On Occasion: The Essay's Moment

KATHRYN MURPHY
(Oriel College, University of Oxford)

Abstract

This essay argues that the essay is written under the sign of occasion. The allegorical figure of *Occasio*, known in Greek as *Kairos*, figured the moment of opportunity which must be seized for success in rhetoric, politics, and life; failure to grasp the occasion leads to *Metanoia*, or regret. The first sections show how the early essayists Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, and Robert Boyle shaped the essay as an occasional genre. The final sections turn to the contemporary writer and photographer Teju Cole, to show how photography engages with the decisive moment of *Occasio*, and how Cole's 'lyric essay' *Blind Spot*, composed of texts and photographs, reinscribes the themes of occasion, seizure, and regret which animated the early essay.

Keywords

Francis Bacon; Michel de Montaigne; Robert Boyle; Teju Cole; the literary essay; *kairos*; occasionality; idleness; temporality; photography

In 1641, an edition of Francis Bacon's *Essayes and Counsels, Civill and Morall* (1625) was printed in Leiden in Latin translation. In 1597, Bacon had published the first English book of essays; the Latin translation was a version of the much revised third edition. The Latin translation gave it a new name – 'Francis Bacon's Faithful Speeches, Ethical, Political, and Economic, or, The Innards of Things' – and an enigmatic title-page, designed by the Dutch engraver Cornelis van Dalen, which offers an idea of what this book might contain. On one side of a table are three men, listening intently to someone who stands, finger raised to teach, on the table's other side. With his capotain hat and characteristic ruff, this didactic figure is recognisable as Bacon himself. He draws his listeners' attention to an image in the sky emerging between parting clouds: a naked woman treading on a ball while holding the ends of a sail which bellies out before her. Her strange hair streams forwards from her brow, while shaven short behind.

Figure 1. Frontispiece to Francis Bacon, *Sermones Fideles, Ethici, Politici, Œconomici…* (Leiden: Franciscus Hackius, 1641). Engraved by Cornelis van Dalen. Source: The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Shelfmark Vet. B3 g.20, © Bodleian Libraries, under Creative Commons license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/.

Contemporaries would easily have identified this figure as a representation of *Occasio*, the personification of opportunity and occasion. *Occasio* walks on a sphere to show that she is never still, using her sail to make the most of the unpredictable wind. Bacon describes her strange coiffure in his essay 'Of Delays': '*Occasion* […] *turneth a Bald Noddle, after she hath presented her locks in Front, and no hold taken*' (Bacon 1985: 68). If you do not seize *Occasio* by the hair in the moment when she is facing you, all that's left to grasp at is the slippery surface of the back of her head, impossible to hold. Though van Dalen places her in

the air, *Occasio* was often depicted floating on her ball on the sea, or on a boat, sailing away, while a figure on the shore laments their failure to grasp the opportunity: this second figure was called '*Metanoia*', literally 'change of mind', or '*Poenitentia*', repentance. Potential readers of Bacon's Latin essays would have realised what the engraving promised: an education in how to seize the moment, grasp opportunities, and avoid regret.

I want to suggest that, as this frontispiece to the first English essayist implies, the essay is written under the sign of Occasio. The first part of this essay shows how early modern writers – Bacon, Michel de Montaigne, and Robert Boyle – establish the essay as the form of occasion, in many senses of the word. But I also want to suggest that this persists in the modern and contemporary essay, despite changes in the meanings of occasion and different ideas of how the essay should relate to time, and in closing I will turn to the contemporary essayist and photograph Teju Cole. Zadie Smith's 2009 volume of essays, *Changing My Mind*, calls back – deliberately or otherwise – to the tradition in its subtitle: 'Occasional Essays'. Her foreword explains that '[t]hese are "occasional essays" in that they were written for particular occasions, particular editors' (Smith 2009: 8). For Smith, occasionality is a matter of accident (her book was written, she tells us, 'without [her] knowledge'), a result of the contingent demands of editors or events giving the writer an occasion, a prompt to write. This sense of 'occasionality', however – a word the *OED* dates to 1767 and defines as 'The quality or fact of being occasional, esp. of being prepared, composed, etc., for a particular occasion' (*OED s.v.* 'occasionality', *n.*) – conceals a stranger history of the essay's occasions. Smith's main title, 'Changing My Mind', is an accidental translation of the Greek *metanoia*, the figure of lamenting regret. The drama of *Occasio* and *Metanoia* is a primal scene for the essay, I want to suggest. In Smith's use, however, *Metanoia* is less penitence than happy flexibility, claiming for essayistic writing a sense of change as growth and expansion into possibility, rather than rumination on the mordant smarts of missed opportunities. As we'll see, this shift from regret to pleasure in change of mind is characteristic of the essayistic occasion.

