

## FEATURE



In a culture that values extroversion over introversion, what might we be missing out on?

Dorothy Canfield wrote in 1932: '[Those] with restless, inquiring minds do not belong in hermits' cells any more than racehorses belong in an aquarium'.<sup>1</sup> It is a slick analogy and one which more than offsets the endless, pejorative, accompanying words when reading about introverts. Glowering,<sup>2</sup> embittered,<sup>3</sup> sad,<sup>4</sup> shadowy,<sup>4</sup> touchy<sup>5</sup> and awkward<sup>6</sup> are just some of the assumptions and assertions that precede introvert. Unlike his/her fortunate counterpart, the extrovert, who is, by definition, transparent – easy to be around, a mixer, a mingler, bright<sup>7</sup> and brilliant<sup>8</sup> – introverts are often weighed down by society's suspicion, its demands and its desire to lay *everything* on the table.

Introverts, of course, prefer to hold something back, because they do not bow to the cloying and conspicuous game before them. Why say something blindingly obvious? Why indulge in 'parties [and] small talk?'<sup>9</sup> Why be upbeat when it is perhaps a very ordinary, if not extremely boring, day? It seemingly takes a lot to stimulate an introvert, whereas extroverts survive on plain crackers and their own sense of fun. Winnicott famously wrote: 'The extrovert needs to find fantasy in living; and the introvert may become self-sufficient, invulnerable, isolated and socially useless.'<sup>10</sup> Fantasy/imagining improbable things versus impossible to damage/socially useless; it is quite a stark sentence. And yet there is so much in it.

Extroverts *do* create fantasies of sorts – they are men and women of action. Things will be built, connections made, experiences had. Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*, theorises over extroversion's first-class personality trait compared with introversion's second-class standing, certainly from an American perspective:

'We started off from the beginning as a kind of anti-intellectual culture that valued action over contemplation. This only intensified in the 20th century, when people started moving into the cities having to compete in the job market, selling themselves in job interviews and on behalf of their company... what historians call the cult of personality.'<sup>11</sup>

Something in the above was not natural to the introvert and indeed resisted – the choice to pursue a deeper sense of self more important; 'Romantic preoccupations [of] self and art'<sup>12</sup> essential to wellbeing and faithful to an inner voice. Winnicott's words though – invulnerable and socially useless – don't they hint at *strength*? A person with strong beliefs, unwilling or reluctant to dilute, diminish or decrease his/her original dreams? And socially useless – isn't that another way of saying he/she doesn't believe in the not-so-grand political venture, the 'phenomenon of bullsh\*t jobs,'<sup>13</sup> as David Graeber would later observe?

We could put this to rest with the jury now and circumvent *all* the traditional definitions of an introvert (Feltham/Dryden: 'Inward-turning of libido or heightened interest in internal events to the detriment of external reality';<sup>14</sup> Cardwell: 'Reluctance to seek the stimulation of social contacts... generally more passive and controlled')<sup>15</sup> by quoting a few famous names: Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Karl Marx, Isaac Newton, Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt. But I would rather describe two lesser-known individuals whose behaviour and thoughts – to me at least – are insightful and invigorating; individuals who challenge Taylor/Gilbreth time and motion studies and the Myers-Briggs personality test (or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) as it is misused today, six decades after its conception.

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# Introverts need an audience too



## WORDS

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### Case study one: Louis MacNeice

MacNeice died young, aged 55, as is the prerogative of the genius or polymath. He was ‘...always to one side of the fashionable drift... of the swim... but never in it’.<sup>16</sup> He worked in universities and with the BBC (producing radio drama and features) and was well known as a poet. His introversion brings with it so many examples of a personality type. He was a ‘...spiritual isolationist [and] frugal of speech’.<sup>12</sup> He ‘...badly needed to feel he belonged to a group, [yet] he hated institutions’.<sup>12</sup> His ‘growing solipsism’<sup>12</sup> was a straitjacket in many ways and one that pushed people away. This could be both disconcerting and, at times, humorous. His ‘...lack of warmth, silences [and] impenetrable moods’<sup>16</sup> hardly made him wished-for or compulsory company, but then he could indirectly represent *every employee* with his bold retorts; for example, when ‘...a time and motion expert dared to ask what he was doing when not visibly preparing a programme’. “Thinking,” he growled.<sup>12</sup>

