



Charles Green

In Praise of Navel Gazing: *An Ars Umbilica*

In 2012, the Belly Button Biodiversity project, a group of scientists exploring the bacterial habitat of the human navel, published their first peer-reviewed paper. They had swabbed 60 navels and found over 2,300 species of bacteria; of those, 1,458 “may be new to science.” Commonality was rare: only eight phylotypes appeared in more than 70% of participants. One person’s navel “harbored a bacterium that had previous been found only in soil from Japan,” where he had never been; another two navels had “extremophile bacteria that typically thrive in ice caps and thermal vents,” places inaccessible to the human body. The vast majority were lonely travelers: they appeared only in one belly button. As it happens, what our navels share may be rare and far-flung.

I do want and to know what might be found in mine, and, at the same time, I don’t want to know. I’ve been the caretaker of a particularly filthy navel, and I was ashamed to have it exposed. In high school, a long-time friend and I briefly became much more than friends in some undefined physical intimacy. One weekend, her mother was out of town; I spent most of the weekend at her house. Saturday afternoon, a lazy day, the sun bright on the hardwood floors of her bedroom. I’d never been that naked that long with anyone else. We were in her bed. She paused over my belly button and said, “Wow, your belly button is *really* dirty.” I already knew; I’d been caught. And here I’m confessing. I had a nubbed outie in the shape of a cinnamon bun. Dirt and lint gathered in the folds. In bored, private moments, I’d excavate grayish flecks, only to grow frustrated at what seemed like an interminable project. She smirked at me. To my surprise, though, she wasn’t disgusted by the muddled unknowns stowing in my navel. But had the situation been reversed, I would have recoiled and pulled away emotionally. Eventually, I would.

I know that story is disgusting, maybe too much for some readers. They'd rather leave well enough alone. Most of the time, I would, too. Writing that down requires sitting with myself, with how disgusting I've been.

Not only that, it's a too-terribly-literal moment of navel gazing, supposedly one of the great sins of personal nonfiction. (For the purposes of this essay, I refer primarily to memoir and the personal essay under "personal nonfiction.") The criticism arises regularly; the most prominently cited critique is James Walcott's "Me, Myself, and I" in the October 1997 issue of *Vanity Fair*. With the tone of a prudish elder, Walcott scolds personal nonfiction: "Creative (fiction) writing and creative nonfiction are coming together, I fear, to form a big, earnest blob of me-first sensibility. Both share the same premise—that writing is primarily self-expression, not a voyage out but a foraging in. The academic community accepts this phenomenon with open arms (and legs) because it is in the thick of its own pierced-navel-gazing orgy. . ." (212–4). Open legs, pierced navels, orgies: beware the young, so self-absorbed, so self-mutilating, so over-sexed.

One doesn't have to read much personal nonfiction to discover how faulty Walcott's critiques are: James Baldwin, Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, and, among younger writers, Leslie Jamison, Eula Biss, Kiese Laymon. One doesn't have to read far into teachers of personal nonfiction, either. In the first few pages of his textbook *Crafting the Personal Essay*, Dinty W. Moore writes, "Self-expression can be the starting point of writing, but it should never be the end point" (25). Similar advice appears in guidebooks by Phillip Lopate (10–11), Brenda Miller (64), and Lee Gutkind (69–70). (Bless the latter for using Walcott's insult, "the Godfather of creative nonfiction," as marketing material.)

Most teachers and writers of personal nonfiction, if not all, warn against the danger of solipsism, of writing that never explores beyond the self. But many of us flinch when we hear "navel gazing." As cliché always is, it's tiresome, yet it pinpoints a real anxiety I have writing about myself: that I'm nothing

more than Narcissus made flesh. When I write about the girl who pointed out my filthy navel, I'm engaging in an age-old self-love, even more tiresome than hearing the cliché. As James Baldwin writes, "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read" (89).

Maybe the details of my pain and heartbreak aren't unprecedented, but that fact doesn't mute the sting. A week after she commented on my dirty navel, she called. Not to worry, she told me, but her ex-boyfriend had a Hepatitis B scare, so he got tested and told her she should, too, so she got tested, and his results came back negative and so did hers. No big deal, everything was fine. So when did I want to hang out again?