***

Roman *Occasio*'s Greek equivalent was the masculine figure of *Kairos*, who bore most of the same allegorical signifiers: winged feet walking on a ball, long forelocks and a shaven back of the head. Both were gods or personifications of the moment or the right time. The earliest meanings of *kairos* were as a 'penetrable opening, an aperture': an exploitable gap (Paul

2014: 45). But it came to mean, primarily, the right or critical moment or opportunity for some kind of action. Erwin Panofsky defines *kairos* as 'the brief, decisive moment which marks a turning-point in the life of human beings or in the development of the universe', a pivot-point of before and after (Panofsky 1972: 71). *Kairos* erupts into the ongoing flow of time, called '*chronos*' in Greek or '*tempus*' in Latin. On van Dalen's frontispiece, an hourglass sits on the table, a measure of chronological time; Bacon interrupts its undifferentiated flow by drawing attention to Occasio.

Kairos is currently having a moment. Jenny Erpenbeck, the German novelist, essayist, and opera director, has recently published a novel under that title, in which 'the god of fortunate moments', who has 'a lock of hair on his forehead, which is the only way of grasping hold of him', presides over the story of a souring love affair and the fall of Communist East Germany, in which contingency transforms into fate on the spontaneous decisions of the protagonists, the momentary becoming momentous (Erpenbeck 2023: 5). Jenny Odell's recent book, with the telling title *Saving Time*, sets itself explicitly in the domain of *kairos*, allying occasionality with hopeful uncertainty and the evasion of inevitability. In the context of anticipated climate collapse and exploitative late-capitalist wage labour, she writes, we have need of a sense of a gap in time, as an escape from helplessness in the face of catastrophe, in which 'doubt is a lifeline, a little space for agency […] a strangely un-collapsible *kairos*' (Odell 2023: 276). The essay tries to hold open the aperture of the moment just long enough for uncertainty to slip in.

In the Renaissance, seizing *Occasio* was less about avoiding global cataclysm, and more about the exploitation of contingency to benefit, whether personal or political. In what has been called the 'Machiavellian moment' of the Renaissance (Pocock 2016), the tact and trick of times, knowing when to act, and what particular actions suited the moment and its circumstances, was the secret of rule: Machiavelli's scandalous *Prince* taught 'a knowledge of *occasione*' as a secret of how to rule (Paul 2014: 44). It was also a necessary skill for the counsellors who tried to guide the ruler's actions.

That the 1625 edition of Bacon's essays was called *Essayes or Counsels* suggests that he saw his new form in this domain. Bacon had already had his mind on occasion: in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), he wrote of the need 'to frame the mind to be pliaunt and obedient to occasion', a capacity which he calls, following the ancient historian Livy, a *Versatile Ingenium*, a changeable mind. Not all *metanoia* is bad: being flexible in response to circumstance is a gift, as long as such flexibility happens before or at the moment, not after. The acquisition of skills of occasion was however tricksy, since *kairos* and *occasio* emerged

unrepeatably out of the welter of contingent circumstance and idiosyncratic personality that attend every occasion. Some people, says Bacon, 'make vse of occasions aptly and dexterously', while others lack 'point and penetration' of judgement and thus 'come in, too late after the occasion' (Bacon 2000: 173–4).

In 1605, Bacon complains that this 'wisedome touching Negotiation or businesse' had not yet been written down. In the *Advancement*, he describes how some Roman senators were 'professors' of this wisdom: they would 'walke at certaine howers' at a known place, and 'Citizens would resort vnto them, and consulte with them of the marriage of a daughter, or of the imploying of a sonne, or of a purchase or bargaine, or of an accusatio*n* and euery other occasion incident to mans life' (158–9). Bacon's essays, which advise on how to travel, how to grow a garden, how to colonise, how to know when to lie and when to tell the truth in negotiations, on marriage, children, and health, are the literary form of such oral counsels.

Many of them also give advice on time and timeliness. The ability to be 'seasonable' or timely in discourse is recommended in 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation'; 'Of Innovations' discusses when and how to begin new things. 'Of Dispatch' – about how to perform actions quickly – argues that 'To choose Time is to save Time; And an Unseasonable Motion is but Beating the Ayre', like *Metanoia*, grasping after the retreating *Occasio*. 'Of Delayes' – the opposite of dispatch – also emphasises the necessity of the skill of knowing the right time: 'There is surely no greater Wisedome, then well to time the Beginnings, and Onsets of Things […] The Ripenesse, or Unripenesse, of the Occasion […] must ever be well weighed' (Bacon 1985: 78, 68–9). Bacon's *Essays or Counsels* found a literature of occasion, grasping the kairotic moment by means of the essay.

