enters the text as a meta-textual element. Here it is the bedroom, often accused of hosting idleness, but where, on the contrary, imagination is channelled and questions are asked. Thus, if on the one hand imaginative devices lead to creation of what can be considered literary characters, on the other, the essay creates a more complex, somewhat disguised *persona*, which is what allows to channel that modest and concurrently subversive voice that makes the text effective.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>58</sup> Woolf (2009), p. 160.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 160.

The level of identification with characters in a story, according to Nabokov, is the most basic and undesirable level of reading. However, if we consider the narrating I as an essayistic *persona*, and not as a purely fictional character, and we account for the open-ended questions, it is clear how Diski is able to provoke the reader's mind – especially that of a woman reader. In the small space of a text which was first published on the *Guardian Weekend*, where other leisurely pieces on being in bed can be found, Diski's is able to quietly subvert the idea that a woman must have a man by her side by setting the "happy ending" free to hop wherever it pleases.

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