The Lyric Essay

A Contemporary Mode of Reading and Writing

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Abstract

This thesis offers a sustained history and theory of the 'lyric essay' as a mode of reading and writing. Coined in the 1990s to describe a then-emergent hybrid of the lyric poem and literary essay, the term 'lyric essay' has seen increasingly widespread use in both the study and practice of contemporary nonfiction across the last two decades, reaching a broad audience thanks to the popularity of books such as Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and David Shields's *Reality Hunger*. Yet there has been no extended scholarly consideration of the term, or its usefulness as a way of thinking about the strand of modern writing it attempts to define. Drawing together existing scholarship in lyric and essay studies, research into the term's origins, and close readings of key lyric essayists, this thesis asks why the lyric essay has emerged and what it has to offer the modern reader. I reveal the importance of both anthologisation and creative writing instruction in the term's ascendancy, and comparatively assess the contributions of John D'Agata, Judith Kitchen, and David Shields in formulating and popularising it. I then turn to the form's most important practitioners, close reading work by Annie Dillard, Anne Carson, Maggie Nelson, and Claudia Rankine, simultaneously using the term to produce new insights into their texts while using their texts to sharpen my understanding of the term. I conclude by turning back to Montaigne and the essay's origins, comparing all four essayists and elucidating how they challenge the traditional essay's grounding in the self through their adoption of a 'lyric I' borrowed from poetry. Though focused on one particular term, my project uncovers important insights about the nature of genre, the differences between poetry and prose, and the landscape of contemporary literature.

Contents

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Part One

The Lyric Essay's Readers

CHAPTER ONE

The Story of the Lyric Essay

i. The Birth of a Genre

a journey that cannot ever end, to a place that might not exist
— John D'Agata, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*

A New Way of Reading

Suppose you came across the following closing lines from Susan Sontag's much-anthologised essay 'Unguided Tour':

> *Advice.* Move along, let's get cracking, don't hold me down, he travels fastest who travels alone. Let's get the show on the road. Get up, slugabed. I'm clearing out of here. Get your ass in gear. Sleep faster, we need the pillow.
>
> She's racing, he's stalling.
>
> If I go this fast I won't see anything. If I slow down—
>
> *Everything.*— then I won't have seen everything before it disappears.
>
> *Everywhere.* I've been everywhere. I haven't been everywhere, but it's on my list.
>
> *Land's end.* But there's water, O my heart. And salt on my tongue.
>
> *The end of the world.* This is not the end of the world.[1]

What, other than the context, would tell you that you were reading an essay? You might note the passage's many twists and contradictions, the sense of a mind thinking in real time, correcting itself, hyper-aware of its own thoughts, and mark this as the fundamental register of the essay. You might read the italicised phrases as prompts, micro-topics to which the essayist responds and free-associates, writing mini-essays on *Land's end* and *Advice.* You might connect the collage of idioms

Epigraph: John D'Agata, ed., *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009), 45.

[1] Susan Sontag, 'Unguided Tour', in *The Next American Essay*, ed. John D'Agata (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003), 39.

and travel advice to Francis Bacon's depositories of collected wisdom, and note that one of the essay's fundamental activities is to list. Or you might note the juxtaposition of such public advice with the unspoken, subterranean thoughts that bubble through the rest of the passage, how the essay dramatises the negotiation of a public space by a private mind.

Suppose now, instead, you came across the same passage in a book of poems. How would you read it differently? You might notice, perhaps, the subtle internal half-rhymes and assonances skipping through that first list of advice — 'alone', 'show', 'road'; 'I'm clearing out of here', 'Get your ass in gear' — or the circling repetitions of 'everything', 'everywhere', and 'end'. You might spot the apostrophe, 'O my heart', a figure Jonathan Culler notes as typical of the lyric poem, marking its unique 'combination of indirection and address', speaking to us by means of address to another.[2] You might notice the incomplete sentences, or the sense of a performative present tense, even as the past — a holiday — is discussed. What appeared as short paragraphs might scan instead as lines of free verse. What seemed like dialogic responses might instead indicate the delicate patterning of a poet, as in the parallelisms of 'She's racing, he's stalling' and '*The end of the world*. This is not the end of the world.'

Is either one of these readings — the first essayistic, the second lyrical — inherently correct? What if we consider that the piece was initially published as neither essay nor lyric, but as the final piece in Sontag's short story collection *I, etcetera*? Does this discredit our reading of it as either essay or lyric? And finally: are the different approaches mutually exclusive, or can they be meaningfully combined? Can a text be, in the same moment, read as both lyric and essay?

In the last twenty-five years, a new genre term has emerged in response to the increasingly blurred boundaries between poetry and prose, fact and fiction, lyric and essay, in the work of writers such as Annie Dillard, Anne Carson, Claudia Rankine, Maggie Nelson, Judith Kitchen, Eliot Weinberger, Wayne Koestenbaum, Lia Purpura, Sarah Manguso, Eula Biss, Ander Monson, Jenny Boully, and others: the lyric essay. Coined in a 1997 special issue of the *Seneca Review* by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall, it is a term that attempts to answer my final question above with a resounding yes; a term that conjectures a combination of lyrical and essayistic reading as the most useful mode through which to encounter the genre-fluid, formally experimental work that typifies the best of American writing today. Read as lyric essay, all of the above-listed elements of Sontag's text are given equal weight and attention — hence John D'Agata's inclusion of it in his influential anthology of lyric essays, *The Next American Essay* in 2003. Though Sontag is not generally grouped with the lyric essayists mentioned above, many of the hallmarks of the lyric essay are present in

[2] Jonathan Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 886.

'Unguided Tour': a polyphony of voices, a dissolving centre, quick cuts and juxtapositions, the coexistence of contradictions, and close attention to the sound of language itself. What are often claimed as the key innovations of the lyric essay — the blurred sense of self Joe Moran highlights in Rankine's *Citizen*; the discrete thoughts and juxtapositions Michelle Dicinoski emphasises in Nelson's *Bluets*[3] — are found here in one of the twentieth century's most famous, most quintessential 'essayists', no extra adjective needed. Yet to discredit the lyric essay because of this — to doubt its validity as a term because of the ease with which a piece of reframed Sontag illustrates it — is to misunderstand what it is, and why it is such an important innovation in the last quarter-century; for it is not, primarily, a new mode of writing, but a new mode of reading.

This thesis investigates the history, validity, and potential of 'the lyric essay' as a mode of reading. It does so based on a belief that genres are not only ways of classifying texts, but active ways of reading them; that any text can be approached through a multitude of genres, and that the choice of genre matters. In 1971, Stanley Fish conducted a famous experiment in which he tricked his students into reading a list of linguistic textbooks, left on the blackboard from a previous class, as if they were a lyric poem. The students were able to convincingly pull out, from the list of random titles, a central idea and insight, meaningful ambiguities in the language of the 'poem', alliterative and consonantal patterns — all the same things we found in the Sontag passage above. This leads Fish to conclude that 'acts of recognition, rather than being triggered by formal characteristics, are their source. It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities'.[4] In other words, the genre comes first, and what we find in the text is determined by the generic framework we approach it through. Fish's experiment reminds us of something obvious, but not often stated: that genres are invented by readers, not writers. Genres are created as modes of reading, ways to classify, conceptualise and understand certain literary texts, and teach others how to read them: what to look for, what to ignore, what to expect, what to prioritise, what to praise. Though writers, too, use genres as templates to follow and depart from — what Claudio Guillén calls 'invitation[s] to the actual writing of a work'[5] — no writer can, on their own, invent a genre. Rather, genres emerge as wider patterns in the work of multiple authors are spotted and described by readers. Many writers are in fact agnostic, or even hostile, towards genres; when

[3] Joe Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction', *Textual Practice* 32, no. 8 (2018): 1287; Michelle Dicinoski, 'Wild Associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the Lyric Essay', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* 21, no. 39 (April 2017): 6-7.

[4] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 326.

[5] Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 72.

William Carlos Williams experimented with new prose forms in *Kora in Hell*, for example, he left it up to his readers to find the right genre through which to read them, writing: '[n]othing to do but put it down as it stood, trusting to the generous spirit of the age to find a place for it'.[6]

This shift towards locating genre at the point of textual reception rather than textual creation is one of the broader trends of genre theory in the twentieth century. In *Kinds of Literature*, for example, Alistair Fowler emphasises how genres are communicative, functional categories rather than taxonomic ones, discussing how *The Jew of Malta* reads differently if we consider it a tragedy to if we consider it a savage farce.[7] Yury Tynyanov focuses on how genres evolve and change as their readers change, calling any attempt at defining a genre an 'after-effect'.[8] Northrop Frye, meanwhile, locates genre in what he calls the 'radical of presentation', a term he uses to distinguish the 'ideal' mode of presentation from its physical circumstance, arguing that a genre teaches us quite literally how to read a text: whether to act it out (drama), speak it aloud (epic), sing or chant it (lyric), or read it in our heads (fiction).[9] My thesis builds on these critics' understandings of genre by examining how one particular modern mode of reading — the lyric essay — has evolved since the late 1990s, and then testing this mode of reading out on four important North American writers whose work has been prominent in the same period: the theological, spiritual, and nature-focused writing of Annie Dillard; the blend of poetry, translation, and classical scholarship found in the work of Anne Carson; the wide generic and stylistic variance found across the book-length essays of Maggie Nelson; and the blend of essay, visual imagery and prose poetry that constitutes the self-proclaimed 'American lyrics' of Claudia Rankine. By combining a sustained consideration of different concepts of the lyric essay with an extended close reading of key essayists who often fall under this remit, I hope to achieve two things. The first is to better define the term lyric essay itself by carefully reading the actual literature it attempts to describe, in order to establish what formal and stylistic traits the lyric essay exhibits in real practice. The second is to use the idea of the lyric essay, and the two bodies of historical and theoretical thinking (about the categories of 'essay' and 'lyric') underlying it, to produce new insights into important recent works of literature. In other words, the thesis reads both ways, simultaneously using the genre term to enrich its understanding of the texts, and the texts to enrich its understanding of the genre term.

This then, is the story of the lyric essay: a story of writers and readers, evolving in dynamic relation to each other. Since the publication of Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in 1974, the idea of

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[6] William Carlos Williams, 'Kora in Hell: Prologue to City Lights Edition', in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1971), 29.

[7] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38.

[8] Yury Tynyanov, 'The Literary Fact', in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (London: Routledge, 2014), 30.

[9] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 247-48.

the lyric essay has gradually emerged alongside and in tandem with a body of work written by writers poised between the existing categories of lyric poetry and essay. These are the so-called lyric essayists: mostly American, mostly women, publishing on both poetry and nonfiction presses, hard to find (in that there is no lyric essay section in bookshops, no central hub around which lyric essayists cluster, and no agreement on exactly what the term means or who it covers) and yet clearly visible (in that they sell fairly well, with Rankine's *Citizen* even making the *New York Times* bestseller list, and attract glowing reviews and awards, such as Dillard's 1975 Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Carson's two Griffin Poetry Prizes, for 2001's *Men in the Off Hours* and 2014's *Red Doc>*, and the many awards won by *Citizen*, including a Forward Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award). Their work is enormously varied, ranging from the collaged images and prose snippets of Rankine's sweeping *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, to the small, shimmering, isolated paragraphs of Nelson's *Bluets*, to Carson's sprawling 'novel in verse' *Autobiography of Red*. What unites these works is not any single formal feature, for that, as critics such as Fowler and Cohen have noted, is not what unifies a genre.[10] Rather, it is simply that they have caught the attention of the lyric essay *readers*, figures like John D'Agata, Deborah Tall, Judith Kitchen, David Shields, Ben Marcus, and Amy Bonnaffons, who have promoted and disseminated the term, and with it the idea of lyric essay. The story of the lyric essay begins with these readers, and with how and why they came up with a new way of reading.

What's in a Name?

In 1997, two readers, Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, invented a new term, 'lyric essay', for the kind of writing they most liked to read. Tall and D'Agata were writers themselves, too, but before and above that they were readers: reading submissions to the *Seneca Review,* the journal they both had a hand in editing; reading texts with students of the University of Iowa's nonfiction writing programme, in their role as teachers; reading for their own pleasure and edification. Reading in these different contexts, they began to see a need for a new genre term which captured the particular way they enjoyed reading: across the boundaries of poetry and essay, taking texts as both,

[10] Fowler rejects the idea that genres have any necessary elements, favouring instead the theory of 'family resemblance' proposed by Dugald Stewart. As in Wittgenstein's argument that a 'game' has no single defining characteristic, Fowler sees genres as families 'whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all' (Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 41). Similarly, Cohen argues that genre classifications are 'empirical, not logical', that genres are 'open systems' created by critics for a variety of purposes, and that members of a genre 'need not have a single trait in common since to do so would presuppose that the trait has the same function for each of the member traits' (Ralph Cohen, 'History and Genre', in *Genre Theory and Historical Change : Theoretical Essays of Ralph Cohen*, ed. John L. Rowlett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 92).

reading both lyrically and essayistically. Their term would link disparate writers together, suggesting continuity and encouraging comparative reading; it would point to family resemblances, allowing admirers of one author to find the work of another; it would license certain kinds of writing, giving it permission to exist by providing a label for it; and it would bestow prestige on the work, suggesting importance and newness. In short, it would point to something Tall and D'Agata felt was happening in 1997 that needed marking, corralling into a single term.

The term emerges in two key contexts. Firstly, it emerges in the context of publishing. Tall and D'Agata coin the lyric essay not as a scholarly or critical term, but a practical one, a shorthand aesthetic signifier for the kind of writing they are seeking as editors of the *Seneca Review*. This commercial purpose of the term is often ignored, but is central to its emergence: by calling a particular piece of writing a lyric essay, it not only markets it to a certain audience but also helps to create that audience, conjuring into being a network of writers and readers of 'the lyric essay' who share a particular taste: for fragmentation, elision, suggestion, musicality, and so on.[11] From its beginnings, the idea of the lyric essay is bound up with the aesthetic preferences of particular journals: the *Seneca Review,* most directly, but also the *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Brevity*, and others, as well as publishers like *Graywolf Press* and *Essay Press*, the former home to not only D'Agata himself but also Maggie Nelson and Eula Biss, the latter to Jenny Boully. It is also bound up in the process of anthology-making, with D'Agata himself using the term as the central node around which he orientates his three-volume anthology *A New History of the Essay.* Indeed, it is in anthologies that the idea of the lyric essay has most fully blossomed, an idea I explore in depth in the second section of this chapter. The lyric essay, then, is partly a publishing term, the name itself less important than the simple act of having a name, a term around which like-minded writers and readers can cluster, and around which journals, publishers, and anthologies can orientate and market themselves.

Secondly, the term emerges in a pedagogical context, specifically that of the burgeoning interest in nonfiction in American writing programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. Two institutions in particular have played a central role. The first is Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where *Seneca Review* is based and where D'Agata studied as an undergraduate with Deborah Tall, who first introduced him to the term lyric essay and whom Stuckey-French describes as his 'mentor'.[12] The

[11] See Jay Ellis, ed., *American Creative Nonfiction* (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2015) for a more thorough discussion of the marketplace functions of both 'creative nonfiction' and 'lyric essay' as terms, in the chapters 'On American Creative Nonfiction' and 'The Lyric Essay as Non-nonfiction' [sic] respectively.

[12] Joanna Eleftheriou, 'Is Genre Ever New? Theorizing the Lyric Essay in Its Historical Context', *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2017), https://www.assayjournal.com/joanna-eleftheriou-is-genre-ever-new-theorizing-the-lyric-essay-in-its-historical-context.html; Ned Stuckey-French, 'Creative Nonfiction and the Lyric Essay: The American Essay in the Twenty-First Century', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. Thomas Karshan

second is the University of Iowa, where D'Agata went on in 1998 to do his MFA in poetry under the supervision of Thomas Simmons, as well as a second MFA in nonfiction, and where he has been based ever since, becoming director of the nonfiction writing programme in 2013. Tall and D'Agata coin their term not only as literary critics but also as teachers of writing, trying to enthuse their students about the kinds of nonfiction they enjoy. When applied to work the students are reading, as well as their own writing, the term invokes a history, suggesting a continuity between this work and the two longstanding literary traditions — essay and lyric poem — that come before it. It also isolates a zone of conjunction between these two poles, lyric and essay, and thus acts as a prompt to their creative writing students that such an in-between space is both inhabitable and worth inhabiting.

Both of these contexts — that of the literary journal seeking an audience, and of the teacher educating the student — are crucial to understanding why the lyric essay emerges. In the bulk of the rest of this chapter, I examine these two contexts in detail, dealing firstly with the publishing context — specifically, the role of the anthology in both forming the idea of the lyric essay and promoting it — and secondly with the pedagogical context, examining how the rise of the lyric essay fits into the broader story of institutionalised creative writing.

As well as the two contexts in which it does emerge, it is also notable that the term does *not* emerge out of the context of a particular group of writers. The only writer explicitly mentioned in the 1997 *Seneca Review* essay (which I will examine in more detail shortly) is Anne Carson, who does not use the term to describe her own work. Though Tall and D'Agata are both essayists themselves, they do not coin the term to describe their own writing. Like most genre terms, it is thrown retrospectively, like a lasso into a group of cattle, to try and contain something which has evolved naturally and disparately. Perhaps this is why many so-called lyric essayists have shown resistance to the term itself. Lia Purpura, for example, mockingly writes of how 'some people are amused to find they write a thing called "the lyric essay" when all along they were just doing what felt natural, simply asserting the sum total of who they are as writers'.[13] Chila Woychik has also spoken of how the coining of the term placed the work it described 'in a literary zoo for everyone to gawk at, label, and try to observe', when for her 'the lyric essay was meant to be wild and free,

and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 296.

[13] Lia Purpura, 'Why Some Hybrids Work and Others Don't', *Diagram* 8, no. 4, accessed 16 August 2021, http://thediagram.com/8_4/purpura.html. Elsewhere, Purpura tells the story of her failed attempts to use the term to describe her own work: 'I once submitted an essay to a Famous Editor with a note that read "Enclosed is a lyric essay, blah, blah, blah…," and he sent it back saying, "Yes, good, we'll take it, et cetera, but shouldn't 'lyric' be something someone else says about your essay?"' (Lia Purpura, 'What Is a Lyric Essay?: Provisional Responses', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 97).

a lioness of the writing world'.[14] The very qualities of the term which appeal to D'Agata and Tall in their roles as editors and teachers — its marking out of a territory, its acting as an aesthetic shorthand — are what, for Purpura and Woychik, make it a restrictive and unhelpful box that they feel is being placed around them: note how both draw on imagery of the natural and the wild in their objections. Yet for other essayists, the term has had the opposite effect, legitimising their own wildness. Mary Heather Noble, for example, describes how discovering the lyric essay was like 'opening the door to the Secret Garden… a place that provided permission and space for me to play and explore so I could discover my authentic narrative voice'.[15] As Amy Bonnaffons notes, 'once the term "lyric essay" became institutionalized by journals like *Seneca Review*, a writer could sit down and intend to write a lyric essay'.[16] Such comments again suggest that the label 'lyric essay' is useful, for writers as it was for readers, simply because of its function as a label. By allowing writers to call their work something, it allows it to exist: note that for Noble, it is a matter of 'permission', a word also picked up on by Eula Biss, who writes that '[n]aming something is a way of giving it permission to exist'.[17]

Yet the name itself, of course, also matters hugely. Names contain values within them, like seams of ore running through rock. When Montaigne settled down to write his prose meditations, he felt no pre-existing name quite fit the mould of his thoughts, and so came upon *essais*, a word which had, built into it, the ideas about weighing up, trial, and error that would later come to define the genre named after his experiments.[18] Genre names can have in them the seeds of their success, the ethical and aesthetic values that people seize onto, cling to. They can contain their own demise, too, their inherent vice: that we cannot stop proclaiming the death of the novel may have something to do with the attempt to found a genre on the principle of newness — everything, eventually, stales. If a genre is a mode of reading, then a genre's name is that mode reduced down to a single, concentrated word or phrase. It becomes a shorthand for a whole constellation of associations, expectations, and textual approaches. On the one hand, the name itself can thus be

[14] Chila Woychik, 'Interview with Chila Woychik', interview by John Winkelman, *3288 Review*, 12 April 2016, http://www.3288review.com/2016/04/12/interview-with-chila-woychik.

[15] Mary Heather Noble, 'On the Lyric Essay', *Mary Heather Noble* (blog), 5 January 2014, http://www.maryheathernoble.com/on-the-lyric-essay.

[16] Amy Bonnaffons, 'Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay', *Essay Review*, 2016, http://theessayreview.org/bodies-of-text-on-the-lyric-essay.

[17] Eula Biss, 'It Is What It Is', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 55.

[18] As Richard Scholar notes, the 'noun "essai" has a number of possible meanings in sixteenth-century French: its dominant senses of "trial", "test", "attempt", "sounding", and "sample" associate it strongly with the idea of experimentation; others like "temptation" and "risk" refer to the implications with which such experimentation is fraught; others still such as "apprenticeship", "exercise", "prelude", and "beginning" stress the sheer effort and the tentative process of initiation involved… The verb "essayer" has, as might be expected, related meanings including "try" in the strong sense of "endeavour", "undertake", "sample" and therefore "taste", "weigh up", "run a risk", and "start off". Montaigne draws on the noun and the verb in all these various guises and meanings in the course of the book' (Richard Scholar, *Montaigne and the Art of Free-Thinking* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 71).

anything, a mere marker or placeholder for the wider practice; on the other hand, it must convey *everything*, must gesture, with a brief nod, to this practice in all its wild complexity. D'Agata himself gestures to both sides of this dilemma in the introduction to *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay*, in which he dismisses his own term as 'lipstick on a pig', noting that it has fallen out of favour with the editors of the very journal who popularised it, while ultimately concluding that it still has its uses: 'nomenclature, while often limiting, polarizing, inadequate, and always stupid, can also be the thing that opens up our genre to new possibilities and new paths of inquiry'.[19]

The power of genre names is particularly interesting to consider in relation to the essay, a genre which both loves and fears its own name. There is a sense, when reading about the essay, that the conversation must continually start over with the name itself, with many pieces beginning as though defining a form no-one has discovered before; as Leslie Jamison notes, 'if you've ever read an essay about essays, then you've read the root of the word'.[20] Indeed, it is so customary in essay theory to delve into the term's etymological roots that even the noting of this activity as customary has itself become customary.[21] This love of discussing 'the essay' is not limited to critics, as the huge variety of pieces in Ned Stuckey-French and Carl Klaus's anthology *Essayists on the Essay* attests to; rare is the essayist who has not, at some point, tackled the question of what the word essay means. (Imagine if every novelist at some point during their novel broke off into a discussion about what 'the novel' is, and you will grasp how this self-regard is a quality peculiar to the essay form.) Yet there is also a long history of essayists being shy about the term, showing reluctance or scepticism towards it. Cornwallis, for example, dismissed his essays with the remark 'they are but papers', while Hunt talked of writing in the spirit of 'our good old periodical works'.[22] Warren Boutcher finds D'Israeli describing essayists as 'writer[s] of miscellaneous "loose papers" (including Seneca and Plutarch) or "little works"'.[23] Karshan and Murphy show that many essayists

[19] John D'Agata, ed., *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay* (Geneva, NY: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 2014), 6; 10. The book, which doubled as a special edition of *Seneca Review*, not only features D'Agata's titular introductory essay, but also a selection of some of the *Seneca Review*'s favourite lyric essays by Eula Biss, Jenny Boully, Anne Carson, Katie Ford, Michael Ives, Wayne Koestenbaum, Richard Kostelanetz, Ander Monson, Mary Ruefle, Genevieve Turkett, Wendy Walters, Eliot Weinberger, Shawn Wen, Joe Wenderoth, and Paul West, alongside commentaries for each.

[20] Leslie Jamison, ed., *The Best American Essays: 2017* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), xviii.

[21] A few examples: Brian Dillon notes that 'it's customary to inaugurate an essay on essays with a spot of amateur etymology' ('Energy and Rue', *Frieze*, 1 November 2012, https://www.frieze.com/article/energy-rue), while Karshan and Murphy, citing their own example, write: 'it has become a trope, even a cliché, of essays on the essay to reach for word-history as a route into a characterization of the form: as Claire de Obaldia has remarked, "etymological evidence [is] always triumphantly brandished at some point or other"' (Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 4).

[22] William Cornwallis, 'A Second Part of Essayes', *Essayes*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), 79; Denise Gigante, 'On Coffee-Houses, Smoking, and the English Essay Tradition', in Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 155.

[23] Warren Boutcher, 'The Montaignian Essay and Authored Miscellanies from Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century', in Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 61.

have resisted using the term essay itself: they note that 'Addison and Steele, in the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, preferred "papers"', while 'others prefer the modesty of "studies", "sketches", "estimates", "portraits", "pieces", or even, in Robert Louis Stevenson, "gossips"'.[24] The lyric essay is a continuation of this love-hate relationship of a genre with its name. It is a genre whose name is central to its power, and yet which is curiously resistant to using that name: not only is the term mostly avoided by all four of the writers I later examine in Chapters 2 through 5, but even the anthologies of lyric essays I examine in the second part of this chapter avoid the explicit use of the term in their titles.

What is in a name, then? The answer is both everything and nothing. The lyric essay is, to some extent, an arbitrary term: a mere gesture towards the 'the beautiful gangly breath of this unnameable literary form'.[25] Yet the term is also the gateway into a complex network of questions, reading methods, historical developments, and concepts. The term 'lyric essay', its two words sitting there in juxtaposition like two apparent strangers on a park bench, begins to open up, the closer we look at it, into fascinating and important debates in literary studies about the nature and purpose of art, the boundaries between poetry and prose, the function of genre, and the outer possibilities of what writing can do. What begins as a dry, academic debate over a bit of nomenclature opens up, the more we poke and prod it, into a complex, flourishing debate over the very nature of what literature is. In many ways, my project is suitably essayistic in its thrust: it is the nature of the essay to seize on something specific and examine it closely as an indirect approach onto larger issues, and so it is that I take the history and debate around one particular term as my way into large, important questions about genre, reading, and the nature of literature itself.

Three Models

I have spoken so far of the term lyric essay as though it were one thing, discussing its uses as a term and the reasons it emerged within the contexts of teaching and publishing. Yet the lyric essay is not really a single thing at all — rather, it is more accurately described as three terms in one. In fact, depending on both what one is reading and how, the lyric essay may be thought of as one (or more) of three distinct but overlapping ideas, each of which implies different historical precedents, and each of which causes us to approach the text from a slightly different angle.

Firstly, it may be thought of as a new, modified form of the essay, a model I call the 'lyrical

[24] Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 6-7.
[25] D'Agata, *We Might as Well*, 10.

essay'. As essay writers experimented with more poetic techniques, this model contends, the essay took on more and more qualities of the lyric, until it evolved into something new. The essay, this model suggests, has to some extent always been lyrical; it is this innate lyricism which explodes out in the form of the lyric essay, which simply amplifies the lyrical qualities already present in the essay form. Throughout this chapter, I make several arguments that contribute to this model by demonstrating contingencies between the lyric essay and the earlier essay before it. I examine how the essay has historically been formed through anthologisation, a process of removing and re-reading texts in a new generic framework, and argue that the lyric essay continues and extends this tradition. I look at how the essay's own anti-establishment roots are something the lyric essay gestures back to, as it emerges as an idea within the context of the American writing programme. I explore how the essay's ambiguity of thought gradually evolved into the lyric essay's ambiguity of language, arguing that the essay's own self-consciousness as a genre played a key role in this. Such thinking suggests a particular lineage for the lyric essay, positioning it as the next step in a series of increasingly lyrical essayists, starting with Montaigne and continuing through De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Lamb, before arriving at Woolf in the twentieth century, whose own heady essays are on the cusp of lyric essay, but remain tethered by her commitment to prose that 'has neither the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry', that rises only 'slowly off the ground' and 'must be connected on this side and on that'.[26] The lyric essay, this model suggests, is the result of these connections finally breaking, the essay being carried off, like an escaping hot air balloon, into full lyricism.

Secondly, the lyric essay may be thought of as a new, modified form of the lyric poem, a model I call the 'essayistic lyric'. As the lyric poem migrated into prose, this model contends, it increasingly drew on the techniques of its most similar prose genre, the essay, until it, too, evolved into something new. This model flips the direction of influence: rather than essays becoming more poetic, it is poems which take on the qualities of essays. Baudelaire draws on the influence of heady and poetic essayists like Poe and De Quincey to create a lineage of writing that challenges our 'habitual expectation when we see a passage of prose… that it will explain, not sing'.[27] Whitman takes on the qualities of the Emersonian essay, translating them into a uniquely American poetic tradition of essayistic verse, passed on to Ashbery and Stein and eventually reaching Claudia Rankine. Again, I touch on this model throughout this chapter, examining how the lyric essay encourages us to read the music of its language before its meaning, in an act that positions the lyric

[26] Virginia Woolf, 'Impassioned Prose', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 4:363-64.

[27] Jeremy Noel-Tod, ed., *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem: From Baudelaire to Anne Carson* (London: Penguin, 2018), xxi.

as the dominant genre. I examine how the idea of the prose poem normalised the presentation of short blocks of prose as poems, and how the promotion of the lyric essay through the form of the anthology suggests the genre as continuous with this, as well as how the anthology, in its history of reframing the genre of its contents, makes it possible in the first place to read an essay as a poem. I also look at how, in a classroom context, treating students' essays as 'lyric' helped teachers overturn an entrenched association between nonfiction and the techniques of fiction, as popularised by forms such as memoir, biography, and the New Journalism, and instead see essay-writing as a form of poetic practice.

Finally, the lyric essay may instead be thought of as an amalgam of two, previously separate genres, meeting equally in the middle — a model I call the 'lyric-essay hybrid'. Writers thinking and working across or between genres, this model contends, deliberately hybridised the two traditions of lyric and essay in order to explore the fertile and unexplored ground between them. The prose poem here is still a lineage, but in a different way — rather than an example of essayistic verse, it becomes an example of a genre which challenges the very distinction between prose and verse, which takes 'at least part of its meaning from its ability to defeat our generic expectations' by challenging 'traditional distinctions between the lyric, the narrative, the critical essay';[28] a genre where we see the boundaries between poetry and prose break down, as captured by Mallarmé's remark that 'there is no such thing as prose: there is the alphabet, and then there are verses'.[29] In this chapter, I explore how anthologies of lyric essays have implicated this model in their open-minded, cross-genre approaches to choosing texts. I also look at David Shields's *Reality Hunger* as an example of a hybrid text itself, one which has had huge influence in promoting the lyric essay concept. I contextualise the lyric essay's attraction to hybridity against the background of literary studies and what Gerald Graff calls the 'field coverage model' of study, a model which works to keep genres separate and isolated in order to function; I also look at the rise of institutionalised creative writing, and how the lyric essay resists its funnelling students into different 'tracks' for poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

These, then, are my three models of what the lyric essay is: the lyrical essay, the essayistic lyric, and the lyric-essay hybrid. Each, of course, is to some extent a different story we can tell about how the lyric essay came to be — or at least, how the texts that would later be grouped under the heading lyric essay came to be. Yet I do not intend these as three competing histories. That is because, as I have argued, the history of the lyric essay does not lie with writers: rather, it

[28] Michel Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), ix.

[29] Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Evolution of Literature', in *Selected Prose Poems, Essays and Letters*, ed. and trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 19.

takes place in the classrooms at Iowa, the anthologies published by Graywolf Press, and all the other places where the lyric essay, as an idea, has been debated and theorised. It is here that the real history of the lyric essay takes place, where the story we can research, verify, and subject to the conditions of fact unfolds. My models are not intended as histories in this way. Rather these three stories about the lyric essay are really three different conceptualisations of it, each of which shifts the relation, in the term, of adjectives to nouns. To think of a text as a 'lyrical (adj.) essay (n.)' is to imagine it differently, and thus read it differently, than to think of it as an 'essayistic (adj.) lyric (n.)', or as a 'lyric (n.) essay (n.)'. These conceptualisations are thus *not* mutually exclusive: many of the texts this thesis deals with in its later chapters can be imagined as fitting multiple models.

In fact, I would argue that one of the reasons the lyric essay is successful as a mode of reading is that it is left deliberately open as to how the two halves of the term relate to each other. It is unclear which part of the term is the noun and which the adjective: hence I can, by tweaking it into three slightly different formulations, reveal different indications of the terminology. It is my belief that each of these models is *implied* in the term 'lyric essay', which in its comparative simplicity refuses to be explicit about how exactly the lyric and the essay relate within it. Perhaps the most appropriate reading of the term then is the least obvious one: as 'lyric (adj.) essay (adj.)', a noun-less conjunction of adjectives, a way of reading both essayistically and lyrically without needing to make definite the object of said reading, without needing to concretise the noun as either lyric or essay.

All this is worth bearing in mind as we turn, now, to the foundational text of the lyric essay: the 1997 *Seneca Review* manifesto. That is because this text, in which the term was first coined by Tall and D'Agata, has often been the subject of misguided interpretations and simplifications, readings too quick to fix the noun in place. Yet the text itself is surprisingly open, making a number of contradictory suggestions, intended as a prompt for reflection rather than a fixing of definitions. That open spirit in which the lyric essay was born was lost as it became embroiled in a topical debate about the nature of facts which it had, initially, little to do with; D'Agata himself is not without blame for this. Yet it remains what is most attractive about the term: its expansiveness, suggestiveness, and conceptual richness, which has allowed it to be adapted, as a mode of reading, to a wide variety of contemporary texts.

The 1997 Manifesto

In the 1997 special issue of *Seneca Review*, editor Deborah Tall and associate editor John D'Agata lay out the kind of work that they plan to dedicate a new portion of their journal to publishing. At the heart of the publication is a short introductory text by Tall and D'Agata, 'New Terrain: The Lyric Essay', which outlines in a mostly vague, gestural way what kind of writing the editors see as falling under the 'lyric essay' banner. The text is descriptive rather than analytical: like the essays it attempts to describe, it 'give[s] primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information', and often chooses to 'merely mention' rather than 'expound'.[30] It gestures towards a certain aesthetic — 'idiosyncratic meditation', 'sidewinding poetic logic', 'acret[ion] by fragments' — without being overly restrictive about matters of definition.[31] This makes sense, given the two contexts I have outlined: it is to the advantage of both editor and writing tutor that any attempt at defining the lyric essay is relatively broad in its approach, inspiring rather than restricting. From its tone, it is clear that the 1997 manifesto is intended to inspire further thought and discussion, to act as a starting point rather than a definitive statement: it ends with the hope that the term will 'give us a fresh way to make music of the world', closing with the final declaration: 'there are new worlds to be found'.[32] Yet too often, in pieces on the lyric essay, it has been turned to as the definitive statement of what the lyric essay is, used by critics of the term to dismiss it as too vague and open, or by supporters of the term to prop up entirely different interpretations.

Indeed, the influence of Tall and D'Agata's text is difficult to overstate. A number of claims within it are found repeatedly re-quoted in dozens of other pieces on the lyric essay, not only in those written by publishers, journals, and writing tutors, but also by critics, academics, essayists, and poets. In the way that it has become customary to begin an essay on the essay with a gesture towards Montaigne's '*Que sais-je?*' and the etymological roots of the essay as an 'attempt' or 'trial', almost every piece on the lyric essay — whether praising or critically dismantling the term, whether scholarly or intended as instruction for creative writers — takes the 1997 manifesto as one of its points of orientation, using it as the basis for often wildly different definitions of what the lyric essay is. The vagueness of the original manifesto — which invites a broad range of interpretations so as to welcome a variety of work under the open umbrella of its terminology — becomes more problematic as it is taken as the basis for the attempted fabrication of a new, more strictly-defined genre. This text, which originally appeared in print in the *Seneca Review*, but which has arguably had more impact through its republication on the website of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, has

[30] Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, 'New Terrain: The Lyric Essay', *Seneca Review* 27, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 7.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 8.

become the shaky ground on which the genre of the lyric essay has been erected. To give some sense of the scale of its impact, taking just the first five letters of authors in my bibliography, you will find it directly quoted from in: Beasley, Bonnaffons, Bossiere and Trabold, Carlin, Cook, Dicinoski, Eleftheriou, and Jay Ellis.

What, then, does the text itself actually claim? Perhaps the most famous and oft-cited passage is when the authors try to specify exactly what the lyric essay borrows from each side of its name's equation:

> The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.[33]

This is the closest the text comes to explicit definition. Joanna Eleftheriou sees it as the moment Tall and D'Agata most clearly separate the lyric essay from other forms of essay, noting that many famous literary essayists would not fall under this definition: 'Joan Didion isn't particularly musical, and G. K. Chesterton isn't very dense'.[34] Erica Trabold, meanwhile, admires this particular moment in the text for how it 'resists the idea that narrative or argument are the only driving forces behind publishable nonfiction writing', an idea Corinna Cook expands upon, noting that Tall and D'Agata's remarks free the lyric essayist not only from the conventions of fiction, but also 'from the conventions of other nonfiction subgenres: for example, a lyric essay need not be bound to the self-exploration standard in memoir, nor to the devoutly internal meandering mind of the personal essay, nor to the primacy of research in literary journalism'.[35] Both Trabold and Cook implicitly highlight the influence of the American writing programme here, in setting Tall and D'Agata's focus; how they suggest that nonfiction need not be driven by the techniques of fiction, as so much 'creative nonfiction' teaching focuses on, but instead suggest techniques associated with poetry that might be brought to bear on the more traditional essay.

Two specific ideas are gestured at in the passage, each given two possible expressions as they are offered to us in a repeated pairing: what the authors call 'density' or 'distillation of ideas', on the one hand — that is, the poem's heightened use of techniques like metaphor, association,

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[33] Ibid., 7.

[34] Eleftheriou, 'Is Genre Ever New?' Note, however, that Eleftheriou claims the text, on the whole, does not do enough to make such a distinction convincing, arguing that '[w]hat is proposed as distinguishing the lyric essay actually describes the kind of poetry, fiction, and essays that the New Critics considered literary.'

[35] Zoë Bossiere and Erica Trabold, 'In Praise of Ambiguity: The Lyric Essay in 2019', *Essay Daily*, 4 March 2019, http://www.essaydaily.org/2019/03/in-praise-of-ambiguity-lyric-essay-in.html; Corinna Cook, 'Listening the Lyric Essay', *New Writing* 16, no. 1 (2019): 101.

suggestion, and juxtaposition to convey as much nuance in as few words as possible; and what they call 'shapeliness' or 'musicality', on the other — that is, a heightened attention to the non-denotative qualities of language, the sounds of it in the ear and its visual shape on the page. This sense of a new kind of essay which is both dense and focused, on the one hand, and light and musical, on the other, is found ricocheting through much subsequent writing on the lyric essay, particularly online in web journals such as *Assay* and the *Essay Review*, specialist blogs such as Ander Monson's *Essay Daily* blog, and the personal websites of poets and essayists such as Sandra Beasley and Mary Heather Noble. Yet it is also one of the more problematic and muddled claims Tall and D'Agata make, particularly in its sowing confusion as to what the lyric essay borrows from its generic ancestors. The association of essays with weight, for example, is at best only partially true, counter to the sense of lightness we find in the essays of Montaigne, Lamb, and Woolf (as opposed to the 'heavier' essays of Bacon and Johnson), and the association, coming from Montaigne and crystallised through Addison and Steele, of the essay with paper, its lightness and disposability. It also seems muddled with their description of the lyric's 'density', which is not clearly separated from the essay's 'weight'; if both sides provide heaviness, then it is unclear where the lyric essay's lightness of touch — which is strongly suggested in the rest of the piece, through verbs like 'meander', 'leap', 'mention', and 'dance', and adjectives like 'fresh' and 'immediate' — originates from. Moreover, the claim that the essay shows an 'overt desire to engage with facts' is highly questionable, concerned as the essay is with thoughts in the process of being thought, opinions in the process of being formed.

Indeed, in the rest of the piece, Tall and D'Agata go on to counter their initial sense of the lyric essay as a dense, weighty form with a sustained depiction of it skipping over its subjects, leaving things unsaid:

> The lyric essay does not expound. It may merely mention. As Helen Vendler says of the lyric poem, 'It depends on gaps… It is suggestive rather than exhaustive.' It might move by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidewinding poetic logic. Generally it is short, concise and punchy like a prose poem. But it may meander, making use of other genres when they serve its purpose: recombinant, it samples the techniques of fiction, drama, journalism, song, and film.[36]

[36] Tall and D'Agata, 'New Terrain', 7.

Again, we might question why moving by association, suggesting rather than exhausting, and making use of other genres when they serve its purpose are qualities associated here with the 'lyric' part of the lyric essay equation, when each of those qualities is equally found in the essay as it has been written since Montaigne. Still, there are some useful ideas to draw out here. Firstly, it is worth noting that they do not fix the lyric essay in terms of length: though 'generally short', the lyric essay also 'may meander'. Thus there is no suggestion that lyric essays cannot be book-length; and indeed, as we will find throughout the thesis, a surprisingly high number of them are. Secondly, having earlier implicitly set up the lyric essay in resistance to fiction, on the one hand, and journalism, on the other, the editors here suggest that it is in fact able to draw from these as and when it needs to: as Sarah Menkedick writes, it is 'a mash-up: borrowing from all, beholden to none'.[37] Combined with the emphasis on how the lyric leaps and moves through 'sidewinding' logic, these insights suggest how the lyric essay *expands upon* the essay's freedom to steal, remix, and even cannibalise other genres, including fiction and journalism, *through* its use of the juxtapositions, allusions, and quick cuts of the lyric poem.

Perhaps most importantly, the passage sets up a now well-entrenched association between the lyric essay and the gap, which is often described in either visual terms as 'white space' or auditory terms as 'silence'. Amy Bonnaffons draws heavily on both metaphors for the gap in her essay 'Bodies of Text', arguing that the use of white space is a way for lyric essayists to get away from the problem of concreteness:

> Suppose you want to write, in prose, about a slippery subject that refuses definition. Something like water, or the color blue. Like the word 'lyric,' or the word 'essay.' Beginning, you balk at the question of form. One long block of prose seems to suggest a linear accretion of meaning, building to a thesis — but the more you poke at your subject, the more it seems to spread in all directions, to touch everything you've ever touched. Often, 'lyric essayists' like Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson, and Eula Biss solve this problem, or represent it, by using white space.[38]

She then shifts her language to the auditory metaphor, noting that by using silence, lyric paragraphs 'draw attention to their own density' (that same 'density' which Tall and D'Agata claim the lyric essay draws from the poem) which gives them 'a different kind of amplitude', rather than making them hesitant, or 'diminutive'. Michelle Dicinoski, meanwhile, connects the use of white space by

[37] Sarah Menkedick, 'Narrative of Fragments', *New Inquiry*, 3 July 2014, https://thenewinquiry.com/narrative-of-fragments.

[38] Bonnaffons, 'Bodies of Text'.

essayists like Rebecca Solnit and Maggie Nelson to a sense of 'wildness' in their work, arguing that 'in shifting so easily between fragments and topics, the structural association of the lyric essay often adds an element of surprise';[39] as I will explore in Chapter 2, this wildness is something that goes back to the lyric essay's roots in the nature writing of Annie Dillard. Finally, Joe Moran notes that the lyric essay's frequent gaps allow it to make 'intellectual and emotional leaps across the white space of the page', each of its breaks creating 'a more pregnant pause than a new paragraph but less disruption than a new chapter, allowing for shifts of register within a broadly continuous whole'.[40]

Such close connection between what others have said about the lyric essay and what Tall and D'Agata say in their initial statement gives some sense of the text's overwhelming influence. Yet taken as a whole, the manifesto comes to no conclusion. A list of some of the verbs that Tall and D'Agata use to describe the lyric essay's movement gives a sense of their overall vagueness: in addition to those I have already mentioned, we find 'accretes', 'spiral', 'circling', 'stalks', 'elucidates', 'dance', 'delving', 'test', 'quest', 'attempt', 'reconcoct', 'shock', 'still', 'tether', and 'stays'. Imagining something capable of such hugely various movements, we might arrive at something like Emerson's panharmonicon, a limitless machine capable of producing any sound.[41] Even more than its parent genre the essay, the lyric essay emerges in a bundle of contradictions, its openness its defining characteristic, the source of both its strength and its weakness.