***

Bacon was the first English essayist. The first essayist at all, Michel de Montaigne, had already seized and inaugurated the essayistic moment in 1580. Montaigne had retreated to his library to write, taking himself out of the 'affayrs of the world' which are the domain of Bacon's 'wisedome of Counsaile and aduise', and seemingly therefore out of reach of *Occasio* (Bacon 2000: 159). Their example as early essayists often splits along the lines of this engagement with political occasion: while Bacon is public, Montaigne is retired and private; while Montaigne is self-disclosing, refusing to offer advice, Bacon is didactic. But Montaigne's essays, too, have been read as a form of counsel, written under the sign of *Occasio* (Paul 2020: 110–21). That the first English translation of Montaigne, by John Florio,

was published in 1603 under the title *The Essayes, Or, Morall, Politike and Millitarie Discourses*, suggests that they were seen as a contribution to political writing. Bacon had claimed that there was only one good 'fourme of writing' fit for the 'variable argumente of Negotiation and occasions': the Machiavellian form of '*discourse vpon Histories or Examples*' (Bacon 2000: 162). The first essays of Montaigne's book, even more than Bacon's, are little commentaries on assembled historical anecdotes. But while historical example could offer precedents, what those precedents repeatedly show is that the right action could not be legislated in advance: that diverse circumstances and occasions baffle rule-bound decision-making. Montaigne's very first essay, 'We reach the same end by discrepant means', assembles examples of how historical figures captured in battle achieve mercy from their opponents through the different actions of submission or defiance, in their particular circumstances; 'Whether the governor of a besieged fortress should go out and parley' assembles ancient examples *pro* and *con*, but ultimately fails to reach a resolution. Montaigne's essays are not counsels: the consideration of actions in various circumstances tends to reemphasise that circumstances, particulars, and idiosyncratic people are too irreducibly singular to allow for any kind of 'universal insight' or 'general observation'.

In fact, Montaigne takes the terms of the discourse of *Occasio*, and transforms them. The late essay 'Of Repentance' has a significant title, seeming to name the lamenting figure of *Poenitentia* or *Metanoia*. But the essay sets itself against regret – not by teaching the reader how to seize the moment, but by suggesting that regret over its loss is redundant, fruitless. 'I rarely repent', begins Montaigne. Initially, he means that he avoids the ecclesiastical rites of confession and penitence. Montaigne suggests that his vices are inevitable, a result of 'natural inclinations' (Montaigne 2003: 745), and that repenting of them would be both futile (since they are ineradicable), and hypocritical (since not really accompanied by the impetus to amend). But across the essay, theological context shifts to missed occasions. 'In business matters', Montaigne claims, 'several good opportunities' have escaped him; but this was unavoidable, and no reason to wish to have acted differently. '[M]y counsels have been good,' he says, 'according to the circumstances'; 'I should do the same a thousand years from now in similar situations.' Counsel can be good even if it leads to opportunity lost. 'The soundness of any plan depends on the time', he writes, sounding like Bacon; 'circumstances and things roll about and change incessantly'. But in the face of this changeability, we are helpless: 'There are secret parts in the matters we handle which cannot be guessed […] mute factors that do not show'. Our knowledge is limited, and each moment an impossibly complex coalescence of circumstance. As a result, regret is a pointless fantasy

of a remedy impossible either now or even at the time. And it is only of their time that we should consider our decisions: 'I am not considering what [the matter] is at this moment,' Montaigne writes, 'but what it was when I was deliberating about it' (749). To succumb to *metanoia* is to get something fundamentally wrong about how we exist and act in time, imagining our present selves are substitutable with the person of the past. The changed mind of Montaigne's retrospect is instead at peace with its difference from its previous instantiation, rather than wishing it could retroject itself in order to make a different decision.

It is with thinking about his existence across time that Montaigne begins 'Of Repentance', in a famous passage often used to characterise the essay's peculiar temporality. 'I cannot keep my subject still', Montaigne claims:

> It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. […] This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and […] contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects. […] I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth […] I do not contradict. (740)

This is full of the language of occasion. Montaigne's 'staggering' subject, tottering like *Occasio* on a turning ball, is only grasped in the moment of attention, when the thinking 'I' 'takes holds' of it, recording the 'changeable occurrences' of the occasion. The writing adapts to the minute, responding with versatile mind to the 'circumstances and aspects' of the time.