Such a cutting response goes to the heart of the age-old introvert/extrovert argument or thesis and embodies Victor Hugo’s memorable quote that ‘Man is not idle, because he is absorbed in thought. There is visible labor and there is... invisible labor’.<sup>17</sup> The West evidently doesn’t see or *value* invisible labour (or ‘thinking’ as it is traditionally known). And so, in the words of the poet, MacNeice: ‘Such was our aim/But aims too often languish and instead/We hack and hack. What ought to soar and flame/Shies at its take-off, all our kites collapse/Our spirit leaks away...’<sup>16</sup>

This is the case for the prosecution – that we are hacking away in an extrovert’s world, instead of soaring, and our spirit thus leaks away, sadness and despair everywhere because of this thin, easy, blinkered perspective. Man is mostly judged on his output, his industriousness, his efficiency, and crucial snippets of his character are conveniently ignored. ‘Public opinion remorselessly clamping valuable human personalities,’<sup>1</sup> is how Canfield put it. There is a cultural ‘...lopsidedness... that [often] values extroversion exclusively’.<sup>11</sup> In its simplest form: does ‘I’ speak up, or only ‘E’? And which vowel would you prefer to be in the pub with because entertainment and confidence

## “The West evidently doesn’t see or *value* invisible labour (or ‘thinking’ as it is traditionally known)”

undoubtedly matter in this ostentatious and competitive Darwinian world?

History shines a useful light on the struggles of introverts, and Jennifer O Grimes certainly believes that such a personality type is on the autism scale/spectrum<sup>18</sup> – behind Asperger’s syndrome on the continuum and then autism in all its forms. Extroverts have their frothy ‘...social relationships and the ability to regulate emotions’<sup>19</sup> but introverts deem them ‘a shade too reverential’<sup>16</sup> not inventive enough and ‘...choreographed to swarm in one direction’.<sup>20</sup> Edith Sheffer, in her book, *Asperger’s Children: the origins of autism in Nazi Vienna*, chillingly touches upon the apparent Gemüt (soul/spirit) poverty of ‘autistic psychopaths’ (Hans Asperger’s description of the group in 1938) versus the preferred traits of tribal belonging and social competence.<sup>20</sup> Autists were thus – without even beginning to understand them – ‘enemies of the people’<sup>20</sup> enemies of Austria and abnormal. But for Lorna Wing, publishing her paper, *Asperger’s Syndrome: a clinical account*, in 1981,<sup>21</sup> and Uta Frith, translating Asperger’s thesis into English in 1991 *without* its Nazi preface and with autism replacing ‘autistic psychopathy’<sup>20</sup> it is doubtful that such a popular expression would have come about.

One beautiful fragment to arise in recent years amid the earlier language<sup>21</sup> of menace to society, some kind of genius, agitator, aversive and magic man is ‘...self-designated “Aspies” tout[ing] their ability to be guided by

factors other than fame and fortune; to avoid the biases that muddy “neurotypical” or group thinking’.<sup>20</sup> In other words, there is a sense of not manipulating the world or falling for its hollow charms, but rather carrying out meaningful tasks for their own sake in a ‘...measured... deliberate... whimsical and imaginative way’<sup>9</sup> thus feeling like ‘somebody’ and not a label foisted upon them.

Introverts can be obsessive, neurotic and humorous, despite what the science says about being ‘...phenomenologically attuned to stimuli of... negative emotional significance’.<sup>22</sup> Glenn Gould, the Canadian classical pianist, could be ‘...perverse and contrary (“Mozart,” he would say, “died too late, not too early”)’.<sup>23</sup> Born in 1756, deceased in 1791, Mozart reached the grand old age of 35! I suspect Gould said this because he truly believed that genius doesn’t last too long or because he himself ‘...deserted the concert stage and retired into an appallingly claustrophobic world’<sup>23</sup> at the age of 32.

Being an artist, musician, chess player or high-calibre introvert ‘...is to live at an impossible pitch of intensity’<sup>23</sup> sometimes 150 moves ahead,<sup>24</sup> sometimes in a car not built yet, on a road made only of gravel. They contemplate, reflect, anticipate, juggle. They see links, patterns, interesting phenomena. They study, *really* study, everything in their consciousness. And that ultimately comes with a price. Introverts ‘...drain faster because they’re processing so much’.<sup>9</sup> They often desperately ‘...need to recharge after...

periods of socializing’.<sup>11</sup> They are ‘...content to ignore... aspects of life [like] current affairs’<sup>12</sup> because it means they are not chasing mostly insignificant events, but rather dwelling on and digging the guts out of something pioneering and fulfilling.