Following their joint venture to define the lyric essay in the 1997 *Seneca Review*, the paths of Tall and D'Agata diverged sharply. Tall stayed on as editor of the journal, continuing the quiet, hands-off approach that had befitted her initial statement of intent; not wanting to limit the scope of what the lyric essay could be, she produced little else in the way of direct critical commentary on the form, focusing instead on publishing and editing lyric essays themselves. In 2006, she passed away aged 55 from breast cancer, the same year her own lyric memoir, *A Family of Stranger*s, came out on Graywolf Press. Due to both her early passing and her light-on-commentary approach, her contribution to defining the lyric essay runs a risk of being forgotten, especially in comparison to the noisier proclamations of D'Agata in the years since 1997, as evidenced by the occasionally false attribution of the 1997 statement to D'Agata alone. Yet her influence remains vital, especially among those who knew and were taught by her, and is reflected, for example, in Hobart and William Smith Colleges' biennial Deborah Tall Lyric Essay Book Prize, awarded to Erica Trabold's

[39] Dicinoski, 'Wild Associations', 3.

[40] Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose', 1279.

[41] For a discussion of Emerson's attraction to this instrument, see: Robert Atwan, '"Ecstasy and Eloquence": The Method of Emerson's Essays', in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. Alexander J. Butrym (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 109-110; also Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 37-38.

Five Plots in 2018, its inaugural year.

D'Agata, as mentioned, has been far more vocal, and far more hands-on, in his continued championing of the lyric essay. While occasionally displaying a somewhat blasé, dismissive attitude towards the term itself, he has nonetheless used it as the foundation on which to erect his career as an essayist, critic, and academic. Indeed, the lyric essay has become, for D'Agata, not just a scrap of new terminology with which to attract new writers and readers to a journal or graduate programme, but something closer to a fundamental philosophy, a central organising concept through which he can access and explore, as both writer and critic, various questions about literature, genre, art, and truth. Furthermore, it has become increasingly important to D'Agata that this new trend he and Tall identified in 1997, this apparently emerging form, has a long and deep history; one might go as far as to say that, for D'Agata, the lyric essay is not a new form at all, but something that has been happening for centuries — since, in fact, the beginning of writing itself — without being explicitly named.

To show this, D'Agata turned to the form of the anthology, taking the seeds of his and Tall's ideas and using them for the basis of his ambitious, three-volume *New History of the Essay*. It is here — as well as in anthologies or anthology-like texts by Judith Kitchen and David Shields — that the idea of the lyric essay took on its full shape. Much of the development of the lyric essay can be traced through the story of how it has been anthologised. It is to this story I now turn. By delving into the history of anthologies, their role in shaping both the essay and the lyric as ideas in the long eighteenth century, and then comparing this to the role anthologisation has played in the rise of the lyric essay in the twenty-first, I hope to build up a fuller picture not only of how and why the lyric essay as a category emerged, but also how and why all genres are formed.

ii. The Anthology

Gathering Flowers

The anthology has played a central role in both the dissemination of lyric essays and in the theorisation of them. John D'Agata's three volume *New History of the Essay*, Judith Kitchen's series of collected nonfiction 'shorts', and David Shields's collage-manifesto *Reality Hunger* all use, to different extents, the process of anthologisation as way of defining and promoting the lyric essay. Together these texts form the basis of the current corpus on the lyric essay; they are the texts any student of the genre will begin with. Before we delve into these texts in more detail, it is worth pausing and asking: why is this? Why have the proponents of the lyric essay been attracted to anthologisation in this way, as a method of advancing their mode of reading? How and why has the anthology come to play such a central role in this new genre's story?

The role anthologies play in the establishment of genres is often ignored, yet the two have often depended on each other. In 1973, Tom Wolfe published *The New Journalism*, a manifesto and anthology in one, which collapsed different genres together to show their commonality: the writings of 'lumpenprole' journalists with the 'men-of-letters' (essayists) and novelists.[42] Barbara Lounsberry notes that Wolfe himself 'has acknowledged that few of the writers he lauded in his manifesto wanted to be part of his "raggedy band"', yet in inviting the readers of his anthology to view their work as such, Wolfe created a new genre, one cemented further by anthologies in the following years from Nicolaus Mills and Marshall Fishwick.[43] The New Journalism was, like the lyric essay, a mode of reading, one which approached nonfiction with the techniques of fiction in mind. Wolfe's anthology, merely by bringing together texts that would not normally share space, taught its readers that mode of reading. It did not need to do this teaching actively. Rather, by framing the acts of reading, say, both Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* under the heading of New Journalism, he brought to his readers a self-awareness of commonalities in the way they read both texts, and so made explicit something which had already been crackling under the surface of their consciousness. As Ernest Rhys wrote in his own influential anthology *A Century of English Essays* (1913), 'there was a predisposition to the essay, long before there was any conscious and repeated use of the form itself';[44] the anthologist draws that predisposition out and makes it explicit.

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[42] Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 25.

[43] Barbara Lounsberry, 'New Journalism', in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. Tracy Chevalier (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 1261.

[44] Ernest Rhys and Lloyd Vaughan, eds., *A Century of English Essays: An Anthology Ranging from Caxton to R. L. Stevenson & the Writers of Our Own Time* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1913), v.

Genres and anthologies are fundamentally related, both historically and conceptually. Anthologies, which evolved originally as miscellaneous bundles of unrelated texts, became a more prominent form when they began to ground, orientate, and market themselves according to specific genres in the long eighteenth century. In turn, they themselves provided a crucial means of not only establishing which texts belonged to which genres, but in developing our sense of what those genres were. This is perhaps even more true for the genre of the essay, a genre often created (like the lyric) by the reframing of other texts, as in the practice of editors presenting extracts from longer works under new titles. Both essaying and anthologisation are, at root, similar activities — processes of collecting, collaging, comparing. Warren Boutcher notes that both forms were once known as 'miscellanies' — with the essay a single-authored form of 'miscellaneous writing' and the anthology a multi-authored one — a term which fell out of use 'after Hazlitt's time, [when] "miscellany" came more usually to mean an anthology of disparate texts, while 'essay' came more regularly to denote a non-fictional literary composition of a deliberately free and mixed kind'.[45] Both forms also share a common ancestor in the commonplace book, the practice, present since antiquity but particularly popular during the Renaissance, of writers of keeping notebooks filled with inspiring quotations, alongside other notes and jottings. The etymological roots of 'anthology' lie in the Greek *anthologein*, literally 'to collect flowers' or 'to collect honey from flowers'. As David Hopkins notes, these literal meanings imply a sense of 'assembling objects of intrinsic beauty', or in the case of the honey, 'assembling material of nutritive value'.[46] The anthologist selects the tastiest morsels, much as the essayist does. David Brewer, introducing *The World's Best Essays* (1900), describes the essayist as one who 'hands us a morsel, bids us taste its sweetness, smell its fragrance', who 'work[s] out from the milk of life the richer, more nourishing and comforting cream', before using the latter metaphor again to describe his own anthology as 'the cream of the cream', an idea that recalls Emerson's introduction to his own anthology *Parnassus* (1880) — essentially a reprinting of his commonplace book — in which he claimed: 'the world selects for us the best, and we select from these our best'.[47] This conceptual overlap between anthology-making and essay-writing is one reason that the essay has, historically, been so amenable to anthologisation, and so fruitfully discussed through the form of the anthology. The process of anthologisation itself reveals something about the essay form, allowing the anthologiser to respond to essays reflexively, in a way that encompasses in their criticism (whether implicit or explicit; that is, whether in texts

[45] Boutcher, 'The Montaignian Essay', 57.

[46] David Hopkins, 'On Anthologies', *Cambridge Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (September 2008): 287.

[47] David J. Brewer, *The World's Best Essays, from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, vol. 1, 10 vols (St. Louis: Kaiser, 1900), xiii-xvi; Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed., *Parnassus: An Anthology of Poetry* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880), 6.

accompanying extracts or merely in the selections themselves) the form of the texts being collected, presented, and thus critiqued.

Furthermore, anthologies and essays in some ways encourage the same kind of reading: curious, skipping, light, incomplete. As Barbara Benedict notes, 'anthologies prompt a casual form of dip-and-skip reading… picking up a book to read a selection at random and putting it down when other duties call'.[48] She quotes Edward Bysshe, from his *Art of English Poetry* (1702), where he defends his use of small extracts:

> The Melange of so many different subjects, and such a Variety of Thoughts upon them… it may divert and amuse you better, for here is no thread of Story, nor any connexion of one Part to another, to keep the Mind intent, and constrain you to any length of Reading; This is a Book that may be taken up and laid down at Pleasure, and would rather choose to lye about in a With-drawing Room, or a Grove, than be set up in a Closet.[49]

The descriptions of both Benedict and Bysshe of the kind of reading anthologies engender is heavily reminiscent of the essayistic mode of reading, one that favours intuition over method, chance and spontaneity over thoroughness or forethought, pleasure over instruction. Note Bysshe's mention of the 'With-drawing room', that place of removal and polite conversation so suited to the essay, which Montaigne himself aimed to inhabit and where Woolf placed, metaphorically, the essays of Beerbohm, lying 'with an exquisite appreciation of all that the position exacts, upon the drawing-room table'.[50] This place of retreat, reflection, leisure, but also curiosity is the natural home of both the essay and the anthology, a form which another early anthologist notes 'rightly read[s] at odd times, in idle moments, in out-of-the-way places, on the ship or the train'.[51] The descriptions are reminiscent, too, of the kind of pleasure-driven reading Roland Barthes (that most essayistic of theorists) describes in *Pleasure of the Text*, the reader delighting not in the content or structure of a work but 'the abrasions I impose on the fine surface: I speed ahead, I skip, I look up, I dip in again', a pleasure which 'occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*', and

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[48] Barbara M. Benedict, 'Choice Reading: Anthologies, Reading Practices and the Canon, 1680–1800', *Yearbook of English Studies* 45 (2015): 42.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Michel de Montaigne, 'On Some Verses of Virgil', *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Everyman's Library, 2003), 781; Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', *Essays*, 4:221. Woolf's love of the drawing-room is evident in 'Street Haunting', too, where she writes of the pleasure of 'withdrawing to some duskier chamber', and of 'the lamplight [that] falls upon the privacy of some drawing–room, its easy chairs, its papers, its china' (4:482-83).

[51] Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Best of the World's Classics, Restricted to Prose*, vol. 1, 10 vols (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1903), xiv.

which in turn recalls Adorno's idea of the essay as not respecting the whole but starting with the parts, 'accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total'.[52] Both the anti-theological fragmentation of Adorno's vision of the essay, and Barthes's drifting pleasures, are found, too, in the anthology form, as well as, to some extent, the form of the poem, as captured in Montaigne's comments in 'Of Vanity' — perhaps the first text to suggest an overlap between the movements of lyric and essay — that 'I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, flighty, daemonic'.[53]

It is for this reason, I believe, that D'Agata, Kitchen and Shields all turn to the anthology form to promote the lyric essay. It is a form that allows them to not only discuss the kind of reading they advocate, but to actively engage in it. Indeed, several reviewers have noted that D'Agata's anthologies 'seem to be large essays that [he is] composing, using other works as evidence', closer to the tradition of the personal essay's drawing in quotations (albeit, here, very long quotations) than the more critical overview of the anthology — though the two, as I have suggested, are not so different to begin with.[54] The lyric essay anthologies I go on to discuss in the rest of this section not only show us *what* texts might be read as lyric essay, but *how* they might be read as such. If the best way to outline or gesture at a genre is simply to collect and point to the texts that best exemplify it, then the way in which one collects these texts — the formal decisions made by the anthologiser in their presentation — must also be understood as part of this theoretical move. As such, the three very different approaches to anthologisation, as an activity, taken by D'Agata, Kitchen, and Shields reveal three very different ideas about what the lyric essay is, even though their selections overlap considerably. Let us turn now to the most influential of these anthologies, D'Agata's, and examine how he uses his selections to make his most interesting arguments.

D'Agata's Selections

After coining the term in 1997, John D'Agata's main contribution to the lyric essay has been his ambitious *New History of the Essay* anthology series, consisting of *The Next American Essay* (2003), *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), and *The Making of the American Essay* (2016). The series uses its

[52] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 11-12; 18 (italics in original); Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 157.

[53] Montaigne, 'Of Vanity', *Complete Works*, 925.

[54] Sandra Allen, 'John D'Agata', *Wag's Revue*, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 31. See also Stuckey-French, making a similar point: 'The anthology itself felt like a personal essay… together [the headnotes] constituted a running disquisition by D'Agata about the lyricism of the next American essay'. (Ned Stuckey-French, 'The Anthologies of John D'Agata', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 July 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/anthologies-john-dagata.)

selections to make a number of implicit arguments about what the lyric essay is and where it can be found. Though eventually published as a trilogy, it was originally envisioned as a single undertaking, a colossal book with pages numbering in the thousands, which 'would begin with a 5,000-year-old Sumerian list of aphorisms and end in the contemporary United States'.[55] We sense here D'Agata's youthful, overreaching ambition, as well as just how important this project is to him; it also highlights that his vision for the lyric essay is not historically limited, but extends to all three volumes. The most explicit discussion of the form, however, is found in the first volume, which showcases contemporary essay-writing in America from 1975 to 2003, roughly equivalent to the period in which the lyric essay has developed. In a detail telling and typical of his style, the only reason for this cut-off of 1975, as the point separating his contemporary American anthology from his historical one, is that it happens to be D'Agata's birth date; yet the year is also that of Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize win for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, so it, perhaps serendipitously, works well as a year to mark the lyric essay's birth.

D'Agata's selections are supplemented by his own piecemeal, accompanying essay threading through them, and while the topics he discusses in this essay are wide-ranging, the term lyric essay comes up frequently enough to imply that the majority of the work being presented is representative of the form. Yet by avoiding the term lyric essay in any of the anthology titles, D'Agata squirms away from committing to the idea that *all* of the pieces presented are necessarily lyric essays. He uses his anthologies to suggest the lyric essay as a new mode of reading without fixing its definition; they are an invitation to the reader to discover for themselves what the lyric essay is, among a range of possible options. By not explicitly marketing his selections as lyric essays, while still using the accompanying text to explore what the lyric essay is, D'Agata has it both ways: he suggests that any of these texts *can* be read as lyric essay, without tying them down as such. The term is presented not as a mode of classification, but a mode of reading: flexible, adaptable, and itself open to interpretation.

What unites the work in *Next American Essay* is not any consistent characteristic, but simply that we are being invited to read it as lyric essay, often in contrast to the genre or genres the work was initially associated with. The anthology opens, for example, with John McPhee's 'The Search for Marvin Gardens', originally published in 1972 in the *New Yorker*'s long-running series 'A Reporter at Large', and later included in McPhee's 1975 collection *Pieces of the Frame*, described by its publisher as a book of 'artful stories' from 'one of the best journalists and storytellers of our time'.[56] McPhee's main movement is to alternate between describing games of Monopoly he plays

[55] Stuckey-French. 'Anthologies of John D'Agata'.
[56] John McPhee, *Pieces of the Frame* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), back cover. Note, though,

against an unnamed opponent and describing the real streets and boroughs of Atlantic City which the game is based on, emphasising the discrepancy between the uniform squares on the board and the real streets' variance in terms of size ('Park Place is one block long'), and, especially, wealth.[57] There is a sense of people above this landscape playing a game with it, speedily and carelessly. The form of the piece, then, is driven by this moral question, and the parallelism between the game board and the streets; it is *not* determined by genre, which is up for grabs. Both the *New Yorker* and Macmillan position the generic identity of the piece somewhere between fiction and journalism, aligning it perhaps with Wolfe's narrative-led New Journalism, and suggesting the Monopoly game as a narrative device opening onto the real-world journalistic report on Atlantic City. Yet by framing it here as lyric essay, D'Agata brings to light different qualities in the piece: its quest for an elusive subject; its tangential structure, with its diversions into the history of Monopoly and the longest ever games played; the aesthetic pleasure it takes in incidental, unimportant facts, such as the '2,428 games of Monopoly [played] in a single season' by McPhee and his opponent; and the musical qualities of its prose, as in the poetic compression of its short opening paragraph, which might be reimagined as three lines of irregular iambic pentameter: 'Go. I roll the dice — a six and a two. Through the air I move my token, the flatiron, to Vermont Avenue, where dog packs range'.[58] D'Agata's framing is not heavy, however: in his preface to the piece, he refers to its genre only as 'something else', and deliberately de-emphasises any sense of it being an introduction to the lyric essay, stressing the arbitrary nature of his starting in 1975: 'this is not a special year'.[59] By implication, McPhee's is not a special piece; rather it is — to stress again the kind of reading anthologies encourage — merely a first taste of what the lyric essay might be, or perhaps not even first, given that the anthology, as a form, does not beg to be read cover-to-cover but to be dipped into, sampled. That D'Agata has selected a piece which bases its structure on a game board — and so foregrounds the role of chance in its own composition — is surely not accidental, even if this telling choice is meant to, rather paradoxically, gesture at its own arbitrariness.

The anthology continues like this as it advances, placing several more contentious choices of what counts as essay near its opening, in order to stress that its definition of essay is a loose one: second in the running is Barry Lopez's 'The Raven', described by Lopez himself as a 'story' despite containing some of the anthology's most strange and lyrical sentences ('the wind came off the snow-capped peaks to the north and ruffled their breath feathers');[60] sixth is James Wright's

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that my references to the piece itself are from D'Agata's anthology.

[57] John McPhee, 'The Search for Marvin Gardens', in D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 15.

[58] Ibid., 12; 9.

[59] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 7.

[60] Barry Lopez, 'Afterword from Outside', *Barry Lopez* (official website), accessed 17 August 2021, https://www.barrylopez.com/afterword_in__i_outside__i__118687.htm; Barry Lopez, 'The Raven', in D'Agata,

'May Morning', a Petrarchan sonnet written in prose, its subtle rhyme scheme not hidden but highlighted by placing its rhymes at the end of clauses, yet claimed here by D'Agata as an 'accidental encounter' with the essay form.[61] This latter comment is particularly revealing of D'Agata's approach: the essay is something he finds, hiding in unexpected places. One of the book's fundamental theoretical moves is to stress that the best genre for reading these disparate and otherwise variously categorised works is the essay, and to offer the phrase 'lyric essay' as a more open category to assuage those who doubt the viability of this. Furthermore, by laying out his genre like this, through examples, D'Agata leaves open more room for the reader to participate in the construction of the lyric essay as a mode of reading. He recognises that, not only are genres modes of reading, they are *formed* through reading too. Genres are born through acts of creative reading, and anthologies are invitations to this. That is why genres need other genres to evolve from — if we cannot read a text without a genre, then we cannot do the creative reading necessary to create a new genre without starting from the position of an old one.

In the *New History of the Essay* anthologies, that starting genre is the essay. D'Agata's understanding of the lyric essay is firmly rooted (as in my first model of 'the lyrical essay') in the idea that its parent genre is the essay. Indeed, he uses the other anthologies in his series to trace the lyric essay's essayistic roots: *Lost Origins of the Essay* tracks the essay's history back not only to Montaigne (who does not appear until page 115) but further still to its proto-essayistic roots in the writings of Heraclitus, Theophrastus, Plutarch, Seneca, and others, while *Making of the American Essay* traces the specifically American history of the essay from Anne Bradstreet through Emerson, Poe, and Whitman, right up to Kathy Acker in 1974, completing the circle and bringing D'Agata back to 1975, where his first anthology begins. Together, these works seek to both expand and deepen our understanding of what the essay is. Again, D'Agata takes the term as loosely as possible, seeing the essay operating in texts we would not normally classify as essays, whether for reasons of history (the inclusion of texts which predate Montaigne, such as Sei Shōnagon's 'The Pillow Book' and Petrarch's 'My Journey up the Mountain') or genre (the inclusion of poems, such as Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' and Charles Reznikoff's 'Testimony'; short stories, such as Borges's 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and Gass's 'In the Heart of the Heart of the Country'; and novel excerpts, such as Melville's 'The Whiteness of the Whale' chapter from *Moby Dick*). D'Agata is here partially aligned with Robert Atwan's vision of the essay as 'intrageneric' in its

Next American Essay, 25.

[61] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 75. Here, for example, are the first four 'lines' of Wright's piece, rhyming ABBA but without line breaks: 'Deep into spring, winter is hanging on. Bitter and skillful in his hopelessness, he stays alive in every shady place, starving along the Mediterranean' (James Wright, 'May Morning', in D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 77).

character, a sense of the essay not as 'a separate genre represented by a number of important works that we call "essays," but rather as a genre operating within the genres, one that has since the Renaissance continuously permeated and shaped what we normally think of as imaginative literature'.[62] His anthologies find these essays hidden within other genres and bring them out. Yet it is also true that, by isolating these texts and removing their original, non-essayistic context, D'Agata reasserts the essay as the dominant genre through which to read them; by printing them *as* essays, we are invited to read them as such.

For D'Agata, then, the essay is always the noun, and its lyricism is just one of its qualities, one which has been present since the beginning but which has grown more prominent in his own lifetime, as documented in *Next American Essay*. It is 'essay' that appears in all three anthologies' titles, 'essay' that seems, above all, to be the freeing magic word D'Agata clings to. That he uses the suggestion and association of anthologisation to gesture at what the lyric essay *could* be, rather than using strict definition to establish what it is, only reinforces this. For in creating his sense of what the lyric essay is in this way, he is following a template set by earlier anthologists of the essay. To understand that, we need to examine the history of how the essay and the anthology evolved co-dependently in the long eighteenth century. By examining the history of how and why anthologisation has been used, historically, in the formation of the essay as an idea, we can better understand both the strengths and weaknesses of D'Agata's approach.

How Anthologies Create Essays

Though the general practice of collecting together texts is as old as texts themselves, the anthology as we think of the form today — an edited collection, chosen by one or two named compilers, and based around a particular organising principle — evolved in the long eighteenth century.[63] It began as a way for booksellers and auctioneers to bundle and sell unsold texts, attaching to them a loose theme, which was sometimes a genre. Much like the term lyric essay, the anthology began as a marketing tool. Yet as Barbara Benedict notes, it also had social and political affects, acting as a central focus of reading in a fractured society still recovering from the English Civil War of 1642-49. By making more accessible the same groups of texts, 'the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century anthology helped to unify British society and to induct new classes of readers — women, the under-educated — into literary culture'.[64] The anthology became a way of spreading social

[62] Robert Atwan, 'Essayism', *Iowa Review* 25, no. 2 (1995): 6.

[63] For an overview of anthologies in China and ancient Greece, see Alexander Beecroft, 'Anthologies and Canon Formation in China and the West', *Orbis Litterarum* 73, no. 4 (August 2018): 341–47.

[64] Benedict, 'Choice Reading', 36.

cohesion by making available common reading material, and thus informed the tastes of what Woolf would later call, drawing on a phrase of Samuel Johnson's, the common reader. Essays were perfectly suited for inclusion in these anthologies: they were accessible, easily detached from their original context, and popular, thanks to the rise of periodicals such as *The Tatler, The Spectator* and *The Idler* in the same period. The eighteenth-century anthology did two things for essays: it helped further popularise and disseminate them; but it also helped define and promote the idea of the essay *as* a genre. By collecting essays together, anthologies cemented the common sense of what 'the essay' was.

The periodical, in the same period, also helped spread ideas about the essay. In some ways, the roles of both were similar: periodicals acted, like anthologies, as central loci of reading within society, and both contributed to the essay's shift, across the period, from a personal, idiosyncratic collection of ideas and sources, as in the essays of Montaigne, to something which spread social cohesion, as in the essays of Addison and Steele. Indeed, it is perhaps no surprise that Steele also edited a collection of *Poetical Miscellanies*, as well as *The Ladies Library*, a collection of women's writing. The periodical editors were, like the anthologists, collectors — albeit often of their own writings — creating, through the assemblage of pieces with shared aesthetic, moral, and political values, suggested models of how to read, as well as how to be. The periodicals, in turn, became an important source for anthologists, most significantly in Alexander Chalmers's forty-five-volume *The British Essayists* (1823), which collected pieces from *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, *The Rambler*, and *The Idler*.[65] Many readers also made personal collections of their favourite *Spectator* pieces, sometimes organising these by theme. The relationship between the periodicals and anthologies was, in many ways, symbiotic and mutually reinforcing.

Yet the periodical was a more ephemeral kind of repository; the essays in it were encountered in a fleeting and impermanent way, in a paper fated 'to be recycled for quotidian purposes, such as a touch paper to light a pipe'.[66] By contrast, when presented in collections such as *The British Essayists*, those same essays assumed the weight of being not only worth collecting but also of the genre 'essay' itself. The form comes into the foreground, emphasised by the title of the collection, and we read these pieces as examples of the literary form of the essay. The act of collecting pieces from the periodicals changed readers' relationships to them, reforming their sense of what the essay was. Markman Ellis explores this idea further in 'Time and the Essay', where he discusses the difference between reading the essays diurnally, as they were originally published,

[65] Alexander Chalmers, *The British Essayists; with Prefaces, Historical and Biographical*, vol. 1, 45 vols (London: Longman & Rees, 1817).

[66] Markman Ellis, 'Time and the Essay: The Spectator and Diurnal Form', in Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 103.

and encountering them in collections, as the majority of readers have done since, noting how collections 'restructure the reader's experience of the essay, especially its relationship to chronology and the passage of time', by presenting them with 'numerous ways to reorganize the miscellaneous structure of the diurnal essays, not least by reading them continuously, without having to wait until tomorrow for the next one'.[67] By bringing the essays together, their shared characteristics are brought to light. If the essay, as a form, captures the ephemeral — a thought, a walk, a moment — and makes it visible, then the same thing happens *to* the essay as well, when it is collected: having appeared fleetingly, almost tentatively — whether in a newspaper destined to be thrown away after reading, or a passage of a novel easily skipped over to return to the plot, or the foreword or afterword to a poem — it becomes, as is it anthologised and reprinted, more permanent, and more recognisable as essay. In a way, the process of anthologisation is what makes a mere moment of *essaying* into 'an essay'.[68]

It is this process which D'Agata, Kitchen, and Shields continue in their anthologies, turning ephemeral moments of reading — a thought D'Agata has as he reads Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages' and considers that its essential movement is essay-like; a pattern Kitchen notices in Brenda Miller's 'Swerve' and Stuart Dybek's 'Between' — into a named, recognisable genre, a consistent mode of reading applicable across multiple texts. Certainly these editors go much further than Chalmers, whose anthology is less obviously entrenched in any particular mode of reading, presenting its selections in date order with primarily historical, rather than theoretical, introductions — an anthology of 'essayists' rather than essays. Yet many of the debates that circle around the lyric essay and its anthologies originate in this same period in which the anthology was born: debates about copyright and the dissemination of texts (with the various illegal, unofficial and personal anthologies that proliferated in the period particularly inspiring Shields, as we shall see later); debates about how and where and why we should read, about what is worth preserving and re-reading; debates about our common texts, and our common, shared, contemporary modes of reading. Most of all, the rise of the anthology introduced the idea that by collecting something, we can reimagine its genre, and thus change how we read it — an idea that is essential to how the lyric essay has been promoted. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine the lyric essay existing as a

[67] Ibid., 112.

[68] This is not to suggest, however, that the form of the periodicals did not also influence our sense of what the essay is. Indeed, the delight in finding interesting things in unexpected places, a delight central to the essay's appeal, was built into the actual form of periodicals, the essays in which might be rediscovered while using the paper to clean a shoe, or line a closet. It might be truer to say, then, that both the anthology and the periodical promoted essayistic reading, but they did so in different ways; that is, they promoted different kinds of essayistic reading. The same essay, appearing in first *The Tatler* and later in Chalmers, is to some extent *not* the same essay; for it is encountered differently, read differently, and thus made into 'an essay' differently.

form *without* anthologisation, for it is too scattered and elusive to be otherwise detectable. If essayists are 'lonely travelers in an indifferent universe of literature, lurking on the edges of the mainstream territories mapped out and claimed by writers of fiction, poetry, and drama', their works 'less likely to appear in whole books than in out-of-the-way locales', then lyric essayists are even more slippery creatures, their work belonging to not just the hidden space of the essay but the even less visible space *between* the essay and the lyric.[69]

Perhaps the biggest strength of this essay-creation through anthologisation, though, is that it does not overly limit what the essay form can be, or fix it too clearly in place. Anthologisation also allows the essay-critic — as well as, several centuries later, D'Agata — to sidestep the difficulty the essay form has with being discussed in direct, positivist terms. The essay has always shown an antagonism towards positive definitions, preferring instead to be defined by what it is not. It is not a story or a poem or a treatise or a sermon or an article; it 'takes as many shapes as weather or daylight'.[70] It is non-methodical, non-dogmatic, and non-conclusive; 'non-regular, non-scholarly'; 'non-hierarchical'; 'radically-unradical' in its 'consciousness of non-identity'.[71] Individual essays seem to resist the very idea of genres; they are 'experimental modes of writing, continuously shifting their borders, testing constraints'.[72] Thomas Karshan, in his recent piece 'What is an Essay?', suggests that the form itself tries to shrug off the question:

> The very word essay was from the beginning just such a shrug: an expression of modesty; a defensive mask; a licence, like that of a joke, for saying things without being held accountable for them… Claiming the licence to take in anything and everything, essays adopt a potentially unlimited range of forms, and essayists have frequently preferred not to straitjacket themselves in the uniform of a definition. The essay ruins categories and definitions, embracing a wild diversity of possible forms.[73]

For some, this limitlessness, this ability to range anywhere and do anything, is the appeal of the essay form. By being free in its form, the essay is also free in its thought; as Kenneth Alan Hovey notes, it expresses 'a peculiarly nonpositive, nonnegative philosophy';[74] that is, it neither asserts

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[69] Lynn Z. Bloom, 'The Essay Canon', *College English* 61, no. 4 (1999): 409.

[70] Maureen Howard, ed., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary American Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1984), xi.

[71] Boutcher, 'Montaignian Essay', 60; Stefano Evangelista, 'Things Said by the Way: Walter Pater and the Essay', in Karshan and Murphy, *On* Essays, 259; Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 157.

[72] Joyce Carol Oates, ed., *The Best American Essays: 1991* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), xvii.

[73] Thomas Karshan, 'What Is An Essay? Thirteen Answers from Virginia Woolf', in Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 32-33.

[74] Kenneth Alan Hovey, '"Mountaigny Saith Prettily": Bacon's French and the Essay', *PMLA* 106, no. 1 (1991): 74.h

that it has found the truth, nor denies that it *can* be found, but exists somewhere in the middle, in the search for it. It gives us the mind as it is trying to find the truth, the mind in the process of thinking, before those thoughts have hardened into dogma or even into firm opinion. It is a pliable form, one which stretches and investigates the limits of normal thought. For Mario Aquilina, the paradox of the essay is that it is most like itself when it is breaking its own rules, 'most essayistic when it transgresses generic expectations'; it is 'marked more by the desire to stretch and transgress previously established limits than specific formal features, such as style, tone, structure, thematic concerns or rhetorical functions'.[75] Aquilina suggests that any definition we try and shackle the essay with, it will start pushing at the limits of it, for to be *at the limits* is what the essay does: hence, perhaps, why it breaks so easily out of its own boundaries and into the lyric.

The essay is difficult to define, then, because it is difficult to *confine*. The anthology's suggestiveness, and particularly its non-exhaustiveness, is suited to a form that dislikes direct, reductive statements. The anthology form allows the essay to examine itself without burning under the too-bright lights of direct confrontation: it can ask 'what is the essay?' but it can also wriggle away from the answer, change its opinion by bringing in another example, another voice. It is a form that meets the essay's twin, paradoxical needs to be discussed and defined, on the one hand, ignored and left unshackled on the other. It is this that makes the anthology such an appropriate form for D'Agata's project, a project which continues a long tradition of making theoretical interventions about what the essay is, or can be, through the act of collecting pieces together and highlighting their commonality. D'Agata invites us to identify shared characteristics in not only contemporary figures like Dillard, Carson, Nelson, and Rankine, but in writers as disparate as Sei Shōnagon and Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, and Donald Barthelme. It is a gesture which is itself essayistic, and which emphasises the lyric essay's contingency with similarly example-led models of the essay which have come before it. Where D'Agata falters is where he strays from this approach; where, rather than letting his anthologisation itself do the work, he resorts instead to more direct, sometimes polemical statements. The more subtle arguments of the selections themselves give way, at points, to problematic claims in the accompanying commentaries. It is to these we now turn.

[75] Mario Aquilina, ed., *The Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics and Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 12-13; 2.

Critiquing D'Agata

That D'Agata accompanies his selections with discursive commentaries is not, of course, in itself a problem. D'Agata could have used his commentaries to continue the rich thinking about the categories of lyric and essay that takes place in anthologies like Rhys's and Brewer's, where we see the idea that the two forms share commonalities developing; an idea that ultimately goes back to Montaigne's comment in 'Of Vanity' that the best prose 'shines throughout with the vigor and boldness of poetry, and gives the effect of its frenzy'.[76] Brewer, for example, writes that the essayist 'has often the suggestiveness, the divination of the poet. Indeed, he well may be called the poet's cousin. They both are seers, prophets'.[77] Rhys agrees, noting how essayists such as Lamb, Hazlitt, and Goldsmith were also gifted poets, before claiming that essayists are 'dilute lyrists, engaged in pursuing a rhythm too subtle for verse and lifelike as common-room gossip'.[78] Hugh Walker, meanwhile, opens his *The English Essay and Essayist*, the most significant single-volume critical work on the essay of the early twentieth century, with a quote from Alexander Smith, which also appears in Brewer's introduction:

> The essay, as a literary form, resembles the lyric, in so far as it is molded by some central mood, — whimsical, serious, or satirical. Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around as the cocoon grows around the silkworm. The essay writer is a chartered libertine, and a law unto himself. A quick ear and eye, an ability to discern the infinite suggestiveness of common things, a brooding meditative spirit, are all that the essayist requires to start business with.[79]

Smith, Brewer, and Rhys all point to specific aspects of the lyric — suggestiveness, rhythm, and mood — which the reader might find in the essay. This is the lineage of thinking that D'Agata's anthology comes out of, and in places he continues its thinking fruitfully. Building on the idea that both poems and essays are journeys into the unknown, for example, he draws together various metaphors of walking and travelling from his reading in the essay across the centuries to offer a poetics of the lyric essay as a never-ending journey: an 'unmapped quest' or 'journey that cannot ever end, to a place that might not exist', a 'journey of thought into risk' in a 'perpetual pursuit' of the unknown.[80] Though he does not make it explicit, there is a connection here to how lyric poems,

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[76] Montaigne, 'Of Vanity', *Complete Works*, 926.

[77] Brewer, *World's Best Essays*, xiii.

[78] Rhys and Vaughan, *Century of English Essays*, vll.

[79] Hugh Walker, *The English Essay and Essayist* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2011), 2. See also: Brewer, *World's Best Essays*, xv.

[80] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 95; *Lost Origins of the Essay*, 45; 367; John D'Agata, ed., *The Making of the*

too, think into the unknown: what Robert Von Hallberg describes when he claims that 'one thinks in a poem not so much of a truth as toward something unpossessed';[81] a fruitful suggestion for how one might actually read a text as both lyric and essay simultaneously. By offering a poetics of the essay that is not tied to any rules or formal conventions, but to certain tendencies and writerly emphases which can then be read into other genres and other historical periods — writing which wanders without a map or goal, writing which is as interested in questions as answers — D'Agata here strengthens the implicit arguments made by his selections themselves.

Yet for the most part, D'Agata is distracted away from such useful thinking by a persistent, confusing, and altogether shaky argument about the lyric essay's relationship to facts. The roots of D'Agata's conflicted position lie in his own experiences as a student, in a claim he heard while at high school in a lecture by a visiting biologist: that 'the lifespan of a fact is shrinking'. It is a claim which appears verbatim in both the 1997 manifesto and in *Next American Essay*, and from which he derives the title of his controversial book *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012).[82] In both *Lifespan* and throughout all three anthologies, he insists that the essayist should not be beholden to strict fact-checking, but should be given the same freedoms afforded to the poet and the fiction-writer to make things up. This is most succinctly stated at the close of the first anthology: 'the lyric essay asks what happens when an essay begins to behave less like an essay and more like a poem… [when it] starts imagining things, making things up, filling in blank spaces or – worse yet – leaving the blanks blank'.[83] This argument — which he leans hard into from the opening of the first anthology, beginning with the shared etymological DNA of the word 'fact' with 'artifice', 'counterfeit', and 'deficient', as well as Emerson's claim that 'there are no facts, only art'[84] — takes up so much of D'Agata's attention that it begins to swamp the whole project, and, furthermore, the whole debate about the lyric essay more broadly. It revolves around a false dichotomy, which he continually falls back on: between art, the imagination, and a romanticised idea of 'the truth' on

American Essay (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 777.

[81] Robert Von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 125.

[82] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 225. *The Lifespan of a Fact* (London: Quercus, 2019), in which D'Agata further advances the shaky arguments about facts and fiction made across the three anthologies, has stirred up considerable controversy. The book is a partly fictionalised account of the correspondence between D'Agata and Jim Fingal, the fact-checker at U.S. online magazine *The Believer*, regarding D'Agata's 2003 essay 'What Happens There', which was originally rejected by *Harper's* for containing too many factual inaccuracies. It sets itself up as a war between D'Agata the artist, crusading for the freedom to fudge facts in the pursuit of truth and beauty, and Fingal as the stickler for precision and journalistic responsibility. The arguments of *Lifespan* grow out of the claims made in *Next American Essay*, and are essentially a more blunt, polemical extension of them. As such, the book, especially given its unexpected success (it was a surprise bestseller, and was even adapted into a play staring Daniel Radcliffe), has only furthered the extent to which this one, relatively minor element of the lyric essay — its more malleable approach to fact-checking — has ballooned into its defining feature, detracting from the other, more nuanced points which both D'Agata himself, as well as (more troublingly) other writers on the lyric essay, have to make.

[83] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 435.

[84] Ibid., 1-2.

the one hand, and facts, close adherence to reality, and journalistic integrity on the other. We see this in operation, for example, at the opening of *Lost Origins*, where he asks: 'Do we read nonfiction in order to receive information, or do we read it to experience art?'[85] His answer is the latter, but the distinction remains woolly and highly suspect. At no point does he explain why these two things are mutually exclusive, why an essayist cannot be both factually accurate and artistically beautiful, a failure that has opened up both D'Agata himself and the lyric essay more broadly to repeated criticism, such as Deresiewicz's scathing 'In Defense of Facts' and Gutkind's slightly more measured, but equally damning 'Doing a D'Agata'.[86]

D'Agata also ties himself up in contradictions trying to support his fallacious view of the essay as something which needs to be freed from the shackles of hard facts. Some of his argument comes out of his reading of the essay as an 'attempt', a word he reads as inherently speculative and therefore rooted in the imagination, arguing that Montaigne's naming of the essay 'freed this form from the argumentative posturing of political, religious, or scientific treatises, granting it credentials to be recognized at last as what it's always been: art'.[87] Yet elsewhere, he sets up the essay itself as a straw man figure, a bastion of hard fact, as in his claim that the lyric essay is 'an oxymoron: an essay that's also a lyric; a kind of logic that wants to sing; an argument that has no chance of proving anything', which suggests that the clarifying adjective 'lyric' frees the essay from being shackled to facts.[88] Most ironically of all, D'Agata's quest to 'push back' against our 'obsession with facts', as he says in an interview with *Guernica*, becomes his own obsession.[89] In trying to free the essay from facts, he only shackles it all the more inseparably to them. He fails to make room for the very doubt or 'unknowing' which he champions in the essay itself; as Eleftheriou notes, he lacks a 'willingness to be defeated', to 'give the reader space to disagree', qualities which are praised on the surface of D'Agata's work but not formally incorporated into it.[90]

Because of his extreme position regarding the essayist's license to make things up, D'Agata's other, more interesting project — to expand the canon of essay, to broaden our sense of what the essay can be — ultimately fails. He is too willing to draw in any loose example, to

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[85] Ibid., 3.

[86] William Deresiewicz, 'In Defense of Facts', *Atlantic*, 10 December 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/01/in-defense-of-facts/508748; Lee Gutkind, 'Doing A D'Agata Or A Don'tgotta—Or Is It A Daisey?', *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 44 (Spring 2012): 54–58. Gutkind, in particular, is one of D'Agata's most vocal and prominent critics, and as the coiner of the term 'creative nonfiction', is something like D'Agata's arch nemesis. His 2012 guide to writing creative nonfiction has a title so pointedly anti-D'Agata one wonders if it is a deliberate bait of his rival: *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*.

[87] D'Agata, *Lost Origins of the Essay*, 114.

[88] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 436.

[89] John D'Agata, 'What We Owe History', interview by Ariel Lewiton, *Guernica*, 15 February 2016, https://www.guernicamag.com/what-we-owe-history.

[90] Eleftheriou, 'Is Genre Ever New?'

imagine a 'new history of the essay' rather than discover it. For D'Agata, of course, this imagining is not a problem. Changing reality to make a better story is his favoured methodology. He is happy to mistranslate and mischaracterise early texts, such as those in the first one-hundred pages of *Lost Origins*, to make them fit his theory. Yet this ultimately weakens his claim, and distracts from the interesting ways in which these works *are* essayistic. For there is merit, too, to D'Agata's freewheeling approach. One of his most interesting claims comes in *Next American Essay*, when introducing Jamaica Kincaid's 'Girl', originally published not as an essay but a short story, in her first collection *At the Bottom of the River*. D'Agata writes, as though pre-emptively countering those who would argue against the classification of 'Girl' as an essay: 'Maybe the essay is just a conditional form of literature – less a genre in its own right than an attitude that's assumed in the midst of another genre'.[91] The idea recalls Réda Bensmaïa's claim that the essay is not a genre in itself, but a 'matrix of all generic possibilities', the impulse underlying all other genres, as well as Mikhail Epstein's claim that the essay 'retains its character only when it constantly intersects with other genres'.[92] Viewed as a continuation of such thinking, D'Agata's seeing the essay in texts as wildly different as Jonathan Edwards's fiery, rhetorical sermon 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God' and Azwinaki Tshipala's spare, elliptical 'Questions and Answers' becomes more understandable: the continuation of a long lineage of reading the essay into other genres.

It is also worth recalling, here, my earlier points about the publishing and teaching contexts in which the lyric essay, as an idea, emerged: that they exist, at least in part, simply to promote good writing. One gets the sense that D'Agata has taken the opportunity afforded him by Graywolf to compile all of his favourite pieces of writing, without worrying too much about whether they strictly count as 'essays' or not. Certainly there is no formal thread linking all the writers included; rather, one could easily imagine them being a list of someone's favourite writers. This might be levelled as a criticism, but again it is worth stressing that it is in line with the original context of the lyric essay label — a label that seeks to promote the writing it attaches itself to, to suggest that such writing combines the best qualities of both poetry and essay. D'Agata's anthologies follow this impulse, in that they feel, perhaps more so than other, more canon-forming anthologies, designed to be *read*, by curious readers seeking lyrical and essayistic work from across history and across genres. Such a re-emphasis brings to light the merit of even his wilder claims, such as his idea that Impressionist paintings are a kind of essay;[93] such a claim may come across as outlandish,

[91] D'Agata, *Next American Essay*, 41.