But the coincidence with Bacon's teaching of the tact of times goes no further. Montaigne uses verbs which suggest the urge to 'take hold of' the subject, to seize the passing moment; to keep it still. But this inevitably fails. Montaigne's subject is most frequently himself ('It is many years now that I have had only myself as object of my thoughts, that I have been examining and studying only myself', he writes elsewhere (331)), and he begins 'Of Repentance' by saying that, while '[o]thers form man', he only reports on a 'particular one' (740). This makes the paradigmatic scene of *Occasio* and *Metanoia* into an internal psychodrama, as the essayistic 'I' attempts and fails to seize itself. This is not memoir, however: not an attempted revivification of a past self, a study of its emotions

recollected in tranquillity. Instead, Montaigne tries to catch his present mind in the act of thinking. The temporality is impossible; in the moment of the divide of the self into writing 'I' and object of attention, the two are launched into different temporal regimes. The 'I' belongs to *chronos*, to the ongoing flow of time and the sentence; the subjected self is kairotic, escaping the grasp, always changing, and indeed changing through the very process of writing by which the 'I' attempts to see and hold it.

The opening paragraphs of 'Of Repentance' might seem, then, like a monologue spoken by *Metanoia*, regretting unseized moments. But instead they refuse regret. Even if he would 'make [himself] very different from what he is' if he had time again, Montaigne writes, 'now it is done' (740). This isn't just a serene and Stoic acceptance of the things one cannot change; it is an assertion of the self's discontinuity across time, and the kind of writing that demands. This suggests not only that the essay's moment is the time of writing, the *now* and sense of presence which often seen as characteristic; but that each moment in an essay, as in a life, is a discontinuous instant, a seizable moment, and an opening of opportunity for change and new thought. Adorno, in his 'Essay as Form', writes that

> The demand for continuity in one's train of thought tends to prejudge the inner coherence of the object […] A presentation characterized by continuity would contradict an antagonistic subject matter unless it defined continuity as discontinuity as the same time. […] Discontinuity is essential to the essay. (Adorno 1984: 16).

Adorno reiterates the contradictory thought of Montaigne: the essay portrays passing, and is thus characterised by continuity, in the sense of the flowing movement of *chronos*; at the same time, the 'antagonistic' dynamic of essayist and 'subject' – especially when that antagonistic subject is the self – defines 'continuity as discontinuity'. The essay seizes its subject not once and for all, but over and over again, in the 'moment' of each utterance; as writing or reading passes from one sentence to the next, they become a register of 'various and changeable occurrences' – a characteristic as much of Adorno's own saccadic aphorisms as of Montaigne's sentences. This inevitably produces contradictions, but only from a perspective which perceives them simultaneously: at any given instant, Montaigne, or his writing, is utterly self-coincident. Adorno writes that the essay 'allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly' (9), though Montaigne's claim that he contradicts himself but never truth is pretty explicit.

The dynamic of missed opportunity and metanoic self-recrimination is replaced by an ever-changing relation between the writing 'I' and its contemplated self. Montaigne places himself on the one hand on the unstable ball, staggering and passing with *Occasio*, and on the shore: not, however, throwing his hands up in dismay, but holding onto his pen and annotating the passing. Montaigne proposes that the mind's self-experience makes of every moment an occasion, even the most ordinary of lives filled with potential dynamic interest. 'I set forth a humble and inglorious life', he states; 'that does not matter' (740). Instead of the telling historical anecdotes, which Machiavelli and Bacon think teach a knowledge of occasions, Montaigne's 'common and private life' affords just as much matter for attention.

***

The two first published essayists thus offer different models of the essay's occasion: on the one hand, a teaching of the knack of times; on the other, the essay itself as repeatedly seizing the moments of encounter between thinking mind and its passing subject. The distinction is also one of how the essay thinks its time is spent. Bacon's essays address themselves to 'Negotiation or businesse', the 'serious vse of businesse and occasions' (Bacon 2000: 158, 119). They are concerned with opportunity in the social world of politics and self-fashioning. Montaigne, meanwhile, claims that his essaying begins precisely when such business is let up, in the undifferentiated, unco-opted time of leisure. In 'Of Idleness', he explains that he retired from public life in order to 'bother about nothing' and let his mind 'entertain itself in full idleness'; when his idle mind behaved like a runaway horse, however, producing 'fantastic monsters' and 'chimeras', he turned to ink and paper to try to restrain them (24). Seventeenth-century essays and meditations often situated themselves in this zone of idle time. They bore Latin titles like *Horae subsecivae*, or *succisivae*, or *vacivae,* or *consecretae*: hours set apart, empty, deducted from business, with subtitles like 'Spare-houres of meditations' or 'Some long-vacation hours redeemed'. In the Renaissance, this lack of occupation could be associated with freedom of mind and the potential for creative inspiration. But idle time was also dangerous: available to temptation to sin, and a loss of time and business that might lead to metanoic regrets (Baert 2021: 108–17). Into this nexus steps Robert Boyle, who combines the Baconian anxiety about the need to learn a skill of seizing time, with the Montaignean consecration of the quotidian moment.