Suddenly, I didn't. I was on the cordless phone, its rubbery buttons against my cheek, and I curled into myself on the plaid sofa. This person who'd seen something as minor and gross as my dirty belly button and still wanted to know me more: I wanted distance because her physical intimacy with others became immediate to me. I couldn't have articulated that at the time—all I felt was a bodily squirm, sweat at my temples, the sofa's rasp against my bare arms—but what I'd already known about her, that she was more sexually experienced than me, became more real.

That fear isn't just a relic of high school; even now, sometimes, against what I'd like to think is my better judgment, I want to clutch it and live in the safety of isolation.

Ironically, I'm not alone in that desire. To savor life in its entirety and enormity, in its moments and molecules, we have to become intimate with others. I'm not talking about sexual intimacy, but about the nakedness of self, facing others and ourselves as we are. Writing about her, I tremble: I was that grubby, that judgmental, that afraid.

That's how personal nonfiction matters: it makes intimates of the writer and reader. If I write myself well, I take the reader into that intimacy with the self. And, even more so, into intimacy with the world.

Knowing ourselves is terrifying; knowing others maybe just as much—if we only have to know ourselves, that may seem like a relief. There’s a rare condition called mirror-touch synesthesia, in which individuals experience not just what their senses absorb, but also the physical sensations that they see other people feel. Imagine seeing someone peel a scab from the back of their hand and feeling that in your own body; imagine seeing the wind tickle the short hairs of a stranger and feeling your own shoulders rise in response. To me, that sounds like a prison. Yet the essay invites readers into that cell.

Maybe the disdain for navel gazing masks that fear: please don’t draw me into your pain; I have enough of my own.

Maybe Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* is right—hell is the other. Then why do we need each other so much?

So how do we—teachers, writers, and critics of personal nonfiction—approach the critique of navel gazing? Up to now, mostly defensively. Lisa Gill and Jay Ponteri have both written deft, compelling essays that explicitly defend it: “The Necessity of Navel-Gazing” and “In Defense of Navel-Gazing,” respectively. Gill’s is complex and lovely, Ponteri’s sharp and learned. But both rely on an idea that sounds noble but also unfulfilling: *the human condition*. Gill: “I firmly believe that those of us who have experienced disability and trauma, dysfunction or simple oddities, possess knowledge that, no matter how particular to the individual, speaks to the larger human condition.” Ponteri: “In *Enough About You: Adventures in Autobiography*, David Shields argues that the nonfiction writer uses the self as a theme carrier. The writer expresses his or her own memories and thoughts as a way of getting to the other, to reveal the humid human condition.”

I sense that they assume a shared definition of “the human condition,” one that relies on what some see as the fundamental philosophical, moral, and spiritual questions of human life. One could cite psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom’s four given concerns of the human condition: death, isolation, freedom, and

meaninglessness (9). I think what Gill and Ponteri assume, and what Yalom studied and argued for, is that these concerns that we summarize under the realm of “the human condition” represent our most important questions and the most important concerns we share. But one could counter with Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, in which she distinguishes between “human condition” and “human nature”; in her use, condition refers to the circumstances of humanity’s existence—environment among them—and nature refers to the inherent traits of humanity. For Arendt, the “most human condition” is “birth and death” (8). The conditions change, but the nature doesn’t. And we could cite other philosophers who engage with the term relating to happiness or morality. Ultimately, “the human condition” seems slippery. The idea, that we share something essential, comforts me, but I don’t trust that comfort. What if we claim a commonality not because it exists but because we hope it exists? What if only 70% of us share eight bacteria?