[92] Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 92; Mikhail Epstein, 'Essayism, an Essay on the Essay', in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*, ed. Mikhail Epstein, Slobadanka Vladiv-Glover, and Aleksandr Genis (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 216.

[93] D'Agata, *Making of the American Essay*, 233.

but it nonetheless provokes us to think about what *is* essayistic in an Impressionist painting, to what extent it partakes in the essayistic mode, and, perhaps most importantly, what happens to our response to a painting when we view it as such: say, Monet 'essaying' on a pond of waterlilies.

That, perhaps, is the most interesting question that comes out of D'Agata's project, and out of the lyric essay term more broadly. It prompts us to ask: what *happens* when we call a work lyric essay? What does it reveal in said work that would otherwise remain hidden to us? How does it change our response to the work? If we call a poem 'essay', what happens to our reading of it? If we call an essay 'lyric', does it start to sing? Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of D'Agata's more controversial claims regarding nonfiction's debts to accuracy, his increasing embroilment in the debates around said claims and entrenchment of his positions on them, is that they led him away from these more interesting questions, which he is obviously also interested in. The light, speculative, curious tone of Tall and D'Agata's initial 1997 manifesto has given way, by the time D'Agata is writing *Lifespan of a Fact* in 2012, to a more polemical, controversy-baiting register. One of the aims of this thesis is to recapture some of that initial spirit of curiosity in which and through which the term lyric essay was born.

Judith Kitchen's 'Shorts'

After D'Agata, perhaps the most important thinker on the lyric essay is Judith Kitchen, who has contributed to the form in three distinct ways. Firstly, her own essays, in collections such as *Only the Dance* (1994) and *Distance and Direction* (2001), are emblematic of the genre; the *Eastern Iowa Review*, for example, in their page on the lyric essay, cite her final, book-length essay *The Circus Train* (2014), alongside works by Annie Dillard and Anne Carson, as the essays they 'perceive to be truest to the lyric form'.[94] Secondly, Kitchen has written numerous critical pieces on the lyric essay, including 'Grounding the Lyric Essay' and 'Mending Wall', which consider, far more explicitly than D'Agata ever does, how the form compares to poetry. Finally, she has also been a key publisher and anthologiser of the form, founding Ovenbird Books in 2012 as a home for innovative nonfiction, and editing or co-editing four Norton collections of very short essays, *In Short* (1996), *In Brief* (1999), *Short Takes* (2005), and *Brief Encounters* (2015), the latter published posthumously. Yet there is a crucial difference between Kitchen's approach and D'Agata's: Kitchen does not use, in her anthologies themselves, the term lyric essay. Though she frequently uses the term elsewhere, and has done more than many to think through the full meaning of what it means to call an essay

[94] Chila Woychik, 'The Lyric Essay', *Eastern Iowa Review*, accessed 17 August 2021, http://www.portyonderpress.com/the-lyric-essay.html.

'lyric', in her influential anthologies of the form, she barely mentions it by name. Kitchen keeps the two processes entirely separate, using her anthologies to promote work without tying it to a specific genre, and then in a separate space theorising what the lyric essay is. In this section I explore why this is, and how it invites a different approach to reading the lyric essay to D'Agata's. I also explore how, while D'Agata's anthologising was primarily rooted in my first model of the 'lyrical essay', suggesting as he did an essayistic lineage for his new coinage, Kitchen's collections, by concentrating on short, concise pieces of prose, are closer to my second model of 'essayistic lyric', and overlap with the idea of the prose poem.

First, let us begin with what Kitchen does actually say about the lyric essay. For Kitchen, a lot of what has been called lyric essay is mischaracterised, the term pasted hastily onto works that are merely 'philosophical meditation, truncated memoir, slipshod research, and just-plain-discursive opinion', 'applied to all sorts of different things: anything short, anything that uses poetic language, or a mosaic technique, or that is experimental, or "clever"'.[95] The emphasis of Tall's original definition (which she calls 'brilliant') has been, she claims, 'immediately undermined' by an overly generous use of the term. To be considered lyric essay, Kitchen argues, there must be an 'awareness of the cadences and sounds of the language itself.'[96] That is, the essay must be *musical*: 'to be lyric, there must be a lyre'.[97] The work must convey its meaning through sound, as a poem does — through 'the assonance and consonance of thought attuned to language', 'the internal rhyme of the mind' as represented through 'the whisper of soft consonants, the repetition of an elongated vowel'.[98] Kitchen implicitly follows Emerson's idea of the poem's 'metre-making argument', which Marcia Aldrich describes as underlying the lyric essay[99] — the idea that the sound of a poem has a meaning of its own. This is why music is so important to Kitchen's conception of the lyric essay; why she finishes 'Mending Wall' with a list of types of music she hears in the lyric essay ('a music of language', 'a music of structure', 'a music of silence', 'the music of the spheres'); why Fleda Brown hears the 'contrapuntal complexities of Mozart' tolling in her work; why Dinah Lenney even conjectures that Kitchen may have wanted to be a singer.[100]

At the same time, the lyric essay has a much stronger debt to fact for Kitchen than it does for D'Agata. She writes that 'the job of the lyric essayist is to find the prosody of fact, finger the

[95] Judith Kitchen, 'Mending Wall', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 47; Judith Kitchen, 'Grounding the Lyric Essay', *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 13, no. 2 (2011): 115.

[96] Ibid., 116.

[97] Kitchen, 'Mending Wall', 47.

[98] Ibid., 46.

[99] Maria Aldrich, 'The Boarding School', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 108.

[100] Kitchen, 'Mending Wall', 48-49; Fleda Brown, 'Judith Kitchen's Uncertainty Principle', *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 21; Dinah Lenney, 'Like One of Those Songs That You Can't Get Out of Your Head', *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 25.

emotional instrument, play the intuitive and the intrinsic, but all in service to the music of the real… The aim is to make *of* not *up*. The lyre, not the liar.'[101] Though she does not mention D'Agata by name here, the latter two sentences in particular feel like a coded attack on his obsession with making up facts. Indeed, Kitchen's position implicitly criticises D'Agata's conception of the lyric essay on both fronts: for not being musical or lyrical enough, on the one hand, and not factual enough, on the other. For Kitchen, these two qualities are not at all opposed; an allegiance to the latter does not hinder one's ability to be musical. Rather, as she suggests in 'Grounding the Lyric Essay', it is what grounds that music in reality. Kitchen's use of the word 'ground' is complex, but central to her conception of the lyric essay: it refers not only to the lyric essay's allegiance to reality, but also, drawing on I. A. Richard's use of the term in his description of metaphor, to the new meanings created by its juxtapositions and leaps of logic: that is, to the shared context of its disparate parts, including its juxtaposition of the lyrical and the essayistic. Kitchen's attempt to theorise the lyric essay in the terms of metaphor is one of the first attempts to do what we would recognise as conventionally scholarly work on the term, and is an important rejoinder to those who use terms like 'poetic' and 'lyric' in their vaguest, loosest sense, as descriptors for certain essays, the kind of labelling Chris Offutt satirises in his (fictional and parodical) *Offutt Guide to Literary Terms* when he defines the lyric essay as 'an essay with pretty language'.[102]

Given this attention elsewhere to the usefulness of it, it is curious that Kitchen does not use the term lyric essay in her anthologies, despite them containing many pieces — including work by poets such as Jeff Oaks, James Richardson, Lia Purpura, Lance Larsen, Wayne Koestenbaum, Greg Glazner, and Claudia Rankine — that seem a good fit. Instead, taking inspiration from the booming popularity of 'flash' or 'sudden' fiction in the 1980s and 1990s, Kitchen and her fellow editors offer in these anthologies a range of examples of what they call the 'nonfiction short' (later just the 'short'): pieces under 2000 words that display 'the fundamental mark of an essay — the building of a process of thought through a singular contemplative voice', but in a more condensed, abbreviated form.[103] Many of the pieces are drawn from Dinty W. Moore's journal *Brevity*, a home for essays under 750 words; others are excerpts 'carved from longer pieces, usually stand-alone segments that have been composed in a "mosaic" style, complete with their own sense of closure'.[104] As we saw with D'Agata, the form is found rather than made: Kitchen calls it 'cheating', for she is claiming things as shorts which were originally long, but maintains it is 'cheating while I

[101] Kitchen, 'Mending Wall', 47.
[102] Chris Offutt, 'Excerpt from *The Offutt Guide to Literary Terms*', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 38.
[103] Judith Kitchen, ed., *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction* (New York: Norton, 2005), 13.
[104] Ibid., 12.

notice something'.[105] The relationship of Kitchen's anthologies to *Brevity* is not unlike that of Chalmers's or Rhys's anthologies to the journals they collected from, or D'Agata's own relationship to *Seneca Review*; the magazines are places for experiment and play, and the anthologies are places to assess the commonalities of those experiments, as well as, more plainly, highlight the most successful examples.

Why, then, does Kitchen opt for 'short' here rather than 'lyric essay'? On the one hand, given Kitchen's insistence on factual accuracy, it may be an attempt to get away from the taint of fact-flubbing that D'Agata's term carries, emphasising instead the pieces' lightness and spontaneity. Kitchen has spoken of the unexpected insight of off-the-cuff thoughts, 'things that come off the top of your head', and how she tries to create a space, in her own work, for the mind to 'work like a skipping stone', something Kate Carroll de Gutes calls the quality of her being 'alive on the page'.[106] On the other hand, the terms 'short' and 'lyric essay' may be, for Kitchen, somewhat interchangeable — she is one of the few critics to insist on the lyric essay's shortness, arguing that this is one thing which distinguishes it from a simpler, broader category of 'lyrical essays', writing that 'any essay may be lyrical, as long as it pays attention to the sound of its language, or the sweep of its cadences', but that a lyric essay 'functions as a lyric' and can be 'held in the mind — must, in fact, be held in the mind — intact'.[107] This is an unusual distinction, precluding a lot of the material in this thesis, suggesting that texts as various and fractured as Rankine's *Citizen*, as long and meandering as Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, or as stuffed with different genres and formal experiments as Carson's *Decreation* would not count as lyric essays; but for Kitchen, it is clearly an important one, and her use of the word 'short' may be, in fact, fairly synonymous with 'lyric essay'.[108] Using 'short' also emphasises the continuity between the lyric essay and earlier short, lyric prose forms such as the prose poem, a form Jeremy Noel-Tod notes has been associated with brevity 'ever since Baudelaire modestly acknowledged his own inventions as "petit"', and which can also be held 'intact' in the mind.[109] Yet the insistence that the lyric essay must be short fails, I think; indeed, it is interesting to note that Noel-Tod himself departs from Kitchen, using the prose poem's brevity as a way to *distinguish* it from the lyric essay, which he

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[105] Jynelle A. Gracia, 'Right into the Fire', *River Teeth* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 129.

[106] Judith Kitchen, '"Ask Me Whether What I Have Done Is My Life": An Interview with Judith Kitchen', interview by C. J. Bartunek, *Georgia Review*, 14 August 2013, https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/ask-me-whether-what-i-have-done-is-my-life-an-interview-with-judith-kitchen; Kate Carroll De Gutes, 'Learning To Be on the Page: The Generosity and Insight of Judith Kitchen', *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 2.

[107] Kitchen, 'Mending Wall', 48.

[108] Kitchen is the only critic I have found who makes this distinction between the two normally interchangeable terms 'lyric essay' and 'lyrical essay'. It is also worth re-stressing that the original 1997 definition of lyric essay explicitly allows for longer, book-length works, and many of the most influential and important books to have fallen under the category lyric essay indeed are full length works, including Kitchen's own *The Circus Train*.

[109] Noel-Tod, *Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, xxxviii.

explicitly calls 'book-length'.[110] As these opposite approaches suggest, length ultimately forms a poor basis for distinguishing one genre from another; both are misguided attempts to locate the lyric essay in consistent characteristics, rather than as an appropriate mode of reading.

There is also a certain conservatism disclosed by Kitchen's opting for the word 'short', and her insistence that the lyric essay be limited by length. Many of the pieces in her anthologies have a gentler, more conversational tone than in D'Agata's books: there is nothing as formally experimental as Brian Lennon's 'Sleep', Jenny Boully's 'The Body', or Joe Wenderoth's 'Things to Do Today', the three pieces that close *Next American Essay*. Whereas D'Agata's use of 'next' suggests adventure and boundary-pushing, Kitchen's 'short' suggests these are small, simple pieces, a gesture of modesty consistent with the word 'essay' itself. Elsewhere, Kitchen has positioned the essay as a place novelists and poets can escape to in the wake of postmodernism and its destruction of what people really value (or so she claims) from fiction and poetry: stories, characters, and the pulse of 'human daily living'.[111] Similarly, Dinty W. Moore, editor of *Brevity,* has spoken of how the journal does not generally publish things that experiment with language; Moore is also a fierce critic of D'Agata and his more radical claims for the lyric essay form.[112] What matters for both Moore and Kitchen is *only* the lyric essay's shortness; the genre is not an excuse for other kinds of formal play. This is starkly different from, say, Maggie Nelson, who as I argue in Chapter 4 is attracted to the lyric essay for its radical, boundary-crossing potential, and who positions the lyric essay as a continuation of the progressive theory and experimentation of thinkers like Roland Barthes and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. For a writer like Nelson, the legacy of the prose poem is the experimentalism of Mallarmé's *Divagations*, Stein's *Tender Buttons*, and Ashbery's *Three Poems*; texts that challenge our ideas about what prose can do. For Kitchen, it is closer to what Noel-Tod calls the 'plainer style, imitative of speech', a style that co-evolved with the more radical prose poem and which 'employs the formulas and rhythms of story-telling, with all their alluring familiarity and suspense', to produce something closer to fiction.[113]

The most important effect of using the term 'shorts' in the titles of her anthologies, though, is that it allows Kitchen to leave open the mode of reading — prose poem, lyric essay, flash fiction — we choose to read the work through. Indeed, it would be more accurate to describe her use of the noun 'short' not as an alternative mode of reading but as a refusal of one. The lyric essay is sometimes suggested as a similar shrugging off of genre, yet it is difficult to take seriously as such,

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[110] Ibid.

[111] Gracia, 'Right into the Fire', 133.

[112] Dinty W. Moore, 'D'Agata's Trickery and Manipulations: Dinty W. Moore Speaks Out', *Brevity* (blog), 27 February 2012, https://brevity.wordpress.com/2012/02/27/dagatas-trickery.

[113] Noel-Tod, *Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, xxiv.

combining as it does the names of two existing genres, even if one of these, the essay, is itself sometimes configured as a kind of non-genre. 'Short', though, offers us these pieces with the least framework possible — the only point of connection we are given is that the work is short. One point of comparison is Anne Carson's *Short Talks* (1992), a book which I read in Chapter 3 as lyric essay, but which also carries a similarly unassuming title, essentially substituting a marker of genre for a marker of length. For both Carson and Kitchen, 'short' provides the same coherence as a genre (a mark necessary for publishing rather than writing, a mark indicating what the text 'is') without providing any framework for how to approach it. Carson, of course, complicates things further by adding 'talks', though this, too, opens up more possibilities than it closes down, suggesting, simultaneously, the conversational tone of the personal essay, the read-aloud lyric poem, and other spoken genres such as the speech, lecture, and sermon.

Leaving the mode of reading open — whether to one's own work, as in Carson's ambiguously titled *Short Talks*, or anthologised work, as in Kitchen's *Short Takes* — does not, of course, equate to the opinion that all genres are equally valid modes of reading through which to approach a text. Indeed, as we have seen, Kitchen in fact sees the term lyric essay as being too loosely and sloppily applied, to work which does not fit it well, which does not yield fruitfully to it. Perhaps, then, she avoids using the term lyric essay to specifically describe the work in her anthologies because she is unsure whether all the pieces are musical enough to be read as lyric essay. Yet to twist her definition a little, a more subtle modulation of Kitchen's argument might be that the lyric essay is misapplied not when it is applied to the wrong work, but when it is applied to work in the wrong way: that is, when the actual lyricism of a lyric essay is ignored, by critics such as D'Agata, who use it instead as a mode to read fictionality into the essay and disregard its debt to facts. Instead, Kitchen encourages us to read the lyric essay musically: to pay to the essay the same heightened attention to sounds, rhythms, and patterns one brings to a lyric poem; to respond to the full, ambiguous network of connotations sparked by each word of an essay rather than quickly linking them together into coherence. In her anthologies, she provides some short texts on which this approach bears fruit. Yet, though Kitchen herself might have disagreed, we will see in my later chapters that the approach is a useful one for longer works too.

Music Before Meaning

I want now to step briefly away from the anthology context to consider in more detail this question, arising from Kitchen's thinking, of how the lyric essay is a more musical form of the essay. Perhaps the central contradiction at the heart of the essay is that between contraction and expansion, between the digressive and the compact. On the one hand, there is the loose, rambling style of

flitting between one topic and another, which we find originally in Montaigne. These essayists follow associations like a trail of breadcrumbs into the woods until they end up somewhere different from where they set out to arrive at. This getting lost, this finding of insight in an unexpected place, is an essential part of such an essay's charm. The essay is a kind of voluntary madness which the essayist, and the reader with them, chooses to enter. On the other hand, there is the compact, impactful style of the essayist cutting to the heart of an issue, or else distilling an idea down to its essence, that we find originally in Bacon. Phillip Lopate notes that Bacon's essays display 'a more impersonal, magisterial, law-giving, and didactic manner than the skeptical Montaigne', while O. B. Hardison, Jr. describes Bacon's style as 'curt' and 'Tacitean' in comparison to the 'meandering' and 'libertine' Montaigne.[114] There is a split, then, right of the start of the essay's history, as Bacon takes the newly invented form of Montaigne to England, and in doing so transforms it into something like its opposite. Where Montaigne expands, Bacon contracts; expansion causes ideas to proliferate and tumble out of each other, while contraction causes ideas to synthesise, to compress into single expressions.

These two approaches to essaying have both experienced alternating periods of popularity since the essay's invention. The Romantic period, for example, saw a return to the personal, rambling style of Montaigne in the essays of Hazlitt and Lamb, while the Victorian period 'saw a turn [back] toward the formal essay, the so-called essay of ideas written by Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Macaulay, Pater'.[115] As Elena Gualtieri writes, 'Montaigne's subjectivity and Bacon's impersonality effectively marked the two extremes of a spectrum of possibilities within which all subsequent manifestations of the genre seemed to fall'.[116] The essay, we might say, expands and contracts across history, in a kind of pulsing motion, as the Montaignean and Baconian models continue to alternately come into fashion and decline. Furthermore, because the essay is a highly self-conscious form of writing, one that is constantly defining and defending and examining itself, it therefore *internalises* this oscillating history. That oscillation thus becomes (or doubly becomes, for it is already a part of) the form of the essay; the writer of the essay, in adopting the form, also adopts that self-reflexive movement of thought, that constant doubling back and exploring the opposite point. The self-conscious essay internalises its own contradictory history, and thus becomes even more contradictory.

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[114] Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), xlvii; O. B. Hardison Jr., 'Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay', *Sewanee Review* 96, no. 4 (1988): 614-15.

[115] Lopate, *Art of the Personal Essay*, xlviii. Lopate notes that a few more personal essayists did remain in this period, notably De Quincey and Stevenson, but that they were in the minority.

[116] Elena Gualtieri, 'The Essay as Form: Virginia Woolf and the Literary Tradition', *Textual Practice* 12, no. 1 (1998): 49.

By the twentieth century, the essay has fully recapitulated its own oscillating history into the fabric of itself, to such an extent that Adorno is able to claim that the fundamental mode of thinking underlying the essay is a dialectical one. The dialectical form of the essay itself, and the dialectical history of the essay, continue to inform each other, and reinforce each other, with increasing force across history, as the essay continues its 'Heisenbergian flickering between two primary meanings'.[117] Sullivan's choice of 'flickering' here is telling; by the twentieth century, what were macro-level shifts between two essentially different kinds of essay have become so frequent, so fast, contained, even, within the same essay, that they scan as flickering vibrations — not, indeed, unlike sound waves. One conception of the lyric essay is that it is a result of the essay's dialectical movement speeding up, across the essay's history, to the point that it becomes lyrical; that the lyric essay can be seen as a result of the increasingly fevered pitch of the essay's own thinking. The lyric essayists flicker between two different versions of what the essay is, expanding and contracting simultaneously, with such speed and grace that it scans as music; an oscillating sound wave. Just as one can increase the frequency (thus decreasing the wavelength) of any rhythm until it becomes a musical note, so the rhythm of the essay's thinking speeds up until it sings.

Such a description, of course, is highly metaphorical, intended as analogy only. Yet it opens up new ways of thinking about how the musicality of the lyric essay's thinking is connected to the dialectical thinking of the essay, with its tendency to keep turning back on itself, contradicting its own ideas, oscillating between ambiguous possibilities. In the lyric essay, the language of the essay itself starts to resonate with the same qualities of uncertainty, contradiction, and ambiguity which the thinking of the essay has always expressed. We might say that the ambiguities writ macro across the essay's history begin to be writ micro, too, in the very fabric of its language. This is where the lyric essay steps away from earlier forms of the essay, which despite all of its dialectic oscillation is never ambiguous in its use of language, as Adam Gopnik notes: 'the essay is rarely ambiguous in itself, as the poem might have to be; the lucidity of philosophical prose, not the ambiguity of lyrical verse, is the effect most often sought'.[118] Gopnik here suggests that the language of the essay is always clear, even when its thinking is not. It thinks in clear, transparent prose about complex, ambiguous things: it expresses, clearly, its lack of clarity. The essay asks 'what do I know?', and its answer is not only 'I know this' but also 'I *do not* know this': it is interested in both sides, and it aims to be as clear about what it does not know as what it does. When reading Hazlitt or Lamb, Bacon or Montaigne, we find that their sentences, even when their content is extremely ambiguous, rarely require a second read-through to parse at least the basic meaning. The same cannot be said

[117] John Jeremiah Sullivan, ed., *The Best American Essays: 2014* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), xxiv.
[118] Adam Gopnik, ed., *The Best American Essays: 2008* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), xix.

of Dillard, Carson, or Rankine, whose sentences themselves are full of ambiguity, and often require multiple readings to make any sense of. There is a distinct gap between the traditional essay's more macro forms of ambiguity and the lyric essay's ambiguity in language, and it is in crossing this gap that the lyric essay makes one of its key moves towards poetry.

One shift this creates is that while for the essayist, thinking precedes language, for the lyric essayist, as for the lyric poet, language precedes thinking. The difference is elucidated nicely by Robert Von Hallberg's comments, in *Lyric Powers*, about how the lyric poet writes into the unknown, allowing the ambiguities of language to lead their thinking:

> Poets often speak about poems coming from an elsewhere; they know that words and phrases anticipate thought. Phrases and clauses open a range of possible significance… Until one's thinking has caught up with the language, one often knows that one's grip on a subject is still vague and possibly erroneous.[119]

Von Hallberg suggests that ambiguity and error play a role in the actual thinking of a poem, much as they do in the essay. Yet while the essayist follows their thoughts where they will, follows the digressive thought-patterns of their own mind, the poet here follows the trail of language itself: 'phrases', 'clauses', and words. This is a subtle but important distinction: while the essayist does not know what they are going to think until they have thought it, does not know where the essay will end when they begin it, nonetheless thought *precedes* language, and language is then used to capture that thought. For the poet, language seems to precede thinking. The musical aspects of the language guide the poet's thought processes, for poets write first for the ear. They follow the language, and then only afterwards step back to see what they have written, and thus what they have thought. The essayist may not know what they think to the extent they have not made up their mind, but they know what they are currently thinking. The poet may, Von Hallberg suggests, may not know even that; and neither may the lyric essayist.

Such a distinction can also be applied to the lyric essay as a mode of reading; and indeed it is here that we circle back to the ideas of Judith Kitchen. To read lyrically, as Kitchen suggests we should, one allows the music of the prose to sound, to ring uninterpreted in the air, before trying to parse the meaning. It is not that the many lyric essays I will examine in the rest of this thesis do not bear intellectual fruit; they are stuffed with complicated ideas, serious thought, and many weighty political, theological, ethical, and sociological issues. Yet one way to read these as lyric essays is to listen, first, to the sounds of the language; and then to understand how, as in all complex

[119] Von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers*, 114.

and meaningful songs, the meaning of the words is inseparable from the way they are sung.

There are dangers, however, to such a reading: chiefly, that it too enthusiastically promotes an ahistorical, detached conception of the lyric — one separate from any specific verse forms — and so falls into a trap which much recent lyric theory has tried to dig itself out of. Indeed, both D'Agata's and Kitchen's ideas about what it means to call an essay 'lyric' feel oddly disconnected from, or uninformed by, recent trends in lyric studies: specifically the move, spearheaded by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, to resist the ahistorical reading that has dominated thinking on the lyric since Goethe's hugely influential division of poetry into the three 'natural genres' of epic, drama, and lyric in the early nineteenth century.[120] By claiming that the lyric, like the epic and the drama, was a natural form, Goethe popularised the idea that it was a transhistorical category, a fundamental or essential form of literature, and thus set the groundwork for it to be used as an adjective to subcategorise other, non-poetic genres, such as the essay. If the lyric was something fundamental that literature did, then it made sense that other genres were sometimes doing it too. Yet it is this very essentialist idea that the so-called New Lyric Studies aims to question, by examining historical moments when the lyric's definition has broadened or expanded: what Jackson and Prins call both the 'lyricization of poetry' and the 'super-sizing' of the lyric.[121] Such moments include the collapse, in and around the eighteenth century, of various subgenres — elegies, odes, epigrams, epitaphs, eclogues — into the broader category of 'lyric poems', a collapse notably expedited by the rise of the anthology in the same period, with collections such as Dryden's *Miscellany Poems* combining a myriad of verse forms into a poetic dolly mixture, thus encouraging comparative and, eventually, coalescent readings.[122]

The rediscovery of this story of expansion has been a major project of lyric theory in the second half of the twentieth century: M. H. Abrams, for example, pinpoints Cowley's Pindaric odes, through which the idea of sublime feeling became associated with the quality of the poetic more generally, and William Jones's 'Essay on the Arts Called Imitative' (1772), which reconstructed poetic theory around the newly ascendant lyric, as the two key turning points in the lyric's shifting fortunes, culminating in the theories of J. S. Mill in the nineteenth century; Gérard Genette, meanwhile, focuses on Goethe, finding his tripartite classification system repeated in Frye, Bakhtin, Cixous, Todorov, and Austin Warren, as well as espoused by Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, all of whom erroneously attribute it to Aristotle, so

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[120] See: Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 3; Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', 880-881.

[121] Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 93; Jackson and Prins, *Lyric Theory Reader*, 5.

[122] Benedict, *Choice Reading*, 41.

pervasive is the idea that the lyric is a long-established, universal category.[123] My own work to some extent continues these projects, examining a moment in recent history where the category of lyric has expanded to include some contemporary essays. At the same time, I recognise that the very idea of the lyric essay depends on the abstracted sense of 'lyric' which the New Lyric Studies, following the example of earlier critics like Abrams and Genette, resists. This conflicted relationship to the term 'lyric' may, ultimately, be integral to its appeal; indeed, it seems initially rather odd that Jackson, who in *Dickinson's Misery* argues against the concept of lyric, should go on to edit a major anthology on the lyric, and write its entry for the *Princeton Encyclopedia*; her simultaneous need for and antagonism towards the term is reminiscent of D'Agata's own feelings towards the lyric essay. Not only is this recent burst of simultaneous interest in and resistance to the category of lyric another important context for the rise of the lyric essay, a term nearly everyone who uses it seems to feel conflicted about, but it also reveals something deeper about our need for terms we feel uncomfortable about: that it may be the wrinkles in a term, the things which cause us most difficulty, which causes us to need them.

It is also important not to overemphasise the extent to which the meaning of the word lyric is nebulous. Stephanie Burt, who takes a critical view of the New Lyric Studies, argues that though lyric genres do shift and change across time there are nonetheless consistent characteristics which remain stable across history. Burt argues that we can and should read older works as lyric, and that the word clearly had a meaning which is close or analogous to, if not identical to, our current sense of the word. Specifically, she claims that the meaning of 'lyric' has always been tied to the idea of 'intimate feeling', which is, notably, also the definition of the lyric given by the OED: '(of poetry) expressing the writer's emotions, usually briefly and in stanzas or recognized forms'.[124] Burt finds support in Allen Grossman, who echoes her view that the lyric, at its core, is the genre of interiority and human feeling, what Grossman calls 'the genre of the "other mind"', or in Burt's words 'the way that we come to imagine other people's inward lives'.[125] For both critics, the experience of reading the lyric is analogous to encountering another human mind, and in this quality we can see a potential overlap with the essay, and the fruitfulness of a hybrid between these two interior-oriented forms. For Helen Vendler, too — one of the few lyric theorists frequently

[123] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 84-88; Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1-4.

[124] S. Burt, 'What Is This Thing Called Lyric?', *Modern Philology* 113, no. 3 (February 2016): 427; *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2008), s.v. 'lyric'. See also the Oxford definition of 'lyrical', a term which it suggests is a broader category than 'lyric', but which is in fact closer to the way many lyric theorists, including Jackson, use the word 'lyric': '(of literature, art, or music) expressing the writer's emotions in an imaginative or beautiful way'.

[125] Burt, 'What Is This Thing', 428-29.

cited in writing on the lyric essay, as well as by lyric essayists themselves[126] — the lyric is not just an encounter with another mind, but an inhabitation of it. The lyric poem, for Vendler, is analogous to sheet music for the musician; it is a kind of script 'for personal recitation', an action that removes the words from their original historical context and recontextualises them for each individual reader.[127] In *Invisible Listeners*, she finesses this argument further, suggesting that the transformation of social language into new contexts in the lyric poem can nonetheless be used to make social and political points; indeed, it is this very kind of political play with recontextualised speech acts which we find in much of Rankine's work.

Though the lyric had to become a slightly hazy, enlarged category in order to be grafted onto other genres like the essay, it also had to retain these more specific associations and characteristics in order to remain a meaningful term. These qualities — the musicality Kitchen identifies, the intimate feeling Burt finds mentioned so frequently, the encounter with another mind described by Grossman and Vendler, as well as the ambiguous 'lyric thinking' identified by Von Hallberg, discussed earlier — are the inherent associations that the word lyric brings to the term lyric essay. I have argued already that some critics, particularly D'Agata, have been too blasé about their use of the word lyric, using it casually and sometimes synonymously with the word literary, and thus failed to utilise the full potential of it as a descriptor. By drawing on lyric theory, as I will continue to do so throughout the thesis, and considering the full, complicated meaning of the term lyric as it has evolved across the past several centuries, I hope to redress this.

Covert Anthologisation in *Reality Hunger*

The final anthology of lyric essays I want to consider is not an anthology at all. Rather, it is a text which performs an act of covert anthologisation, smuggling in its collected materials and disguising them as manifesto, a formal trick which carries the text's argument as much as the content itself. The text is *Reality Hunger* (2010) by David Shields, a formally adventurous, wide-ranging work, tackling issues such as the relationship of art to reality, copyright law, collage in various mediums (including visual art and the sampling of hip-hop), and the role of literature in the age of the internet. The idea of the lyric essay sits at the book's heart, tying its various threads together, to the extent that the book provides one of the most sustained and detailed explorations of the lyric essay published thus far, leading Roxane Gay to call it 'the ur-book for the modern day lyric

[126] See, for example: Tall and D'Agata, 'New Terrain', 7; Sandra Beasley, 'On Lyric Essays', *Chicks Dig Poetry* (blog), 26 March 2014, https://sbeasley.blogspot.com/2014/03/on-lyric-essays.html; Bonnaffons, 'Bodies of Text'; Rankine, introduction to Adrienne Rich, *Collected Poems: 1950-2012*, ed. Claudia Rankine (New York: Norton, 2016), xxxviii.

[127] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 18.

essay'.[128] Though Shields's text is not an anthology in anything other than the loosest sense of the word, by blending his own argument with his selections he makes overt the concept-forming, idea-crystallising power of anthologisation. He also, in his deliberate hybrid of the essay, manifesto, collage, and anthology forms, places the lyric essay closer to my third model of the 'lyric-essay hybrid', and indeed the whole idea of hybridising different genres is central to Shields's vision.

The book *Reality Hunger* grew out of a shorter piece sharing the same name, first published in *The Believer* in 2006, with a second, expanded version appearing in *Seneca Review* in 2007. These early pieces are far more focused on the lyric essay form (in its initial *Believer* incarnation, the essay had the subheading 'Why the Lyric Essay is Better than Fiction') and are subtler in tone than the more polemical arguments of the book, in which Shields moves away from the lyric essay to argue for things such as the dismantling of copyright law and a total abandonment of the realist novel. Like D'Agata, Shields's early ideas are intriguing, but harden into something more dogmatic as he is forced to defend them. There is perhaps something revealing about this and the lyric essay form — that it is best approached lightly, tentatively, for that is often what lyric essayists are trying to capture: thoughts before they harden. Yet the expansions of the book also allow Shields to explore the broader context in which the lyric essay developed, the other trends and developments it is connected to, further revealing the form's usefulness in understanding contemporary literature.

For Shields, the popularity of the lyric essay is emblematic of a broader attempt, detectable across a range of contemporary media, to 'to smuggle more of what the artist thinks of as reality into the work of art'.[129] Shields calls this trend 'reality hunger', and, like D'Agata, he uses aesthetic descriptors rather than stricter taxonomic language to describe it, listing, early in the book, defining characteristics such as 'a deliberate unartiness', the inclusion of '"raw" material, seemingly unprocessed', an 'openness to accident and serendipity', and what he calls (building on D'Agata's blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction) 'the lure and blur of the real'.[130] He suggests that this reality hunger is felt across a variety of forms, both literary and other: 'lyric essay, prose poem, collage novel, visual art, film, television, radio, performance art, rap, stand-up comedy, graffiti'.[131] That he *starts* with lyric essay, in this list, and then expands to other forms is representative of the development of his own thinking, branching out from an initial discussion of the lyric essay in the shorter pieces to wider trends in literature and art. The book also *closes* by focusing back in on the lyric essay, in a section titled 'Manifesto', suggesting that the lyric essay is

[128] Roxane Gay, 'Manipulations of the World: On The Lyric Essay', *Lit Pub*, 15 July 2011, https://www.thelitpub.com/blog/manipulations-of-the-world-on-the-lyric-essay.

[129] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011), 3.

[130] Ibid., 5.

[131] Ibid., 3.

the form he sees as the solution to the social and cultural issues discussed in the rest of the book.

One such issue is that of copyright, which Shields is heavily critical of, drawing in his arguments from Kevin Kelly's 'Scan This Book!', a *New York Times* article about the failure of copyright in the internet age. This anti-copyright stance is again felt in the form of the book itself and its covert anthologisation, which consists of 618 fragments, around half of which are Shields's own writings and half of which are unattributed quotations from others.[132] The connection between copyright law and anthologisation is deep, going back to the 1774 House of Lords ruling on Becket v. Donaldson, which established the principle that any publisher could print a work after its copyright had expired, a ruling which 'facilitated both the power of authors to control their own works, and the development of the canon, for once the well-known and revered texts of the past flooded the market, booksellers had to develop new ways to make profits by both publishing new works and finding new ways to sell old ones'.[133] The lyric essay is, as we saw with both D'Agata and Kitchen, to some extent simply the latest development in response to this need: a new hook to hang old work on, or a new frame through which to view it. For Shields, though, that process itself — the repackaging of old work in new arrangements — is key to the lyric essay's power as a creative form. For Shields, the lyric essay is less a mode of reading, as I see it, and more a mode of active creation. This is why his book is more active in its anthologisation, chopping and changing its source material to a greater extent, one that blends the line between an anthology of lyric essays and a lyric essay itself to the point that it is hard to say which *Reality Hunger* is. Such an approach also provides an alternative way of tracing the lineage of the lyric essay. Rather than the sequential influences D'Agata lays out in his chronological anthologies, Shields mixes everything up: Dillard's remark that Maggie Nelson is 'writing for her very life' in *The Red Parts* rubs shoulders with lines from Lawrence and Yeats; a quote from Carson's 'The Gender of Sound' sits between passages of Emerson and Montaigne.[134] By crumpling old and new ideas together, Shields suggests that the lyric essay as an idea is not something which has evolved linearly, but which has gradually pieced itself together in fits and starts, across different disciplines. He creates, for this contradiction-embracing form, something equally contradictory: a nonlinear lineage.

Shields also positions the lyric essay as a solution to what he perceives as the failures of

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[132] For legal reasons, there is also an appendix at the back, giving attributions for the quotations. Shields asks the reader not to look at this ('Stop; don't read any further', 219) and includes a dotted line along the edge of the appendix's pages, with instructions to cut it out of the book and restore the book 'to the form in which I intended it to be read' (219). As though expecting readers to ignore this advice, he then proceeds to include some standard footnotes in the appendix as well, which display further irreverence towards standard academic practice: the note for entry 510, for example, reveals that the story he tells in that section is one he made up, while another, for entry 232, simply reads 'No comment'.

[133] Benedict, 'Choice Reading', 46.

[134] Shields, *Reality Hunger*, 186; 157-58.

realist fiction in the twenty-first century. He opens his original *Believer* essay with the declaration 'The world exists. Why recreate it?' and this criticism of fiction remains fierce, at points heavy-handed, throughout his writing. He is critical of both the necessary illusions of fiction, the buying into a made-up story and made-up world, and of the limitations of fiction (particularly the realist novel) as a single, clearly defined form, arguing that such a form cannot capture the 'In-Between', which is 'precisely where we all live now'.[135] This would appear, initially, to be a very different position to D'Agata's: Shields, after all, is arguing *against* making things up, arguing for the infusion of more 'reality' into prose. Yet it is really the flip-side of D'Agata's argument, its necessary correlative: if the nonfiction writer should not be beholden, for D'Agata, to fact, then the fiction writer should not be beholden, for Shields, to imagination. Indeed, Shields presents *both* sides of this argument throughout the book, drawing heavily on D'Agata's own thinking, whom he quotes more than twenty times in the book. We see D'Agata's influence, for example, when he notes that writing itself was invented to record essentially 'nonfiction' true information, something D'Agata also begins *Lost History of the Essay* with.[136] It is as though both thinkers are attempting to ground their claims as deeply as possible, anthologising predecessors — D'Agata explicitly, Shields covertly — in order to suggest that there is something essential and timeless about this form that is emerging; that, like Montaigne's naming of the essay as a moment which both 'form[ed] and backform[ed] a tradition', the naming of the lyric essay is an identification of something which has been there all along.[137] We also hear D'Agata's tolling in the background when Shields claims that the line between fiction and nonfiction is 'an utterly useless distinction', and that all literary forms — 'fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and all forms of storytelling' — sit somewhere along a continuum between reality, on the one hand, and fantasy, on the other.[138] We might conclude that lyric essay, as a term, appeals to figures like D'Agata and Shields because it does not fix the writing it describes on this continuum; rather, it suggests the continuum itself, suggests a writing that either sits or shifts between the poles of 'essay' and 'lyric'.

We sense, in these three different depictions of the lyric essay — and these three different approaches to anthologising it — how the genre is arrived at from multiple directions simultaneously. For D'Agata, it is an escape from the strict fact-checking and supposedly limited imagination of other forms of nonfiction, including both journalism and memoir. For Kitchen, it is a new, better way to write poetry, a place where 'the canvas seemed a bit larger', and thus

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135 Ibid., 71.

136 Ibid., 7.

137 David Shields, 'Reality Hunger: A Manifesto', *Believer*, 1 March 2006, https://believermag.com/reality-hunger-a-manifesto.

138 Shields, *Reality Hunger*, 63.

'liberating, inviting, expansive in ways that allowed me to surprise myself'.[139] For Shields, it is a new destination for fiction writers who have grown tired of what they perceive as realist fiction's inability to truly capture reality, a view echoed by Ben Marcus, who argues that the 'lyric essayist seems to enjoy all of the liberties of the fiction writer, with none of a fiction writer's burden of unreality'.[140] From nonfiction, from poetry, from fiction: the point of departure, from which the lyric essay is travelled to, affects each critic's take on the destination.

The method of anthologisation also affects each thinkers' conceptualisation of what the lyric essay is and why it matters. D'Agata promotes the form through anthologies of essays, and thus suggests it as a natural evolution of what the essay has always done; the lyric essay is, for him, just a new way of approaching the essay, refreshing in it an artfulness which it has always had, but which he claims has been lost, at least in public understanding. Kitchen keeps her anthologisation separate from her theorisation, allowing her to develop a more specific, limited idea of the lyric essay than D'Agata — one which is explicitly musical, and explicitly short enough to be 'held in the mind' as a whole — while promoting a broader variety of work, including but not limited to texts that fit such a definition. Shields goes in the opposite direction, entirely enmeshing his selections with his own commentary to the point that they read as one single text, resulting in the most radical vision of the lyric essay, as a form that decimates traditional genre distinctions and offers the writer a freedom to steal from and remix other people's work, to make poetry out of the essayistic detritus of 'reality'.

Though I have broadly associated each theorist with one of my three models — D'Agata with the lyrical essay, Kitchen with the essayistic lyric, and Shields with the lyric-essay hybrid — this association is only tentative. All three models are at play in all three anthologies; indeed, this openness is one of the reasons the anthology makes such a good form for promoting the lyric essay, as it allows for the coexistence of different conceptions of the form. D'Agata includes, in his anthologies, seminal prose poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Ashbery and Stein; Kitchen includes plenty of narrative-driven pieces in her anthologies, from the likes of Stuart Dybek and Cynthia Ozick, complicating any sense of them as essayistic lyric; Shields draws, like D'Agata, on a rich essayistic heritage, quoting from Cicero, Plutarch, Montaigne, Emerson, Woolf, and Didion. What is suggested by all three thinkers is the idea that the lyric essay does not have a single heritage. There is no one story that can be told about how it evolved as either a mode of reading or a mode of writing. Rather, it is an inherently multifaceted idea, one full of irreconcilable contradictions, not least the idea that a text can be, concomitantly, both essay and lyric.

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[139] Kitchen, 'Ask Me Whether'.
[140] Ben Marcus, 'The Genre Artist', *Believer*, 1 July 2003, https://believermag.com/the-genre-artist.

iii. The Classroom

'Lyric Essay' vs 'Creative Nonfiction'

We have seen how genres such as the lyric essay teach us how to read a text, and how anthologies play an important part in this. I want now to consider that word 'teach', and how one of the first functions of the lyric essay as a term was its function as a teaching tool. Deborah Tall coined the term in discussions with her student John D'Agata at Hobart and William Smith Colleges; D'Agata, in turn, taught it to his own students when he became director of the nonfiction writing programme at the University of Iowa in 2013. David Shields has taught at the University of Washington since 1988; Judith Kitchen, too, disseminated her thinking on the lyric essay not only through her writing but also as a teacher, on the Rainier Writing Workshop (which she co-founded and co-directed) at Pacific Lutheran University, where she was known for the 'generous spirit' with which she 'encouraged, cajoled, [and] conversed' with her students.[141] If the lyric essay story begins with these readers, then it is notable that they are also teachers. Much can be understood about why the lyric essay emerged, as a category, by examining the broader trends within academic study and pedagogy across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is notable, too, that most of the practitioners of the lyric essay come from academic backgrounds, supporting their writing with teaching jobs, including all four of the writers I examine later in this thesis: Dillard for more than twenty years at Wesleyan University; Carson at institutions such as McGill, Princeton, and the University of Michigan; Nelson at the California Institute of the Arts and the University of Southern California; Rankine, too, at the latter, as well as, more recently, Yale. From its inception, the idea of the lyric essay has been enmeshed with this pedagogical background, a context which both created the need for the term in the first place, and shaped what it subsequently became.