The 'Thoughts of man', wrote Boyle in an early essay, 'will do any thing rather then Nothing' (Boyle 1991: 196). For Boyle, idleness is a domain of potential *metanoia*, as time

and opportunity slip away; and an opening of opportunity for temptation to sin. Idleness is not a sin in itself, but it is a great occasion of sin, 'exposing the empty Soul, like an uninhabited place, to the next Passion or Temptation that takes the opportunity to seize upon it': it makes of a person's mind a kairotic gap which can be seized by the 'Ghostly Adversary', the devil (Boyle 1665: 3–4). To be idle is also wasteful: it squanders time, a commodity more precious than money, because more scarce and of more moment to salvation. Boyle writes that 'Time has Eyes to see it's way forwards, but no Eares to be cald back by': 'It is Irrecouerable and Vnrecallable' (Boyle 1991: 241). Like *Occasio*, time, once past, cannot be recalled. Boyle wants, as Raymond Anselment has written, to 'profit' from these scraps of time (Anselment 2009: 76). The remedy is a training of mind, 'Teaching men to Improve their Thoughts, as well as Husband their Time' (Boyle 1665: A3v).

Boyle's anxiety of idleness contrasts with the contemporary valorisation of this exempted temporality as a domain of essayistic freedom. Before the kairotic *Saving Time*, Jenny Odell's previous book was called *How to Do Nothing*, an argument for *not* putting each moment to the service of purpose, and for allow our minds the freedom to wander, without the constant stimulation of the attention economy (Odell 2019). The contemporary essay defends underdetermined moments, the creativity of idleness, against the encroachments of quantification and monetization of time: advocating for resistant temporalities, for slowness (Berg and Seeber 2016), aimlessness (Lutz 2021), idleness (O'Connor 2018), meandering of thought, as armature against the pressures of business and productivity. According to Michelle Boulous Walker, in a work advocating 'slow philosophy', the essay 'allows us the time and space to reconsider our work in open and open-ended ways'. 'Slow reading' – Boulous Walker's advocated habit – 'takes its cue from the essay' (Boulous Walker 2017: 56).

Boyle, at the origins of the essay, certainly finds idleness, in contrast, threatening. But rather than recommending business as its remedy, Boyle's recommendation is for a new 'way of Thinking' (Boyle 1665: 1), with which the mind can occupy itself between 'the more stated Employments, and important Occurrences of humane Life', in what he calls, variously, 'smaller parcels of Time', 'uncertain Parentheses […] or Interludes', 'little Fragments, or Parcels of Time'. These little threshold moments, empty of apparent content, are liable to be 'dissipated, and lost', and so Boyle advocates a practice that can 'rescue' or 'redeem' these 'Portions of our Life', so that one does not 'lose the Fragments and lesser Intervals of a thing incomparably more precious than any Metal, Time'. We should 'lay hold on the short, and transient Opportunities' these time-fragments offer us (8–11).

Boyle thus aims to redeem time, not by filling it with negotiation, but by recognising that every moment is an occasion. His most sustained address to occasional thinking was the book-length *Occasional Reflections upon Several Subiects Whereto is Premis'd a Discourse about Such Kind of Thoughts*, which begins with a long prefatory account of how to think occasionally, before exemplifying the practice in over seventy reflections. The reflection is 'of the nature of short and Occasional *Essays*' (Boyle 1665: a2v): 'occasional' in that they are chancy and intermittent, unplanned, taking place in the intervals of business; and because they are *occasioned*, or prompted, by attention directed even at unpromising material.

Cultivating occasional thinking can 'make the World vocal', so that 'almost every occurrence', 'the little Accidents of […] Life', can speak. It makes the world 'a well furnished *Promptuary*', or a storehouse of spurs to thought. Indeed, the world is over-determined: circumstances 'may be so many ways consider'd, and so variously compounded, that they may […] be suppos'd capable of affording Occasions to Notions, and Reflections, far more numberless than themselves' (Boyle 1665: 4, b2r, 14, 24). Boyle, like Montaigne, sees each moment of experience as infinitely rich in possible extrapolation. The titles of Boyle's occasional reflections demonstrate this seizing of the quotidian: 'Upon the sight of a Wind-mill standing still'; 'Upon the sight of some variously-coloured Clouds'; 'Seeing a Child picking the Plums out of a piece of Cake his Mother had given him for his Breakfast'. Even the most minor of occasions has potential.