I think, too, of experiences that have been marginalized. What about the women undergoing the threatening gazes of men? What about people of color living under the daily fear of white supremacy? Even still, many women have their writing dismissed as domestic or narrow; writers of color have been treated as of minor importance—in MFA programs and beyond. One might counter that race inflects every American’s experience, so it’s part of the (American) human condition, but that fact elides how differently people of color experience the social constructions of race and racism from, say, me, a white boy who grew up in a segregated suburb in Arkansas. So I see the idea of the human condition as double-sided: whether clearly defined or not, it can be a comfort and a cudgel. I’d like to believe the comfort, but I can’t. And I don’t think teachers should hold it up as a goal.

Like Gill and Ponteri, Robin Hemley defends the idea of navel gazing in his essay “Confessions of a Navel Gazer.” I like much of Hemley’s defense (and admire so much of his writing), particularly his observation that what some call navel gazing he sees as interiority, which is not unique to nonfiction but

common to poetry and fiction as well. As he points out, crafting oneself on the page as a comprehensible-yet-complex “I” is no less rigorous, or engaging, or meaningful, than crafting characters in fiction.

That said, Hemley’s explanation of interiority seems too narrow to me. He writes, “The kind of navel-gazing that the memoirist, the poet, and the fiction writer are all interested in reveals the interior truths of small lives. This should be no less important than large truths of civilizations. I wonder how we can hope to understand the world at large in any meaningful way if we don’t confront the secrets we carry inside. The human heart in conflict with itself, as Faulkner wrote.” I find much to argue with here, starting with the seeming certainty about truths, the fact that we can delineate between interior truths and those of civilizations. Maybe it’s my own imaginative failure, but I can’t articulate a large truth of civilization, one that encapsulates that civilization in any way specific enough to be precise or broad enough to be inclusive. Not to mention “small lives”: even if they feel tiny sometimes, each life is enormous. Among seven or eight billion people, our planet’s many ecosystems, galaxies and universes, we are tiny. Yet each life is substantial.

I also trip over the idea of interior truths, whatever they may be—as Gill and Ponteri invoke the human condition, Hemley does with truths—especially that they are small. How does one measure or name an interior truth; is it simply a feeling, however right or wrong its interpretation of what triggered that response? I don’t write that to dismiss other people’s emotional responses; I have intense emotional responses to all kinds of stimuli. They feel potent and, in some way, true, but I find—often enough to dismay me—that I’ve misinterpreted the world’s particularity, be it what my mother said or didn’t say, or some headline I didn’t read past, or a girl smirking at my belly button. The pleasure and challenge of personal nonfiction is to take several lenses to life: the jeweler’s loupe, the camera, the telescope.

Hemley doesn’t use the phrase “human condition,” but he does present the following Emerson quote favorably: “To believe what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense” (18). There it is, the universal. I love

Emerson's essays, but the assumption that people feel as deeply as you do isn't genius: it's easy and, at worst, self-serving. I've met too many people who assume that what they think goes, that what they believe really is true. I have been that person and, no matter how long I live, will be. In all likelihood, you have been, too, no matter how well you adhere to facts.

I think of the students who declared at one university I attended that the student body was no less than 25% African American, and who refused to believe it was 11% even when I showed them the demographic breakdown on the university's website. I think of the anonymous internet commenter who cited the Oregon petition, signed by 31,000 scientists who refused to accept global warming as real; after being shown that the signatories included such scientific luminaries as Ginger Spice and characters from *Star Wars*, he went on to cite the petition again just a few months later. (Admittedly, Chewbacca's knowledge of light speed may be relevant to climate science.) I think of Donald Trump's fervors. No, thank you.

When I've written about my depression or experiences in public spaces like men's restrooms, I've had to quiet the nagging voice: *does this matter?* Not only our subjects, but personal nonfiction itself. Other media are more culturally ascendant, even well beyond fiction and poetry. (If nonfiction is the "fourth genre" among writing, where does it stand among movies and TV shows and Twitter and YouTube?) We share a language, but what if my understanding of it doesn't match anyone else's, and, worse, what if my use of that language doesn't communicate anything like what I'm trying to say?

A fundamental abyss of loneliness underlies all writing. Will we be heard among all the noise of the world? Do we deserve to be?

Maybe those questions move near a useful definition of the underlying human condition of personal nonfiction: do I hear myself? Does anyone else?