The most immediate and important background against which the lyric essay developed was the rise of the nonfiction writing programme in the late twentieth century. The term was birthed out of a resurgence of interest in nonfiction, on the one hand — Stuckey-French notes that in 1986, the same year Robert Atwan launched the influential Best American Essays series, nonfiction programmes were the fastest growing writing courses in the U.S.[142] — and a growing distaste among certain teachers for the term 'nonfiction' on the other. Sandra Allen, for example, laments 'Iowa's poorly-named Nonfiction Writing Program', while many critics have dismissed nonfiction as too broad a term to be useful, 'taking in everything from telephone books to Walden',

[141] De Gutes, 'Learning To Be on the Page', 3.
[142] Stuckey-French, 'Creative Nonfiction and the Lyric Essay', 295.

'a one-size-fits-all garment draped over artifacts requiring something tailored'.[143] Nonfiction, as a term, is an empty shell; it defines the genre only in terms of what it is not. Teachers on nonfiction writing programmes needed a better descriptor of what it was they were doing, how it differed from journalism courses and other potentially overlapping spaces. Two competing terms emerged in the 1990s to combat this: Lee Gutkind's 'creative nonfiction', on the one hand, and Tall and D'Agata's 'lyric essay' on the other. Both terms emerged out of a need to inspire students, to jog them into a certain way of thinking: in the case of creative nonfiction, to apply techniques from their other creative writing classes in fiction and poetry to their nonfiction prose; in the case of lyric essay, to dismantle their thinking of the essay as something they write in school. Yet the former term — which does not get rid of the unhelpful, empty word nonfiction but simply grafts another equally vague adjective onto it — solves little. The word 'creative' adds little to our understanding of how to either write or read the work; even Phillip Lopate, one of D'Agata's most prominent critics and a defender of the term nonfiction more broadly, disparagingly remarks that 'no one sets out to write "uncreative nonfiction"'.[144] Creative nonfiction is a merely functional coinage at best, and a downright confusing one at worst.

By contrast, the term lyric essay, as we have already explored, implies not one but two deep lineages of writing and thinking for the genre. It is a term flexible enough that either part of it can be adjective or noun; but in any combination of adjectives and nouns, it is never meaningless. It draws into itself commensurate acts of essaying and lyricising from other genres, other periods of history, and enables teachers to link contemporary writing to these other practices. In short, it teaches us something about the work it describes. Indeed, this is why the term was coined in the first place: Tall coins the term to teach her student, D'Agata, something new about the essay. Other essayists, too, have turned to the term not during their writing but their teaching: for Steven Church, for example, the label 'is most useful pedagogically for teaching writers and readers how to embrace a kind of nonfiction writing that is artful, eccentric, elusive, and perhaps impossible to define', noting that 'the lyric essay as a thing itself, distinct from other forms and styles of essaying or from other genres, may not exist at all.'[145] As a teaching tool, and as an alternative to creative nonfiction, it is less important whether or not the term lyric essay defines, in a circumscribed manner, a particular body of work. Rather, what matters is how it makes new ideas available to

[143] Allen, 'John D'Agata', 31; Scott Russell Sanders, 'Interview with Scott Russell Sanders', interview by Robert L. Root, *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 1, no. 1 (1999): 123; Robert L. Root Jr., 'Naming Nonfiction (A Polyptych)', *College English* 65, no. 3 (3 January 2003): 244.

[144] Phillip Lopate, 'Curiouser and Curiouser: The Practice of Nonfiction Today', *Iowa Review* 36, no. 1 (April 2006): 3. See also 'A Skeptical Take', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 30–33, for more of his criticisms of D'Agata.

[145] Steven Church, 'On Lyric Essays and Dancing in Sequined Pants', *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 14, no. 2 (2012): 179.

students, how it inspires their own acts of creative reading and writing.

The coining of both creative nonfiction and lyric essay were also attempts — in different ways — to suggest that the burgeoning nonfiction programme was as important and worthwhile as its fictional counterpart. D'Agata's need to defend the essay, to retain for it all the imaginative possibilities that writers of fiction and poetry take for granted, comes from a sense of inferiority which essayists have always felt — as captured in E. B. White's declaration that the essayist is 'a second-class citizen'[146] — but which is felt even more acutely in an academic context, where nonfiction students (and teachers) can sometimes feel like 'the resident aliens of academia', experiencing what Phillip Lopate calls 'fiction envy'.[147] D'Agata, straddling both the poetry and nonfiction MFA programmes at Iowa, is likely to have felt this envy even more sharply than others. In such a context, D'Agata's controversial views of the essay's debt to facts become easier to understand. In all of his writing, he shows a continual concern that nonfiction is no longer seen as true art, or true literature, by contemporary readers, and regardless of whether or not such a claim is true, it is this anxiety that causes him to double down on the lyric essay's potentially more flexible attitude towards factual accuracy. He is trying to find another way to combat the second-class feeling among nonfiction students other than simply adopting techniques from fiction, as teachers like Lee Gutkind advocate, and as the term creative nonfiction implies. Indeed, for Gutkind, this is explicitly what creative nonfiction is: a way of writing nonfiction using 'scenes' that 'together make one big story'.[148] By contrast, for D'Agata, nonfiction should not need to behave like fiction in order to be taken seriously.

While D'Agata was keen to separate out nonfiction from fiction, however — to take the essay out of fiction's shadow, and put it on equal footing with the novel or the short-story — he was also equally keen to do the opposite when it came to nonfiction's relationship with poetry. One specific idea that the term lyric essay helped convey at Iowa was that nonfiction was not its own separate thing, sequestered off from poetry. The splitting of poetry and nonfiction into two separate degree programmes is something the lyric essay explicitly resists: D'Agata comments that it is the 'dirty little secret' at Iowa that the 'genres are segregated', something he became increasingly uncomfortable with as he moved from his first MFA in poetry to his second in nonfiction.[149] The

[146] E. B. White, foreword to *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999, x.

[147] Lopate, 'Curiouser and Curiouser', 4.

[148] Lee Gutkind, 'The Yellow Test', *Opinionator* (blog), *New York Times*, 27 August 2012, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/the-yellow-test. Gutkind's essay takes its title from a piece of telling advice he gives his students: 'Pick up a book by your favorite nonfiction writer… Take a yellow highlighter and color in the scenes — that is, the places with characters and action, where things happen. I promise: You will find you have highlighted a major portion of the text.'

[149] Allen, 'John D'Agata', 32.

lyric essay, as something close to a portmanteau, resists the compartmentalisation that has characterised university departments since the late nineteenth century and the emergence of what Gerald Graff calls the 'field coverage' model, 'a structure of departments whose separation from each other — managed by a new cadre of academic administrators — guaranteed a level of peace and quiet'.[150] Creative writing programmes have followed the same template, splitting into not just separate modules but, at postgraduate level, separate degree programmes for fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and screenwriting. This model allowed departments to be 'virtually self-regulating' by providing 'enormous flexibility in assimilating new ideas, subjects, and methods';[151] whenever a new idea came — whether feminism or Marxism, New Journalism or the new nature writing — it could simply be given its own module, its own tutor, added as a new category to the whole. Whatever radical potential it may have had is stripped away by the defanging process of modularisation. Modules let English departments do what Rebecca Solnit says all categories do: 'let people tidy up the complicated world into something simpler'.[152] By choosing a phrase which moves *across* two existing categories, Tall and D'Agata resist the neatness and safeness of such modular thinking. Unlike creative nonfiction — which positions itself as just another easily subsumed subcategory — the term lyric essay suggests that there are kinds of learning that can only take place outside of modules, in the spaces that exist between them, spaces that the field coverage model either ignores or denies the existence of.

Setting the lyric essay in this context reveals something else about how genres work: that the act of creating a space for something can neutralise and thus diminish the very thing space is being made for. By providing a kind of permission to do something, a safe space in which to explore and play, a genre might be seen as inherently conservative. Genres teach us the expected standards of behaviour within them, licensing certain kinds of thinking. A miscellaneous or negatively-defined genre like the essay initially seems to counter this, providing a space in which there are no rules, a space for unlimited play, in which any question can be asked, any idea challenged. Yet it may be that such a category is necessary in order to uphold the conservative standards of the genre system, in the same way that Bakhtin theorises about the space of carnival: a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order', one that works to release tension and thus reinforce the status quo, rather than letting that tension accumulate and bubble over into revolution.[153] The essay's miscellaneous play, we might say, arises *because of* the

[150] Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), viii.
[151] Ibid., 7.
[152] Rebecca Solnit, 'Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved', *Orion* 32, no. 3 (June 2013): 19.
[153] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

rigidity of the norms and rules of classical rhetorical composition, in the same way that carnival is an inevitable side-product of the rigidity of social norms, one that actually enables it. In some sense, delineating this writing as 'essay' or 'miscellany' reinforces, by creating a space in which all this loose, unrigorous stuff is allowed to spill out, the strict boundaries and rules of the conventional forms which the essay is being pit against. The formulation of the essay as a genre thus becomes a conservative move, rather than a radical one.

It is only by allowing essayism into other forms that it becomes subversive. By reading or writing across more than one genre, there is already a sense in which any idea of a safe space is challenged. By its nature, hybrid writing places things where they are not meant to go; though the two genres might be 'safe' in their own right, in their combination they become potentially dangerous.[154] Hybrid forms such as the lyric essay unleash the power of the essayistic mode — that is, they unleash the radical potential of essaying — which is constrained when it is held within the genre of the essay. The essay is only free when it is outside 'the essay'. So long as the carnivalesque impulse is kept within the prescribed space of the carnival, it cannot be truly carnivalesque, for it is being used to uphold the normal structures which, by contrast, make the carnival what it is; but when it is allowed outside of the carnival, its subversive power is realised, even as its definition (that is, its identity as a miscellaneous or negative space) is dispensed with. Comparing this to the relationship between the essay and the rigid forms it to some extent upholds, such as the treatise, we see how the essay *enables* the treatise, for it keeps the essayistic impulse out of it, yet also how the treatise therefore *needs* the essay to keep its own form. It needs space for those thoughts which cannot fit into it, or else it would inevitably spill over its own boundaries. In contrast, the essay does not need the treatise; it can exist elsewhere and independently from its opposite. By hybridising with another form, such as the lyric, it is able to reorientate its subversive power, to become more essayistic even as it becomes less essay. Given that so many lyric essayists, such as Carson and Nelson, display a decidedly anti-conservative bent, this may be one reason why they seek out the hybrid space, rather than working within one prescribed genre. It is also why, within the field coverage model of the modern university, D'Agata and Tall could not simply come up with *another* genre to explore the radical potential of their new way of reading. They had to find a way to bring the values of one module into another; to bring the techniques taught in an Introduction to Poetry class crashing into a class on the nonfiction narrative, and vice versa.

Yet, it is worth noting that the lyric essay genre was also successful because it *fit into* the

[154] To use a wild analogy for a moment, imagine combining a Harvard men's club with a biker gang bar: both might be, in and of themselves, safe and conservative spaces, but a combination of the two would create something which challenged the assumptions of both, something with the potential for danger.

structure of the existing nonfiction programme. Lyric essays were ideal creative writing workshop exercises: they could be short and self-contained, set as weekly homework tasks, or expanded into longer end-of-year pieces and portfolios; they were flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of student styles and interests; they framed the students' work within a number of easily accessible debates, including the nature of genre itself, as well as the different debates around facts, copyright, and language which we saw unfolding in D'Agata, Kitchen, and Shields's anthologies. In short, the lyric essay was the ideal counterpoint, for the burgeoning nonfiction programmes, to that most popular of forms beloved by their fiction-teaching colleagues: the short story, a form which, due to its brevity, flexibility, relative ease of publication (when compared to novels), and the deep well of examples settable as texts for students to read, became what Mark McGurl calls the 'key genre of creative writing instruction'.[155] In light of this, Kitchen's opting for the term 'short', for her anthologies, seems like an obvious choice. For all of its module-challenging hybridisation, the lyric essay fit remarkably well into the existing templates of creative writing instruction, and indeed, its success is as much down to this familiarity as it is to its innovation. To understand this better, let us turn now to the term's deeper pedagogical context — the rise of creative writing itself as a discipline — and examine how, while the lyric essay was a push-back against certain elements of the contemporary nonfiction classroom, the institutionalisation of creative writing more broadly helped create the perfect conditions in which it could flourish.

The Rise of Creative Writing

The first way in which the development of the lyric essay relied on the creative writing programme was a simple and practical one: the artistic freedom it offered to both its writers and its initial readers was only made possible by the financial freedoms of academic support and job security the institutional safety net of creative writing programmes provided. Whereas fiction can and does exist outside of academic institutions, especially genre and children's fiction, it is difficult to find a poet who does not at least partially rely on universities for financial support, usually in the form of a teaching job, due to the relative unprofitability of poetry in the book market, and the collapse of the system of patronage on which poets had, historically, relied. D. G. Myers, for example, notes that around 85% of the writers in *The Best American Poetry* for 1990 and 1991 were affiliated with a creative writing institution.[156] Though there has also always been a degree of resistance to the

[155] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 66.

[156] D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

professionalisation of poetry — a view of 'the "true lyrist", discontent with professionalism and mediocrity' that Myers roots in Romantic aestheticism[157] — it has proved a difficult thing to avoid in practice. Furthermore, the classroom was, practically speaking, a good place for discussions about the lyric essay to occur. As McGurl argues, the creative writing classroom is consistent with other, more fashionable kinds of literary organisation, such as the French and American café scenes of the early twentieth century, differing in its degree of formality, but nonetheless offering the same function: a locus for a 'a complex and evolving constellation of aesthetic problems' being explored, together, by a group of passionate writers.[158]

As well as this practical support, there is a more conceptual, spiritual sense in which the lyric essay's birth, as an idea, arises from the same undercurrents as the birth of creative writing. From the first elective composition courses offered at Harvard in the 1880s, through the founding of the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1936, the first such programme in America, until the full establishment of creative writing as a discipline following World War Two, the creative writing programme endeavoured to create spaces in which students could engage with texts passionately and imaginatively, treating literature 'as if it were a continuous experience and not a mere corpus of knowledge — as if it were a living thing'.[159] Such spaces, which McGurl describes as 'distant descendants of Plato's erotically charged symposium', were an attempt to re-inject eros into the study of literature, in a similar manner to D'Agata's attempt to revivify the essay, and in a way which foreshadows works like Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* and Nelson's *The Argonauts*, which (as I later discuss) are similarly erotic in their handling of literature and theory.[160] Furthermore, many of the debates at the heart of the lyric essay — about the nature of knowledge, about what literature is for and how it should be read — come directly out of the creative writing programme's wrestling with its own existence. Myers specifically locates the birth of creative writing in a conflict between positivism — that same belief in the measurability and observability of all things that lies at the heart of the field coverage model, with its depiction of knowledge as 'a set of discrete bricks of information' — and idealism — the philosophy that, more than any other, has shaped American poetry in the wake of Emerson and Whitman.[161] If the early creative writing pioneers rejected positivism, with teachers like Brander Matthews and Katharine Lee Bates critiquing the then-dominant philological approach that saw literature as 'a stockpile of raw materials for study', then

[157] Ibid., 77. Myers's quotation here of 'true lyrist' is taken from an 1885 *Atlantic Monthly* piece by George Woodberry, lamenting the dulling effect of poets working for money.

[158] McGurl, *Program Era*, ix-xii.

[159] Ibid., 4.

[160] McGurl, *Program Era*, 6.

[161] Graff, *Professing Literature*, xiv; Myers, *Elephants Teach*, 16.

the position of teachers like D'Agata and Shields is a little more fraught.[162] Shields, after all, very much wants to treat literature as raw material, and his 'reality hunger' manifesto is in some ways anti-idealist; D'Agata is more in line with the anti-philologists, and yet he too begins *Lost Origins of the Essay* with an essentially philological account of how and why the Sumerians invented writing, and seeks, throughout the anthology, texts in which 'fact and fantasy collide'.[163] It is not, then, that the lyric essay is a simple continuation of the creative writing project, but rather that it emerges out of the circumstances of that project, and the debates it set in motion.

One of the early transformations of the creative writing pioneers was of the word 'theme', an exercise which, under the tutelage of Barrett Wendell at Harvard, transformed from a dry, purely academic endeavour to something lively and personal — an inversion of the word's meaning similar to what D'Agata seeks to do with the word 'essay' for his students. Wendell asked his students to write daily, short, informal sketches, based on their lives and experiences, intended as a way of generating ideas for longer, more formal essays, but not seen as any less important: rather, as Myers notes, the success of the latter 'relied on the truthful expression of the former'.[164] Such themes were not judged according to any strict criteria — rather they were a means for each student to express themselves, and try out new styles and ideas. Note how fully this differs from the 'themes' written by nineteenth-century literature students, a process that involved reading a selection of textbooks and articles, then synthesising and summarising them in the students' own words. Wendell flipped the word on its head and used it to describe an essentially antithetical activity: not a synthesis but a tidbit, not a regurgitation but an original idea or spark of thought. For D'Agata, of course, the similar transformation of the word 'essay' is more about returning to the word's *original* meaning; but the point stands that, in its formation of a kind of mirror universe to conventional literary studies, the creative writing programme provided the right environment in which the meaning of centuries old words and practices could be inverted; a place where the essay could be turned inside out and made into a kind of poem.

The rise of creative writing also popularised certain tendencies which we find expressed in the lyric essay, such as what McGurl calls 'autopoetics' or the 'variable tendency to "involuted" self-reference', the idea that the writing produced in the academy is, perhaps inevitably, 'rife with reflexive consideration of writing as an occupational and existential condition'.[165] This trend towards self-referentiality created the right climate for the essay — which as we have already noted is a highly self-referential genre — to flourish. The essay is, in some ways, the perfect genre for

[162] Ibid., 33.
[163] D'Agata, *Lost Origins of the Essay*, 367.
[164] Myers, *Elephants Teach*, 50.
[165] McGurl, *Program Era*, 32-33.

the creative writing course: it allows for a wide range of formal styles and subjects, thus providing a good deal of actual writing practice, while also letting students reflexively comment on what it is they are doing. The latter we see, too, in the now standard accompanying commentaries that students are often required to submit alongside poems and stories, a process which both helps students identify what is and is not working in their own writing and which helps overworked teachers interpret and mark work more quickly. By folding together both practical training in and reflective analysis of writing as a craft, the essay makes the ideal form of writing training. Similarly, poems that investigate their own processes, such as Seamus Heaney's 'Digging', Ted Hughes's 'The Thought Fox', and Marianne Moore's 'Poetry', have become classroom staples, again due to their ability to simultaneously provide models of good poetic practice, in their form, and analysis of poetic craft, in their content. The usefulness, within the classroom, of texts that consider their own processes helps explain why other genres, as they are written in an academic environment, drift towards the essayistic mode, a mode detectable to different degrees in quintessential writing course genres such as the campus novel, autofiction, and the proliferation of novels about writers, artists, and other creators. The lyric essay can be seen as fitting into this broader trend towards autopoetics, especially in my second model of the essayistic lyric; the idea that poetry, written increasingly in a classroom space where all acts of writing cannot help but be self-conscious, became increasingly essayistic.

As before though, this rise of the self-referential also created the conditions *against* which the lyric essay would push, leading to a climate of nonfiction in which the self-gazing genres of memoir and biography are the dominant nonfictional modes. McGurl notes that 'the deep affinity of workshop fiction (not to mention that curious new thing, "creative nonfiction") to the nonfictional genre of the memoir' partially stems from creative writing's heightened interest (compared to other subjects) in the individual students: what he calls the sense 'that the teacher is grading a person, not a paper, or answers on an exam'.[166] The lyric essay is a turn away from this, a rejection of the individual in favour of overlapping voices, contradiction, and the erasure of the essayistic self. At the same time, it is also a rejection of the uniformity of voice that figures such as John W. Aldridge have criticised creative writing programmes for; the sense that students are being trained to write to a formula, and that universities are churning out polished, bloodless, identikit writers impossible to distinguish from one another.[167] On the one hand, then, you have writing that in its content is obsessed with individuals and biographies, but in its style lacks individuality:

[166] Ibid., 16-17.

[167] John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 28.

the memoiristic nonfiction which the lyric essay pushes against. On the other, you have writing that, to take Annie Dillard's as an example, is highly individualistic and peculiar in its style, but which in its content looks past the details of individuals towards the collective lives of humans across history (as in *For the Time Being*) or the non-human life of the natural world (as in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*). Once again, we find the lyric essay in a complicated, push-and-pull relationship with the creative writing programme, both enabled by and rejecting its ideas, often in the same breath.

A New Kind of Learning

I have discussed how publishing and pedagogy, the anthology and the classroom, are the two key contexts for the lyric essay's emergence. These two things are not, of course, entirely separable. The anthologies of lyric essays I have examined were all created by editors working, also, as teachers; the *Seneca Review* is published by Hobart and William Smith Colleges (though other important homes for the lyric essay, such as Graywolf Press and *Brevity* magazine, have no institutional affiliations). Both Kitchen and D'Agata's anthologies have the classroom at least partially in mind, in their selections, and have indeed been used in teaching; founding editor of *Fourth Genre* Michael Steinberg, for example, describes using Kitchen's anthologies in both undergraduate and MFA workshops.[168] Anthologies have long played an important role in the classroom, particularly in the post-war period that saw the lyric essay develop. David Hopkins notes a number of reasons for this, including increased modularisation, a shift from lecture to seminar teaching, and increased costs of individual texts, all of which have led to what he calls a 'a boom in anthology-making' in the 'academic world'.[169] According to Asiya Bulatova, such a boom applies to the physical size of anthologies, too; she notes how essay anthologies in the second half of the twentieth century generally became larger, expanding from the pocketbook size of earlier collections, and marketed themselves at specific audiences 'such as aspiring writers and university students', in the model of early textbook-anthologies such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Fiction*, a text Flannery O'Connor called her 'bible' while studying at Iowa.[170] The lyric essay is not only a reimagining of how the essay can be taught, but also a reimagining of the role anthologies have to play in that teaching — a new evolution of this pedagogical anthology lineage.

Students' encounters with essays have long been shaped by anthologies. Most American

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[168] Michael Steinberg, 'Blog #36. Tribute to Judith Kitchen and Excerpt from Her Essay, "Mending Wall"', *Michael Steinberg* (blog), 24 January 2015, https://www.mjsteinberg.net/blog/posts/31119.

[169] Hopkins, 'On Anthologies', 286.

[170] Asiya Bulatova, 'Technologies of the Modernist Essay: Movement, Author, Genre' (PhD thesis, Manchester, University of Manchester, 2011), 7n7; McGurl, *Program Era*, 133.

students are first introduced to the essay as a form in the pieces printed in freshman composition anthologies or Readers, most famously those published by W. W. Norton. In 'The Essay Canon', Lynn Bloom analyses hundreds of these Readers to build up a picture of which essays are most widely read by students in America, and thus most influential in forming their conceptions of the essay genre. Notably, she finds that Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' and Dillard's 'Sight Into Insight', the second chapter from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* extracted and presented as an essay in its own right, are among the most often included — authors and texts that belong in the lineage of lyric essay.[171] Yet this should not lead us to the conclusion that such Readers prime students for the lyric essay concept. In fact, they do quite the opposite, creating a diminished sense of the essay *as a genre*, one which the idea of the lyric essay fights against. By focusing on ease of teachability rather than interest, and surrounding pieces with interpretive apparatus, they encourage an entirely passive, muted engagement with essays — reading 'to unlock the meaning of the text'; writing to 'replicate its matter, mode, or manner'[172] — and thus promote the idea that the essay is a lesser genre, only useful as a way of teaching us about other genres, or teaching college freshmen how to write. Most importantly for understanding the interventions of the lyric essay, there is no consideration, in these Readers, of how *essayistic* a piece is, or of what the formal qualities of the essay as a genre are. Instead, pieces are selected based on purely practical criteria, such us how easy they are to teach, how affordable they are to print, and the political or historical relevance of their content. Thus all sorts of other texts, which can only loosely be considered essays but which fit these other criteria — such as letters, speeches, and political documents[173] — end up becoming canonical 'essays', and distorting students' sense of what the essay is.

In these various ways — their dubious criteria for what counts as essay, their presentation of the essay as a service genre, and their encouragement of a dulled, bloodless engagement with the essay as a form — the dominant anthologies of essays taught in the twentieth-century classroom do a disservice to the essay genre. The lyric essay is a direct counter to this, an attempt to treat the essay as a living, breathing thing. Yet in some interesting, perhaps surprising ways, the lyric essay anthologies are contiguous with these Readers, which are as loose as D'Agata in their definition of the essay, and as disruptive as Shields in their uprooting of texts from their original contexts. D'Agata might see his freewheeling selections as radical, finding the essay in places where

[171] Note that the title, 'Sight Into Insight', is not in the original text, where the chapter is just called 'Seeing'. See my second chapter for a discussion of Dillard's debt to, and continuation of, the legacy of Thoreau, a writer read by every American literature student.

[172] Bloom, 'Essay Canon', 419.

[173] For example, featured in the top twenty of Bloom's list of the most-anthologised essays are: Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'; his 'I Have a Dream' speech; and the U.S. Declaration of Independence, presented as an 'essay' by Thomas Jefferson.

it is not obviously found; yet the same unconstrained selection process is found in these decidedly un-radical textbooks of composition models. The supposedly revolutionary quality of the lyric essay that Shields identifies in *Reality Hunger* — its freedom to remove and recontextualise other texts — is found, too, in these Readers, which 'deracinate their material — old or new — from its original context and replant it in the anthologist's soil'.[174] What distinguishes the lyric essay anthologies as teaching tools from the Readers, then, is not their selections — which not only overlap but are gathered in a similar way — but the way they are asking students to engage with those selections. Gone is the larding of texts with gentle exposition; instead, D'Agata riffs wildly and personally on his selections. Gone is the passively affirmative attitude of the Readers presenting texts as canonical and important; instead, Shields cuts texts up and rearranges them in his own, idiosyncratic pattern, and encourages us not to revere but ignore the original authors. Gone is the implication that these are exemplary texts for students to model their assignments on; instead, Kitchen encourages us to listen to their music, and then write our own. This is where the radical teaching power of the lyric essay comes into play, not as a new kind of text but a new (or rediscovered) way of engaging with texts.

Such a theoretical move, particularly as made by D'Agata, can be understood as an attempt to return the essay to its origins as a more radical way of studying and understanding the world. One thing the essay, in its original Montaignean spirit, emerged as a reaction to was the oration, especially in its standard form the *dispositio*, which both began and finished with a statement of summary, a paraphrased capsule of the oration's main argument.[175] Not only can the message of the *dispositio* be summarised, but the form even does the work of this summarisation itself: it paraphrases its own meaning at its edges. The placement of the summary at the beginning and end reinforces this paraphrasable content as the main 'meat' of the oration; its details merely enrich or exemplify. The essay resists this way of thinking. There is an unfinished, endlessly meditative quality to the essay that leaves it continually open to further discussion and interpretation, that leads it to questions rather than answers. It is a form with no end, and equally, with no clear beginning; as Adorno writes, it 'does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss… Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle'.[176] The essay, suggests Adorno, begins and ends where it will; it takes things as it finds them, not as it hopes or preconceives them to be. That open-ended thinking implies a very different approach within the classroom, too: a rejection not just of the structural

[174] Bloom, 'Essay Canon', 418.
[175] Hardison, 'Binding Proteus', 613.
[176] Adorno, 'Essay as Form', 152.

props of argument — introductions; conclusions; sequential, logical arguments — but even the very idea of paraphrasable argument itself. The whole architecture of school syllabuses, module summaries, learning outcomes and so on is called into question by the essay on a structural level, by its insistence that process matters more than outcome, questions matter more than answers, and ideas matter only in the moment they are discussed, not as part of a larger system or line of reasoning, and not in summary, outside of the actual process of thought and debate.

This emphasis on trial and process is the pedagogical pedigree of the Montaignean essay that the lyric essay is an attempt to return to, a philosophy captured by Montaigne's comments in 'Of Practice' that '[w]hat I write here is not my teaching, but my study'.[177] Such a philosophy contrasts sharply with not only that of the Norton Readers, but also the phenomenon of the modern study guide: services like SparkNotes and Cliff Notes that do all the processing work for the student, giving them shortcuts to the answers; services that rely wholly on the process of summarisation, the idea that content can be separated from form. More broadly, it contrasts with a general trend in contemporary nonfiction towards the prioritisation of content over form. Unlike the essay, general interest nonfiction is categorised by subject, and is designed to be easily summarised in places such as blurbs and reviews. As Joe Moran notes, 'much mainstream nonfiction is reducible to a single snappy thesis that can be summed up by reviewers and the public' without what Geoff Dyer calls 'the tedious obligation of reading the whole book'.[178] Summarisation is a crucial part of the paratexts, to use Gérard Genette's term, that surround these works: blurbs, non-academic book reviews, study guides, and Wikipedia pages all rely on the ability to effectively paraphrase content without too much loss. Another recent trend is the emerging popularity of apps such as Blinkist, which condense down the main points and general arguments of nonfiction books into a series of bullet points intended to be absorbed in minutes rather than hours. Mainstream contemporary nonfiction in the vein of Malcolm Gladwell (whose much-imitated, 'highly contagious' style has become synonymous with the nonfiction bestseller list)[179] is the bread and butter of Blinkist; if, as Moran and Dyer argue, Gladwell's books read like 'expanded versions of "skilfully managed proposals"', then it makes sense that they can easily be condensed back down to their key points.[180]

One final reason I believe the lyric essay has emerged when it has is in resistance to this new form of content-driven, easily summarised nonfiction, both inside and outside of the classroom. Such nonfiction may seem distant from the essay, yet its principles affect, or infect,

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177 Montaigne, 'Of Practice', *Complete Works*, 331.
178 Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose', 1294. Dyer quoted in Moran.
179 Rachel Donadio, 'The Gladwell Effect', *New York Times Book Review*, 5 February 2006, 12.
180 Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose', 1294.

many of the places we find the modern essay: the think piece, the short-read, the listicle. These modern 'essays' are forms of writing wholly focused on content at the expense of form; not only that but often cheap content, quick content, content for content's sake. The lyric essay is a push-back against this. Lyric essays do not feature on Blinkist, partially because of their smaller readership, but also because there is no extractable content for the app to work with. A lyric essay cannot be condensed to its core ideas, because its core ideas are inseparable from its form. Often the blurb-writers for lyric essays seem to struggle to know what to do with them, and are reduced to simply listing themes, or attempting to describe the books' various forms.[181] By promoting such work, D'Agata, as a teacher, reassures his students that their writing need not be reducible to buzzwords and bullet points in order to find success. As a mode of reading, the approach of the lyric essay rejects the too-easy summarisation of the study guide, or the five-paragraph essay; it encourages students not to search for extractable content they can easily regurgitate, but to engage with work on a formal level, to consider those lyric qualities in it which cannot be summarised, and to assay with and respond to it, rather than merely 'learning' it.

Both the anthology and the classroom were ideal homes for the lyric essay to develop in this way: as an active, engaged, formally adventurous mode of reading. Yet for the lyric essay to take hold, the term must prove both relevant and valuable beyond these contexts in which it first flourished. The reader must come to the end of the anthology and be able to apply the insights gleaned from its salmagundi of texts to other texts outside of it — to find their own texts that respond fruitfully to the descriptive handle of lyric essay, that yield new insights from the application of it. The student must graduate from the classroom and yet still want to take with them the lyric essay idea, not as a learning exercise but as something beneficial in their own personal, pleasure-led reading and writing. In short, the lyric essay must prove itself useful as a way of engaging with the writing of the modern world. In the second half of this thesis, then, I put the lyric essay as a mode of reading to the test. I take four important and influential contemporary writers, writers whose work straddles the line between poetry and essay — whose work, indeed, feels important in continuing the story of the lyric essay's emergence and growing popularity —

[181] The blurb for William Gass's *On Being Blue*, for example, settles for: '*On Being Blue* is a book about everything blue — sex and sleaze and sadness, among other things — and about everything else', before filling most of the back cover's space with a long quote from the book itself. The blurb for Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being* cannot even settle on concrete themes, and opts instead for vague questions: 'Why do we exist? Where did we come from? How can one person matter?' Many of the blurbs for Anne Carson's work, meanwhile, take the form-listing approach: *Men in the Off Hours* is 'an intoxicating mix of opposites — the classic and the modern, cinema and print, narrative and verse'; *Red Doc>* is a 'stunningly original mix of poetry, drama and narrative'. Carson's publishers also tend to opt for adorning the back covers with gushing quotes from Carson's many big-name admirers (Susan Sontag, Michael Ondaatje, Alice Munro) and relegating the more difficult-to-write blurbs to the inside jacket flap. (All quotes from editions indicated in bibliography.)

and ask: how does the lyric essay work in practice? Does this term help us understand, better, what is interesting, unique, and important about these writers? How does reading their work through the lens of lyric essay add to our understanding of both the term and the work itself? And finally, what prove to be the most distinctive elements that this particular mode of reading reveals when it is actually put to use? It is to these questions I now turn.

Part Two

The Lyric Essay's Writers

CHAPTER TWO

Annie Dillard

that the universal
loves the particular,
that freedom loves to live
and live fleshed full,
intricate,
and in detail
— Dillard, 'Feast Days'

Let a man learn to look for the permanent in the mutable and fleeting; let him learn to bear the disappearance of things he was wont to reverence, without losing his reverence; let him learn that he is here, not to work, but to be worked upon
— Emerson, 'Montaigne, or the Skeptic'

Another World, in This World

In his introduction to *The Abundance*, a recent collection of highlights from Annie Dillard's work, Geoff Dyer writes of how 'in everything [Dillard] writes, she subscribes to the idea — attributed variously to Éluard or Yeats — that "there is another world, but it's in this world". Wherever you are in this world, she reminds us, "life is always and necessarily lived in the detail"'.[1] What Dyer gives a sense of here is how, as a writer, Dillard has one foot planted firmly in this world — in its particularities, its limitations, its imperfections — and another dangling out over the precipice of 'another world' — a world of strangeness and wonder, of what the European Romantics called the sublime and Emerson called infinitude. It is no wonder, then, that her primary form is a hybrid one: the scruffiness and reality of the essay brought together with the rapturous otherness of the lyric. She develops her unique combination of lyric and essay out of a need to engage with questions of time and eternity, the particular and the universal, the world and God. With her 1974 book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which won the Pulitzer prize for general nonfiction in 1975, she arrived more or less fully formed, with a prose that has been variously described as 'verbal music' constructed out of 'brute factuality' (a description which reminds us of Kitchen), as 'a rushy

Epigraphs: Annie Dillard, *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 9; Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Montaigne, or the Skeptic', in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert Ernest Spiller et al., 10 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), 4:105.

[1] Geoff Dyer, foreword to Annie Dillard, *The Abundance* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), xxi.

kaleidoscope of perceptual and intertextual fragments', and, perhaps most tellingly, as 'right on the border of poetry, dense with dazzling effects'.[2] Three further volumes in the following decade — 1977's meditation on suffering *Holy the Firm*, 1982's essay collection *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, and her 1987 memoir *An American Childhood* — continued its formal innovations, culminating in her most experimental and lyrical work, *For the Time Being*, in 1999. Among all of Dillard's work — which also includes two poetry collections, two novels, and several book-length reflections on writing and being a writer — these five texts might be thought of as the foundational texts of the lyric essay genre: texts to which the development of the lyric essay, as a mode of reading, was at least in part a response. In them, we find the point of connection between the great tradition of the American essay — especially in the examples of Emerson and Thoreau, as well as the essayistic poems of Whitman — and the new genre-resistant nonfiction that has flourished in the last four decades in the work of writers like Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson, and Jenny Boully, all of whom have either written on Dillard or identified her as a crucial influence.[3]

Dillard, then, is the perfect candidate for our first test of the lyric essay as a mode of reading. Yet it is worth briefly noting that Dillard herself has shown little interest in the term, having produced most of her writing before its coinage, and certainly before its widespread use in the twenty-first century, during which she has published very little. Her own relationship to genre, and especially to the genre of the essay, is (as for so many essayists) conflicted. On the one hand, she often refers to her books as 'nonfiction narratives' rather than essays, and claims that *Pilgrim* was mistaken for a book of essays due to her naming of the chapters 'in the style of 19th-century narratives'; on the other, she laments how essays are often miscategorised by readers who remain 'curiously blind' to their possibilities, choosing instead to call them stories, as though they have 'mysteriously tiptoed out of [their] proper (but dull-sounding) genre and crept into a more fashionable (but incorrect) one'.[4] On the one hand, her 1995 selected works, *The Annie Dillard Reader*, which she edited herself, claims that *Teaching a Stone to Talk* is her 'sole book of essays'; on the other, her later collection *The Abundance*, also self-edited, refers to *all* of its contents as 'essays',

[2] William Deresiewicz, 'Where Have You Gone, Annie Dillard?', *Atlantic*, 9 February 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/03/where-have-you-gone-annie-dillard/426843; Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 237; Sam Anderson, 'Annie Dillard's Impossible Pages', *New York Times*, 2 March 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/magazine/annie-dillards-impossible-pages.html.

[3] See, for example: Maggie Nelson, 'What's Queer Form Anyway? An Interview with Maggie Nelson', interview by Annie DeWitt, *Paris Review*, 14 June 2018, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/14/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson; Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 150; Jenny Boully, '2013 Contest: An Interview with Nonfiction Judge Jenny Boully', interview by Leia Penina Wilson, *Black Warrior Review*, 30 July 2013, https://bwr.ua.edu/an-interview-with-jenny-boully.

[4] Annie Dillard, 'Books by Annie Dillard', *Annie Dillard* (official website), accessed 11 October 2021, http://www.anniedillard.com/books-annie-dillard.html; Annie Dillard, ed., *The Best American Essays: 1988* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), xviii.

despite containing many of the same pieces.[5] Dillard seems to want to claim the essay's freedom — there is 'nothing you cannot do with it', she writes, 'no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed'[6] — while also claiming a certain freedom from the essay itself, from any existing weight that it carries as a genre term: a love-hate relationship which recalls D'Agata's own conflicted position. Revealingly, she also writes that the essay can do things which poetry cannot: 'The essay may deal in metaphor better than the poem can, in some ways, because prose may expand what the lyric poem must compress. Instead of confining a metaphor to half a line, the essayist can devote to it a narrative, descriptive, or reflective couple of pages, and bring forth vividly its meanings'.[7] As she put it to Katherine Weber, 'poetry was a flute and prose was the whole orchestra'.[8]

For Dillard, then, the attraction of the essay is its ability to produce a prose which has the effects of poetry. In this chapter, I aim to uncover exactly how she does this, and thus uncover one of the possible ways one might write a lyric essay. I begin by examining what Dillard's ideal lyric qualities are, finding them best expressed in a metaphor from 'Living Like Weasels', where she depicts a weasel's way of life as receptive, immediate, and abundant. I show how this way of living is also an idealised way of writing, drawn from an American lyric tradition which stretches back through Whitman to Emerson. I then argue that such a poetic is never fully realised, but is only gestured to from within the essay form; and that, furthermore, it is the opposing qualities of the essay — its interiority and high level of consciousness, its incompleteness and selectivity — that allow it to make such a gesture. Developing this argument, I examine how Dillard uses the essayistic technique of being highly attentive to her own forms of attention to make her essays behave like lyrics, reaching from within the essay towards the lyric. I also examine how such a movement is enclosed, on the other side, by a return to the essay form, one which reincorporates the lyric experience within the more easily understood context of the essay.

Moving on to the question of why Dillard combines the lyric and the essay in this way, I examine the concept of fallenness in her work, arguing that for Dillard, the lyric is impossible to access directly in a postlapsarian world, but exists, like the Adamic language of Eden, only as an ideal. Writing cannot be fully immediate, because everything in the fallen world arrives second-hand; it cannot be fully receptive, because to be so leaves it open to danger and corruption; and it cannot be fully abundant, for that abundance becomes, in the fallen world, what Dillard calls

[5] Annie Dillard, foreword to *The Annie Dillard Reader* (London: Harper Perennial, 1995), np; Dillard, *Abundance*, np (previous publications list).

[6] Dillard, *Best American Essays: 1988*, xxii.

[7] Ibid., xvii.

[8] Annie Dillard, 'PW Interviews: Annie Dillard', interview by Katherine Weber, *Publisher's Weekly* 236, no. 9 (1 September 1989): 67.

'fecundity'. Continuing with these insights, I explore how the idea of the fall impacts Dillard's concept of language itself, comparing her dense and opaque language with that of Emerson and Whitman, whose own theories of language are based in an idealism which Dillard rejects. Through this, I arrive at a working theory of how Dillard combines the essay and the lyric at a micro level, in the very fabric of her language. I close with a reading of a passage in *Holy the Firm* where she does this at a very high level, describing the immolation of a moth in a candle — a moment I contrast with the idealised lyric poetic of the weasel and read as a poetics of the lyric essay itself.

Receptive, Immediate, Abundant

At the heart of Dillard's work is a poetic, a way of writing, which is also an ethics, a way of living and being in the world. It is a poetic based around three things: receptivity, immediacy, and abundance. Her work aims to be hyper-receptive, to register the world in all its minute detail; to be immediate and direct, not only in its responses to the world but in its effects on the reader; and to be abundant, to get everything that is out in the world into the text. These three qualities are the things her writing is always aiming towards; and they are the qualities, too, that make it lyrical. To call Dillard a 'lyric' writer is to gesture at both the visceral musicality Kitchen evokes (the immediacy of sound, carrying its own meaning), and the omnivorous appetite of Shields's 'reality hunger'. It is to evoke an idea of the lyric as something choral and multiple, of poetry which allows everything in, which expresses in its music the entirety of the world. This is emphasised by the effusive natural metaphors often used to describe Dillard's work: as writing that 'tends to soar and sink on lyrical thermals and downdrafts', or that 'course[s] like a river swollen with snowmelt in spring from thing to thing, from inner life to outer'.[9] It is also something that comes out of a particularly American lyric tradition: traceable through the long poems (Pound's *Cantos*, Olson's *Maximus Poems*, Zukofsky's "A"), and prose poems (Ashbery's *Three Poems*, Williams's *Kora in Hell*, Creeley's *Presences*) of the twentieth century, back to Whitman's huge, all-enveloping 'Song of Myself', and ultimately back to Emerson.[10]

The most clear and famous expression of this poetic in Dillard's work is in the much-anthologised essay 'Living Like Weasels', from *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Dillard describes a moment of contact with a wild weasel, and how, as she stared at the creature, she seemed to 'swap' brains with it, feeling what it was like to live naturally, instinctively, and fully in-the-moment. This way of

[9] Donovan Hohn, 'Earth Beneath Her Feet', *New York Times Book Review*, 27 March 2016, 14; Melissa Holbrook Pierson, 'That's Inspiration!: Rereading Annie Dillard', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 22 May 2016, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/thats-inspiration-rereading-annie-dillard.

[10] For more on this lineage, see the introduction to Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 2-13.

living, she discovers, is also a poetics, a way of writing:

> And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel's: open to time and death painlessly, noticing everything, remembering nothing… [I] could live under the wild rose wild as weasels, mute and uncomprehending. I could very calmly go wild. I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses. Down is a good place to go, where the mind is single. Down is out, out of your ever-loving mind and back to your careless senses. I remember muteness as a prolonged and giddy fast, where every moment is a feast of utterance received. Time and events are merely poured, unremarked and ingested directly, like blood pulsed into my gut through a jugular vein… The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting. A weasel doesn't 'attack' anything; a weasel lives as he's meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity.[11]

The weasel (and thus the writer who is 'living like' it) remains 'open', 'noticing everything', because it lacks the filter of consciousness. The world enters it unprocessed ('mute and uncomprehending', 'unremarked and ingested directly'), and thus nothing is left out: 'every moment is a feast of utterance received'. This is the root of Dillard's poetics as a writer: she is always attempting to take in every detail, every tree in the woods, to see the world as 'an extravagance of minutiae'.[12] It is a poetic she takes both from her studies of nature and from her reading in American poetry. The weasel's instinctive, omnivorous way of living aligns it with the immediacy and multitudinousness of the American lyric, in the tradition of Whitman: 'I am large… I contain multitudes'.[13] It is a desire for fresh, unfiltered experience, a desire which ultimately goes back to Emerson, who wrote of how we are '[e]mbosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us', calling in 'Nature' for a literature that would meet this life-flood head-on and behold 'God and nature face to face'.[14] American literature after Emerson can be thought of as an attempt to capture something of this first-hand experience which 'Nature' evokes, turning always to 'the sun [that] shines to-day'.[15] Thoreau, Whitman, O'Hara: all want a sense of directness, of what

[11] Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 33-34.