The value of these occasions can even come in being distracted from them. Distraction can be, like idleness, an opportunity for sin: it is a 'Policy of the Deuill, when he sees vs zealously employed […] to endeuor to distract vs by […] some Interuening Thought' (Boyle 1991: 200). But such interventions can also be kairotic. Trivial subjects are a mode of dowsing, 'like Hazel switches that are said to help Metallists to the Discovery of Mines': they are themselves negligible, but might lead to deeper, unanticipated resources. The fleeting thoughts that occur to us while thinking about something else are, significantly, 'like Opportunity […] painted Bald behind, [which] if they be not intercepted […] in their Passage, are but fruitlessely pursu'd' (Boyle 1991: 201). In 'some cases', Boyle claims, 'the Occasion is not so much the Theme of the Meditation, as the Rise' (Boyle 1665: 24). 'Rise', here, means prompt, reason, cause; the 'subject' of occasional reflection may really be only the excuse, the pretext, for what comes up (Murphy 2022). This oblique process can be trusted: there is a 'Strange Efficacy of pursued Thoughts' (Boyle 1991: 187). Boyle's occasional world translates the vacancy and vanity of idleness into a plenitude of latent essays, every moment, every object, an opportunity. He saturates time with possibility. The

essay, as the record of this directed but distractible meditation, is a realisation of that everywhere latent potential, and, at the same time, a substitute for all the other unrealised essays to which any moment could give rise.

***

In Teju Cole's *Blind Spot*, 'a lyric essay that combines photography and text', the Nigerian-American essayist sets his own photographs alongside short texts headed by the name of the place in which the pictures were taken (Cole 2017: 324). Like Boyle's *Occasional Reflections*, each piece starts with a 'rise' – the photograph – and accompanies it with reflections, some directly connected, some oblique. And as in the seventeenth-century examples which have absorbed this essay so far, there is a concern with the anxiety attendant on seizing the occasion. One of several pieces called 'Brooklyn' shows a woman from behind, with very bright dyed red hair, entering a shop. The text doesn't describe the image, but instead the general conditions of taking a photograph. Everything moves – 'you are moving, the cars are moving, other people are moving, even the sun is moving':

> and in the middle of this multidimensional moment you must decide when to press the shutter, decide which of these rapidly refreshing instants is more interesting than the others around it. A second before, it has not yet arrived. A second later, it is irretrievably gone. (Cole 2017: 166)

This is the anxiety of *Metanoia*. The moment is multidimensional – it is 'so variously compounded', in Boyle's words, that circumstance is beyond comprehension. The particular configuration of Cole's image will never come again. That the thought emerges in relation to an image of the back of someone's head, a motif which recurs across the book, recalls the allegory of occasion. The moment at which the shutter is pressed makes the decision, seizes the occasion, closes the aperture of *kairos*.

The kairotic instant has long been associated with photography. In 1952, Henri Cartier-Bresson's photobook *Images à la Sauvette* – images on the sly, on the fly, snatched or hasty – was published in English as *The Decisive Moment*. Cartier-Bresson's famous dictum in that book's preface, that the art of photography rested in 'the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organisation of forms which give that event its proper expression', makes it the photographer's task to master

kairos: to be ready, as Bacon recommended, to recognise the right moment and exploit it. But Cole, though sensitive to the regret of the moment unseized, is nonetheless critical of the idea, writing in an essay that 'To limit Cartier-Bresson's photos to just a single moment misses the point'; quoting the photographer Alex Webb, he observes that there are '"multiple potential moments to discover"' (Cole 2016: 161). Moments are multidimensional; the decision isolates not the *right* moment, but '*which* of these rapidly refreshing instants' will become the photograph. The air is alive with possible photographs, many untaken. Over the page the red-haired woman appears again, seen from greater distance; the text tells us, however, that this photograph was taken first. Like Montaigne and Adorno, Cole's *Blind Spot* proposes a time of continuous discontinuity, a mosaic of many moments, many possible photographs, each a matter of placement in space and time. 'Your progress', Cole writes in the text accompanying the first Brooklyn image, 'is not a line, direct or winding, from one point to another, but a flickering series of scenes' (Cole 2017: 166). Like Boyle, he suggests that the moment contains within it a plenitude of different possible 'takes'; there are many ways of taking its 'rise'.

Cole's pictures, like Boyle's reflections, turn away from the iconic, emblematic, journalistic or documentary, towards revelations in the ordinary. His images are determinedly oblique; they show not 'the significance of an event', but unostentatious though formally rich and compelling compositions. Despite the global peripateticism of the photographs in *Blind Spot*, there is little telling differentiation of, say, Brooklyn from Beirut from Brazzaville. This difficulty in placing places reflects the fact that 'the world is more uniform than most photo essays acknowledge', as Cole wrote in the essay 'Far Away from Home'. 'This doesn't mean', however, that 'the world is uninteresting. It only means that the world is more uniform than most photo essays acknowledge' (Cole 2016: 227). At the end of *Blind Spot*, he refers to 'the continuity of places … the singing line that connects them all' (Cole 2017: 324). A continuity of discontinuity, sameness across distance. The purpose is not to exoticise, but to show the complexity in what's common. Cole quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty: '"The idea we have of the world would be overturned if we could succeed in seeing the intervals between things […] as […] things themselves"' (Cole 2017: 220). Boyle's occasional thinking redeemed 'Intervals of Time': Cole, too, elevates the gap, making blind spots of place and time visible and available to attention.