"What I assume you shall assume," Walt Whitman famously writes, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." I find myself trusting his certainty, even though the contents of our belly

buttons might disagree. In *Song of Myself*, I have to assume what he assumes—he’s constructing the poem. But, as I interpret it, he’s not claiming to know the interiority of us all; he’s inviting me into his interiority so I can return to explore mine.

If we are good enough writers, if our stories resonate, then readers carry them into their lives. The best personal essays face our fear of intimacy and write past that fear. If an essay succeeds (if we can conceive of writing in terms of success), we bridge our fundamental loneliness.

That loneliness may seem to some like narcissism. But what seems like narcissism to some in the personal essay seems to come from uncertainty. The *I* creates stability; the reference to self seems to fend off the ultimate ontological fear: what am *I*?

That’s the question we readers have to ask: what is *I*?

Recent research into personal pronouns suggests that *I* is used more often by followers, not leaders; by unhappy people more than happy; by the insecure more than the confident. So maybe the assertion that *I am I, I am what I am*, (Popeye aside) isn’t the narcissist’s signal but the self asserting even a momentary certainty in oneself.

I think, therefore I am, I think.

Joan Didion suggests as much in her essay “Why I Write.” She attests that she knows little—or, rather, that she knows little other than writing—and begins:

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 the 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 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.

By the end of her essay, Didion makes clear that the aggressive certainty of I comes from her own uncertainty. My students resist the idea of the I as aggressive; they like to think of their personal essays as excursions toward an other, inviting the reader into their individual space. Sharing is caring, not hostility.

But, frankly, *I* is hostile, even if it's more frequent in the mouths or pens or word processors of the anxious. *I* crystalizes a self, concretizes the uncertain into something as simple, as whole, as small and imposing as a single capital letter. It's why *I* writes.

The grammar of *I* is crucial here. It's a pronoun, according to all the teachers, but the OED is right; it's both pronoun and noun. All other pronouns replace—*you* for reader, *he* for *Claudius*, *they* for *those aggressors*. But *I* doesn't exactly replace the same way. If I change *I went to the store* to *Claudius went to the store*, then I've shifted the sentence to third person. I can write *I, Claudius, went to the store*, but *I* doesn't replace in that case: it parallels. So as a signifier, *I* is oddly universal—after all, in English, we all use it—yet utterly un-unique.

Thus, if *I* doesn't know if the rest of the world shares anything with me at all, then my saying or writing *I* connects (or, at least, tries to); *I* can ignite recognition. As the personal pronoun that readers interpret as “Charles Green,” *I* is separate from them. And *I* is also each of them.

In other words, if I am I, and the reader is I, then we share something. I can take some comfort in that.

Of course, the self on the page isn't whole; it's a *persona*, which comes from the a Latin root meaning *mask*, so even a persona that reads as honest is a mask. If the sliver of self that the writer crafts in the essay is simply a rare, exceptional filament spun and spinning, then *I* isn't self; rather, it is a metonym, a comprehensible substitute for a thing too big to comprehend.

Ultimately, I don't want to defend navel gazing: I want to praise it, to hold it up as personal nonfiction's greatest strength. We shouldn't argue from a downtrodden defense; instead of letting the cliché deaden us, we should rejuvenate it.

Before we breathe, we live in liquid. In the womb, we are a we before we are an I. Remarkably, the placenta contains DNA from *both* mother *and* child; the umbilical cord contains only the child's DNA. If navel gazing does anything, it attempts to rediscover that primal connection. Yes, unsuccessful personal nonfiction fails to explore more beyond one's individual experience. At its best, though, it explores and recreates connection, how we might connect, and how we might not, and why.

Until my mid-twenties, my belly button was an outie. Then my metabolism went on its first phased retirement, and my stomach's expansion made my navel an innie. I clean much more assiduously than I did as a grubby teen. But I still don't know what's in there, and I still need to look. Not to avoid the world and its essential intimacies, but to help me look back out more precisely. The oval of the navel is an eye. It can help us see.

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