[12] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 129.

[13] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.

[14] Emerson, 'Nature', *Collected Works*, 1:7.

[15] Ibid.

Stanley Cavell calls 'the low and the near', a desire he identifies as the defining quality of American literature.[16] Dillard evokes that desire, too, in her description of the immediacy with which the weasel takes in its environment, 'sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk'. David Herd connects this desire for nearness to the development of Quakerism, specifically its practice of listening to God and waiting for inspiration, rather than going through an established ritual.[17] It is a practice which is not unlike that of Thoreau in *Walden*, sat quietly by his pond, listening and waiting — like the weasel, 'yielding, not fighting'. The myth of Thoreau, indeed, is so strong in American literature that it might be thought of as the equivalent for the American essay of Montaigne retreating to his tower; though Thoreau is not widely remembered as an essayist himself, the association of the essay with retreat and repose inevitably means that, in America, he is one of its spiritual forefathers, something furthered by the wide inclusion of his writings on civil disobedience in college freshman Readers, as discussed in the previous chapter.

We see, then, how these three qualities — immediacy, receptivity, and abundance — are tied up in a distinctly American ideal of the lyric. In many moments throughout her work, we find examples of Dillard attempting to realise this lyric poetic and live like a weasel. One such moment is when she is stalking muskrats in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

> For that forty minutes last night I was as purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate; I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared; it seems now almost as though, had I been wired to electrodes, my EEG would have been flat. I have done this sort of thing so often that I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly; it is second nature to me now. And I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self-forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. I wonder if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves.[18]

Dillard attempts to 'disappear' here by reducing herself to pure receptivity, likening herself to a photographic plate. For a brief moment, Dillard becomes like Emerson's transparent eyeball: 'I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me'.[19] The writer, for Emerson, disappears as he observes — he becomes one with the

[16] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 148.

[17] David Herd, *Enthusiast! Essays on Modern American Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 14-15.

[18] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 198.

[19] Emerson, 'Nature', *Collected Works*, 1:10.

universe, so that 'the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one'.[20] These dissolutions are what Thoreau admired in Emerson: that his essays seemed like 'unembodied' voices.[21] In her resistance to self-consciousness (the mind 'saying hello' to itself all the time), and to comment (the mind 'printing out captions'), Dillard reveals her debt to this Emersonian idea of impartial, transparent observation. In making themselves transparent, both Dillard and Emerson allow as much as possible of the outside world into themselves, and into their writing. This hyper-receptivity, it should be made clear, is *not* the same as consciousness. The eyeball is itself 'nothing', Emerson says; it is not the brain. The photographic plate does not interpret or process what it 'sees' — it merely absorbs. The weasel, too, lacks consciousness, because it lacks the framework of time, living in an eternal present. Thus, though it notices everything, it remembers nothing — which is to say it is not conscious of what it 'notices'. Rather, it merely 'yields' to the world, 'mute and uncomprehending', its senses 'careless' and its responses 'necessary' and purely instinctive. We are far, here, from the acute self-consciousness of the typical essayist; if, as Chris Arthur writes, the essay 'is a literary electrocardiogram that traces out in words the pulse of thoughts', then here the EEG is switched off, its output 'flat'.[22]

In a broader sense, too, Dillard's essays often attempt to dissolve the self, to erase the observer. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, for example, deliberately excludes the personal details of her own life, including the fact she was living with her husband in a suburban house during the period it documents, in an attempt to focus on the wildness of nature, to such an extent that it has confused some readers: Diana Saverin notes that 'Dillard was so successful in casting herself as a lone sojourner that online biographies often allude to an undefined period when she left her husband and went off to live alone in the woods'.[23] Yet no such *Walden*-like trip was taken; Dillard simply left the everyday details of her domestic life out of the text. In a strict biographical sense, Dillard is rarely the focus of the texts; even her memoir, *An American Childhood*, is full of outward-facing observations and descriptions as much as it is stories of her own life. There are exceptions: *Encounters with Chinese Writers* (1984), for example, has a more conversational tone, with none of Dillard's usual rhapsody, and is full of personal anecdotes, as when she describes taking Allan

[20] Emerson, 'The Over-Soul', *Collected Works*, 2:160.

[21] F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 10.

[22] Chris Arthur, 'Afterword: Thirty-Six Ways of Looking at an Essay', in *Hummingbirds Between the Pages*, (Columbus, OH: Mad Creek Books, 2018), 239. Arthur is perhaps a little muddled with his medical terminology here: an electrocardiogram (ECG) measures heart activity, whereas an electroencephalogram (EEG) measures brain activity; the essay is surely, in fact, the latter, and I have taken his point to mean as such, in order to make my comparison.

[23] Diana Saverin, 'The Thoreau of the Suburbs', *Atlantic*, 5 February 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com /culture/archive/2015/02/the-thoreau-of-the-suburbs/385128.

Ginsberg and a visiting group of writers from China to Disneyland.[24] Yet, for the most part, we find Dillard taking the position of a watcher, a spectator, fully absorbed in her surroundings, 'detached from all I saw and knowing nothing else'.[25]

To some extent, these three qualities of immediacy, abundance and receptivity are shared, too, by the essay in its original incarnation. Indeed, they are the very qualities Emerson admired in Montaigne, writing fondly of how he 'smack[s] of the earth and of real life, sweet or smart or stinging' on the one hand, and of his 'abundance of thoughts', of how he 'tastes every moment of the day', on the other.[26] This might suggest, too, that the essay is, from its very beginnings, weasel-like. Yet there is also a whole bundle of associations and qualities in the history and theory of the essay that are counter to Dillard's poetic: the essay's high degree of consciousness and self-awareness; its interiority (as mind made incarnate on the page); its non-exhaustiveness (a quality which seems to directly contradict the idea of omnivorousness, though the essay can also be seen as aspiring, through its miscellany, to a kind of encyclopaedic totality); its propensity to make judgements and 'weigh up' its materials. These qualities are present in Montaigne, too — that is, they are present from the essay's beginnings. Furthermore, the weasel-like qualities of the essay (its immediacy and its copiousness) softened across time, as it became, in the transformations of essayists like Addison and Steele, a form of taste and discernment. As the essay's judgements came to the forefront, its omnivorousness receded. Instead, this omnivorousness became the central quality of American poetry, as expressed by Whitman, and found in everyone from Ginsberg to Ashbery to Reznikoff. Robert Atwan notes how Emerson's 'quest for a form in which "everything is admissible" — the image of that curious panharmonicon — [found its realisation in] the barbaric yawps, howls, minstrelsy, and jazz tunes, the ecstatic rhythms of American eloquence in our great long poems' rather than in the future development of the essay itself.[27] As such, we can read the weasel — and the omnivorous, purely receptive way of living and writing which it symbolises — as being an idealised form of the lyric poem, rather than an idealised form of the essay. If the essay is sometimes like the weasel, then this merely means that it is sometimes like the lyric — indeed, that there is a lyric kernel in the essay form, as far back as Montaigne, waiting to be developed.

Dillard's ideal poetic, then, is marked by three things: the multitudinous omnivorousness of Whitman; the freshness and directness of Emerson; and the hyper-receptivity of Emerson's transparent eyeball. All three are symbolised in the weasel, who lives with his nose to the ground,

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[24] Annie Dillard, *Encounters with Chinese Writers* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 75-84. Even the most self-erasing writer could, perhaps, not resist telling such an anecdote.

[25] Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 233.

[26] Emerson, 'Montaigne, or the Skeptic', *Collected Works*, 4:94-95.

[27] Robert Atwan, '"Ecstasy and Eloquence": The Method of Emerson's Essays', in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. Alexander J. Butrym (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 114.

in the immediate present, absorbing everything around him, 'totally open' to the world. The problem remains, however, that the essayist is *not* a weasel, *not* a photographic plate. Living like weasels is a utopian aim for the writing, but never a fully realised possibility. Though Dillard may desire to live 'by instinct', to become a purely receptive 'tissue of senses', she must in fact, counter-intuitively, remain in a high state of consciousness in order to accomplish this.[28] She is only able to get to the zen-like state she achieves stalking muskrats through a great deal of conscious effort, by observing her own behaviour ('I have often noticed') over time ('I have done this sort of thing so often'), and judging what is effective and what is not. That is, she achieves the loss of consciousness she describes through trial and error, through *essaying*. This is the fundamental contradiction at the heart of Dillard's work: that Dillard's lyricism is only counter-intuitively realised through the fostering of essayistic qualities: through craft, trial, conscious attention, and self-awareness. These qualities are *not* those shared by the essay and the lyric, but rather the places where the essay departs from the lyric — and yet they are the very qualities which Dillard must develop and foster, before she can abandon them and reach towards lyric rhapsody. That is, she must notice everything so she can abandon everything she has noticed: like the weasel, 'noticing everything, remembering nothing'.

This contradiction — the need for a high degree of consciousness in order to create work which relinquishes (or appears to relinquish) that consciousness — is played out across Dillard's work. We see it in *An American Childhood*, in a moment when Dillard, as an adult, both 'conscious and self-conscious', chooses to pretend to fly, to run down the street flapping her arms:

> So I ran the sidewalk full tilt. I waved my arms ever higher and faster; blood balled in my fingertips. I knew I was foolish. I knew I was too old really to believe in this as a child would, out of ignorance; instead I was experimenting as a scientist would, testing both the thing itself and the limits of my own courage in trying it miserably self-conscious in full view of the whole world.[29]

Here we have a fully 'awake' person choosing a kind of 'sleep', or childlike ignorance: 'I was too aware to do this, and had done it anyway'.[30] Is this, perhaps, analogous to the essay choosing to abandon its consciousness? Throughout her work, Dillard writes in a way that reduces the role of the essayist's own consciousness by giving herself over to the language itself, by letting it repeat on the page and be the generative source of the next thought, as in a clause like 'flung, and flowing,

[28] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 201.
[29] Ibid., 108.
[30] Ibid., 109.

sowing, unseen, and flown'.[31] She also writes in a way that is particularly unreserved — that is, she is not afraid of verging on purple prose, on going 'over the top', bringing the essay to moments of linguistic density or excess — because it feels good, and because it might push her into feeling something otherwise inaccessible. This is not, though, a simple case of the prose shifting from 'essay' to 'lyric'. Rather, the very giving up of consciousness, this movement of the essay towards the lyric, is itself a kind of essayistic experiment. The essay is the framework in which it is possible. The decision to write essays in a highly concentrated, poetic style is itself a kind of essaying, as suggested by the labelling of such prose as 'experimental'. Dillard's argument that she is experimenting 'as a scientist would' seems misguided; there is no control group, no hypothesis. Instead this is clearly the experiment of the essayist, the trial by doing, the privileging of lived experience over theory.

Even when Dillard is trying to write like the weasel, then, she is doing so consciously, essayistically. Returning to 'Living Like Weasels', we find hints of this overarching consciousness are present even as the original poetic of the weasel is offered to us. The weasel becomes hyper-receptive as it stalks its prey, the same action — stalking — through which Dillard becomes like a photographic plate in *Pilgrim*. But this stalking, as it is turned into a poetic — a way of writing rather than a way of living — becomes entangled with Dillard's own consciousness. The essayist describes how she must keep her eye on her object (or prey) for long enough that it will fully reveal itself. She must follow her instinct in knowing when to strike, in knowing where to 'plug into'. One way of interpreting this is as an image of the essayist choosing what will make it into the essay itself, hunting for the most 'tender and live' parts — that is, the most interesting and juicy material. For though the essayist, in Dillard's conception, must remain open to every detail, to every tree in the forest, as she goes about her research, she cannot put all of that detail into the book itself. She must choose the material which is most resonant and rich, which 'pulses' most forcefully in her blood. The mixture of electrical and bodily language ('live spot', 'plug', 'pulse'; language which picks up on the earlier 'sudden beating of brains [between essayist and weasel], with all the charge and intimate grate of rubbed balloons')[32] reinforces the sense that this process is, at its most effective, an instinctive one, a process of sensing the energy or 'charge' (electric or bodily) within things. But it is still a conscious process, a process of experiment, of essay. Dillard's language is charged because she has charged it — she has chosen to write in a linguistically dense, heady style, chosen to listen to her instinct and include the words and the material with the most electric or

[31] Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, in *The Annie Dillard Reader* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), 436. My references to *Holy the Firm* are from the revised text as it appears in *The Annie Dillard Reader*, which Dillard requests scholars use as the definitive version of the text on her official website. (See Dillard, 'Books by Annie Dillard'.)

[32] Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 32.

bodily 'charge'. The essay is the context in which these processes of 'stalking' material and 'charging' language occur. Even when one writes by instinct, one must deliberately attempt to write by instinct; even when one writes omnivorously, one must selectively craft that omnivorousness, or the impression of it. Even the idealised way of writing represented by the weasel — the very metaphor for pure lyric — is accessible only from a place of consciousness. The weasel is only ever a simile, a *like*: a rhetorical figure which is itself only possible in a conscious, processing mind, one which makes connections between the things it absorbs. The weasel cannot live like anything else, because that 'like' is unavailable to it — it does not make connections between anything, but absorbs everything equally, 'mute and uncomprehending'. Dillard, by contrast, can make her life like the weasel's, and make her essay like the lyric. She can reach from one context into another; indeed, can *only* do this, never escaping the context from which she reaches entirely. Any gesture toward the lyric, then, can only be made within the framework of the essay.

Paying Attention to Attention

How, exactly, does Dillard achieve this? How does she use essayistic techniques to produce lyric effects? One of the things that makes Dillard an essayistic writer — a lyric *essayist* rather than, say, a prose poet — is that she is always conscious of her own consciousness, attentive to the kinds of attention she is paying. The essayist herself is always 'both observer and observable', the 'object of [her] own humming awareness'.[33] Even at her most weasel-like and instinctive, Dillard's prose is made possible by a conscious attention, something which is deliberately brought *to* objects, as she learns when trying to draw as a child:

> Evidently, a given object took no particular amount of time to draw; instead the artist took the time, or didn't take it, at pleasure. Similarly, things themselves possessed no fixed and intrinsic amount of interest; instead things were interesting as long as you had attention to give them. How long does it take to draw a baseball mitt? As much time as you care to give it.[34]

Attention, here, is something that is freely given, almost like a gift. This is not the attention of the weasel, whose attention is only governed by his instinctive, evolutionary responses; neither is it the attention of Emerson's transparent eyeball, which takes in everything equally, not adjusting its focus. Rather, this is a *conscious* attention, deliberately given 'at pleasure' to some objects and not

[33] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 12.
[34] Ibid., 79.

others. It is not the attention of the photographic plate, but of the camera lens: adjustable, selective, and capable of altering (or rather incapable of *not* altering) the things it 'looks' at.

One of the ways Dillard adjusts her own lens of attention is by extending or otherwise adjusting the length of it. Returning to the passage, we see how the essayist, like a good draughtsman who takes time to draw his object, to examine its real shape and not just the shape he expects, spends time looking at a baseball mitt, considering it at length, despite its apparent ordinariness or even unworthiness. There is a slowing of time here, a patient waiting, which feels inspired by Thoreau, whose days 'were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock'.[35] Like Thoreau, for whom '[t]ime is but the stream I go a-fishing in', Dillard waits patiently for the insight (the fish) to come to her.[36] Apparently insignificant details or events will be kept under the lens of the essayist's attention for pages and pages: her parents' skin; the ways in which people sit and take communion at her church.[37] There is no obvious framework in which certain details can be judged 'significant' and others 'insignificant', rendering everything equally significant, and causing small happenings to take on infinite-seeming proportions. Elsewhere, as in 'Total Eclipse', Dillard plays with the temporal dimension of her attention in a different way:

> It was an abrupt black body out of nowhere… In the black sky was a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old, worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone… against a backdrop of sky. I saw a circular piece of that sky appear, suddenly detached, blackened, and backlighted… It was enormous and black… It materialized out of thin air — black, and flat, and sliding, outlined in flame. Seeing this black body was like seeing a mushroom cloud.[38]

The titular eclipse seems to happen outside of time, to happen over and over. Dillard's descriptions of it go on for several pages, with fragments of phrases repeating ('I saw', 'it was', 'in the sky') and the words 'back' and 'black' echoing through the sentences. It is as though the essayist is going over the moment again and again, trying to make sense of it, not allowing her attention to move onto other things — or even other words — before she has absorbed the full extent of the eclipse's blackness. Furthermore, in making her language here opaque and difficult, she forces us to slow

[35] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 109.
[36] Ibid., 96.
[37] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 24-28; 191-99.
[38] Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 17-18.

down, too, to literally take more time reading — that is, she plays with the length of *our* attention, as readers.

Dillard, then, consciously plays with the temporal dimension of attention in her work, stretching out and extending the lengths of attention that both ordinary and unordinary objects seem to invite. She also plays with its spatial dimension: the closeness of the attention we pay. For Dillard, life should be examined as closely as possible — the forest is made of trees, which are made of bark, branches, and leaves, which are made of cells, which are made of atoms. At each level there is more detail to be uncovered. Like Thoreau looking into an ice crystal, or the rime covering a pond, Dillard finds this close attention transformational, as when she describes the revolutionary moment of being given a microscope for Christmas:

> I looked at the transparent membrane inside an onion's skin and saw the cells. I looked at a section of cork and saw the cells, and at scrapings from the inside of my cheek, ditto. I looked at my blood and saw not much; I looked at my urine and saw long, iridescent crystals, for the drop had dried.[39]

This concern with detail is thoroughly essayistic: the essayist, as Adorno noted, begins with details, with things as they are, rather than with generalised concepts. The passage evokes the essayist's restless curiosity about the ordinary world around them. Ordinary objects hold the potential of wonder; one need not go further than an onion in the cupboard, or one's own urine or blood, to find something worth examining and considering. These things may appear ordinary at first, but under the microscopic close attention of the essayist, become fascinating and transformational. Dillard describes looking through the microscope as being the moment she grew up, became an individual, distinct from her parents, with her own interests: 'I began to understand then, that you do what you do out of your private passion for thing in itself'.[40] This, again, is a choice, a deliberate 'looking' rather than a blankly open receptivity — it is the essayist herself, with her 'private passions', who decides where to zoom in. Elsewhere, we are given a depiction of her mother's own, contrasting form of attention, one which 'questioned everything, every pair of scissors, every knitting needle, gardening glove, tape dispenser', a 'restless mental vigor that just about ignited the dumb household objects with its force'.[41] This pragmatic wisdom of her mother, which 'ignites' ordinary household objects under her gaze, is an interesting parallel to the essayist who makes ordinary things interesting by the power of their insight and reflection. It suggests a different kind

[39] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 148.
[40] Ibid., 149.
[41] Ibid., 116.

of essay: one concerned with the practical applications and external surfaces of objects. Dillard's own work, by contrast, is concerned not with questioning things, necessarily, but simply with looking at and absorbing them; not (only) with exterior surfaces but with interior life. In this, she appears to depart from Emerson, who writes in 'Experience': 'we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them'.[42]

All of this close attention to the quality of attention itself is highly essayistic. Yet its effect, in the final prose, is, in fact, lyrical. By playing with the 'filters' of attention in her work — as though adjusting the settings on a camera, lengthening the exposure or widening the aperture — Dillard tries to absorb as much of those objects as possible. That is, she is modifying her lens so that it behaves as much as possible like Emerson's transparent eyeball: so that it takes in the world's abundance. By doubling down on the essayistic tradition of paying attention to her own forms of attention, Dillard makes her essays behave like lyrics. Furthermore, this sustained and close attention brings out new and unexpected qualities in the objects she examines, and thus makes them seem strange and new to us, as readers: a snake, for example, becomes 'a thickening of the air spread from a tip, a rush into being, eyeball and blood, through a pin-hole rent'; skin becomes 'the joined trapezoids of dust specks God had wetted and stuck with his spit the morning he made Adam from dirt'.[43] These are richly metaphorical descriptions, the kind of thing that would rightly be labelled 'poetic'; but they emerge not from wild imaginings but careful observation, of the 'trapezoids' that texture a hand, or the shape of a snake's tail as it seems to taper into the air itself. By increasing the essayistic self-consciousness of her writing (both its attention, and its attention to its own attention), Dillard produces work which is, in its effects, fresh, immediate, weasel-like: that is, lyrical.

This, then, is one of the ways Dillard is a lyric essayist. She uses essayistic techniques to produce lyric effects. At their most intense, these effects are so strong that the work seems to break away from the essay entirely. Reading her most lyrical passages, we are put in the position of the blind children she describes, in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, regaining their sight:

> For the newly sighted, vision is pure sensation unencumbered by meaning: 'The girl went through the experience that we all go through and forget, the moment we are born. She saw, but it did not mean anything but a lot of different kinds of brightness'… In general the newly sighted see the world as a dazzle of color patches. They are pleased by the sensation of color, and learn quickly to name the

[42] Emerson, 'Experience' *Collected Works*, 3:35.
[43] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 225; *An American Childhood*, 25.

> colors, but the rest of seeing is tormentingly difficult.[44]

The passage describes the effects of operations to restore the sight of children blinded by cataracts since birth, as detailed in Marius von Senden's *Space and Sight*, from which Dillard quotes. The newly sighted blind children see only patches of colour, which they must work hard at to attach to objects, just as we, as readers, must sometimes work hard to unravel Dillard's over-saturated prose. The world in their eyes is made both strange and new. The idea that literature might be able to do the same for us is essentially a Russian formalist conception, one Dillard to some extent subscribes to as she reduces things to the 'dazzle' and 'brightness' of their sensations. Indeed, on the following page, she explicitly aspires to such a form, to see the world as a newly sighted blind child does:

> I saw color-patches for weeks after I read this wonderful book. It was summer; the peaches were ripe in the valley orchards. When I woke in the morning, color-patches wrapped round my eyes, intricately, leaving not one unfilled spot… Some patches swelled and loomed, while others vanished utterly, and dark marks flitted at random over the whole dazzling sweep.[45]

Objects, in this passage, are dissolved into pure sensation, pure colour. In doing so, they are made new, as though the essayist is seeing them for the first time, as though she has been newly sighted. In her most lyrical passages, Dillard achieves something similar, registering not only solid objects but vibrations, wavelengths: light and sound. She does this, partially, by paying closer attention to the sounds of words, and thus heightens our attention to sound, so that we might be able to hear, briefly, the sounds of the world disconnected from the sources we interpret them as coming from, the categories we filter them into — just as Dillard, after reading von Senden, begins to see colours disconnected from shapes and objects. The sensation, furthermore, is overwhelming, an experience of rapture, 'leaving not one unfilled spot'. This is, very much, the experience of being caught up in one of Dillard's more musical passages.

Yet, as I have argued, such moments are always enclosed within the essay form, which is always returned to. There is always a pressure to get back to the comfort of a more essayistic register. A formless vision, Dillard finds, cannot be kept up over a sustained period: 'I couldn't sustain the illusion of flatness. I've been around for too long. Form is condemned to an eternal

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[44] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 26-27. The passage is taken from the chapter 'Seeing', which (as noted in my introduction) appears in many freshman college Readers as 'Sight Into Insight', making it almost certainly the most widely read part of Dillard's oeuvre.

[45] Ibid., 29.

danse macabre with meaning: I couldn't unpeach the peaches'.[46] The dream of an entirely new form is impossible, for form is always death-dancing with meaning. Dillard is a writer who is not just interested in seizing raw information — she also wants to make sense of it, to have not just 'form' but 'meaning'. To do that, she has to take what she uncovers in her most lyrical moments and translate it back into the essay. There is, therefore, not only a movement from the essay towards the lyric, but also the inverse — a movement from the lyric back towards the essay. This is because we are only able to absorb the lessons of our forays into unconsciousness — of those brief moments where we manage to become like the weasel, or the transparent eyeball, or the photographic plate — by waking up again. To absorb the dream we must wake up from the dream.[47] This is made explicit in the essay 'Total Eclipse':

> We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up. We teach our children to look alive there, to join by words and activities the life of human culture on the planet's crust. As adults we are almost all adept at waking up. We have so mastered the transition we have forgotten we ever learned it. Yet it is a transition we make a hundred times a day, as, like so many will-less dolphins, we plunge and surface, lapse and emerge. We live half our waking lives and all of our sleeping lives in some private, useless and insensible waters we never mention or recall. Useless, I say. Valueless, I might add — until someone hauls their wealth up to the surface and into the wide-awake city, in a form that people can use.[48]

The idea of the 'will-less' dive into unconsciousness recalls the attempt to live like a weasel, to eliminate the mind which 'says hello to itself' over and over and 'plunge' instead into pure lyric. But that unconsciousness is given new adjectives here: 'private, useless and insensible'. The hyper-receptivity of the weasel is here reimagined as a kind of comatose, senseless state — we are reminded that though the weasel 'notices everything', he 'remembers nothing', and thus (unlike a photographic plate) nothing is really absorbed. 'Private' and 'useless', meanwhile, suggest the worst kind of pure lyric prose: that which refuses meaning, which descends into idioglossia and uses words in an entirely aberrant and impenetrable way. Instead, the passage suggests, the benefits and insights gained by the essayist's 'plunges' into lyric must be 'hauled' back up to the surface and

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[46] Ibid.

[47] The concern with waking and sleeping is one seen throughout Dillard's work, as in the early poem 'Bivouac', in which she alternates between passages of wakefulness (repeating the phrase 'You wake') and passages depicting deep, subconscious memories of our own evolution as a human species: 'the deep sea, the pressure'; 'how you lungless lay in slime' (*Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, 29-33).

[48] Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 22-23.

reformed in 'a form that people can use'. If not quite as explicit as Emerson's call for 'our own works' at the beginning of 'Nature', the moment is almost a call, from Dillard, for a new literary form[49] — one which might combine these two states of sleeping and waking. Dillard, then, must stay alert. The lyric essay must keep waking itself up, keep dragging the hidden meanings it uncovers in its reaching towards the lyric back into the light of essayistic consciousness.

Dillard's work is full of this movement back and forth between waking and sleeping. In *An American Childhood*, she describes growing up as a continual process of being woken into consciousness, bit-by-bit, 'in intervals', 'piecemeal', and always '*in medias res*': children 'wake up and find themselves here, discover themselves to have been here all along'.[50] These qualities — piecemeal construction, beginning in the middle — are qualities of the essay form itself. Thus it becomes clear that the book, in moving between lyrical passages (streams of unshaped memories, the raw experience of unselfconscious childhood) and more essayistic moments of lucidity, awareness, and, especially, self-awareness, is dramatising, in its form, the process of growing up: 'I discovered myself and the world, and forgot them, and discovered them again'.[51] This pattern is also the way in which her essays themselves grow and develop, moving back and forth between moments of lucidity and moments of unconscious lyric intensity, which, as I have argued, are only made possible to begin with by lucidity. The insights gained from Dillard's unconscious 'dives' into the lyric must be brought back to consciousness to be made sense of. The lyric essay, then, at least as Dillard writes it, might be summarised as a form which frames the insights of the lyric within the more easily understood context of the essay.

From Abundance to Fecundity

Why should this be? Why can Dillard only reach towards the lyric through the essay, only realise her idealised poetic — the Whitmanesque omnivorousness and Emersonian immediacy and hyper-receptivity of the weasel — through the compromised, impure, corrupt form of the essay? The answer lies in the world's fallenness, a theological concept first introduced in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, where Dillard describes how the world is 'eaten' and 'nibbled':

> I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am

[49] Emerson, 'Nature', *Collected Works*, 1:7.
[50] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 11.
[51] Ibid.

> wondering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions[52]

All living things, Dillard writes, are battered and torn, 'bloodied' since birth. There is a sense of imperfection in Dillard's description of the world; it comes to us like a piece of second-hand furniture ('frayed', 'nibbled', 'gnawed', 'splintered', 'scarred'), marked already with suggestions of violence, suffering, and failure. In a simple sense, then, lyric can only remain an ideal in such a world, for everything in the world (including language itself) is pre-used. In such a world, pure lyric is impossible — for lyric is language purified into melody: uneaten, un-nibbled. Lyric is the language of fresh, unfiltered experience; yet everything in the world arrives spoiled, already filtered into categories, already scribbled on and annotated with ideas. Nothing can therefore be accessed directly or immediately, without mediation. We cannot return to being blind children — we have already learned how to see. Knowledge, once learned, is almost impossible to undo — imagine trying to unlearn how to talk, or how to walk. If the movement between wakefulness and sleep in *An American Childhood* is symbolic of the movement between lyric and essay, innocence and knowledge, unconscious weasel and conscious human, then it is notable that, of course, we eventually grow up completely, as Dillard herself remarks: 'I woke at intervals until, by that September when Father went down the river, the intervals of waking tipped the scales, and I was more often awake than not. I noticed this process of waking, and predicted with terrifying logic that one of these years not far away I would be awake continuously and never slip back, and never be free of myself again.'[53] To wake up permanently is to wake into the fallen world, in which the Father has gone, and one is unable to escape one's individual, limited consciousness and return to Eden.

To translate this to a historical context, rather than a theological one, we can compare the America Dillard is writing in with that of Emerson. Emerson's writing was explicitly intended to establish a sense of American identity and character; to inject what Richard Poirier calls 'the denuded landscapes' of America with the cultural traces that were taken for granted in Europe.[54] Whereas Europe was full of histories and stories that were literally visible in the landscape itself, in its ruins and its architecture, Americans had to provide this meaning themselves. That is, meaning had to come from the eye of the beholder, the mind of the writer: 'American nature was a splendid, empty theater, offering economic promise but suggesting no previous human

[52] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 242.
[53] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 11.
[54] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987), 10.

experience.'[55] Such an America might be thought of as essentially prelapsarian — a kind of blank canvas on which Emerson was able to practice an Adamic naming. Dillard, by contrast, is writing in an America with several hundred years of existing literary and cultural history; an America in which every idea and thought has already been thought before.

Furthermore, in this fallen world, it is impossible to write pure, unconscious lyric, for to do so is to stray into potential danger: the danger of being eaten, or 'scarred and bloodied' by the 'splintered wreck' of the world. There is a risk, in Dillard's work, in being purely open, receptive, and instinctive, because it leaves one open to an imperfect and cruel world. To become a transparent eyeball is to risk becoming overwhelmed by an oceanic universe; though the essayist may want to take in everything, she has to take in particulars, to be selective, in order to protect herself. To live by instinct, too, is dangerous: caterpillars starve themselves, following each other's silky trails in a circle, neglecting food and water and rest; wasps feed as they are eaten by mantises rather than trying to escape.[56] Insect life is often used, in the work, as a locus of apparently meaningless suffering, as when Dillard describes the slow, unremarkable suffering of a moth dying on a driveway:

> He heaved himself down the asphalt driveway by infinite degrees, unwavering. His hideous crumpled wings lay glued and rucked on his back, perfectly still now, like a collapsed tent. The [school] bell rang twice; I had to go. The moth was receding down the driveway, dragging on. I went; I ran inside. The Polyphemus moth is still crawling down the driveway, crawling down the driveway hunched, crawling down the driveway on six furred feet, forever.[57]

There is nothing spectacular about this death — in fact, the death itself is never even arrived at, the essayist leaving before the climactic moment, leaving the moth to crawl eternally down the road, like a figure from Keats's urn, unable to ever reach the end of its suffering. This suffering is, furthermore, human-caused: the moth was born in a jar and, unable to grow fully, crippled its wings, which hardened in a semi-unfolded state. This connects it to a series of harsh cruelties at human hands which litter the opening pages of 'Winter': starlings shot with foam, trapped and frozen to death; gulls frozen to a cliff, who are then sawn off for food, leaving a forest of legs sticking out of the ice; Inuit tribes killing wolves by tricking them into licking knives.[58] Yet these

[55] Larzer Ziff, 'Introduction', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, by Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 2003), 8-9.
[56] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 63-66.
[57] Ibid., 61.
[58] Ibid., 35-43.

moments are no crueller than nature itself, no crueller than the giant water bug who, in the first few pages of *Pilgrim*, sucks the innards out of a frog, causing it to deflate before the essayist's eyes.[59] The sense of meaningless suffering which comes through here is a theme Dillard returns to repeatedly across her work, and is one of the ways she departs from Emerson, who is sometimes levelled with the complaint 'that he is recklessly affirmative, that he lacked the sense of tragedy', and that he can, as such, be superficially accommodating.[60] No such complaint could be made against Dillard, whose work is full of the casual cruelty of both nature and man, a cruelty always present in the work, undoing its tendency towards lyricism, towards beauty, and keeping it tethered to a necessary and protective consciousness, just as it formally remains tethered to the reality of the essay even as it reaches towards the transcendence of the lyric. In a dangerous world, it is important to stay awake.

One of the unexpected ways Dillard keeps her prose 'awake' is through her use of humour, which is always a kind of jolting awake. Jokes are something Dillard frequently reflects on — she describes in *An American Childhood* how important they were to her parents, and how the telling of a good joke was both 'the highest art' and a 'moral obligation'.[61] Jokes also play an important formal role in Dillard's writing, providing a degree of levity which undercuts some of her sometimes-overwhelming seriousness. Laughter smacks us in the face like a rake and brings us back to our own bodies: 'The joke of the world is less like a banana peel than a rake, the old rake in the grass, the one you step on, foot to forehead'.[62] Jokes here are explicitly connected with the process of being jolted awake into consciousness, explaining why Dillard tends towards her mother's condensed, 'staccato, stand-up style' of humour — her mother who 'simply tried to keep us all awake' — as opposed to the shaggy dog stories her father favoured.[63] This bringing us back to attention is also a bringing us back to corruption — to our specificity and to our fallenness. In a fallen world we cannot afford to stay asleep, or we will become the butt of the joke, rather than its teller.

To unpack this further, let us contrast two key chapters from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which offer two contrasting views of the same quality: 'Intricacy' and 'Fecundity'. The first, 'Intricacy', is a glorious evocation of the extravagance of detail in the world, from the impossibility of grasping how complicated a single tree is, to the two million Henle's loops inside the human kidney. The world is full of abundant detail, most of which will go unseen by anyone:

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[59] Ibid., 5-6.

[60] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 24.

[61] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 50.

[62] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 440.

[63] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 51; 117.

> Everything I have seen is wholly gratuitous… [Creation] accumulates in my mind as an extravagance of minutiae. The sheer fringe and network of detail assumes primary importance. If you can't see the forest for the trees, then look at the trees; when you've looked at enough trees, you've seen a forest, you've got it. If the world is gratuitous, then the fringe of a goldfish's fin is a million times more so. The first question — the one crucial one — of the creation of the universe and the existence of something as a sign and an affront to nothing, is a blank one. I can't think about it. So it is to the fringe of that question that I affix my attention, the fringe of the fish's fin, the intricacy of the world's spotted and speckled detail.[64]

The essayist here conveys the incredible abundance of creation, its profusion of detail. This abundance is, as we have seen, a central concept for Dillard's poetics as well as her metaphysics. There is an abundance to Dillard's language itself — a spillover of signification, of signifiers over signifieds — which leads to an abundance of meanings and possible meanings crammed into each sentence. Dillard's prose can sometimes feel so dense, it is like reading two blocks of text overlapping each other, accidentally printed on the same side of the page. This is not merely a stylistic choice but a formal response to the world as she sees it, which is 'wholly gratuitous' and 'extravagant', overflowing with life and with detail. Her language proliferates, its signification spilling over, because this is what the world is like. She writes towards the fringes of words and meanings, for the world itself is all 'fringe': 'a free, fringed tangle'.[65]

Furthermore, this focus on detail over generalisation is, she suggests, the *only* way she can think about the world. To think about abstract questions on their own (alluding, here, specifically to Leibniz's question of 'why is there something rather than nothing?') leaves her 'blank'; and so she turns instead to the profusion of detail in even the smallest 'fringe of a goldfish's fin', and finds, there, a concrete place to reflect and philosophise. It follows that this is the only way she can *write* about the world, too; that she can only describe the forest by describing the trees. From Emerson, she gets the idea of the essay as an invisible eye, seeing all, eliminating the self — but she refuses the simplification and abstraction, the inevitable erasure of detail, that comes from simple, clear prose. Rather, her prose is noisy, choral, profuse, overflowing with meanings: the chapter closes on the words 'running over'.[66] No reader is likely to unravel every sentence — they are sometimes so opaque, dense, and strange in their choice of word or image that they border on impenetrable — and so there is inevitably only a degree of understanding, a degree of detail which

[64] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 129-30.
[65] Ibid., 137.
[66] Ibid., 146.

is grasped by the reader. Thus the prose enacts its own meaning, and the form enacts its own content — we, reading it, find details and meanings slipping past us, and must slow down and pay attention to the prose in order to absorb its meanings more fully. If Dillard is sometimes accused of being too ornate, too wordy, and, particularly, too obscure or obtuse, then this argument might go some way to defend her style — this is prose that attempts to capture, in its form, the magnificent abundance of creation, the experience of being a creature in the world who will only ever experience that world partially. Our reading of Dillard, too, is inevitably partial.[67]

Yet, continuing the idea that the Biblical fall is a key patterning device across her work, this depiction of the world as abundant is later reimagined, in a kind of dark inversion, as a depiction of 'fecundity'. Coming after a chapter titled 'Flood' — another Biblical allusion, which casts the 'Intricacy' chapter as antediluvian — the chapter 'Fecundity' reimagines the intricacy of the world as something abject, disgusting, and cruel:

> Creatures extrude or vent eggs; larvae fatten, split their shells, and eat them; spores dissolve or explode; root hairs multiply, corn puffs on the stalk, grass yields seed, shoots erupt from the earth turgid and sheathed; wet muskrats, rabbits, and squirrels slide into the sunlight, mewling and blind; and everywhere watery cells divide and swell, swell and divide. I can like it and call it birth and regeneration, or I can play the devil's advocate and call it rank fecundity—and say that it's hell that's a-poppin'.[68]

We might read this as a kind of fallen, or postlapsarian, reimagining of abundance. There is something nauseating in Dillard's choice of verbs ('extrude', 'slide', 'puffs') and adjectives ('turgid and sheathed', 'wet', 'mewling'), for these are all words which seem to apply equally to birth and death. This is language that could equally describe a baby being born or a disintegrating, diseased body. The language thus reminds us that the former — in the fallen world — depends on the latter. The abundance of the world curdles here, becomes fetid; life may proliferate in the world, but it does so only by treating individual lives themselves cheaply — like the rock barnacle that releases 'a million million larvae' into the sea, only a handful of which will ever find something

[67] In this light, the repurposing and republishing of various chapters and fragments from her work, in the *Annie Dillard Reader* and the (tellingly titled) *Abundance*, does not seem, as it might initially, an attempt to avoid Dillard's work being lost. Rather, it actually increases the partiality with which she is read by the majority of her readers, who will mostly not read every book she has published, especially when several contain the same material with minor variations. Dillard's body of work itself is profuse, abundant, and living; her essays spill out of their original confines and reproduce, reappear, mutate, evolve, just like creation — which is always Dillard's underlying subject.

[68] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 161.

hard to clasp onto and survive.[69] The world's abundance depends on this mass death: 'it is death that is spinning the globe'.[70]

If, as I have argued, Dillard's choral, freewheeling style emerges as a response to the world's abundance, then this transformation of abundance into fecundity also has a knock-on effect on that style, keeping it tethered to a degree of consciousness which it might otherwise be able to entirely abandon. In a world of pure abundance — that is, the bounty of Eden — an instinctive, weasel-like prose might be plausible. The essayist could give herself fully over to the language, following each word instinctively, writing on pure whim, for the language could not stray into untruth, or into danger. Adam can babble all he wants — what could he say that would possibly be untrue, if his language is in perfect union with the world, creating it as he speaks? This is the pure, abundant babble of the idealised lyric, an idea that recalls Northrop Frye's theory that childish 'babble' and language play are at the root of the lyric's musicality, what he calls its *melos*.[71] Yet, as *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* suggests, the world is not just abundant; it is fecund. Its abundance contains violence — animals survive by eating and destroying other animals, and meanings survive by eating and destroying other meanings. Thoughts, in this world, can only progress by negating or modifying prior thoughts, as in a Socratic dialogue. That is, to push the analogy further, they develop parasitically, feeding on prior knowledge and thus destroying it; or, to push it further still, cannibalistically, a kind of prose that eats itself.

Postlapsarian Language

Language itself, then, is fallen in Dillard's work. To understand this better, we can compare Dillard's views of language to those of Emerson and Whitman, from whom her idealised poetic is drawn, to explore how such a poetic is dependent on a prelapsarian concept of language: language which, like Adam's, perfectly expresses the world, and which, unlike Dillard's, does not arrive nibbled and gnawed, already imperfect. For Whitman, names contain the full meanings of the things they describe: 'All the greatness of any land, at any time, lies folded in its names'.[72] This is an essentially prelapsarian view of language: 'Just as Adam when he named the beasts completed the creation because until the animals had names they did not exist in the field of thought and thus were unrealized, so Whitman named the objects in his America in completion of the merely political creation of the United States.'[73] Underlying this theory of naming is an idealism which

[69] Ibid., 166.
[70] Ibid., 180.
[71] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 296-97.
[72] Walt Whitman, *An American Primer* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1904), 31.
[73] Ziff, 'Introduction', 24.

comes from Emerson. For Emerson, naming is relatively simple, as meaning is conferred on nature by humanity — he names things in nature, and thus gives them meaning. It is a view that sees the natural world as having 'whatever meaning the human mind gives it, and no other'.[74] Nature is worthless, meaningless, and valueless outside of the human mind which engages with it and pays attention to it — a 'hawk' has no true life outside of the word 'hawk'. This, then, is the idealist philosophy of language on which the ideal of Whitmanesque lyric rests. Because the mind and the world are able to fully align, the essayist himself is able to fully disappear and become like a transparent eyeball, or a photographic plate. If all of the world exists only in the mind to begin with, then the mind, or consciousness, cannot get 'in the way' of the world and interfere with our understanding of it. Language, which arises in the mind, and the things it describes, which also exist in the mind, are thus perfectly aligned. Language can — at its purified, lyric best — absorb, fully, every aspect of the world: immediately, without interference, and abundantly, in all of its multitudinous detail.

It should be noted that even in Emerson, this perfect language is still only an ideal, not a guarantee. That is, Emerson was also conscious of language's potential to fail, to come up short, to be inadequate. Lyric is still difficult to write. For Emerson, 'words are (or can be) the irreplaceable translations from the wordless sublime moving through time and space', but they can also convey only a 'corrupt version' of this sublime.[75] Emerson is aware he is not Adam; Adam is simply a metaphor for human language operating at its best. Yet, despite this difficulty in making lyric — in making language which is immediate, direct, and fully open to the world, which gets all of the world into it — lyric is at least a possibility in Emerson. It can be realised by a good enough poet — hence Atwan's suggestion that Emerson's vision for literature is realised in the 'great long poems' of figures like Pound and Whitman.[76] In an idealist conception of the world, it is at least philosophically possible to write pure lyric.