On the page facing an extraordinary image taken in Zürich – the interior of a hotel room, in which the doors of a wardrobe are covered in a picture of a lake and Alps behind it, a ship on the lake, which look as if they are a mirror reflecting the outside world, incongruous

against striped wallpaper – is a text which begins obliquely: 'I sat there for hours and watched the sun slip across the landscape. Anything can happen. The point is to shatter serenity; the absurdity of contrast between before and after is the very point' (76). The very point of what? In an essay evocatively titled 'Memories of Things Unseen', Cole had remarked that photography 'selects, out of the flow of time, a moment to be preserved, with the moments before and after falling away like sheer cliffs' (Cole 2016: 197). Out of *chronos*, the photograph selects a moment of *kairos*, on which before and after pivot. But in the meditation on this image, something else is at stake. The word 'point' invokes both the original title of *Blind Spot*, which was first published in Italian as *Punto d'Ombra,* shadow point; and Roland Barthes's famous distinction between *punctum* and *studium* in photography. The *studium* is the ostensible subject of the image, its historical contextualisation and interpretation, its relation to a 'body of information' and to knowledge. The *punctum*, meanwhile, 'will break (or punctuate) the *studium*'; a piercing detail which captures the viewer, unplanned by the photographer (Barthes calls it an 'accident', an 'unexpected flash') (Barthes 1981: 26–7, 43, 94–6). The tension between the continuity of *studium* and the interrupting *punctum* is the dynamic of *chronos* and *kairos*.

In this text, the particular 'anything' that might shatter serenity is terrorist violence: an eruption into the serene scene of lake and hotel. This is a different kind of kairotic moment; one which suggests that there are decisive moments which are not within individual agency. Another image from Zürich faces a text which says 'I think the Annunciation must have happened on a day like this one. Stillness' (70). Stillness anticipates an imminent angel: before and after on the turn. The awaited interruption in the second Zürich image is more violent. Cole observes that the incongruity of such eruptions is itself the illusion: that, in other places – 'places I don't live, in other cities, in remote borderlands, on farms, what happens also happens there' (76) – violence occurs elsewhere, without spectacle. As its title suggests, *Blind Spot* wants to acknowledge what is elided in the process of seeing: 'Even in the most vigilant eye', Cole writes, 'there is a blind spot. What is missing?' (325). Not only is the imagined terrorist attack unrepresented, because only anticipated; the anxious anticipation of potential attacks 'in hotels popular with Westerners' ignores violence perpetrated beyond the capture of the lens. The *punctum* may be a piercing detail absent in the photograph's representation.

Cole thus makes the photograph visible not as a singular point of time, but as a register of duration. 'Photography', he reminds us, 'registers, in pixels or in print, the quality and variety of light entering an aperture during a specific length of time'; '[t]here are no

instantaneous photographs' (Cole 2016: 165). In a review of a book of photographs by Howard French, Cole praised it for its distinction from photojournalism. French's images are 'far more patient':

> the photographer has not so much captured a "decisive moment" as gained us admission into private moments of long duration. Many of the images project the longueurs that are […] a substantial part of regular life: unhurried, unharried, the part of life that isn't caught up in working for pay […] (167).

Cole claims for French's photographs something like Montaigne's paradoxical characterisation of the essay: it portrays passing, not just as fleetingness, but as duration, moment to moment. The 'unhurried, unharried' time of idleness is redeemed by its record and preservation, just as the essay which accompanies the image of 'Zürich' amplifies the photograph's sense of long hours waiting for an event.

Cole's reworking of the 'decisive moment' and the *punctum* in relation to photography also revises the anxious metanoic regret over the unseized occasion, the untaken photograph. In one of the many texts on Beirut, Cole reports a loss: 'a couple of weeks ago, I developed a roll and found it empty: thirty-six lost shots.' A technical error meant that he was not taking pictures: 'each time I framed a shot and clicked the shutter and advanced the film, I was fooling myself'. This is *Metanoia*, lamenting the now irretrievable moments. But the text ends consoled by a line of Emily Dickinson: 'The fine – impalpable Array – That swaggers on the eye.' 'I take this', writes Cole, 'as a reminder that what is seen is greater than what the camera can capture' (162): the multidimensional moments, rapidly refreshing instants, are a continual swaggering (Montaigne's staggering subject), an impalpable array that always exceeds what it is possible to grasp, leaving more latent that will ever be realised.