Most importantly, they nearly always have to be *authentic*. And this sets itself apart from the extrovert’s bluster. Such integrity was to cost MacNeice his life. ‘Soaked while recording... sound-effects in a cave [for his drama], [he] stood around in a bar instead of changing and died of pneumonia four days after the programme went out.’<sup>12</sup> Austere, intimidating, withdrawn, laconic – MacNeice could be difficult. But his life represents an almost perfect and compelling example of ‘making it’, of doing something weighty and seminal despite the difficult bridges he inevitably had to traverse. The great irony for this introvert was that as a broadcaster he had access to nine out of 10 homes<sup>12</sup> during his post-Blitz career at the BBC; a daunting prospect and giant graveyard to some introverts (fearing their audience and the possible disconnect), but an immense challenge to others wishing to change the world or dent its discrimination.

MacNeice, as a man and writer, had a lot of difficult experiences to fall back on. His mother, previously ‘...serene and comforting... the very essence of stability’<sup>16</sup> became ‘deeply unhappy’<sup>16</sup> and indecisive following a hysterectomy and was ‘removed to an asylum’<sup>16</sup> when Louis was just five years old. Two years later, she died. If we remove the repeated, italicised line of ‘*Come back early or never come*’<sup>25</sup> between each stanza in his poem, *Autobiography*, we are left with his

“...introverts are often weighed down by society’s suspicion, its demands and its desire to lay *everything* on the table”

absolute anguish: ‘When I was five the black dreams came;/Nothing after was quite the same./The dark was talking to the dead;/The lamp was dark beside my bed./When I woke they did not care;/Nobody, nobody was there./When my silent terror cried,/Nobody, nobody replied./I got up; the chilly sun/Saw me walk away alone.’<sup>25</sup>

You cannot replace a mother. A *good* mother. And that terrible fate was MacNeice’s at such a young age; first, in a physical sense – not being there; and then, in a permanent sense – Death. Upon reading ‘When I woke they did not care’, I actually shuddered, trembled and wept because it speaks of a loss so great, dismantling and cutting that MacNeice could never, indeed, be the same. Loss had disassembled him, broken him, made him wonder where his next protector would come from. But the repetition, the emphasis, ‘*Come back early or never come*’ – isn’t that pleading and wanting, followed by a more independent, yet disappointed, tone? Don’t leave me hanging. Don’t hurt me. Because *I have to know* what is in my life.

Christopher Isherwood, in 1994, hinted that ‘...attachment... was... unhealthily neurotic’.<sup>2</sup> Eighty years earlier, MacNeice no longer had a mum, witnessed soldiers on the streets of Belfast, and was surrounded by a string of ‘ferocious nannies’<sup>26</sup> along with his distant, Protestant minister father. The ‘bleakness of his childhood’<sup>26</sup> suggests that attachment meant everything to him. His mother was an audience – *his* audience. And without her, he arguably suffered and turned inward because there was no one to bring his lighter side out.

Would he have become an introvert anyway? Undoubtedly so – because ‘...solitude is a crucial ingredient of creativity’.<sup>11</sup> And MacNeice was destined to be creative, artistic and driven, even if laced with moodiness. Are these exclusive, introvert traits? Of course not. There are many subsets, combinations and oxymorons such as ‘shy extrovert’ (liking people, but feeling shy and awkward around them).<sup>11</sup> MacNeice, though, had that vital interior, that relentless ‘...interrogation of the Self: what kind of human being should I/could I be? How much... virtue has my self-questioning laid waste?’<sup>16</sup> His last few poems (notably his finest) are said to include ‘...laborious self-scrutiny [that] hardened into horrified self-knowledge’.<sup>16</sup> This is the danger – *too much* introspection, *too much* knowing; art, in some ways, a destroyer of the self. Best to look outside once in a while. And be *less* autobiographical.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton I. Smartened up. [Online.] <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v17/n05/ian-hamilton/smartened-up> (accessed 11 December 2021).