Dillard, by contrast, rejects the idealism on which direct and immediate language depends, which is in turn the very language which makes Whitmanesque (and weasel-esque) lyric possible. For Dillard, language is *always* corrupt, and so pure lyric always remains an ideal, and never a fully realised possibility. The potential corruption of language in Emerson is Dillard's starting point, and is a given: in her work, attempts at perfect unity between mind and world always fail. In *Holy the Firm*, she describes taking a walk and imagining what it would be like to exist in a state of perfect unity between mind and landscape, as in a transcendentalist or idealist conception of the world:

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[74] Denis Donoghue, *The American Classics: A Personal Essay* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 24.

[75] Albert Gelpi, 'The Paradox of Organic Form', in *Emerson: Prophecy, Metamorphosis, and Influence*, ed. David Levin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 157.

[76] Atwan, 'Ecstasy and Eloquence', 114.

> I seem to see a road; I seem to be on a road, walking. I seem to walk on a blacktop road that runs over a hill. The hill creates itself, a powerful suggestion. It creates itself, thickening with apparently solid earth and waving plants, with houses and browsing cattle, unrolling wherever my eyes go, as though my focus were a brush painting in a world. I cannot escape the illusion. The colourful thought persists, this world, a dream forced into my ear and sent round my body on ropes of hot blood… The dream fills in, like wind widening over a bay. Quickly I look to the flat dream's rim for a glimpse of that old deep… and just as quickly, the blue slaps shut, the colors wrap everything out. There is not a chink. The sky is gagging on trees. I seem to be on a road, walking greeting the hedgerows, the rose hips, apples, and thorn. I seem to be on a road walking, familiar with neighbors, high-handed with cattle, smelling the sea, and alone. Already I know the names of things. I can kick a stone.[77]

We sense, here, the essayist trying to feel her way into an idealist conception of the landscape, into the complete union between world and mind depicted in Emerson's 'The Transcendentalist', in which '[m]ind is the only reality', both 'the center and the mirror of the world's form'.[78] Yet even as the language powerfully evokes this, even as the essayist's eye becomes a brush, painting in the world as it looks at it, words sneak in to remind us that it is merely a 'dream', an 'illusion', a 'colourful thought' — 'colourful' meaning both vivid but also fanciful. By the end of the passage, the Emersonian, idealist 'dream', has fallen away, and the essayist powerfully refutes it with the same evocation of the reality of the physical world — 'I can kick a stone' — with which Samuel Johnson refuted Berkeley's idealism.[79]

This rejection of idealism necessitates a different understanding of how language works. The essayist finds that 'already, I know the names of things', a statement which suggests a shift from prelapsarian to postlapsarian language, a shift also hinted at in the phrase 'ropes of hot blood', which picks up on Dillard's description of a snake in *Pilgrim* as a 'blood-filled, alert creature, this nerved rope of matter'[80] — as though the corrupting knowledge of the Biblical serpent is coursing through the poet's veins. Whereas in prelapsarian language, the Adamic language of Eden, the names of things are unknown before they are spoken, and there is perfect alignment between the thing named and the name, in postlapsarian language there is always a gap between the name and

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[77] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 435-36.

[78] Emerson, 'The Transcendentalist', *Collected Works*, 1:203; David Porter, *Emerson and Literary Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 58.

[79] James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 333.

[80] Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 225.

the thing, the signifier and the signified. Language after Eden falls into the 'confusion of multiplicity', as 'words and world disjoin'.[81] Because of this gap, the natural world cannot be entirely absorbed by the mind of the essayist; there is a discrepancy, a part of the physical world which remains inaccessible, unabsorbed. Thus, two models or conceptions of the essay which, for Emerson and Whitman, are harmonious and compatible — the essay as stony and physical, and the essay as highly interior, as a record of the thinking mind — become, for Dillard, incompatible.

The sense of Dillard's language as postlapsarian is reinforced by two passages in which she does attempt a kind of Adamic naming:

> I see a new island… I have no way of learning its name. I bring the labelled map to the table and pencil a new line. Call that: Unknown Island North; Water-Statue; Sky-Ruck; Newborn and Salted; Waiting for Sailor.
>
> …
>
> I have no way of knowing, or if it be island or main. I call it Thule, O Julialand, Time's Bad News; I name it Terror, the Farthest Limb of the Day, God's Tooth.[82]

Both passages describe Dillard attempting to name a new island that she has spotted on the horizon. In the first, her names describe the physicality of the rock ('water-statue', 'sky-ruck') as well as its newness ('unknown', 'newborn'), in a way that both suggests and performs its newness: as though the act of naming itself calls the islands into being. The second, however, comes literally after a fall — that of the little girl Julie Norwich, who falls from a plane to her death — which has strong connotations with the Fall of Man. The names are thus corrupt, imbued with latent violence or distance: 'bad news', 'terror', 'farthest limb', 'tooth'. Returning to the first list, we see hints of this corruption already, in the violence of 'ruck' and the implied distance of 'unknown island' and 'waiting for sailor', the latter evocative of Beckett. Moreover, we might read Dillard's offering of multiple possibilities, multiple names, as itself a consequence of her postlapsarian condition — the same 'over-naming' that Benjamin calls 'the deepest linguistic reason for all melancholy'.[83] Her language must be multiple, for no single signification is adequate or perfectly aligns with what it attempts to signify.

We see, then, that in Dillard's work language is always corrupt. Even a simple language act

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[81] Michael Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 10-11.

[82] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 434; 445.

[83] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *One-Way Street: And Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 2021), 134.

like naming something in the natural world involves a complex interaction between the conscious mind and the world external to it, which are not able to perfectly align. The essayist must always begin in the former — in her consciousness, or in what Emerson calls the imagination — and reach towards the latter; but to do so is, in a fallen world, always a trial (and thus always, itself, an essaying) that inevitably results in failure. This is, on a micro level, the same reaching from consciousness into unconsciousness that Dillard does on a macro level (that is, a formal level) by reaching from within the essay towards the lyric. In both cases, the thing reached towards (the lyric; the world) and the place reached from (the essay; mind, consciousness) are not able to fully align. Language — which is the vehicle through which the reaching takes place — remains trapped, partially, in the place from which it reaches.

We can see how Dillard's use of language is always tied up in her own consciousness as we zoom out to examine, more broadly, her descriptions of things, which are, like her attempt at naming the islands, marked by trial and failure:

> You can't picture it can you? Neither can I. Oh, the desk is yellow, the oak table round, the ferns alive, the mirror cold, and I never have cared. I read. In the Middle Ages, I read, 'the idea of a thing which a man framed for himself was always more real to him than the actual thing itself'. Of course. I am in my Middle Ages; the world at my feet, the world through the window, is an illuminated manuscript whose leaves the wind takes, one by one, whose painted illuminations and halting words draw me, one by one, and I am dazzled in days and lost.[84]

It is never quite clear when Dillard's eyes are down on her book and when they are up and looking out the window, reinforcing what the passage itself is telling us: that it is only possible to view the world through the conceptual 'window' or 'frame' of language: that the framed idea is 'more real' than the 'actual thing itself'. The source for the quote is probably the French art historian Émile Mâle, but it also reads as an inversion of Wallace Stevens's poem 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself', as well as an allusion to Kant's idea of the thing-in-itself, the object as independent of observation.[85] For Dillard, the desire is always there to get to this 'thing-in-itself', to experience the reality of nature with as little interference as possible from the observer. But, unlike the weasel, who can experience nature directly, without the filter of consciousness, Dillard cannot quiet her consciousness, which insists on processing her sensory perceptions and putting

[84] Ibid., 423.

[85] See: Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York: Dover, 2012), 34.

things into categories: 'the desk is yellow, the oak table round'. She wants to escape this consciousness ('never have I cared') but cannot — in fact, it is so overwhelming that its 'framed' ideas seem more real that the raw 'actual thing[s]' of the world outside of her.

Furthermore, unlike Adam in Eden, whose language comes into being as it is spoken, in direct response to the world, Dillard is writing about a world already 'illuminated' by pre-existing language, already 'painted' with ideas, traces, concepts, words. These other traces are 'halting' even as they 'draw' her in: they are both her means of access to nature, and the thing that stops her from being able to fully be at one with it. That is, language itself, in the fallen world, cannot entirely disappear and become transparent: it comes bundled with pre-associations and other ideas stuck to it, muddying it, and so always at least partially brings attention to itself, and its own history. Every use of every word points back to all the uses of that word before it. All language therefore to some extent merely signifies itself, becoming opaque — like Stevens as he hears the 'chorister whose c preceded the choir' (the first bird of spring), the line itself bringing attention to that final word 'choir', its construction from the alphabet, even as it describes birdsong as a kind of pre-language.[86] 'Choir' thus becomes visible on the page — we do not see through it to the meaning (that is, it is not transparent like Emerson's eyeball) but rather see *it*, 'choir'. Similar suggestions of the physical materiality of language abound in the passage from Dillard above: words and phrases repeat in gentle puns ('one by one' appearing twice; the shifting meaning of 'Middle Ages'); pronouns are avoided for the sake of repeating the original noun, reiterating the sound of it; there are suggestions of the physicality of the book in 'manuscript' and 'leaves'.

This materiality becomes, in Dillard's most lyrical passages, overwhelming, as in the climax of *Holy the Firm*:

> These are only ideas, by the single handful. Lines, lines, and their infinite points! Hold hands and crack the whip, and yank the Absolute out of there and into the light, God pale and astounded, spraying a spiral of salts and earths, God footloose and flung. And cry down the line to his passing white ear, 'Old Sir! Do you hold space from buckling by a finger in its hole? O Old! Where is your other hand?' His right hand is clenching, calm, round the exploding left hand of Holy the Firm.[87]

So much of this paragraph, which is isolated by a section break on either side, congeals into opacity. It immediately brings attention to its own 'ideas', which are carried on its 'lines, lines', never

[86] Wallace Stevens, 'Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself', in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens: Corrected Edition*, ed. John N Serio and Chris Beyers (New York: Vintage, 2015), 566.

[87] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 453.

reaching a single idea but rather 'infinite points', the prose self-knowingly mocking its own inevitable misinterpretations, the way its meanings 'spray' and 'spiral' away from itself. It closes on the name of the book itself, capitalised as if it were a title. This is Dillard's language at its most opaque and confusing — a far cry from Emerson and his belief that language, at its Adamic best, should fully and clearly describe the world, acting as 'material only on one side', pointing clearly to what it speaks of.[88] Dillard's language, by contrast, might be described as 'material on both sides'. It is always material: you can turn it over and over, but you can always see the material of the language itself.

Yet even though it is near-impossible to interpret the passage literally, we get a sense of the unavoidable materiality of existence — which is *Holy the Firm*'s central theme — through the physicality of the words themselves, which contain their 'exploding', multiple meanings in their single, clear sounds, like the right hand calmly clenching the exploding left. This doubling down on language's own materiality is an interesting and unexpected solution to the problem of fallen or postlapsarian language. Unlike Emerson, for whom the impurities of language get in the way of it achieving its maximum lyric potential, for Dillard it is these very impurities that allow her to best realise the lyric. Dillard, in following the example of poets like Stevens, doubles down on the broken, self-signifying qualities of her language: she pushes her prose towards opacity, revelling in unexpected word choices ('the rest is gravy'), misused nouns, and knotty, repetitive clusters of clauses. This is one of the ways we think of her work as lyric — it is choral, abundant, multitudinous. Yet this is not, on closer inspection, a weasel-like abandoning of consciousness, but is, rather, the result of a heightened and inescapable consciousness. Thus this is writing which moves *towards* consciousness, rather than away from it: the language becomes almost conscious of itself. Yet in doing so, the prose suggests, indirectly, something of the immediacy and the physicality of the world. It is as though by heightening our consciousness to an extreme, to the extent that the very language we are using to think becomes sticky and tactile, we become, eventually, unconscious; as though we might know the true physicality of the stone not by seeing through the word 'stone' to the mental picture of a stone, but by seeing the stoniness of the word 'stone' itself; as though by submersing, subsuming, overwhelming, barraging us with her broken words, their spray of significations — like the downed power cable 'thrashing like a cobra and shooting a torrent of sparks' in *An American Childhood*[89] — Dillard might help us, even as we lose the thread of what is being literally described, come to sense more viscerally a fundamental truth about the world: that it is, itself, broken, multiple, and abundant.

[88] Emerson, 'Art', *Collected Works*, 7:43.
[89] Dillard, *An American Childhood*, 102.

In such passages, the categories of lyric and essay start to completely break down. Is this language, in all its opaque, noisy multiplicity, the language of the lyric, sounding itself, becoming music? Or is it the language of the essay, corrupt and interior, entangled in individual consciousness? The answer seems to be both. By finely integrating aspects of the essay into her lyrical flights, Dillard extends them as long as she can, before they inevitably collapse back into the relative comfort and familiarity of the essay. In such flights, she escapes, briefly, the dilemma of being a creature in the fallen world. The world seems to present us with two options: either you ignore the category of 'peach' and fall into a world of lushness as the weasel does, or you live in a postlapsarian world where a peach is a peach is a peach. Dillard's work attempts to offer a way out of this, not only by moving between the two categories — like the child growing up and moving between sleep and waking — but by folding the former into the latter, by attempting to reincorporate a sense of lushness into the word 'peach' itself. At her best, categories and consciousness dissolve into pure sensations and back again almost imperceptibly: a peach is a peach is peach is juice is soft fruit softness fuzzy fuzz *fzzzz psssh* pink peach is a peach is atoms and roundness and juice.

I would like to close by considering an example of where Dillard does this at the highest level — that is, where she integrates the essay and the lyric most fully, moving between the two so finely, and with such skill, that they become almost one thing. Towards the opening of *Holy the Firm*, Dillard describes the death of a moth:

> One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burnt dry, and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of a pine… All that was left was the glowing horn shell of her abdomen and thorax–a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle's round light.
>
> And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That

> candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth's head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.[90]

The moment is classic Dillard. It combines the close examination of the essayist (noting the species, the wingspan, the exact fate of the thorax, abdomen, and wings) with the feeling and sensitivity of the poet (the awareness of beauty, such as the delicate colours cast around the room, even in a moment of horror; the implied empathy of 'her' rather than 'it'), all the time using the material as an opportunity to practice a kind of play with language itself ('wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled'; 'thorax-a fraying'). The moment displays the cruelty of the fallen world, again brought into the text through descriptions of insects: think of the moth, in *Pilgrim*, crawling slowly down the road to its death. The moth's death here is no less cruel: it burns alive, its foot stuck in wax. Yet it is turned — without *losing* any of its mothy reality — into a symbol of lyric intensity, in the burning flame of the candle. The moth becomes, under the gaze of the lyric essayist, a symbol for all of life and death, in a way that directly draws on and alludes to Woolf's famous 'Death of the Moth': 'it was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zig-zagging to show us the true nature of life'.[91]

The passage, furthermore, functions as a kind of poetics of the lyric essay itself, an alternative poetic to that offered in 'Living Like Weasels'. If the weasel is the pure lyric, then the moth's immolation is the lyric-essay hybrid that Dillard eventually arrives at. That the passage might be read as being about the essay form itself is suggested by a number of things. Firstly, the essay is, in one tradition, written by candlelight: in the dead of night, in the private bedchamber, as suggested by the use of the term 'lucubrations' (literally, 'to work by lamplight') by essayists such as Swift and Cowley. The candle is symbolic of the essay's privacy and intimacy; it conjures a sense of the essay as something written in a state of repose, a state of rest; if it arises out of a moment of intensity then is not written in such a moment, but in the reflection that follows. Secondly, the moment follows a passage describing a spider in the bathroom, its 'six-inch mess of a web' a collection of dead insects, including moths — an image, as I read it, of the essayist 'jammed in the pool of materials', as Dillard herself puts it later in the book.[92] The moth, then, is, like the books around the candle, all part of the material of the essay — fed into the flame of the essay itself. In literal terms, both the death of the moth Dillard witnesses, and 'Death of the Moth', Woolf's essay, are part of the materials from which the essay, *Holy the Firm*, is constructed.

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[90] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 428-29.

[91] Virginia Woolf, 'Death of the Moth', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 6:443.

[92] Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 427; 431.

How, then, are we to interpret this moment as a possible poetics of the essay? The moth's death, I have argued, is a glimpse at the sublime, a moment which conjures the fleeting beauty and cruelty of life. This aligns it with the lyric intensity of the Romantic poets, and that of the weasel, for whom the world is immediate. At the same time, though, the moth's death is real (we presume), and has the decidedly essayistic effect of lighting up the room, of *throwing light* on the original materials of the essay itself: her books and her immediate environment. That is, Dillard literally reads by the light of the dead moth burning. The death of the moth, then, is an opportunity for poetic intensity (for a deeply symbolic and mysterious image; for language to rise to the pitch of the lyric) without the need for the essayist to abandon the machinations of the essay itself: the process of reading other books, making observations, and feeding these into the central, flickering, unstable flame of the essay that is being written. Like the two wicks standing side-by-side at the top of the candle, the moment is both lyric and essay.

CHAPTER THREE

Anne Carson

Towns are the illusion that things hang together somehow, my pear, your winter

— Carson, 'The Life of Towns'

for I'm a strange new kind of inbetween thing aren't I

— Sophokles, *Antigonick*

My Pear, Your Winter

Whereas Dillard is at her most lyrical when standing perfectly still — taking in the universe like Emerson's transparent eyeball, watching an animal or an eclipse, or else arrested by a transcendent moment such as the immolation of the moth — Anne Carson is, by contrast, always moving. What is most striking about Carson's writing is the elusive way in which it moves, with enormous freedom, from form to form, movement to movement, moment to moment, and subject to subject, taking in everything from television to Telemachus. She is a shapeshifter, an evasive dancer of a writer, who continually subverts readerly expectations by moving in unexpected directions, curving when one expects a straight line, indicating left before turning right. She shows an 'imperious disregard for even the laxest of forms', writing poems that read like essays, and essays that read like poems.[1] Her attitude to form is inherently playful, with some critics noting that she seems 'to invent a form for each of her works', something borne out by the few interviews she has given on her writing process: she tells John D'Agata, for example, that she likes to 'mess around' and 'mush around' with forms, 'break[ing] rules' and 'go[ing] outside where… the line is', treating each form less like a template and 'more like a tempo being uncovered, like a movement within an event or a thing'.[2] Forms, says Carson, are movements that happen *within* the writing, analogous not to the structure, key, or even rhythm of a piece of music, but its tempo; they are not static but can change, mid-piece.

Her rebellious attitude extends beyond form. Trained in classical Greek at Toronto, she continues to work as a classical scholar alongside her work as a poet, working literally on two

Epigraphs: Anne Carson, *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 93; Sophokles, *Antigonick*, trans. Anne Carson (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2012), np.

[1] Daphne Merkin, 'Last Tango', *New York Times Book Review*, 30 September 2001, 13.

[2] Joshua Marie Wilkinson, ed., *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 3; Anne Carson, 'A ___ with Anne Carson', interview by John D'Agata, *Iowa Review* 27, no. 2 (1997): 20; 12-15.

different desks, and yet frequently including academic essays in her poetry collections and personal poems in among her more academic works.[3] She is also known for her startling juxtapositions of the ancient and the modern, often taking unexpected pairs of subjects together: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides, Longinus and Antonioni, Simonides and Paul Celan. Such anachronisms have become one of her stylistic markers: *Autobiography of Red* reimagines the Greek monster Geryon as a gay, moody teenager; *Antigonick*, her translation of Sophokles's play, puts Kreon in a powerboat; *Decreation* finds Hephaistos surrounded by robots. Such juxtaposition — reminiscent of fellow renegade classicist Ezra Pound's remark that '[a]ll ages are contemporaneous'[4] — is present in Carson's work from its very beginnings: her PhD thesis, for example, despite being on ancient Greek poetry, mentions Woolf directly alongside Plato in its abstract, and features a line from *The Waves* as its epigraph. Though it lacks the wild juxtapositions of ancient and modern found in her later books, it displays a clear desire to bring the two together, using, for example, Freudian theory to enrich its ideas about how Greek lyric poetry 'marks the discovery of the self'.[5] In *Eros the Bittersweet*, a book adapted from the thesis but able to take more creative freedoms due to its less specialised audience, Carson is able to explore these juxtapositions more readily, placing Sappho alongside Dickinson, for example, as she conveys the importance of wounding to Greek lyric.

Carson's books can be generally split into two categories. There are the eclectic, multi-genre grab bags, in which a variety of different forms jostle for space: examples include *Glass, Irony and God* (1992), *Plainwater* (1995), *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), *Decreation* (2005), and *Float* (2016). The subtitles of these books gesture at their generic variance, listing multiple genres rather than suggesting a hybridisation of them: 'Essays and Poetry' for *Plainwater*; 'Poetry, Essays, Opera' for *Decreation*. Then there are the long, book-length works, each a single, extended piece that contains within it multiple generic gestures: *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) and *Short Talks* (1992) are the key prose examples, while the key verse examples are *Autobiography of Red* (1998) and *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001). These works carry subtitles that indicate a kind of fusion or hybrid between genres: 'A Novel in Verse' for *Autobiography of Red*; 'A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos' for *Beauty of the Husband*. What unites both approaches is the lack of a single, dominant form: either forms are woven together into new hybrids, or they are spread out like a buffet of options for the reader to dip into. Both critics and publishers have, as such, often had difficulty knowing what overarching genre to place Carson's work under. Her books are generally marketed as poetry collections, yet their pages are just as likely to contain interviews (the closing pages of *Autobiography of Red*), journal entries

[3] Ibid., 7.

[4] Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1952), 8.

[5] Anne Carson Giacomelli, 'Odi Et Amo Ergo Sum' (PhD thesis, Ann Arbor, University of Toronto, 1981). Carson used her married name Giacomelli until the dissolution of her first marriage.

('Water Margins', *Plainwater*), academic essays complete with references and footnotes ('Dirt and Desire', *Men in the Off Hours*), numbered lists ('Stacks', *Float*), operas (the title poem of *Decreation*), or TV scripts ('H&A Screenplay', *Decreation*). When they do contain poems, these vary from book-length confessional narratives (*Beauty of the Husband*) to short, gnomic, haiku-like verse (the 'Epitaph' poems in *Men in the Off Hours*) to prose poems (*Short Talks* and *Red Doc>*). Scattered among these larger forms are a variety of appendices, epigraphs, and inserted quotations, sometimes marked and sometimes unmarked. She is also a prolific translator, and her translations, which have sometimes been published on their own (*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*; *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*; *Antigonick*) and sometimes incorporated into her own collections (fragments of Mimnermos in *Plainwater*, of Stesichorus in *Autobiography of Red*), are difficult to separate out clearly from her 'own' work, as one might do with a more conventional writer, for they often take great personal liberties with the material, injecting her own interests and personality. Such formal variety has led to her work being discussed in a wide variety of contexts: for example, as well as being anthologised as a poet, a prose poet, and an essayist,[6] Carson has also appeared in at least two anthologies of short fiction — Ben Marcus's *Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*, which features an extract from *Short Talks*, and Rosemary Sullivan's *Oxford Book of Stories by Canadian Women in English*, which features an extract from *Plainwater*'s 'The Anthropology of Water'.

That Carson's genres are so difficult to pin down indicates how she is interested in questioning the nature and purpose of genre itself, choosing genres as much for how they fail as how they succeed, as captured by Adam Phillips's comments that, in Carson's work, 'all the rituals of form are first and foremost an expression of their own limitations, the sign of what leaks out of them'.[7] Like the towns she describes in *Plainwater*, genres in Carson are a convenient organising fiction, but they are also an 'illusion'. Though there might, for practical and political purposes, be a town border, a 'Welcome to [Here]' sign, there is no obvious material edge to towns, which usually become sparser at their edges, gradually merging into the surrounding countryside; it is, analogously, in such border regions that Carson resides, where there is 'leakage' from one thing into another. There is also no strict taxonomical principle governing when a group of settlements gains enough volume and solidity to be considered a town; it is a matter to be decided by culture, whether a group of houses, shops, public buildings, and roads 'hang together' enough — that is, have enough integrity, unity, and cohesion — that we consider them a town. That decision process is something Carson's work prompts us to investigate. Finally, a town is an abstract noun made up

[6] For examples of each, see: Todd Swift and Evan Jones, eds., *Modern Canadian Poets: An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010); Jeremy Noel-Tod, ed., *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem: From Baudelaire to Anne Carson* (London: Penguin, 2018); John D'Agata, ed., *The Next American Essay* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003).

[7] Adam Phillips, 'Fickle Contracts: The Poetry of Anne Carson', *Raritan* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 117.

of concrete nouns: it does not itself exist, but neither is it purely abstract. So it is with genres, and their relation to the individual texts they both do and do not consist of; as noted by Derrida, every text contains a mark of its genre, yet this mark itself 'does not belong' to the genre, or rather, 'belongs without belonging'.[8] Similarly, forms in Carson do not 'live' in the towns they belong in; we do not find all of her essays in a neat book of 'Essays'. She resists the tidy illusions of categories, creating conglomerate, illusory towns by placing the fire station from one town next to the library from another, or by populating the school from one town with the pupils from another: that is, by putting forms both next to each other, in juxtaposition, and inside each other, in a kind of hybridisation. 'My pear, your winter' becomes, as they are brought together, your pear, my winter, our winter-pear.

In its cumulative effect, Carson's work is something like the endpoint of Whitman and Emerson's dream of a truly omnivorous form: everything is permissible, and everything is mixed. Elsewhere in 'Towns', she writes: 'What if you get stranded in the town where pears and winter are variants for one another? Can you eat winter? No. Can you live six months inside a frozen pear? No'.[9] Only, in Carson's work, the answer is: yes. Such towns are imaginable, and possible. This playfulness about the category of what can and cannot be eaten is found throughout *Plainwater*, from which the poem is taken: other examples include the phenomenologists who want to eat the paintings in 'Canicula di Anna', as well as the continual confusion between loaves of bread and roadside boulders by the narrator of 'Kinds of Water'.[10] The confusion seems to extend to Carson's own life: she tells the story in *Decreation* of how, as a young child, she fell so in love with one particular book that she tore out and ate the pages.[11] That desire to eat everything suggests not only a Whitmanesque omnivorousness, but also the erotic hunger of Keats, a figure who is woven through *Beauty of the Husband*, and who Yeats once described as a boy with his face pressed to the window of a sweetshop.[12]

Given this omnivorousness, we might ask: why read Carson's work as lyric essay? What claim can be made that this term is an appropriate descriptor of her work? Why pick out and privilege these two forms? Carson's relationship to the lyric essay is certainly more complicated than Dillard's. She occupies a strange position within the pantheon of contemporary lyric essayists, at once central and remote. On the one hand, she is one of the most well-known and widely read

[8] Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (London: Routledge, 2014), 230.

[9] Carson, *Plainwater*, 94.

[10] Ibid., 57; 134.

[11] Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 175.

[12] Lionel Trilling, 'The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters', in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 15.

of the writers who fall under this remit, and is frequently cited in critical pieces on the lyric essay: D'Agata, for example, claims to have first heard the term used in a description by Michael Ondaatje of Carson's work, while Ben Marcus calls her 'the flagship practitioner of the lyric essay'.[13] On the other hand, she exists at a remove from the other writers in this thesis, having little explicit connection to writers like Dillard and Kitchen, placeable, instead, in other contexts: among late twentieth-century Canadian avant-garde poets like Lisa Robertson, Christian Bök, and fellow maverick translator Erín Moure, or among other rebel classicists like Norman O. Brown, Peter Kingsley, and Guy Davenport, the latter of whom places her in this very context, among 'classicists whose writing is just short of terrifying to read'.[14]

Yet though the lyric essay is only one possible context in which her work can be placed, only one possible machete with which to hack into the jungle of her generic variance, it remains, this chapter argues, an extremely useful term through which to engage with Carson's varied, often difficult body of work. Beginning with her early works *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Short Talks*, I examine how the patterns of both lyric and essay shape her initial formal experimentation. In particular, I focus on how Carson uncovers in her reading of Sappho's 'Fragment 31' an idea of the lyric as triangulated — an idea I connect to thinking by J. S. Mill, Northrop Frye, and Jonathan Culler — which shapes not only her subsequent poetry but also the way she moves between other genres. Sappho provides Carson with a working theory of how lyric language functions in a way similar to erotic desire: both share this triangular pattern, and both are dependent on gaps and boundaries. The tactics of desire, I argue, become the animating force of Carson's poetic. In addition, I also trace how several different kinds of essaying — including both a self-contradicting, dialectical essayism, and a free-associating, wandering essayism — shape this early work, even when she is not explicitly writing essays. Turning to her middle period, and works such as *Autobiography of Red* and *Men in the Off Hours*, I explore how these two kinds of textual movement, lyrical and essayistic, frequently combine, both within and between individual pieces, creating a kind of machine that moves in multiple ways simultaneously. Like an engine that combines rotary and reciprocal motions, so too do Carson's lyric essays combine the triangulated, circuital flow of her lyrics with the back-and-forth dialectic of her essays. This desire to move in more than one way simultaneously — 'way' meaning here both 'direction' and 'manner' — eventually leads Carson, as I argue at the end of the chapter, to abandon the lyric essay, moving, in her latest books, towards something more expanded, exploded, and uninhibited.

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[13] John D'Agata, ed., *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay* (Geneva, NY: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 2014), 6; Ben Marcus, 'The Genre Artist', *Believer*, 1 July 2003, https://believermag.com/the-genre-artist.

[14] Guy Davenport, introduction to Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), vii.

Carson makes such an interesting contribution to the study of the lyric essay *because* she does not quite fit the label, because she comes at it from such a different angle to Dillard, and yet remains an oft-cited and central figure in its formulation by figures such as D'Agata and Marcus. The comparison with Dillard, in particular, is revealing. Most immediately, we see that for Carson the lyric is a form concerned with boundaries, while for Dillard it strives towards boundlessness. In Dillard, we saw how the essay reaches towards the lyric but is not quite able to grasp it. It is like Sappho's hand, in another of her fragments, reaching for the apple too high on the tree: 'as the sweetapple reddens on a high branch / high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot— / no, not forgot: were unable to reach'.[15] For Dillard, this inability of the essay to grasp the lyric is a theological problem, the fault of a post-Adamic language marked by particularity, waste, and corruption. In Carson, however, the same qualities of the essay that for Dillard stop it from becoming purely lyric — its incompleteness, its boundedness, its individuality — are *occasions for more lyricism*, for they are generative of eros. For Carson, it is this very constraint, this boundedness, which causes and allows both eros and lyric to emerge. As Lee Upton puts it, '[i]n Carson the urge toward perfection requires imperfection, requires Keats's lovers never meeting, never kissing'.[16] While in Dillard, the essay's inherent imperfection is what *stops* it from becoming purely lyrical, in Carson it is the *source* of the essay's potential lyricism — that erotic quivering — itself. To understand this, let us begin by turning to the book where she first lays these ideas about eros and lyricism out, *Eros the Bittersweet*.

Carson's Erotic Lyricism

Carson's career as a writer begins with the idea of lyric. After happening upon a collection of Sappho's lyrics in an Ontario shopping mall, Carson went on to study classics at Toronto, where she majored in Greek lyric poetry.[17] Her PhD thesis, 'Odi et Amo Ergo Sum', examined how such poetry marks 'the origin of self-consciousness' in literature, focusing in particular on its treatment of erotic desire and how, 'in the lyric poetry of the Greek archaic age, eros is the mechanism through which is explored, for the first time as far as evidence shows, the personal experience of the individual in contact with his surroundings and with other individuals'.[18] In a way that sets her apart from Dillard and Nelson — though perhaps not from Rankine — she is explicitly concerned

[15] Sappho, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Anne Carson (London: Virago, 2003), 215.

[16] Lee Upton, *Defensive Measures: The Poetry of Niedecker, Bishop, Glück, and Carson* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), 99.

[17] Anne Carson, 'A Short Talk with Anne Carson', interview by Catherine Bush, *Catherine Bush*, 2000, https://catherinebush.com/articles/a-short-talk-with-anne-carson.

[18] Giacomelli, 'Odi et Amo Ergo Sum', vi; iv.

with the word lyric, and what it means to write lyric, even as she turns repeatedly to other forms such as the essay. Her thinking on the lyric is best understood through a spatial metaphor — the 'ruse of the triangle' as the 'radical constitution' of both erotic desire and lyric language[19] — which she uncovers in her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*. Carson has described this book as the only time she successfully integrated her academic scholarship with her poetry, getting them 'to move in the same stream', and while we should take such a claim with a pinch of salt, it does reveal the work's importance to her, as a central node in her network of interests, both academic and poetic.[20] The book, which takes the more academic and historical analysis of Greek lyric poetry found in her thesis and uses it as a way of exploring a number of related concerns about language, contact, boundaries, bodies, and erotic desire, sets into play ideas which continue be worked out, in different formal structures, in her subsequent work.

The book begins with Sappho's description of love as *glukupikron*, or 'sweet bitter'. Carson finds that throughout Sappho, as well as other lyric poets, desire always splits the self into opposites — sweet and bitter, hot and cold, love and hate — in a moment of wounding. She draws this out through a reading of Sappho's 'Fragment 31', a poem which provides her with a replicable pattern of bittersweetness, echoes of which can be found throughout her work. Here is the fragment in full, as translated by Carson in *If Not, Winter*:

> He seems to me equal to gods that man
> who opposite you
> sits and listens close
> to your sweet speaking
>
> and lovely laughing — oh it
> puts the heart in my chest on wings
> for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking
> is left in me
>
> no: tongue breaks and thin
> fire is racing under skin
> and in eyes no sight and drumming
> fills ears

[19] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 17.
[20] Carson, 'A ___ with Anne Carson', 9.

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am dead — or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty[21]

The fragment cuts off there, but it should be noted that in *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson makes no mention of the last line, focusing only on the triangular shape suggested by the position of the lovers in the main body of the poem: the poet, the beloved, and the third figure, 'that man', who comes between them.[22] Her analysis then shifts to make the lover (that is, the poet) *both* the first and third points of the triangle, by analysing how the lover has been wounded by eros, and a new lack has been revealed in them, splitting the self into two: the lover (point A) desires the beloved (point B) but is unable to have them, revealing a new lack in the lover (point C). The experience of unrequited desire makes tangible and sensible things which were previously hidden: the distance between A-B, the boundary between B-C, and the difference between C-A. That is, the force of the desire makes the underlying structure of the moment visible, revealing the invisible network of relations between the different figures. Not only that, but these previously hidden substructures are brought into tangible and physical reality, experienced as a powerful, sensory overload: the 'bittersweet' splitting of the self into opposites, here 'cold sweat' and 'fire racing under skin', as well as the stripping away of speech ('no speaking', 'tongue breaks') and the normal senses of sight ('in eyes no sight') and hearing ('drumming fills ears'). It is as though in ridding the lover of their ordinary senses, the moment of unrequited desire makes sensible new realities which are normally hidden from the senses, or inaccessible to them: the invisible boundaries, distances, and differences between people.

Carson attempts to replicate this sensation throughout her work by bringing together stark opposites: ancient and modern, academic and personal, poetry and essay. Her interest in the lyric essay form — itself a juxtaposition of opposites, like sweetness and bitterness — stems from her fascination, arising from her work as a scholar, with the crisis of erotic contact depicted in Sappho's poem. The shift in technique from her PhD thesis to *Eros* reveals this further. Both *Eros* and 'Odi et Amo' begin with what Carson calls the 'crisis of touch' between human beings, the idea of

[21] Sappho, *If Not, Winter*, 63.

[22] In contrast, the last line is the focus of her second analysis of the poem in *Decreation* (159-62), a reanalysis which marks the shift in her later work towards a more expansive, looser style.

anthropologist Edward Crawley that contact — not just physical but any kind of contact — is the 'one universal test of mutual human relations', that 'every touch is a modified blow'.[23] Her thesis focuses, initially, on the importance of this idea to the formation of Greek lyric, drawing on examples from poets such as Alkman, Archilochos, Sappho, Alkaios, Ibykos, and Anakreon, and supporting her readings with other scholarship from classicists like A. W. H Adkins and Norman O. Brown. In *Eros*, this scholarly architecture is stripped away, but the variety of sources is not: instead, it is amplified further, as she draws from a more personal, historically varied list, colliding, within the first few pages, Plato, Weil, Dickinson, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Lacan, and Sappho. *Eros* shows the beginning hints of Carson trying to replicate, throughout her work, the whiplash experience of desire through the effects of juxtaposition. She captures how the jolt of eros makes sensible the differences and distances between people by moving, with a similar jolt, between different sources. Moreover, she does this by using a classical technique of the essay — its bringing together unexpected neighbours by drawing on purely personal references from the essayist's own lifetime of reading. Indeed, while 'Odi et Amo' reads as academic scholarship, *Eros* is quintessentially an essay: taking an initial term, *glukupikron*, and turning it over and over to reveal more implications of it; colliding a wide range of influences and references; reaching, ultimately, no conclusion.

Her discovery of the triangular shape suggested by the lovers in the poem also has a profound impact on the rest of Carson's writing. As Chris Jennings writes, the principle of triangulation is 'taken as a paradigm' across her work, structuring a 'poetics of lack that employs and enables duality as an essential component'.[24] Once one notices this triangular shape in Carson, one starts to see it everywhere: in the many poems and essays where she refracts her thinking through two other figures, as in 'The Glass Essay' (her mother and Emily Brontë), *Economy of the Unlost* (Simonides and Celan), and *Decreation*'s 'Foam' (Longinus and Antonioni); in pieces where three distinct textual elements play off each other in a repeated pattern or sequence, as in 'Kinds of Water' (the epigraphic haiku, the journal entries, and the closing aphorisms/riddles) and *Beauty of the Husband* (the Keats epigraphs, the strangely essayistic and extended titles, and the poems themselves); in rhyme schemes, as in the two central stanzas of 'Nighthawks', which run ABC DEF FED CBA, with the tabulation further emphasising this sense of reaching out and returning, giving the two stanzas a > shape.[25] One can see why Carson might be drawn to Edward Hopper's

[23] Giacomelli, 'Odi et Amo Ergo Sum', i; Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 4; 20. The idea also appears again in 'Dirt and Desire' from *Men in the off Hours* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 130.

[24] Chris Jennings, 'The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 923.

[25] Carson, *Men in the off Hours*, 50.

painting 'Nighthawks', the subject of this ekphrastic poem, given her love of Sappho's 'Fragment 31': the bar itself is triangular in shape, while the three customers are sat in a similar arrangement to Sappho's poem, with two figures sat together, on one side of the bar, and another sat alone, facing them. Perhaps it is not a coincidence, too, that her most famous motif, the volcano — 'Carson is obsessed with volcanoes', as Sam Anderson notes, and went through a period of painting them[26] — is suggestive of the same shape.

Crucially, this triangular shape is not only the structure of erotic desire, for Carson, but also the structure of lyric language. Through it we can connect Carson's work to a long history of thinking about the lyric as triangular, one most explicitly formulated by Jonathan Culler. Culler describes the lyric's address as 'triangulated', that is, an 'address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else', finding the most blatant manifestation of this in the figure of the apostrophe: an 'address [to] something that is not the true audience, whether a muse, an urn, Duty, or a beloved, [which] highlights the event of address itself as an act'.[27] The apostrophe is a figure marked by impossibility and distance: it is a 'turning aside from supposedly real listeners', in favour of 'the invocation of impossible addressees, such as unseen powers… or creatures and things unlikely to answer'.[28] There is, then, an element of unfulfilled desire to this address, similar to that felt by Sappho's lover, something drawn out sharply in Carson's own lyrics. In addressing the wind, an absent lover, 'a nightingale, an urn, or one's own poem', the lyric poet stages an impossible connection, the transmission of a message which must inevitably fail to reach its recipient, and so leaks out into another dimension, flowing instead towards the reader.[29] This fundamental structure of the apostrophe underlies the experience of lyric reading in general, for Culler, even when we examine non-apostrophic verse, for there is always a degree of leakage, of unintended meaning, which the reader themselves creates in the act of reading, becoming the third point on the triangle, the overhearer of the message: as Carson writes, '[s]omething becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure'.[30] Moreover, this leakage can be itself interpreted as the lyric poem's *failure* to communicate with its intended recipient — that is, as a limitation, or lack, which is revealed in the moment of attempted communication — even as it is obviously also the source of the poem's success. The idea recalls, again, Adam Phillips's comments that forms, for Carson, are 'first and foremost an expression of

[26] Sam Anderson, 'The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson', *New York Times Magazine*, 14 March 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/magazine/the-inscrutable-brilliance-of-anne-carson.html.

[27] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 186-87.

[28] Jonathan Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 886; *Theory of the Lyric*, 187.

[29] Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', 886.

[30] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 17.

their own limitations, the sign of what leaks out of them', and suggests that this failure and leakage is, in turn, their usefulness.[31]

Culler's vision of the poem as triangulated depends upon a long-standing idea of the lyric as overheard utterance, one which even in its original formulation by J. S. Mill carries associations with the split self which Carson's own writing continually meditates on. Mill himself uses a spatial metaphor, albeit not an obviously triangular one: 'the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next'.[32] There are three implied points in this metaphor: the prisoner or poet speaking; the apparent audience of the message (which may be another person, real or imaginary, or may be the poet themselves again, in self-dialogue); and the eavesdropping audience of the reader. A triangle is thus suggested: the linear line of communication, from addresser to addressee, is extended into a three-dimensional space by the addition of a third, overhearing party. This triangle remains even when the poet is addressing himself — what Mill calls 'feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude'[33] — for the act of speaking *to* oneself necessitates a splitting of the self into speaker and listener, addresser and addressee: a self-*dia*logue, between two points. In such a moment, the lyric is already somewhat like the essay, with its own tradition of self-dialogue; and both forms are, for Carson, ways of evoking the splitting of the self created by eros, as in 'The Glass Essay', when she writes of sleeping with her unfaithful husband: 'There was no area of my mind // not appalled by this action, no part of my body / that could have done otherwise'.[34] The convulsive experience of eros, in which one can literally feel oneself pulled apart into contradictory desires and impulses, is perhaps the *felt* (and lyric) equivalent of the experience of *thinking* in contradictions which we find in so many essayists. Note, too, how these contradictory impulses seem to bind the lover, 'no part' of whose body could behave 'otherwise'; indeed, it is particularly revealing that the poet in Mill's spatial metaphor is a prisoner, suggesting the poet as someone who is, like the lover, in a bind. For all of Carson's extraordinary freedom of movement, she is also a writer continually concerned with ties and chains, as in the sequence 'Kinds of Water', where she feels bound to both the road and to her walking partner: 'ensnared' in his 'tendrils', 'entangled with another mind', pinning flowers to his hat to entangle herself in him further.[35] The poet is bound to her partner even as she is unable to fully become one with him: she can neither unite nor untie. The sequence thus enacts the ways in which eros both separates and binds, reveals boundaries even as it pierces those boundaries.

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[31] Phillips, 'Fickle Contracts', 117.

[32] John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties', in *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 350n33.

[33] Ibid., 348.

[34] Carson, *Glass, Irony, and God*, 12.

[35] Carson, *Plainwater*, 144; 175; 149.