***

Adorno's 'The Essay as Form' ends with an 'enthusiastic fragment' from Nietzsche, which he allies with essayistic temporality:

> If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things: and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was

> needed to produce this one event and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed. (Nietzsche 1968: 532–3)

If just *one* moment, Nietzsche suggests, can be adequately seized and affirmed, the fleetingness of all other circumstance and uncaptured time will be redeemed. Though Adorno immediately tempers Nietzsche's enthusiasm by suggesting that 'the essay distrusts even this kind of justification and affirmation' (23), in each of Montaigne, Bacon, and Boyle, we saw a mode of essayistic consolation for the irretrievably evaporated instant: whether in disarming the regret of *Metanoia*, or teaching the seizing of the occasion, or inculcating a mode of occasional thought which rescues lost time.

Cole's photographic imagination offers a different kind of affirmation of the instant, and of consolation. The final photograph of *Blind Spot* reprints an earlier image, of a boy on a beach in Brazzaville, his gaze averted, his gloved hands holding onto a red railing at the height of his forehead. At its first appearance, Cole meditated on the echoes of Christ carrying the cross; the final sentence reads 'Suddenly, he lowers his head, his eyes disappear' (22), suggesting that the photograph is taken at the moment at which the encounter evaporates, as the boy turns away, the moment unseized. At the end, however, Cole has 'rescanned the negative', and, adjusting the settings, discovered his eyes and his face in clarity, despite the shadow. The supposedly decisive moment of the photograph, or the essay, is repeatable; it can be returned to and adjusted. Rather than analogised with Christ, in his second apparition the boy is identified with Mangaaka, a mythic sentry and carved 'power figure' of the people along the Congo River, who defends them against the invading European colonists. 'This boy is double-visioned', writes Cole: 'He is looking out, looking outward, but here, poised at the edge of the crisis, he is also looking inward, looking in' (322). Balanced on the edge of crisis – literally a decision-point – the boy is a figure for occasion itself. But this is his second manifestation. At the close of *Blind Spot* is something impossible for *Metanoia* to imagine: a reappearance, a repetition, *Kairos* come again.

References

Adorno, Theodor W. (1984 [1958]), 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature, Volume One* [1958], ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 3–23.

Anselment, Raymond (2009), ‘Robert Boyle and the Art of Occasional Meditation’, *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 32: 4, 73–92.

Bacon, Francis (1985 [1625]), *The Oxford Francis Bacon, Vol. 15: The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bacon, Francis (2000 [1605]), *The Aduancement of Learning*, ed. Michael Kiernan, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baert, Barbara (2021), *From Kairos to Occasio through Fortuna: Text/Image/Afterlife*, trans. Lizzy van Rijswijck, Turnhout: Brepols.

Barthes, Roland (1981 [1980]), *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang.

Berg, Maggie and Barbara K. Seeber (2016), *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Boulous Walker, Michelle (2017), *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution*, London: Bloomsbury.

Boyle, Robert (1991 [c.1642]), ‘The Doctrine of Thinking’ and ‘Of Time and Idleness’, in *The Early Essays and Ethics of Robert Boyle*, ed. John T. Harwood, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 185–202 and 237–48.

Boyle, Robert (1665), *Occasional Reflections upon Several Subiects Whereto is Premis’d a Discourse about Such Kind of Thoughts*, London: W. Wilson for Henry Herringman.

Cole, Teju (2017), *Blind Spot*, London: Penguin.

Cole, Teju (2016), *Known and Strange Things*, London: Faber & Faber.

Erpenbeck, Jenny (2023 [2022]), *Kairos*, trans. Michael Hofmann, London: Granta Books.

Lutz, Tom (2021), *Aimlessness*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Montaigne, Michel de (2003 [1943, 1580]), *Essays*, *The Complete Works of Montaigne: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald Frame, London: Everyman.

Murphy, Kathryn (2022), ‘On On: The Essay As Prepositionality’, *The Contemporary Essay*, eds Lola Boorman, Ella Barker, and Luke Young, *ASAP/J*, https://asapjournal.com/the-contemporary-essay-on-on-the-essay-as-prepositionality-kathryn-murphy/.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968), *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

O’Connor, Brian (2018), *Idleness: A Philosophical Essay*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Odell, Jenny (2019), *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing.

Odell, Jenny (2023), *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*, London: Bodley Head.

Erwin Panofsky, (1972 [1939]), 'Father Time', in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, London: Harper & Row, pp. 69–93.

Paul, Joanne (2014), 'The Use of Kairos in Renaissance Political Philosophy', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 67, 43–78.

Paul, Joanne (2020), *Counsel and Command In Early Modern English Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pocock, J.G.A. (2016 [1975]), *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Smith, Zadie (2009), *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, London: Hamish Hamilton.