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## Man is mostly judged on his output, his industriousness, his efficiency and crucial snippets of his character are conveniently ignored

### Case study two: Neil

Neil was very different from MacNeice. A client of mine over 30 sessions, he realised that most of the world didn't suit him. It was showy and false. Sometimes cruel and cunning. The older he got, the more he began to think that almost everyone just wanted to sell him something, irrespective of whether he needed it or not. What kind of world is this, he asked himself many times, when people no longer want to better others' situations, but just race and run and get *more* of something they already have enough of?

He talked about many things, including the Myers-Briggs personality test, which was a typical victim of capitalism in that its original use was well intentioned. The mother-daughter team of Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, who developed it in 1943 to help the war effort's recruitment, was idealistic – certainly from the daughter's perspective. Briggs Myers '...envisaged type as a way of achieving society-wide equilibrium, helping people to be efficient and at ease'<sup>27</sup> – in other words, the inclination or bent towards a utopian impulse which helps people express themselves in *their* way. The system would show that '...everyone [was] good at something'<sup>27</sup> thus restoring faith and belief and harnessing self-motivation. The point was that people didn't have to *fit* in as much, because the system would use their methods and ways, and be more understanding. It would be a dynamic interaction – workers '...bind[ing] themselves to their jobs freely and gladly'.<sup>27</sup>

Nothing is quite that simple of course. And the dangerous ideology of 'people sorting'<sup>27</sup> was bound to be exploited. Psychometric tests – why should we take on him or her

when they clearly don't have a team mentality? Why would I recruit someone like that when he is slow? 'It's an over-monitoring and a complete insult to our nature,' Neil would regularly say. 'Why would I want to be part of that, even if I *do* get in the door?! And the Silicon Valley nerds or dweebs that supposedly represent the introvert camp in the modern era – what are they actually about? Advertising revenues, as far as I can see, which is hardly inspiring. Sales. Again!'

Neil was a frustrated man, but one sufficiently aware of the classic stand-off between extroversion's '...cabaret slickness of expression [and introversion's] ideological vehemence'.<sup>2</sup> He knew the pitfalls on his side – '...corrosive self-criticism and [the] crippling anticipation of being shamed'<sup>9</sup> – but was equally clued-up on what he did *not* want to become. 'Announcing the death of a loved one on social media – why do people do that? Such a private thing – a telephone call, a get together, but not the click of a mouse or mobile. I no longer *get* this world.'

During session eight, he proposed that there should be a new world or rather an additional world – one clear to children from an early age; one full of chess, contemplation, nature, art, cooking, cafés, documentaries, walking and not just the 'coming of age' stuff like booze, festivals and night clubs. 'We overcome embarrassment by normalising things early on. And that starts, for many, in the classroom. In Armenia and parts of India and Russia, chess is mandatory. Why can't we have that here? Something to change our wiring or settle our minds?'

Neil spoke of it being his audience – having these things in his life. Without them, without having found them, well, he daren't even imagine the world. He went out of his way to

watch films or TV series about geniuses – not because he was one, but because he felt their difference and that lifted him, it shrank his sense of being ostracised. *Shine. Rain Man. The Imitation Game. Frida. A Beautiful Mind. Pawn Sacrifice. Limitless. Little Man Tate. October Sky. The Queen's Gambit. Gifted. Hidden Figures.* They were all attentive in some way. They reflected something back at him. Often it was like the characters in the films were watching *him*, rather than the other way around. And that felt good – like he mattered.

Geoffrey Grigson said of our first case study, Louis MacNeice, 'He could be embarrassingly silent. A conversation came to a halt. Who was going to break the silence and bridge the ...interruption? His lack of usual reticence, too, could be sudden, startling and improbable.'<sup>16</sup> Grigson was '...intrigued by the contradiction of the sceptical romantic... the melancholy and the wit, the confidence and the reticence. Much though he liked MacNeice, he never felt he knew him'.<sup>16</sup>

Maybe this is the lingering predicament of the introvert – that nobody truly knows him or her. The existential question remains though: is it OK to die like this – not being known in a reasonably concrete way? MacNeice and Neil would probably argue that what they did give away is worth more than an extrovert's soliloquy. ●

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### YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

If you have a response to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter or respond with an article of your own. Email:

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