Yet though the poet-lover-prisoner may be in a bind, it is not connection but separation, or distance, that unites Carson's, Culler's, and Mill's depictions of lyric communication. The lyric triangle only appears because the three points are separated from each other, held apart; the prisoner's mutterings are turned into poetry by the wall separating him from his eavesdropper, an image that recalls Frost's description of poetry as the sound of conversation heard through a wall.[36] For Culler, the lyric address only emerges because of the impossibility of closing the distance between addresser and addressee; similarly, for Sappho's lover, desire is only felt because it cannot be consummated. Carson herself draws this out through a reading of Emily Dickinson's 'I had been hungry', showing how eros disappears as soon as that which is desired is attained:

> So I found
> that hunger was a way
> of person's outside windows
> that entering takes away.[37]

We see here how closing the gap between the desirer and the desired 'takes away' the desire itself. Desire requires space or distance to exist; like the lyric, it requires a gap in which to develop. To hear a lyric poem requires that we hear the address itself, that we are able to eavesdrop on it as an act of communication, from 'side on'. If addressed directly, the act of the address itself disappears; hence, for Culler, it is indirection of address which is the mark of the lyric. Similarly, to feel desire we must be apart from the thing or person we desire; we must be standing outside Dickinson's windows. From here, we can do our looking; we might say our overlooking, just as the poem is an overhearing. Again, one can understand Carson's attraction, in *Men in the Off Hours*, to Hopper's paintings, which stage within the work itself the act of overlooking that all paintings involve, with many of the paintings depicting action taking place behind windows: in diners, barbershops, offices at night, motel rooms. We as the viewer are doubly outside, observing from the other side of the window and the other side of the canvas; we are like Dickinson's poet-speaker standing outside, desiring to go in. Carson's writing, though it is extremely mobile, does not compress this distance as it navigates between things; instead, it continually emphasises this feeling of distance, leaving gaps in which meaning (specifically, lyric meaning) can accrue, as in, for example, the physical separation of the Keats epigraphs in *Beauty of the Husband* from the poems that follow them, kept apart by the reader's act of turning the page.

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[36] Robert Frost to John T. Bartlett, July 4, 1913, in *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 79-80.

[37] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 10.

Such distance is essential to how the lyric functions for both Culler and Carson. Northrop Frye, too — who was Professor of English at the University of Toronto in the 1970s while Carson was studying there — explicitly marks the necessity, for the lyric form, of a gap between poet and addressee or 'muse', arguing that this is what distinguishes lyric from *epos* (epic), where the muse speaks through the poet, thus eliminating any distance between the two. Direct contact between reader and poet is made impossible by the very form of the poem: 'the poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners, though he may speak for them, and though they may repeat some of his words after him'.[38] Yet it is this very denial that, just as the denial of consummation by the unreciprocating lover engenders eros, makes the lyric possible. By removing language from the more conventional structures and patterns which, in everyday use, make it a functioning communication tool, the lyric makes language *itself* audible, revealing new nuances in words and phrases, revealing new connections between words which would otherwise remain hidden, as well as new distances and differences between them. The lyric poem, for Carson, has the power to make visible invisible things: boundaries, gaps, unspoken desires, connections, the movements between people and ideas, and the invisible network of language itself. Moreover, it has the power to make us *feel* these things, which might otherwise only be graspable in the abstract. The revelations of poetry are wounding, producing a powerful physical response in the body, as in Dickinson's famous description of feeling 'so cold no fire can ever warm me... as if the top of my head were taken off'.[39] In this, they are not unlike the exposing, revelatory convulsions of erotic desire.

Two Kinds of Essay

If *Eros the Bittersweet* is an essay in which Carson works out, among other things, her conception of the lyric, then its follow up, *Short Talks* — originally published by Brick Books, with selections later included as the second part of *Plainwater*, as well as in the U.K. only collection *Glass and God*[40] — can be read as a series of short prose lyrics in which she, among other things, consciously explores the essay form. A number of things lead us to this conclusion. The title itself carries the essayist's gesture of modesty, as captured in Cowley's ironically titled 'Of Greatness', in which he wrote that the essay is marked by a taste for 'littleness';[41] it also, as I noted in my first chapter,

[38] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 250.

[39] Emily Dickinson to T.W. Higginson, August 16, 1870, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986), 473-74.

[40] Intended to introduce Carson's work to the U.K. market for the first time, the Cape-published *Glass and God* is almost identical to New Directions's original *Glass, Irony and God*, but with two pieces, 'Book of Isaiah' and 'The Gender of Sound', omitted and replaced by a selection from the *Short Talks*.

[41] Abraham Cowley, *Essays, Plays and Sundry Verses*, ed. A.R. Waller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

overlaps with Judith Kitchen's own term 'shorts'. As a gesture, it finds Carson embracing the anti-scholarly freedom of the essay, shifting further away from her academic origins. In her PhD, Carson was mostly confined to academic process, forced to sequester off her more personal, idiosyncratic meditations as appendices; in *Eros*, she was able to more loosely arrange this material under the banner of 'essay', while still retaining some of the architecture of academia, including detailed references, a list of abbreviations, an extensive bibliography, and multiple indexes; in *Short Talks*, one can feel her fully shedding this debt to academia, gesturing in the title that these are neither long, sustained pieces of scholarship, nor fully developed theses or arguments; rather, they are 'short' and they are 'talks' — mere fireside chats, or conversational openings. By not explicitly calling the pieces essays, Carson only enhances their essayistic freedom; one might go further and say, by not actually writing essays — for the pieces are too short, their ideas too condensed, to really be seen as examples of the essay *form* — but instead engaging, within these fragments of poetic prose, with the essayistic *mode*, she maximises the essay's freedom, recalling again that idea, suggested by both Bensmaïa and Epstein, that the essay is most fully realised when it takes place inside other genres. Like Kitchen in her anthologies, she avoids any concrete generic markers, even the word 'essay' itself, allowing these pieces to be read through multiple lenses — though it is worth noting that elsewhere she embraces the essay more openly, indeed more than any other generic term, in the titles and subtitles of many of her works.[42]

In addition to the collection title's gestures at the essay, there is the notably essayistic titling practice used for the pieces themselves — 'On Trout', 'On Ovid', 'On Waterproofing' — which directly engages with the tradition of using what G. Douglas Atkins calls 'innocent-looking prepositions' to mark the essayist's complicated relationship to their apparent subject.[43] As in many essays, these subjects often act as mere entry points onto other concerns; initial foundations the essays themselves are constructed 'on'. 'On *Homo sapiens*', for example, begins with early humans making cuts on their tools, but moves within a few short sentences to finish on the 'taunt' of storytellers who only let us see so far into their stories.[44] There is an interesting parallel, here, to the triangulated address of the lyric, and especially the figure of the apostrophe, which invokes an audience that is not the poem's true audience, just as the essay invokes a subject that is not its true subject. In both instances, it is the invocation itself that is important, the preposition — whether

2014), 429.

[42] The word is used in the subtitles of *Eros the Bittersweet*, *Plainwater*, *Decreation*, and *Beauty of the Husband*. In these and other texts, it frequently appears in the titles of works both obviously essayistic (the prose pieces throughout *Men in the Off Hours*, for example) and less so ('The Glass Essay', from *Glass, Irony and God*.)

[43] G. Douglas Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 7.

[44] Anne Carson, *Short Talks* (London: Brick Books, 2017), 27.

'on', 'of', 'about', or 'to' — rather than the noun that follows. (At the same time, prepositions might also be used to distinguish forms: an essay and an ode, for example, might both be on the same subject — Montaigne's 'Of Sleep' and Keat's 'To Sleep' — but will come to different truths about that subject, for they are approaching it through different prepositions.) Kristi Maxwell, meanwhile, reads Carson's use of 'On' as the marker of an 'erotics of scholarship that emerges throughout the book', 'establishing what subject the body of the mind lies over or moves on top of at the moment', an interpretation that positions such acts of titling as contingent with Carson's erotic lyricism.[45] The two readings — the 'on' as essayistic, the 'on' as erotic or lyric — are mutually reinforcing. Her embrace of the essay, in *Short Talks* and elsewhere, continually takes Carson deeper into the lyric; that the essay is an *amateur* form not only offers her an escape from her academic profession, but also, through an etymological entangling, positions the essayist — like the pining, Sapphic poet — as a lover.

These gestures at essayism are continued within the pieces themselves, which frequently move like essays in miniature, condensed down to just the essential words, and yet still containing a surprising amount of essayistic sprawl. They display the beginnings of what Meghan O'Rourke calls, describing Carson's style, 'the over-all action of the mind rather than the high-shine lacquer of the apt image'.[46] We see an aspiration towards this in Carson's introduction to the volume, where she writes:

> You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.[47]

The sense of constant, urgent movement here, carried in the repetitions of 'never [verb] enough', pushes beyond the enclosed triangle of the lyric towards something more open, something which does not return to where it began, closing the circuit, but which continues to move outwards, towards more knowledge, more strangeness. This is the restless spirit of Carson's essaying, which moves always from one thing to its opposite, and then to *its* opposite, and then the opposite of *that*. If Carson is drawn to the erotic lyric because of its fingering of boundaries, then she is conversely drawn to the essay because of its lack of boundaries: '[d]on't like boundary', as she writes in 'Maintenance'.[48] Using the restless movement of dialectical thinking, the essay is able to

[45] Kristi Maxwell, 'The Unbearable Withness of Being', in Wilkinson, *Ecstatic Lyre*, 60.

[46] Meghan O'Rourke, 'The Unfolding', *New Yorker*, 5 July 2010, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/07/12/the-unfolding.

[47] Carson, *Short Talks*, 23.

[48] Anne Carson, *Float* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), np.

keep constantly moving, to remain unbound in a way the lyric lover never can, in what is notably a reversal of the relationship of the essay and lyric in Dillard.

At the same time, there are certain elements in this introductory statement that are antithetical to the essay as it is often conceived. The idea that the writer can 'never work enough' opposes the idea of play and leisure, both important, the latter especially, to the traditional essay. The phrase 'never leave the mind quickly enough' is also quite different to our well-trodden sense of the essayist as someone who dawdles, who dwells in thought, reflecting and musing. Furthermore, there is a sense not of free movement but of movement which is deliberately restricted or frustrated: the writer 'impede[s]' movement 'harshly' to force it in new directions. Indeed, there is a tension in this list of clauses, each like a mini manifesto for Carson's writing, that speaks to a wider tension or contradiction in how different writers have described the essay. On the one hand, the essay is, according to Pater, Adorno, and Lukács's descriptions, dialectic: immediately pushing back, countering, rather than following a thought to its resolution and thus its end.[49] On the other hand, the essay is often conceived of as a form of totally free and unhindered movement: 'no one is freer than the essayist — free to leap out in any direction, to hop from thought to thought'.[50] In the first conception, there is a push-and-pull, a back-and-forth, the dialectic requiring two opposing forces, like someone pulling on a rubber band to feel the force of it snapping back; in the second, there is only pull, *all* pull, like someone pulling continually on a thread, unravelling and unravelling it. The former proceeds by 'yes but'; the latter by 'yes and'. Both kinds of movement are crucial to the essay's appeal for Adorno: on the one hand, the essay 'freely associates what can be found associated in the freely chosen object', beginning and leaving off wherever it pleases; on the other, it is 'more dialectical than the dialectic' itself, for 'the daring, anticipatory, and not fully redeemed aspect of every essayistic detail attracts other such details as its negation', creating a constant push and pull as the essay advances.[51]

In the *Short Talks*, we find a model for how these two kinds of essayistic movement work together in Carson. While it would be a stretch to call it a strictly dialectic work, there is certainly

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[49] For both Adorno and Lukács, the essay is a form of writing which 'eschews the dichotomy of arts and science as two opposed and irreducible kinds of knowledge', with Lukács stressing its ability to synthesise the two, and Adorno stressing its ability to oscillate in an unresolved dialectical movement. It is for this reason that Lukács identifies Socrates as the first essayist: the unresolved dialectical movements of Socratic dialogues are, he suggests, the pattern of movement on which the essay is based (Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 13). Pater makes a similar claim for Plato, writing that 'the Platonic dialogue in its conception, its peculiar opportunities, is essentially an essay', and that 'the freedom, the variety and elasticity, of dialogue, informal, easy, natural, alone afforded the room necessary for [the] long and complex process [of essayistic thought]' (Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 175; 178).

[50] Cynthia Ozick, 'She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body', in *Quarrel & Quandary: Essays* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 184.

[51] Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 159; 166.

a tension between the 'harshly' 'impede[d]' movements of stopped thoughts on the one hand, and the free flow of ideas on the other. We see this in the piece 'On Hopes':

> Soon I hope to live in a totally rubber house. Think how quickly I will be able to get from room to room! One good bounce and you're there. I have a friend whose hands were melted off by a firebomb during the war. Now, once again, he will learn to pass the bread at the dinner table. Learning is life. I hope to invite him over this evening in fact. Learning is the same colour as life. He says things like that.[52]

The image of Carson in a rubber house, bouncing from one idea to the next, suggests the restlessness and unimpinged freedom of Carson the essayist, for whom every sentence is always a new surprise. Yet note the tonal shift that occurs with the sentence 'I have a friend whose hands were melted off by a firebomb during the war'.[53] That image of hands melted off contradicts the idea of bouncing movement in the previous sentence, suggesting that not everyone can move so freely. Yet it does not contradict the previous idea directly; rather, it introduces a whole new image, one which, indirectly, through both its tone and the implications of its content, pushes back against the old. Rubber bounces, we are reminded, because of its high elasticity; when compressed, it pushes back. Similarly, Carson *pushes back* against her opening image with the introduction of the image of the burnt hands, and in doing so *bounces off* to a new idea, moving 'from one idea to the next'. Thus we have a sense here of both restricted and unrestricted movement, the former engendering the latter. Carson's distinctive style is created by the unexpectedness of the push back, which is so new an idea that it feels like a new association as much as it does a questioning response. While she does counter and impede, she does not do so through logical counter-argument or direct response. We might say her *buts* are so wild that they appear like *ands*; as though Socrates's questions were so unexpected as to appear like non-sequiturs, while still also functioning to continue the dialectic. Throughout *Short Talks*, she achieves this trick of moving with both an *and* and a *but* simultaneously.

Short Talks also finds Carson combining elements of the essay and the lyric within the same piece of prose. In 'On the Total Collection', we find the Biblical Noah, exhausted from his attempts at creating an encyclopaedic and total form (his ark, which here contains not only two of every animal but 'all the objects', and all the texts, of the world), moving towards something

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[52] Carson, *Short Talks*, 28.

[53] The line hints at a motif from *Decreation:* 'If police in that city burnt off people's hands with a blowtorch' ('Seated Figure With Red Angle', 97) and 'How long / will / it feel like burning, said the child trying to be / kind' ('Stops', 5).

resembling both essay and lyric:

> From childhood he dreamed of being able to keep with him all the objects in the world lined up on his shelves and bookcases. He denied lack, oblivion or even the likelihood of a missing piece. Order streamed from Noah in blue triangles and as the pure fury of his classifications rose around him, engulfing his life they came to be called waves by others, who drowned, a world of them.[54]

The encyclopaedic ark here is posited as the antithesis of both the lyric and the essay. It 'denie[s] lack', which as we saw is so crucial to the emergence of the lyric as Carson depicts it in *Eros the Bittersweet*; it aims to classify and organise, to keep its objects 'lined up' in order, an intention so counter to the spirit of the essay, and one which proves to be impossible, a 'dream'. The attempt at order is given over to disorder through Carson's choice of verbs: it 'stream[s]', becoming liquid, as its classifications rise and 'engulf'. In this change from solid to liquid its essential nature changes, too: it comes 'to be called waves by others'. Carson suggests here an intention to take the solidity of prose and liquify it into the alternative order, or disorder, of the lyric; note the transformation into 'blue triangles', and consider how eros, too, is a kind of engulfing. But it is also, as I have said, the essay: the resistance to organisation strongly recalls Adorno's sense of the essay resisting totality. Indeed, it is this resistance to organisation which is the key marker of Carson's essaying; and it is interesting that, right from this early stage, she sees lyricism as one way to enact this.

Carson's resistance to organisation is also felt in the several pieces in *Short Talks* that discuss paintings and painters. She notes how when Van Gogh 'looked out at the world he saw the nails that attach colours to things and he saw that the nails were in pain', while she admires Rembrandt for how he 'wakens you just in time to see matter stumble out of its forms'.[55] We sense the 'pain' implicit in that metaphor for classification: the nailing down of things. (It is this pain, perhaps, that erupts and engulfs Noah in 'On the Total Collection'.) Nails are painful for Carson, for they fix things down, recalling Dillard's pain at her failure to 'unpeach' the peaches and separate out, as Van Gogh does, the qualities of things from the things themselves. That is one reason she avoids using a single form: to fix an idea in just one form is to see it in only one way. Carson is drawn to both the essay and the lyric because of their mobility, their resistance to fixity. Furthermore, by moving between them, she remains even more mobile, switching form mid-poem as though to catch it off guard and glimpse the matter 'stumbl[ing] out of it'. Contrasting these depictions of Van Gogh and Rembrandt is her description of the people 'lost in thought' in Seurat, Europeans

[54] Carson, *Short Talks*, 57.
[55] Ibid. 47; 52.

'slow[ed] down' by sunlight', 'spellbound'.[56] These people are, we might say, like that other kind of other essayist, lost in thought, dwelling, pontificating at length. This kind of slow, dreamy attention 'lies on the other side of attention, a long lazy boat ride from here'.[57] By contrast, Carson, bouncing in her rubber house, resists any kind of dwelling; a rubber house, we might say, is a dwelling in which one cannot dwell; a form in which one cannot fully *form*, and thus fix in place.

Patterns of Movement

When Carson republished the *Short Talks* as the second part of *Plainwater*, with its subtitle 'Essays and Poetry', she retained their genetic ambivalence by giving no indication which of these categories they fell under.[58] Instead, she brought them into contact with a number of other similarly ambiguous generic experiments. As she begins to play with different combinations of genres, in books such as *Glass, Irony and God*, *Plainwater*, and *Men in the Off Hours* — all of which deviate from her earlier works by containing, within them, multiple sections, and thus an assortment of different forms, rather than the ambiguous but nonetheless singular forms of *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Short Talks* — there is an increasing sense that Carson treats forms as different patterns, different kinds of textual movement, which can be combined and contrasted as she sees fit. We see her in this period arriving at that insight she reveals in her contemporaneous interview with D'Agata in 1997: that forms are like 'movement[s] within an event or a thing', and that these can be shifted between to create different effects.[59] I have suggested already that her approach to the lyric is rooted in the idea of it as triangulated, and thus triangular in shape; and that her essayism combines both a sense of the essay as dialectic, that is a movement between two points, and a sense of the essay as free, unrestricted movement; in the books that follow *Short Talks*, we find these different movements themselves being moved *between*, both within and between pieces.

One interesting way to track this is to examine moments where Carson writes about movement itself. In the sequence 'Kinds of Water' — originally published much earlier, in *Grand Street* in 1987, and chosen, notably, by Annie Dillard when she edited the *Best American Essays* in 1988 — we find the forward narrative momentum of the pilgrims, venturing forth towards their destination as though in a quest narrative, continually derailed by a more essayistic kind of

[56] Ibid., 29.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Kristi Maxwell has this revealing take on the book's subtitle, in relation to the generic ambiguity of its contents: 'Building on the combinatory gesture of the title, the subtitle, "Essays and Poetry," which may at first give the impression that the book consists of interspersed essays and poetry, comes to suggest that each piece is both essay and poem, both of which are accommodating to exploratory gestures' ('Unbearable Withness of Being', 57).

[59] Carson, 'A ___ with Anne Carson', 13.

wandering.[60] One contrast we can make between narratives and essays is in their relationship to land. While the essayist is a wanderer, one who ventures out into the land with no destination in mind, the writer of fiction *plots* the land, in the sense of both planning or scheming, and of surveying the area, mapping it and marking it out. The essayist encounters the land; the novelist traverses it, moves across it. The pilgrimage is a journey which combines these two kinds of movement. It has a fixed end point — here the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela — and yet the point of the pilgrimage is in the undertaking of it, and in the unexpected encounters along the way, the divergences and wanderings. We find this expressed from the outset of the piece, with the poet beginning her pilgrimage 'in the belief that a question can travel into an answer as water into thirst'.[61] She deliberately sets out, like the essayist, to get lost, to wander in and essay the desert, taking no maps: 'I cannot read maps — why press a seal on running water? After all the only rule of travel is, Don't come back the way you went. Come a new way'.[62] That comment on maps leads us to identify the lyric pattern also present in this would-be narrative. In the lyric triangle, we return to the starting point but 'come a new way', creating a circuit. We see this triangle, too, in the shape made by the two walkers, in dialogue along their route. The essay, as we have seen, is either dialectic or wandering: it is a stationary dialogue, in that Socratic tradition picked up by Pater and Lukács, or it is a lone traveller wandering the terrain, in dialogue with the landscape (which may be a literal landscape, the interior landscape of the mind, or the literary landscape of an essayist's library, the books they 'wander' through). Yet Carson has two figures in dialogue, walking, and so introduces the element of continual difference into the movement of the essay. The spatial metaphor of two figures in dialogue gives us the back-and-forth movement of the dialectical essay, but by having this dialogue take place along a journey, the two points (which are moved between) are themselves also continually moving. If a standard dialogue is Person A and Person B in conversation, then here Person A moves between the speech act and the reply, so that when Person B speaks back to Person A, it is not the same person, but a new person, C. Such a description should feel familiar:

[60] The association between the essay and the movement of walking is well-trodden; we find it in Montaigne, who deigned 'to follow a movement so wandering as that of [his] mind' ('Of Practice', *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Everyman's Library, 2003), 331), as well as in Hazlitt, who claimed that 'from his various walks and turns through life, [the essayist] brings home little curious specimens' (William Hazlitt, 'On the Periodical Essayists', *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), 6:95). Johnson's periodical was, of course, *The Rambler*. Kathryn Murphy claims that walking, 'whether country rambling or city flânerie, is one of the essay's great themes, and often bears epistemological claims', citing examples such as Thoreau's call in his essay 'Walking' for the essayist to walk like the camel, 'the only beast which ruminates when walking' (Kathryn Murphy, 'Of Sticks and Stones: The Essay, Experience, and Experiment', in Karshan and Murphy, *On Essays*, 80-81). The metaphor of walking is perhaps so rich because it combines the sense of the essay's dialectical thinking, in the rhythm of one foot following the other and back again, with the essay's well-established sense of unrestricted freedom.

[61] Carson, *Plainwater*, 122.

[62] Ibid., 123.

it is the shape we uncovered earlier, which Carson drew out of Sappho's 'Fragment 31'.

In *Autobiography of Red*, we find another kind of pilgrimage: the road trip. Much of *Autobiography of Red* takes place in vehicles, a move which allows it to dwell in details, in a kind of passive, non-narrative reflection, while still taking the characters somewhere new and thus advancing the story. The enclosed space of the vehicle acts like the cosy space of the essay, a space of withdrawal, in which one can read and reflect; only it is a portable version: it is Montaigne's study on wheels. Or, indeed, in flight: in the poem 'Aeroplane', for example, Geryon spends most of the flight reading, and the pages pile up with essayistic material: facts about harpoons, Yamana variations of the word 'to bite'.[63] These found materials mix with his own thoughts ('what is time made of? He could feel it massed around him') and observations ('he watched the red line inch forward from Miami towards Puerto Rico at 972 kilometers an hour').[64] There is little sense in which this poem could be considered narrative, for nothing really happens; there is no plot, but only a jumble of vague associations. Yet, by nature of being on an aeroplane, Geryon *does* arrive somewhere, and the narrative continues as though by accident: he arrives in Argentina and meets his old lover Herakles. Vehicles are also, throughout *Autobiography of Red*, spaces in which both eros and Carson's lyric sensibility emerges. As he sits in a car with Herakles, for example, Geryon finds himself becoming aroused: 'hot unsorted parts of the question / [lick] up from every crack in Geryon'.[65] Note how desire emerges from the cracks, seeping its way into the text and into Geryon's thoughts in the small distances between things. The car is a space where he and Herakles are 'not touching / but [are] joined in astonishment', like the elements in Carson's hybrid text, crackling with 'astonishment' as they go nowhere and everywhere. Vehicles are also a space in which words are allowed to melt and become plastic: 'the sentences mixed around in Geryon's drifting drowsing head… / …Shiny ropes of old lava / rose and fell in every direction / around the car'.[66] A charged, lyric feeling here seems to melt the narrative and turn it into a liquid, allowing it to run fluidly into the text's other genres.

Both 'Kinds of Water' and *Autobiography of Red* demonstrate how Carson combines lyrical and essayistic movements within a single piece. We also find, in these middle-period works, Carson playing with these patterns as she moves *between* pieces. In *Men in the Off Hours*, for example, she keeps returning to earlier poems and finding them changed: a poem called 'TV Men: Artaud' follows another poem called 'TV Men: Artaud', while multiple other poems appear with the parenthetical subtitles '1st draft', '2nd draft' and so on. These are not conventional redrafts or

[63] Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010), 78; 80.
[64] Ibid., 80; 79.
[65] Ibid., 44.
[66] Ibid., 63.

revisions, but rather whole new poems that share the same title. Each successive 'draft' might be seen as a return to the spirit or idea of the previous poem, with the idea changing through its encounters with other poems in the intervals: note that drafts rarely appear in direct succession. What we have, then, is a kind of formal manifestation, in the sequencing of the poems, of how one thing (one subject, one person, one poem) is changed through an encounter with another, through the revelation of difference, and thus the gap between what one is and what one could be — an idea central to Carson's sense of lyricism. We see this in the repeated drafts of the poem 'Flatman', in which a two-dimensional circus performer is gradually wounded by revelations of the three-dimensional world, in successive redrafts of the poem. The Flatman starts out in an entirely flat space — 'my voice is flat, my walk is flat', 'hands, feet, vowels, hair, shadows, feelings of community, / strings (you do not see) all flat'[67] — a space that can be read as a world without eros, a world without the edges, differences, and doublings of lyric meaning. By the end of the first draft, this world is being intruded on: desire for three-dimensionality cannot be stifled ('*return the ball to me!*') and certain things are too complex, too rich, too musical to flatten ('Not Beethoven — Beethoven I cannot flatten').[68] These intrusions continue, until the Flatman eventually finds himself in the world of the triangulated lyric, where 'barest panoramics imply internal difference':[69] to look outside the self — even just at the 'barest panoramics' of a landscape — reveals internal difference within the self, the gap between what one is and what one could be. To be in the 3D world is to be continually aware of lack and loss, of gaps and differences; to be incomplete; to have one's internal ideas, one's way of organising the world, continually wounded, and thus opened to change ('I do not organize well anymore').[70]

At the same time, the continued 'redrafting' of poems is also highly essayistic, capturing how the essayist proceeds without a plan, revising their ideas as they go, questioning themselves as in a dialogue. For the essayist, not only is each piece of writing only a draft, but each version of the self is also only ever a starting point, to be revised. The act of essaying, drafting, revising, returning to, and refining an idea reveals, in the poems, things which are previously hidden. Again we see this in 'Flatman', with Carson using the practice of essayistic association to continually (and somewhat paradoxically) 'fold' or 'layer' new ideas about flatness into the poem (these standard descriptions of textual richness already contradicting the world of the Flatman and revealing how implicitly three-dimensional our sense of literature is): the flatness of Brechtian theatre; the flattening effect of postmodernism; the idea of the 'straight man' in comedy, whose role it is to

[67] Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, 22.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 25.
[70] Ibid.

emphasise the clown's comedy through their contrastingly 'straight' attitudes. This essaying on flatness is used not to counter but to further the poem's lyricism: indeed, it is these essayistic intrusions that introduce three-dimensionality into the Flatman's world, and thus open him to an awareness of what he lacks, creating the feelings of wounding and loss — 'WHY DID I AWAKE… // lonely among the sleepers'[71] — that imbue the poem, even as it transitions into prose in this final draft, with increasingly powerful lyric feeling. The inspiration for the line, which is spread across the title and the first line of the poem, appears to be Paul Celan's 'All Those Sleep Shapes', as suggested by Carson's comment on said poem in *Economy of the Unlost*: 'because he is awake among the sleepers, Celan begins on the dark side of words "in the language shadow."'"[72] In the Flatman's world there are, initially, no sides, no shadows; but here he is introduced to the shadows of both the physical world, and of language, which in a flat world has only literal meaning, but in a three-dimensional, lyric world means more than it seems to, has shadows or shades of meaning beneath it.

Perhaps the most interesting moments in these books come when Carson combines these two approaches: not merging genres, nor shifting between them, but constructing pieces that contain, within them, several different generic or textual elements, held apart but together. In 'Sumptuous Destitution', two contrasting elements — short lines of heavily enjambed lyric, and a collage of quotations taken from Emily Dickinson's letters — dance around each other, the relation between them at once both lyrical and essayistic:

> 'Sumptuous destitution'
> *Your opinion gives me a serious feeling: I would like to be what you deem me.*
> (Emily Dickinson letter 319 to Thomas Higginson)
>
> is a phrase
> *You see my position is benighted.*
> (Emily Dickinson letter 268 to Thomas Higginson)
>
> scholars use
> *She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview.*
> (Thomas Higginson letter 342a to Emily Dickinson)[73]

[71] Ibid., 48.

[72] Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 70.

[73] Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, 13.

The quotations here interrupt the movement of the sentence of the poem, recalling Carson's claim in *Short Talks* that one can 'never impede movement harshly enough'. The poem thus enters into a kind of dialectic relationship with the quotations, mirroring the contradiction in the title of the poem itself. Across the jumps from the end of a quotation to the start of the next line of the poem, we move from 'benighted' to 'scholars', and later from 'silence' to 'rushing', and 'female' to 'God', the new line, in each case, picking up an opposite idea, a Socratic countering which propels the poem forward (though note, too, how it is never a *direct* reversal, never a one-eighty bounce-back to where we started, but always a contrasting idea that takes us somewhere new — not 'benighted' to 'enlightened' but to 'scholars'; not 'female' to 'male' but to 'God' — something emphasised by the shift in word-type in each case, from adjective to noun, or noun to verb). The gathering of the quotations together is also essayistic, recalling the collage of the commonplace book, and the idea of the essay showing its working; there is a sense of gathering up loose threads, without necessarily tying them together, one which we find throughout *Men in the Off Hours*: note how it is the 'little dropped comments' people made after George Eliot's death that are 'saddest of all' in the poem 'A Station'.[74] Yet, though there is something tangibly essayistic about the poem, it remains nonetheless unclear which part of it is the essay, and which the lyric; the two categories are kept in an unresolved tension. For the quotes, as much as they act as oblique comments on each line of the poem, are also commented on, as a whole, by the poem itself, which runs like a thread or rope down the left margin: "'Sumptuous destitution" / is a phrase / scholars use / of female / silence. / Save what you can, Emily. / Save every bit of thread. / One of them may be / the way out of here'. Each part, then, essays on the other. Furthermore, the attribution of the quote acts as a third textual element on the page; justified to the right, with the short lines on the left and the fairly long quotes, although justified left, stretching well into the middle of the page, it not only creates a triangular shape on the physical page but also suggests the quotes themselves as a kind of boundary or barrier between the poet on the one side and Dickinson and Higginson on the other. This least lyrical of elements, the attributions, turns out to be central to the lyrical effect with which the poem's different elements interact.

As though extending this latter idea, we find a similar trick throughout Carson's next book, *The Beauty of the Husband*, a long sequence on the dissolution of her first marriage, in which even the most lyrical, feeling-driven poems are held in a dynamic relation to two other textual elements, accompanying each poem: an epigraph from Keats, and an oblique, all caps statement that functions as a title. Many of the poems themselves find Carson at her most erotic, as well as her

[74] Ibid., 23.

most conventionally lyrical, as when she describes, in 'Tango VI', crushing wine grapes barefoot:

> You cannot imagine the feeling if you have never done it —
> like hard bulbs of wet red satin exploding under your feet,
> between your toes and up your legs arms face splashing everywhere…
> [He] Ran out and got more dregs in his hands and smeared
> it on my knees neck belly licking. Plucking. Diving.[75]

There is nothing that is essayistic about this poem. It takes us to a sensuous union of sound and meaning: 'hard bulbs of wet red satin', 'sticky stains, skin', 'licking. Plucking. Diving'. Yet when we consider the two other textual elements accompanying it, the picture becomes more complex:

> purple slaughter-house where Bacchus' self
> Pricked his own swollen veins!
>
> …
>
> VI. TO CLEAN YOUR HOOVES HERE IS A DANCE IN HONOR OF THE GRAPE WHICH THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAS BEEN A SYMBOL OF REVELRY AND JOY NOT TO SAY ANALOGY FOR THE BRIDE AS UNCUT BLOSSOM[76]

We have here a kind of title, albeit an unusual one, printed in capitals at the top of the poem, as well as a quotation from Keats's *Otho the Great*, printed on the page before. What relation do these three textual elements, poem, title, and epigraph, have to each other? On the one hand, they feel like decidedly essayistic additions, readable perhaps as the workings out of the poem, the materials of it, left behind in the text. Like the Dickinson quotes in 'Sumptuous Destitution', the extracts from Keats are the poem's source text, one of its inspirations, as we see in the direct connection between the image of Bacchus the wine god, with his 'purple slaughter-house', and the description in the poem that follows of exploding wine grapes. The connection is, of course, also symbolic: Bacchus represents fertility, religious ecstasy, and ritual madness, all of which can be sensed in the poem that follows. The title, meanwhile, acts as a hinge connecting inspiration to poem, providing an exegesis of both simultaneously, decoding and contextualising the symbolism of the grapes. Yet as in 'Sumptuous Destitution', it is not quite clear which element is essaying on which here: is the poem essaying on the quotation from Keats, or the capitalised prose essaying on the poem, or do

[75] Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (Toronto: Vintage, 2002), 29.
[76] Ibid., 27; 29.

the patchwork of Keats quotations form a kind of essay themselves? Though less precisely lyrical than the triangulated address we find in the poems themselves, there is a kind of triangle of essaying going on, with each element essaying on the previous, forming a network of thinking we can follow around repeatedly. Furthermore, we might say that the three elements are held in a delayed relation to each other: the epigraphs' connection to what follows is literally delayed by the turning of the page, making them at once both separate from, and connected to, the poems that follow. The title, meanwhile, acts as the boundary between the first and third element, the boundary which both connects and divides, and which is, in Carson, always the most lyrically and erotically charged point. They are 'the third component [which] plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros'; the 'screens' on which the epigraphs are projected back, reflecting off the poems, 'in a kind of stereoscopy'.[77]

There is both essay and lyric, then, in this play of textual elements on the page. There is also play here with the idea of the lyric as oral and the essay as written. In comparison to the poem itself, which begs to be read aloud, to become pure and sensuous sound, the other two elements feel far more shackled to the page, printed and textual. The epigraphs, as quotations, each marked with their sources, point outwards to other texts, and thus to the process of text-making and text-reading, to cutting and pasting, and thus to essay, as well as to the construction of the poem itself as a text which can be mined, extracted, excerpted. Furthering this sense, they are mostly drawn from obscure texts such as Keats's annotations to *Paradise Lost* or his pencilled edits to his own *Otho the Great*, what Eric Walker calls 'off-the-road Keats', rather than his more well-known, and more lyrical, odes.[78] That is, not only do the quotations act as marginalia to the poems, but they are themselves, often, marginalia, the same thing Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims of the essay form itself: 'the essay is all margin, marginalia, and interstitial writing'.[79] They assert themselves as written text: Tango XV's reads, in full, 'She] *written over* {He}', while several others make mention of the medium of writing itself: a 'faint mark' or 'slip of the pen', a line 'altered in pencil'.[80] The titles assert the same conscious textuality with their obtrusive, almost ostentatious capitalisation: they hit us, firstly, as text, as typed characters. Yet there is also something erotic and sensual about such writing, which causes it to be an appropriate site for lyric. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson notes that the first poets of eros were also the first poets to write their poems down, noting that such an act separates the poet from their audience, and that such separation is a site for eros: 'As eros insists

[77] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 16; 17.
[78] Eric C. Walker, 'The Muse of Indifference', *PMLA* 120, no. 1 (2005): 211.
[79] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'F-Words: An Essay on the Essay', *American Literature* 68, no. 1 (1996): 20.
[80] Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 63; 103; 43.

upon the edges of human beings and of the spaces between them, the written consonant imposes edge on the sounds of human speech and insists on the reality of that edge'.[81] These solid lines of text — made more solid by their capitalisation — assert the boundary between epigraph and poem, between essayistic material and lyrical material, the impossibility of the two completely merging in union. To read the poem requires we attempt to penetrate that boundary, to hold the epigraph in our head as we turn the page to read the poem, while knowing we can never fully do so. The pain of separation is written into the structure of the book itself.

As well as combining in the play of textual elements on the page, the lyric and essay also meet in *Beauty*'s mingling of lyrical and essayistic address. In 'Tango XII', Carson plays with both forms of address by explicitly inviting the reader, addressed in the second person, to eavesdrop on the conversation between her and her husband:

> You want to see how things were going from the husband's point of view —
> let's go round the back,
> there stands the wife
> gripping herself at the elbows and facing the husband[82]

Carson here uses the direct, intimate address of the familiar essay to position the reader as the overhearing lyric reader that we saw in Mill. Following this opening, the reader is then ignored, with no further direct address; instead, the wife and husband have a dialogue, on which we eavesdrop. Yet the wife does not talk in this 'dialogue': her lines are just the word 'Watching', the repetition of the word bringing the reader's attention to their own attention, as well as recalling Carson's attraction to Emily Brontë's acts of 'whaching' [sic] in 'The Glass Essay'. On the one hand, then, our own distance from the action is foregrounded — we are apart, watching — just as the distance between the couple is exposed ('What will she do after I go? he wonders. Her evening. It closed his breath').[83] We feel the one coursing through the other. On the other hand, the fact that both reader and wife are 'watching' the action, as though from outside it (like Dickinson outside her windows) creates a sense of closeness between the two. Note, too, the subtle shift from 'you' to 'us', hidden in the contraction 'let's' — an implicit understanding that direct address invites the reader into communion with the poet, so that the two become 'us', closing down the distance between writer and reader, inviting them into the same shared space. We seem to be both inside and outside the events of the poem. As in Sappho, the poem presents distance and

[81] Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, 55.
[82] Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 53.
[83] Ibid.

connection as, paradoxically, two sides of the same coin, as in the poem's most cutting, truthful observation: 'If I could kill you I would then have to make another exactly like you. / Why. / To tell it to'.[84] Though there is direct address, and though the reader is acknowledged, this only reinforces the sense of the address as triangulated. All of the elements of Carson's triangle of desire are in full force here, moving like volts around multiple, overlapping triangles: between reader (overhearer), husband and wife (the two figures overheard in the scene); between the poet-speaker, the wife (who is, we understand, also the poet, but another past version of the poet, who in recounting these events reveals the gap between who she was then and who she is now) and the husband; and between the poet, the wife, and the reader, as the former reveals to the latter who she was and who she is.

Throughout her middle-period works, Carson plays with such combinations of the lyric and essay forms: sometimes letting them fall into step, like walking pilgrims; sometimes cramming them together in a hot car; sometimes dancing between their different modes of address, like two tangoing lovers. She rearranges their figures, revealing their shapes from new angles, as captured in the continual motifs of turning, folding, and otherwise manipulating shapes in *Beauty*: from the poet's early remark that she can 'rotate the husband and reveal a hidden side', to the book's closing line, 'watch me fold this page now so you think it is you'.[85] That presence of a folded page, at the very end of the book, hints, however, at how Carson is also ready to move beyond this dance of lyric and essay. Both *Men in the Off Hours* and *Beauty of the Husband* respond well, still, to being read as lyric essay; but they also hint at a new approach, one that moves beyond the lyric essay towards something even more expanded and exploded. I want to close, now, by briefly considering how, in the books she has published since the start of the millennium, Carson has become increasingly formally adventurous, to the point that the lyric essay stops being a useful lens through which to approach her work.

Three, No Four

> Inasmuch as we are now entering upon the fourth part of a three-part essay, we should brace ourselves for some inconsequentiality.[86]

So begins the fourth part of 'Decreation', the title essay from the collection of same name, an essay

[84] Ibid., 54. Continuing the connection to Sappho, note how, as we are presented with this paradox, the poem again expresses wounding ('it stung him'; 'pain rested [on them]') and the continual movement of desire, like volts around the triangle ('beauty does not rest').

[85] Ibid., 19; 145.

[86] Carson, *Decreation*, 171.

which begins 'This is an essay about three women and will have three parts'.[87] It is a trick we find repeated throughout Carson's later books. This movement — the suggestion of three things, and then the unexpected introduction of a fourth — is, I want to argue, one way in which Carson's poetry moves beyond the dance of lyric and essay towards something more scattered, diffuse, and spatially expansive, culminating in the exploded forms of *NOX* (2010) and *Float* (2016), in which she is, in her own words, '[t]aking the page of words and unfolding it at angles… [e]xploding it'.[88]

The first time we see this movement from three to four in Carson is in 'Essay on What I Think About Most', from *Men in the Off Hours*. The form of the piece is already fairly unstable, and difficult to get a reading on: it is an 'essay' presented as a poem, in uneven sestets, yet the line breaks could easily be removed and it would read as prose. Most of the poem is taken up with an 'error of arithmetic' made in a fragment of ancient Greek lyric by Alkman, who writes that an unknown someone (a god, presumably) made three seasons, before going on to describe, in the poem, four. Carson playfully states that 'there are three things I like about Alkman's poem', leaving a long enough gap after listing the third to make the joke land when it hits: 'the fourth thing I like / about Alkman's poem…'.[89] But while one reason for this manoeuvre is to wittily riff on the pattern in her source material, there is a deeper comment being made here, too, about the value of errors and mistakes. This, after all, is the poet's answer to the question posed by its title: what Carson thinks about most is 'Error. / And its emotions'.[90] The idea of error reappears at the poem's conclusion:

> what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
> the wilful creation of error,
> the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
> out of which may arise
> unexpectedness[91]

The breaking of the pattern of three can be read, in light of this, as a way of introducing this quality of 'unexpectedness', by means of a mathematical error. To simply have four things would not do this, but to suggest three and *then* add in a fourth implies the breaking out of an established shape. The sudden introduction of a fourth point disrupts the now familiar triangular pattern we find throughout her work, breaking it open and allowing in 'the wilful creation of error'. This 'three,

[87] Ibid., 157.
[88] Anne Carson, 'Collaborating on *Decreation*', interview by Peter Streckfus, in Wilkinson, *Ecstatic Lyre*, 221.
[89] Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, 33-34.
[90] Ibid., 30.
[91] Ibid., 35.

no four' manoeuvre occurs again in *Beauty of the Husband*, notably in the fourth poem, 'Tango IV'. The poet quotes a letter from her husband, sent after their divorce, in which he writes of the 'deep sadness between' the two ex-lovers. The source of this sadness, the husband suggests, emerges in the gap 'between' them; sadness here is behaving like eros, and might be thought of as the other side of eros, after it has cooled; as that which moves between ex-lovers, rather than aspiring lovers. We have a kind of cooled triangle of desire suggested here, perhaps a slowed down one, on which the volts only sluggishly move. Carson then provides her own commentary on the letter, in which she again pulls off the move of suggesting three things, before introducing a fourth:

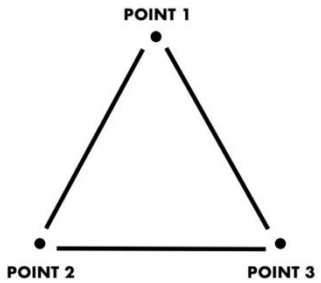
> There are three things to notice about this letter.
>
> First
> its symmetry.
> *Make me cry… You make me cry.*
> Second
> its casuistry:
> cosmological motifs, fire and water, placed right before talk of love
> to ground it in associations of primordial eros and strife.
> Third no return address.
> I cannot answer. He wants no answer. What does he want.
> Four things.
> But from the fourth I flee
> chaste and craftily.[92]

The fourth thing here is not given. Whatever it is, it is too painful for the poet to state directly: she flees from it. The error thus again introduces unexpectedness. It reintroduces the wounding that seems to have gone from their relationship. For though desire pierces and wounds, it is also always pleasurable; the lover can become addicted to their desire, dependent on it, luxuriating in the lack it reveals rather than turning their desire to other objects and thus revealing new lacks (and thus avoiding the pain that comes with the revelation of lack). Unless kept mobile, desire ceases to function to bring us outside ourselves. The lover becomes like an unadventurous reader, addicted to re-reading the same story over and over, staying in the space of the page rather than taking on the wounds of the story and bringing them out into the real world. One senses, in her late work,

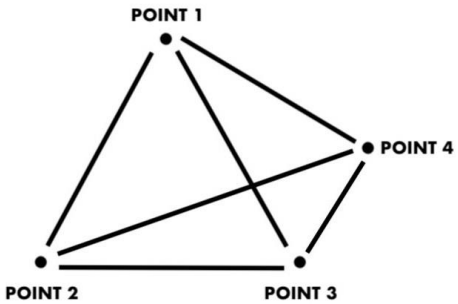
[92] Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 20.

that Carson begins to feel the same about the forms of the essay and the lyric: that though mobile and changeable, they had begun to become a safe, unadventurous space, one that needed bursting open.

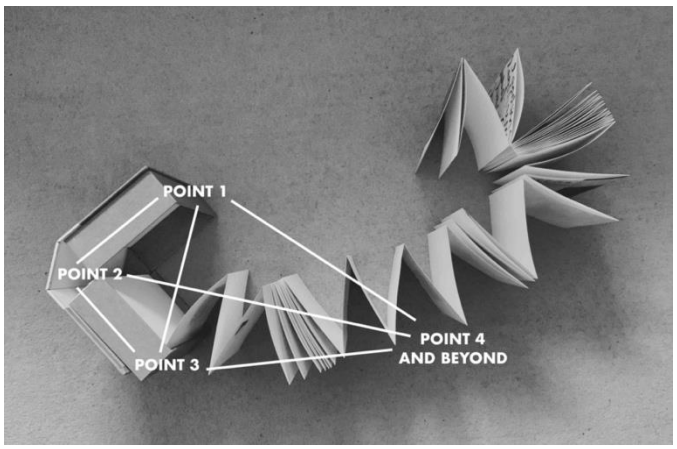
For Carson, I want to argue, performs something akin to this same spatial trick in her late work, breaking it away from the triangular movement of the lyric (as well as the dialectical movement of the essay) and introducing new jolts of unexpectedness, causing it to spill out in multiple directions at once. I suggested in my analysis of 'Flatman' that Carson is interested in making work that is three-dimensional, and that she uses the pattern of three, uncovered initially in *Eros the Bittersweet*, to suggest this. But a triangle, of course, remains a two-dimensional shape: she remains, even in the most formally inventive pieces in *Men in the Off Hours* or *Decreation*, shackled to the flat space of the page. In the pattern of 'three, no four', however — a pattern she initially discovers in these 'flat' works — she finds a new way of moving forward, a new pattern to apply in late works such as *NOX* and *Float*, one which transforms the spatial metaphor of the triangle into something truly three-dimensional. In Carson's original metaphor, there are three points: in Sappho's poem these are the lover, the beloved, and the lack revealed by the distance between them, but as we have seen, the three points can be mapped onto almost anything. If we connect these three points, we get a two-dimensional triangle:



However, if we introduce a fourth point, as Carson does in the examples discussed above, then connect this fourth point back to the original three points, we get, instead, a three-dimensional pyramid:



By suggesting three, then revealing four, Carson performs a spatial trick where she *appears* to show us a flat triangle, then has us sidestep to see the triangle extend back into three-dimensional space and take on depth. In doing so, she playfully suggests an extension of the flat reading space mapped out in *Eros the Bittersweet* and hints at the physical act of reading the book itself. Carson here is trying to get beyond the triangular figure of desire which has shaped so much of her work, and see what is behind it or beyond it. This extension of space is dramatised in the physical form of her book *NOX*, the pages of which spill out from the triangular shape suggested by its box, extending out towards a fourth point:



To return again to the equation of the triangle with Carson's recurring motif of the volcano, we might envisage this late work as the moment the volcano erupts; *NOX*'s concertinaing pages are like a spew of lava laying waste to Carson's previously triangular patterns. *Float*, meanwhile, explodes the triangle entirely, each section of the book physically separate from the others, in the style of B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*. Even *Red Doc>*, a late work which is relatively conventional in its form in comparison to *NOX* and *Float*, suggests a kind of extension out of the physical book through the '>' that emerges out of its title.

It is, perhaps, possible to view this bursting open of the pattern of three as a movement away from the lyric but towards the essay; towards, at least, that second kind of essay we have been thinking about: the free, unrestricted essay, which we might envisage as moving in four or more directions. To move in four directions is, metaphorically if not literally, to move in *all* directions: north, south, east, west. The essay, which is sometimes called the 'fourth genre', is from its inception a genre which moves in more than one direction simultaneously, immediately being taken in opposite directions by Bacon and Montaigne. As it has developed, it has become so many different things, taken on so many different qualities, that we might see it as omnidirectional. As well as a form itself, it is invoked as a license to move beyond form, beyond any particular pattern

of movement, by writers who wish to move in new ways. Yet the *physical* breaking away from the patterns which have so defined her work, and the literal expansion of her books, like an erupting volcano, into a new dimension, suggests a desire to go further than this, I think. It suggests that even the free license of the unrestricted essay has become too limiting a form, for Carson, shackled as it is to the page; indeed, her recent *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (2019) was written explicitly for performance, intended from its beginnings to inhabit three-dimensional space. The publications of *NOX* and *Float* are the moment at which the lyric essay handle starts to break down as a useful descriptor of Carson's work. It is the moment we find her not just going to another kind of lyric, or another kind of essay, but attempting to get beyond form, and beyond category, altogether.

CHAPTER FOUR

Maggie Nelson

The weakness of our condition makes it impossible for things to come into our existence in their natural simplicity and purity. The elements that we enjoy are corrupted.
— Montaigne, 'We Taste Nothing Pure'

The Reluctant Inheritor of a New Tradition

Up until now, I have mostly been applying the lyric essay, as a mode of reading, to work which pre-dates its christening in 1997 by Tall and D'Agata. Though both Carson and, to a lesser extent, Dillard have continued to publish since 1997, including work that responds well to being read as lyric essay (as we saw with Carson's *Men in the Off Hours* and *The Beauty of the Husband* in the previous chapter), their work can generally be seen as coming 'before' the lyric essay's creation, as a category, in that their experiments in combining lyric and essay predate the widespread use of the term, and are, furthermore, examples of the very work to which the term was itself a response. In contrast, the subjects of my next two chapters, Maggie Nelson and Claudia Rankine, can be seen as coming 'after' the lyric essay. Nelson published her first book, *Shiner*, in 2001, and while Rankine had published poetry before 1997, we do not find her combining it with the essay form until 2004's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*.

Nelson's work, in particular, finds many of the ideas I explored in my first three chapters coalescing, and displays specific influences from Dillard, Carson, and D'Agata. Nelson was taught at Wesleyan University by Dillard, whom she describes as her 'mentor' and her 'first writing teacher, whose influence on me abides';[1] she lists Dillard's *For the Time Being* as one of her ten best-loved books, while the title for Nelson's *Something Bright, Then Holes* (2007) has its source in Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.[2] In particular, she takes from Dillard a desire to avoid the active pursuit of meaning, instead allowing it to accrue as though on its own terms, a Dillardesque principle she

Epigraph: Michel de Montaigne, 'We Taste Nothing Pure', *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Everyman's Library, 2003), 619.

[1] Maggie Nelson, 'What's Queer Form Anyway? An Interview with Maggie Nelson', interview by Annie DeWitt, *Paris Review*, 14 June 2018, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/14/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson; Maggie Nelson, 'The Rumpus Interview with Maggie Nelson', interview by Darcey Steinke, *Rumpus*, 6 May 2015, https://therumpus.net/2015/05/the-rumpus-interview-with-maggie-nelson.

[2] Maggie Nelson, 'My 10 Favorite Books: Maggie Nelson', *New York Times*, 7 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/t-magazine/entertainment/maggie-nelson-favorite-books.html; Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 28. Dillard discusses a newly-sighted blind-born child seeing their hands for the first time and describing them as 'something bright and then holes'.

translates into her own Nelsonese as 'you can't fuck up the space for God'.[3] Anne Carson, meanwhile, inspired the title for *The Red Parts* (2007), and Nelson has expressed her admiration for Carson on numerous occasions, writing that her 'uncommon parallels' are a 'glorious reminder of how much novelty and invention can be found in connection', and elsewhere admiring how Carson's 'spectacular melding of literary criticism, scholarship, poetry, and prose', along with her 'refusal to get worked up over ultraserious notions of literary value', has given her 'an enormous liberated space from which to work'.[4]

That mention of 'space', in her descriptions of both authors' work, gives a sense of how these lyric essay foremothers — like the 'many gendered-mothers of the heart' she describes in *The Argonauts*[5] (2015) — opened up a gap or a territory in which Nelson felt able to write, a sense of finding one's space which chimes with many other writers' comments on their attraction to the lyric essay term, as well as with Tall and D'Agata's original mission for it.[6] Indeed, D'Agata himself is another important, albeit more contentious, influence on Nelson: she praises his *Lifespan of a Fact* as 'provocative, maddening and compulsively readable', and D'Agata himself thanks her in the acknowledgements of his anthology trilogy, where he lists her as one of his 'friends and colleagues'; yet she also dismisses the D'Agata-led debate around facts as 'miss[ing] all the action'.[7] Nonetheless, these debates have clearly impacted her work, with texts like *Jane: A Murder* (2005) and *The Red Parts*, her first forays into the lyric essay form, explicitly engaging with questions of fact, interpretation, and truth. Overall, then, there is a clear sense in which Nelson comes in the wake of the lyric essay, rather than in anticipation of it. To read her as a lyric essayist, therefore, is different than reading Carson or Dillard as such: it is not a retrospective application of a mode of reading but a contemporaneous one, using a category the writer is themselves aware of as a potential lens through which they may be read. Nelson provides, to some extent, our first example

[3] Nelson, 'Rumpus Interview'.

[4] Maggie Nelson, 'Q&A: Sasha Frere-Jones and Maggie Nelson Discuss Writing and Form', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 March 2016, https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-sasha-frere-jones-maggie-nelson-q-a-20160307-story.html; Maggie Nelson, 'All That Is the Case: Some Thoughts on Fact in Nonfiction and Documentary Poetry', in *Lit from Within: Contemporary Masters on the Art and Craft of Writing*, ed. Kevin Haworth and Dinty W. Moore (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 160; Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007).

[5] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2016), 57. Note that the hyphen does not sit between 'many' and 'gendered' (which would suggest a multiplicity of genders) but between 'gendered' and 'mothers', suggesting that in her taking influence from them, Nelson genders these people *as* 'mothers', as maternal figures.

[6] See, for example: Amy Bonnaffons, 'Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay', *Essay Review*, 2016, http://theessayreview.org/bodies-of-text-on-the-lyric-essay; Mary Heather Noble, 'On the Lyric Essay', *Mary Heather Noble* (blog), 5 January 2014, http://www.maryheathernoble.com/on-the-lyric-essay.

[7] John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (London: Quercus, 2019), cover; John D'Agata, 'A New History of the Essay' (PDF), online supplement to *The Next American Essay* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003), https://www.graywolfpress.org/sites/default/files/NewHistoryoftheEssay.pdf, 41; Maggie Nelson, '2012 Contest: An Interview with Nonfiction Judge Maggie Nelson', interview by Barry Grass, *Black Warrior Review*, 31 July 2012, https://bwr.ua.edu/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson-judge-of-bwrs-2012-nonfiction-contest.

of someone writing *within* the now-identified space of 'the lyric essay', a writer in whom the tendencies of D'Agata, Dillard, and Carson coalesce.

Yet Nelson herself would surely balk at such a description, at being positioned as a site of cohesion, as emblematic of and central to a category — for her writing is defiantly and deliberately anti-categorical. Declaring for herself, in *The Argonauts*, the totem animal of the otter, Nelson writes in a way which is continually slippery, which extends the essay's own anti-categorical impulse by combining it with the lyric's impulse towards the slippage of language.[8] Her books often feature the movement of a particular term or idea across categories: the diffuse meanings of red and blue in *The Red Parts* and *Bluets* (2009) respectively, bleeding like coloured dyes into different contexts; her circling around the twin nouns of her title in *The Art of Cruelty* (2011); the shifting use of the Argo metaphor, itself a metaphor for change, in *The Argonauts*; the consideration, in her recent *On Freedom* (2021), of the malleable meanings of 'freedom' in the twenty-first century. These are books which are *about* diversity, as well as being, themselves, diverse in subject and form. They explore how language refuses to play by the rules of category, for the signifier always points to places other than the signified, always introduces unintended meanings from outside contexts, and thus degrees of abjection and impurity. This slippery play of the signifier is what makes Nelson's essays lyric, continually unsettling the essay form and overwhelming any loyalty to fact, knowledge, or interpretation that it might otherwise display.

The irony, then, is this: that the category of lyric essay, as a modern mode of *writing*, is most detectable in one of its most anti-categorical practitioners; that it coheres, as an idea, in a writer who herself refuses to cohere. It is perhaps no surprise to find that Nelson herself resists the term. 'The words,' she says, 'kind of bug me. They make it sound like the pieces have to be self-contained and pretty, song-like. Whereas some of the work I like the most is more chafing, awkward—ugly, even'.[9] Her objection is, I would argue, based on an overly limited view of what it means to call the essay lyric, but it is revealing of her own aims. Though Nelson brings together poetry and essay, she does not do so to make her writing more beautiful ('pretty') or musical ('song-like') — and not, despite the influence of Dillard, to bring it closer to transcendence — but to make it uglier and more impure. The lyric poet in her continually develops non-rational structures of thought via language which cuts against the rational, essayistic structure of her arguments, taking her essays away from safety and towards danger. That is, she uses what Frye calls the lyric's 'babble', its prioritisation of and pleasure in the sounds of language, in order to introduce

[8] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 112. One wonders if, given Dillard's own love of the weasel, Nelson's choosing a fellow mustelid here as her totem animal is a subtle nod to her mentor.

[9] Nelson, '2012 Contest'.

dangerous ideas into her otherwise rational essays, threatening to travel, via this babbling, from bluets to bullets in *Bluets*, or from anal sex to the anus of her child, in the opening pages of *The Argonauts*. Her writing refuses to keep things separate which either taste, tradition, or form would keep separate: sex and motherhood, art and theory, violence and love. This continual refusal is what connects her otherwise disparate, non-repetitive works, and it is the ability of the lyric essay to make manifest this refusal that continually attracts her to different permutations of the form. To read her as a lyric essayist, then, is not to put her in a category, but to highlight how she uses the interplay of lyric and essay to resist categories — the 'woman', the 'mother', the 'theorist', the 'depressed person' — across her work. Or rather, it is, paradoxically, to do both.

This ability of the lyric to introduce discrepancies and perversities into the essay also reveals to us the lyric essay's potential queerness. 'Queer', coming from the German word *quer* meaning 'oblique, perverse', is a guiding concept for Nelson, a word she claims in *The Argonauts*, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is itself impossible to pin down, containing 'all kinds of resistances and fracturings and mismatches that have little or nothing to do with sexual orientation'.[10] Lyric language queers the essay by introducing these fracturings and mismatches — or rather, it extends a queerness which is already inherent in the essay, in its lability, its 'resistance to stability', and 'the way it signifies its refusals, its openness, its difference', as well as its delight in 'following its own carnivalesque rules' and embracing the 'cheerfully perverse and multi-coloured'.[11] These descriptions of the essay hew close to the aspects of 'camp' taste drawn out by Fabio Cleto: its complexity, its excess, and its lack of a stabilising core; its 'heterogeneity, and *gratuitousness* of reference'; how it 'challenges the cultural imperatives that rely on the manageability of *discrete* (distinct and docile) historical and aesthetic categories'.[12] These are all qualities of the essay Nelson draws out further using the lyric. Taking from Sedgwick the manta of 'pluralize and specify' — an idea she also finds in Barthes's call to 'pluralize, refine, continuously' — she uses the lyric to *smear* the essay without *blurring* it, without it losing its characteristic specificity.[13] That is, she spreads her ideas across diverse contexts, staining and sullying them, while remaining exact

[10] Francesca Rendle-Short, 'Essay (Queer). The. Essay. Queer. And. All. That', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* 21, no. 39 (April 2017): 7; Nelson, *Argonauts*, 28-29.

[11] David Lazar, 'Queering the Essay', *Essay Review*, 2013, http://theessayreview.org/queering-the-essay; David Carlin, 'The Essay in the Anthropocene: Towards Entangled Nonfiction', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* 21, no. 39 (April 2017): 4.

[12] Fabio Cleto, 'Introduction: Queering the Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 3. Camp's slipperiness as a term extends to its various grammatical uses: it can be used as an adjective, an abstract or adjectival noun, an adverb, a transitive or intransitive verb, as well as variously capitalised or made lowercase. There is a parallel, here, with swear words — the ultimate example of this grammatical polyvalence, where there is no inherent meaning, just explosive semantic force, like little mines dotted through a sentence. Camp, too, is a four-letter word.

[13] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 62.

and exacting in her thinking. Wayne Koestenbaum, whom Nelson met and befriended while studying at City University of New York, is another touchstone here, with Nelson seeing both her and Koestenbaum as part of a 'philosophically inclined subset of body-smeared literature', a phrase the latter came up with in response to Hervé Guibert, and which suggests the gleeful and perverse delight these writers take in bringing together the cerebral with the corporeal.[14] 'Body-smeared' also hints at both writers' interest in exploring bodily taboos and feelings of shame. Delight and shame are not antithetical emotions for Nelson. As Sedgwick argues, feelings of shame and abjection have their source in pleasure: 'without positive affect, there can be no shame: only a scene that offers you enjoyment or engages your interest can make you blush. Similarly, only something you thought might delight or satisfy can disgust'.[15] Nelson puts this delight back into disgust. The embrace of kitsch, gossip and sexual frankness in writers like Kathy Acker, Chris Kraus and Eileen Myles is also influential here, with Nelson admiring the latter for her 'active disobedience to categories' and her 'rooted[ness] in bodily presence, in the force and rhythm of her own particular body', an influence detectable in *The Argonauts*'s descriptions of Nelson and Harry's changing bodies.[16]

More broadly, Nelson follows not only Koestenbaum but also Anne Carson and the Barthes of *A Lover's Discourse* in resisting the partitioning off of theory from life, literature, and feeling. Theory, for her, is something to love, desire, touch; like Susan Sontag did with art, she seeks not a 'hermeneutics', but an 'erotics' of it.[17] This is part of a wider resistance, which we see throughout her work, to the partitioning off of knowledge into discrete categories: theoretical and actual, intellectual and bodily, polluting and redeeming. The idea of the essay as anti-*discrete* (in both senses of the word, because it is also an airing of privacy, right from Montaigne inviting us

[14] Hilton Als, 'Immediate Family', *New Yorker* 92, no. 10 (18 April 2016): 33; Nelson, 'Q&A'.

[15] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Queer Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 116.

[16] Nelson, *True Abstractions*, 215; 171. All three writers are associated with the New Narrative, and it is perhaps in Nelson's work where we see most clearly the influence of this movement on the lyric essay — a topic which would be fruitful for further study. Bob Glück, in his 'Long Note on the New Narrative' (in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, ed. Mary Burger et al., Coach House Books, 2010) writes of how he and Bruce Boone, the movement's forefathers, desired to bring 'high and low together between the covers of a book, mingling essay, lyric and story' (29); the essay and the lyric are thus specifically identified as two of the genres that New Narrative writers were interested in combining. Both, moreover, share what Glück calls an interest in 'the pleasures and politics of the fragment' (29). Yet the influence is political as much as it is formal. The New Narrative provided an extended model of how to think progressively and provocatively, within the genres of lyric and essay (as well as narrative forms like the novel), about race and gender, one that suggested how the essay might get away from its polite, genteel, belletristic leanings towards something more radical. 'The question', write Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian in their introduction to *Writers Who Love Too Much* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2017), 'was how to reproduce the sensations of ordinary life while subverting the totalizing narrative that had stymied and withered our lives, and had reduced the world to a patchwork of colored squares on a globe' (ix) — a question clearly on the minds, too, of writers like Nelson and Rankine, who share the movement's 'urge to turn the private into the public, and vice versa, ever questioning where does the self end, the social begin' (xi).

[17] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 14.

to sit down with him, as Hazlitt remarked, 'in his gown and slippers')[18] is a particularly useful one to bring to bear on Nelson, for whom discreteness is always something to be resisted. Describing in *The Argonauts* the presence of sexual feelings while breastfeeding, she writes:

> But how can it be a mix-up, if it's the same hormones? How does one go about partitioning one sexual feeling off from another, presumably more 'real' sexual feeling? Or, more to the point, why the partition? It isn't *like* a love affair. It *is* a love affair.
>
> Or rather, it is romantic, erotic, and consuming — but without tentacles. I have my baby, and my baby has me. It is a buoyant eros, an eros without teleology.[19]

Such prose shows Nelson resisting the discrete on multiple levels. Carefully dismantling assumptions ('it isn't *like*… it *is*…') and qualifying her thoughts in real time ('or rather…', 'but…'), she resists making one part of her thought process discrete from another. The process of thinking moves *across* and *back* to ideas, rather than progressing linearly; note how the chiasmus in the penultimate sentence resists putting either the baby or the mother first. She also resists the 'partitioning' of different sexual feelings as discrete categories, reconfiguring the connection between erotic and motherly love not as simile (*like*) but as metaphor (*is*). As such, she resists the one kind of discretion that the essay *has* traditionally fostered — 'discretion' as 'good taste', manners, refined judgement — by breaking the taboo of associating breastfeeding with sexual pleasure. Instead, she takes from the essay its love of impurity, writing elsewhere of her admiration for Montaigne's 'We Taste Nothing Pure', and how it 'instantly reminded [her] of breast-feeding, which often has a sentimental aura of "purity" wafting around it, whereas it is really ground zero for the hot problem of contaminated nourishment'.[20] For Nelson, the essay is a place to explore how 'nourishing of all kinds must get done by and for real people who are blessedly impure, corrupt, laced with all the ambivalences and melancholias and joys that Montaigne here describes'.[21]

The lyric, then, is Nelson's method of extending the qualities she already finds appealing in the essay: its queerness, its anti-categorical impulse, and its resistance to the discrete.

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[18] William Hazlitt, 'On the Tatler', *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), 4:7.

[19] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 44.

[20] Maggie Nelson, 'We Can Savour Nothing Pure', in *After Montaigne: Contemporary Essayists Cover the Essays*, ed. David Lazar and Patrick Madden (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 223.

[21] Ibid.

Throughout this chapter, I explore how she does this. Beginning with Nelson's first foray into the prose essay, 2007's *The Red Parts*, I show how she resists 'categorical certainty' — not only the apparent infallibility of facts, but also the reassurances of classificatory exactness — by travelling metaphorically through the many meanings of her title, a phrase which itself can be read as indicating both facts and interpretations. I then turn to 2009's *Bluets*, showing how the book gestures towards classically essayistic structures, then subverts these through a lyric prose that draws from the symbolism of Mallarmé, as well as her own background as a poet. Finally, I come to the most famous and successful of Nelson's works, as well as her queerest and most anti-discrete essay, 2015's *The Argonauts*, to explore how Nelson adapts these techniques to queer the idea of motherhood. Taking its title from Barthes, *The Argonauts* finds Nelson most fully embracing the idea that the lyric essay can be an abject, unpleasant form, rather than the 'pretty' lyric essays she explicitly claims to dislike.

Indeed, of all the influences on Nelson, Barthes is perhaps the most useful for understanding the particular way in which Nelson lyricises the essay. In a recent study of Barthes's attraction to the essay form, Neil Badminton argues that Barthes found, in the essay, two opposite qualities. On the one hand, its associative, connection-sparking mode provided an answer to the problem raised by Saussurean semiotics, that meaning 'does not exist in isolation' but 'depends on difference… within a larger signifying system', and thus, in Barthes's own words, 'a meaning can never be analyzed in an isolated fashion'.[22] The lightness and responsiveness of the essay, in which meaning 'keeps on coming, keeps on going', allowed Barthes to respond to this always-spreading quality of meaning; as did, somewhat paradoxically, the fact that, as Réda Bensmaïa notes in his seminal *The Barthes Effect*, the 'Barthesian essay can be neither monumental nor finished'.[23] On the other hand, the essay also allowed Barthes to entertain what Badminton calls his 'desire for a complete exemption from meaning', a fantasy detectable in 'The Death of the Author', *Writing Degree Zero*, and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.[24] Both these tendencies — towards connecting everything up, on the one hand, and erasure, forgetting, and undoing, on the other — are present in Nelson's work. For Nelson, too, the essay is a way of exploring the unseverable connections between different readable objects — a blue flower and her injured friend's blue feet; the anus of her child and that of her lover; the Argo at different stages — while also dismantling assumptions about these objects. The restlessness of Barthes's essayistic thinking, his habit of always 'try[ing]

[22] Neil Badminton, 'Brief Scenes: Roland Barthes and the Essay', in *The Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics and Form*, ed. Mario Aquilina (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 53.

[23] Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 18.

[24] Badminton, 'Brief Scenes', 54.

to uproot his seedlings as they sprout',[25] is translated in Nelson into a restless lyric language, one which continually slips us away into other contexts, upturning the connotations and denotations of words and so reversing the essayist's train of thought. In his inaugural lecture at the College de France, Barthes spoke of forgetting and unlearning as his fundamental processes, describing himself as 'yielding to the unforeseeable change which forgetting imposes on the sedimentation of knowledges, cultures, and beliefs'.[26] This concept of 'unlearning' is a final helpful idea to keep in mind when reading Nelson, and indeed provides something of an answer to the problem I noted earlier: that Nelson's work is fiercely anti-categorical, and yet also the site where the category of lyric essay coalesces. For we can, perhaps, best view Nelson's simultaneous resistance of and strong debt to the influences of Dillard, Carson, and D'Agata as an attempt to *unlearn* the lyric essay, even as she inherits it. As one of the first writers to receive this newly gifted form, Nelson nonetheless feels the need to unravel it, recognising, perhaps, that the moment a genre hardens into shape it may cease to be useful.

Against Separation

Nelson's first move towards the lyric essay comes in *The Red Parts*, a book about the murder of her aunt, Jane, in 1969. Having written, already, a poetry collection about the event — 2005's *Jane: A Murder* — Nelson found herself unexpectedly writing about it a second time when a suspect in the long-unsolved case was found and brought to trial shortly after *Jane*'s publication. The resulting book found Nelson turning to a combination of lyric and essay in order to respond to her many feelings and responses to the trial: how it layered facts and emotions, the personal and the public, the known and the unknowable. While the actual trial, the book suggests, tries to erroneously present itself as a place where one kind of knowledge (hard facts, the truth and nothing but the truth) can be separated out from other kinds of knowledge (instinctive, bodily, emotional, phenomenological), the lyric essay, by contrast, more honestly grapples with the reality that these different strands of knowledge cannot be separated:

> One by one, each juror solemnly swears to his or her capacity to distinguish between dramatisation and reality, between fact and fiction. This strikes me as completely disingenuous. But then again, who's going to sit there in the jury box

[25] Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), 4.

[26] Roland Barthes, 'Lecture: In Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977', trans. Richard Howard, *Oxford Literary Review* 4, no. 1 (1979): 43-44. Notably, this is also the lecture where he claimed to have 'produced only essays', describing himself as a 'fellow of doubtful nature, whose every attribute is somehow challenged by its opposite' (31).

and say, *Actually, Your Honor, I admit it. I can't tell the difference between representation and reality anymore. I'm very sorry.*[27]

Throughout *The Red Parts*, Nelson uses the lyric to challenge the 'disingenuous' charade of hard fact, to uproot and undo the narrativising effects of the trial, which seeks to shape evidence and events into one 'true' story, and to resist the idea that there is any singular (and thus safe) form of knowledge. This is a book where interpretation is always a fraught thing, and where knowledge itself is established, in the epigraph from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, as something potentially dangerous and ethically dubious: 'In all desire to know there is already a drop of cruelty'.[28] Nelson resists Joan Didion's maxim that 'we tell ourselves stories in order to live', arguing that all stories are false interpretations: 'in their scramble to make sense of nonsensical things, they distort, codify, blame, aggrandize, restrict, omit, betray, mythologize'.[29] She suggests we make things that resist stories — poems, lyric essays — in order to live with the things that we cannot make sense of, such as the motiveless 'open murder' Gary Lieterman (the killer) is finally charged with, a 'murder without a story'.[30] In this, she aligns with the anti-Gutkind context of the lyric essay's emergence, the resistance of Tall and D'Agata to the essay's co-option by fiction-writing courses as another form of memoir — as, indeed, suggested by the rather D'Agata-like suggestion, above, that 'distinguish[ing] between… fact and fiction' is an impossibility. Yet unlike D'Agata, her response to this impossibility is not to embrace making things up; in fact, there is a strong ethical obligation throughout the book to avoid 'colouring' the truth, a word with particular resonance given its title. Instead, her response is to uncover and examine ambiguities — within words, within stories, within interpretations — as closely as possible, to always 'pluralize and specify', and thus get away from the singular without straying into the endlessly multiple, a principle she will later reformulate in *The Argonauts* as an interest in that which is 'more than one' but 'less than infinity'.[31]

We see this Sedgwickian principle play out in the book's various uses of the phrase 'the red parts'. With deft movements, Nelson slips between various possible ways of reading the phrase, moving associatively across puns and ambiguities: the 'red parts' are Jesus's words, are rubrics, are bloodstains on a pavement, are domestic dangers, are red flags, are dreams. The literal meaning of the phrase refers to red letter editions of the New Testament, in which Jesus's words are printed in red ink, a practice that arises from a theological position that takes the biblical texts as written by man, and thus interpretable, but the Dominical passages as the unmediated word of God. Such

[27] Maggie Nelson, *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (London: Vintage, 2017), 95.
[28] Ibid., np.
[29] Ibid., 156-57. Nelson quotes here the opening from Didion's famous essay 'The White Album'.
[30] Ibid., 180.
[31] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 62.

an association suggests that *The Red Parts* is also unmediated, uninterpreted. Yet the practice of printing text in red itself goes back to the process of rubricating medieval manuscripts, in which a second scribe would make additions in red ink, usually titles and short summaries of the text to follow: that is, instructions on how to interpret it. (The practice is the root of the word 'rubric'). The 'red parts', then, are both absolute truths and subjective interpretations: both lyric and essay. *The Red Parts*, moreover, in combining both kinds of knowledge, reveals how it is impossible to separate interpretation from truth — for there is no red text in the book, no clear separation between rubric and body, commentary and object, opinion and fact. Nelson is setting us up here for the idea that there is no pure, untainted knowledge, no language which is not susceptible to corruptions and slippages of meaning. Even the idea of the 'red parts' as Jesus's words lacks absolute clarity, for there are no quotation marks in the original scriptures, making the original 'red parts' also, to some extent, a matter of interpretation.

This refusal of separation extends to Nelson's use of chapter titles, which were also part of the medieval rubric, used to split and separate parts of the text. While later works like *Bluets* and *The Argonauts* dispense with chapter titles altogether, allowing the many parts of these works to flow freely into each other, *The Red Parts* does make a cursory attempt to split the text into chapters (or, following the title, 'parts') that mark different locations ('Red House', 'At the Tracks', 'In the Victim Room') and themes ('Murder Mind', 'Poetic License'). Yet as often as they separate, these chapter titles also muddle and confuse, particularly by challenging the linear momentum of the story: 'Addendum' comes near the beginning; 'The End of the Story' has five more chapters following it; 'After Justice' comes long before the supposed 'justice' of the trial's verdict. Again we find the essay being moved away from narrative, from the potentially false ordering of Didionesque storytelling. Furthermore, the content of the chapters is not clearly separated, despite these titles — ideas and narratives spill over, reappear, refuse to be contained. Thus we find again the impossibility of keeping things separate, whether it is one chapter from another, one genre from another, the body text from its commentary or title, or truth from interpretation.

The title also has a second association, with blood, which reinforces the connection in the book between knowledge and violence. The idea of rubricating Jesus's words in red letter edition Bibles comes from an image of blood in Luke: 'This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you'.[32] Blood here is 'testament', aligning it directly to knowledge. Luke's gospel also provides *The Red Parts* with its other epigraph, which reinforces the connection between blood and knowledge: 'For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be

[32] Luke 22:20 KJV.

known'.[33] Furthermore, the idea of the 'red parts', when it first appears in the body text itself, is immediately associated with blood: Nelson imagines, upon hearing the phrase the first time, 'slitting a body from chin to genitals, spreading apart its internal organs and trying to read them like tea leaves.'[34] Blood is a recurring motif carried over from *Jane*, in which it appears repeatedly, as in the poem 'Revelation':

> So what blood
> is blood—
> head-blood, cunt-blood
>
> Black clots,
> red streams.
> How we've fooled ourselves,
>
> we who've split blood
> into that which pollutes,
> and that which redeems.[35]

Blood, here, by nature of being liquid, is impossible to variegate into different types. Like the poem it 'clots' and 'streams', stops and starts, but it cannot be 'split'. If blood is, as established, associated with knowledge (something furthered by the nature of the murder case, in which bloodstains are clues) then Nelson's poem suggests that it is not separable from other, more sanitised forms of knowledge. There is no separation of knowledge which 'pollutes' and knowledge which 'redeems'. This lack of separation carries over to *The Red Parts*: as the essay engages in its own form of detective work, no matter how nuanced or informed by lyric practice, it is also always in danger; the knowledge it uncovers is always polluting, as well as redeeming. It also always has the potential to conceal further rather than reveal, as in the mystery (never solved) of David Ruelas, the four-year-old boy who somehow ended up with a drop of Jane's blood on his hand.[36] To interpret the literal facts of the case symbolically, blood is both how the case is solved (DNA analysis of blood left at the crime scene) but also at the centre of the case's biggest mystery, what Nelson calls 'the

[33] Luke 12:2

[34] Nelson, *Red Parts*, 41-42.

[35] Maggie Nelson, *Jane: A Murder* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005), 132. Blood appears, too, in the poems: 'Of Her Blood', 'The Gift', 'The Argument', 'Leforge Road', 'One Mistake', 'Conversation', 'White Liver', 'Repeatedly', 'Hideous', and 'The Script'.

[36] Nelson, *Red Parts*, 47.

Ruelas question'.

In the titular chapter 'The Red Parts', Nelson goes beyond the two more literal interpretations of the book's title to explore how it can translate, metaphorically, to stand in for a range of dangers: a teenage boy menacingly skating up and down the block; a burglar sat in the next booth at an Italian restaurant; Nelson's mother's fear of coming across dead bodies while hiking; Nelson's own fear of discovering a dead body in the 'dim lavender bathroom' of the bar where she works.[37] Together these conjure a pervading sense of domestic unease with which the whole book is suffused. They are red flags, moments of intrusion into our world of safety. Most of this suggested violence, with the exception of a gang murder outside Nelson's apartment, remains unrealised, nascent, potent: even the bloodstains from the murder are gone by 'mid-afternoon'.[38] Returning again to the idea of blood as knowledge, the literal blood soon vanishes from the road surface, but the knowledge of it remains, unseen and unspoken. Both violence and the knowledge of it, the passage suggests, cannot be spoken directly of or to; they must be approached through the sideways gesture of metaphor, its ability to transition across categories. This transitional thinking is one thing the lyric brings to the essay, here. We might extrapolate from this and say that knowledge, in the lyric essay, is not always explicit: rather it can be, like the danger that pervades the book, something sensed (and thus absorbed indirectly) in 'the air', in the tone and cadence of the language, something that activates, in the mind of the reader, the full thinking of the essay. It is in this chapter— when the phrase 'the red parts' comes most fully undone; when it is taken furthest away from its literal, scriptural roots and towards its full range of metaphorical associations — that Nelson most fully embraces the idea that an essay can think like a poem, as she slips from one 'red' moment to another.

Nelson's journey with the colour red comes to an end a few years later, with a short, little-discussed essay, 'Red', published as part of *Cabinet* magazine's long-running series of essays on colours. In it, she insists that the 'visceral effect, on the human organism, of apprehending redness' is part of the meaning of the colour red itself, inseparable from its realities as a wavelength of light and as a linguistic signifier.[39] Describing a sculpture by her future partner Harry Dodge, consisting of a sharpened piece of wood dipped in red paint, she writes:

> Now, I know this stabber is red because I have learnt English. But I also know it is red by the visceral chain of associations and reactions I have in beholding it – associations and reactions I would not have had it been dipped in purple, or green,

[37] Ibid., 35-38.
[38] Ibid., 42.
[39] Maggie Nelson, 'Red: Something Dipped', *Cabinet*, no. 38 (Summer 2010): 7–9.

or yellow.[40]

Nelson here counters Wittgenstein's idea that we only know the colour red because we have learnt the correct word for it, and insists instead that the many indirect, metaphorical meanings of red — those same meanings she shifts towards in the titular chapter of *The Red Parts* — are inseparable from our experience of, and understanding of, the colour. These other meanings are not secondary associations of red, claims Nelson, but part of the meaning of red itself, bundled into it, corrupting any sense of it as having a singular meaning, or even a singular reality: 'there are no "true" colors', she writes, a fact that is 'hard to swallow' because of our desire for the uncorrupted and the pure;[41] the same desire that causes our need for jurors to erroneously swear to their ability to deal in only isolated, uncorrupted facts. Just as the indirect, implicit meanings are as important a part of the phrase 'the red parts' for Nelson as its literal denotation, so too is this true of the colour red itself. It is an idea which, following *The Red Parts*, she devotes a whole book to, taking a different colour — blue — and trying to unravel all of its meanings, to unknit and ultimately, following Barthes, unlearn them.

The Language of Colour

From red, to blue. Nelson's next work, 2009's *Bluets*, continues the diffuse, metaphorical thinking she brought to the essay in *The Red Parts*, using it to unravel her many associations with the colour blue, a colour she claims in the opening pages to have fallen 'in love with'.[42] The project is a distinctly Barthesian one, in its attempt to continually shift from one meaning of the colour blue to another, always undoing its previous ideas. It seeks to achieve something described in one of Nelson's earliest poems, 'The Deep Blue Sea': to 'unknit / into wavy threads that play' its various blues.[43] That word 'unknit' suggests Barthes's idea of 'unlearning', as well as his extended metaphor of the text as lace-making, in both *S/Z* (where the text is as 'a piece of Valenciennes lace created before us under the lacemaker's fingers') and *The Pleasure of the Text* (where it is 'worked out in a perpetual interweaving', in which 'the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web').[44] *Bluets* is Nelson's most lyrical essay because it most embraces this undoing, unlearning, unravelling motion, which threatens to overtake the text, lacking as it does the foil of certainty that the trial provided in *The Red Parts*.

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2009), 1.
[43] Maggie Nelson, *Shiner* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 2001), 46.
[44] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 160; Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 64.

Perhaps because of this, Nelson gestures throughout *Bluets* to more solid structures, such as numbered lists and collections of objects, while ultimately subverting these forms through her lyric language. The text itself consists of 240 numbered paragraphs, some of which continue the thinking of the previous, but many of which introduce new ideas, tangents, or quotations. The apparent order bestowed by the numbering of the paragraphs recalls more rigid forms — museum catalogues, lists of dictionary definitions, scientific or philosophical arguments — while the content of these paragraphs — slippery, elusive — undermines them. That the sequential, seemingly controlled structure of the book is ultimately an ironic ruse to be bent out of shape is gestured to in the hopelessness with which other attempts at counting or measuring are described, as with Bénédict de Saussure's futile attempt to measure the blue of the sky with his 'cyanometer', something that Nelson writes 'brings me great pleasure, but really it takes us no further — either into knowledge, or into beauty'.[45] It is a feeling carried over from *The Red Parts*, in which she tries to make a numbered list of the facts of the case but finds that they 'explain virtually nothing', and in which the numbering of 'pieces of evidence' cannot stop them taking on 'allegorical proportions'.[46] Though lists and numbers may appear to wrangle the world into order, to contain it and make it legible, they in fact take us nowhere, says Nelson — to 'nothing', to the point of 'no further'. They are not stepping stones to meaning; rather, they are a dead end.

The process of gathering objects into a collection — a process which is itself typical of the traditional essayist, who gathers and arranges their materials — is also shown to be a false structure, one which is counter to the text's more dominant lyrical impulse. On the one hand, *Bluets* is full of this action of collecting and collating, with Nelson not only collecting blue objects — a tarpaulin, a shirt, a poison strip for termites — but also collecting collections, taking in Joseph Cornell's cabinets of curiosities, Joseph Joubert's assembled philosophical fragments, as well as a long passage on the bowerbird, who itself gathers blue things: 'bus tickets, cicada wings, blue flowers, bottle caps, blue feathers plucked off smaller blue birds that he kills'.[47] Yet Nelson also explicitly rejects the idea that her book is like one of these bowers, writing that '[s]urely this would be a mistake' for '*words do not* look like *the things they designate*'.[48] Words, she suggests, cannot be pinned down like butterflies, for in the gap between the words and the 'things they designate' — between the signifier and the signified — there is too much wriggle room, too much space for error. There is a tension, then, between the essay's act of gathering and the lyric's habit of scattering, of undoing

[45] Ibid., 40.
[46] Nelson, *Red Parts*, 47; 120.
[47] Nelson, *Bluets*, 27.
[48] Ibid., 28. The italics here are in the original, and indicate a quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay 'Cezanne's Doubt'.

what is gathered.

Both these tensions — between the counted and the uncountable, between the gathered and the ungatherable — are captured in the book's central tension between the gathered objects themselves and their colour, which is the source of the lyric essayist's attraction to them. The book is to some extent an example of what Adam Gopnik calls 'the odd-object essay', where an everyday physical object is used as a kind of launch pad for various reflections: here the blue objects Nelson gathers throughout the text. Gopnik notes that such an essay 'works because, in a material-minded time, our lives are filled with things waiting to be made into metaphors'.[49] Yet Nelson takes this further by writing not of the objects themselves but of their colour, which is even more liable to travel along metaphorical tangents, to leak into other thoughts and contexts and get away from the essay's original focus. The gathered objects, like the numbers, are a kind of ruse: they are what the text appears to be about but is not. Instead, the text is about their colour. Building on the ideas in her *Cabinet* essay 'Red', she writes of how colours, unlike the objects we attach them to, are never singular or fixed:

> Try, if you can, not to talk as if colors emanated from a single physical phenomenon. Keep in mind the effects of all the various surfaces, volumes, light-sources, films, expanses, degrees of solidity, solubility, temperature, elasticity, on color. Think of an object's capacity to emit, reflect, absorb, transmit, or scatter light; think of 'the operation of light on a feather'. Ask yourself, what is the colour of a puddle? …We find ourselves face-to-face with all these phenomena at once, and we call the whole shimmering mess 'color'. You might even say that it is the business of the eye to make colored forms out of what is essentially shimmering.[50]

Colours here (much like words themselves) are both of objects and not; they reveal objects, but do not necessarily come from the object itself. *Bluets* is an essay in which Nelson tries to move her language towards the 'shimmering mess' of colour she describes here, in order to capture the feeling of 'blue', separate from its manifestation in any particular blue object. It is an attempt to make 'colored forms' (ideas which are visible, sensible) while remaining aware that these forms are only temporary, never fixed; the material of the essay is always 'essentially shimmering'. The essay is the opposite, Lukács claims, of a form where the colours are 'matt', where the images are 'linear', and where the 'richness and multiplicity of the world' is made simple.[51] Rather (we infer) the essay

[49] Adam Gopnik, ed., *The Best American Essays: 2008* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), xvii.
[50] Nelson, *Bluets*, 20.
[51] Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974), 6.

is glossy, nonlinear, and full of richness and multiplicity; and the lyric essay, by using the slipperiness and connotative abundance of lyric language, extends this richly multiple quality of the essay further still.

One way Nelson achieves this detachment of colours from their objects is by adapting a technique from her earlier poetry, in which she uses colour words in close combinations, like a painter playing one colour off against another. We see this technique in her first collection, *Shiner*, named after the term for a black eye, with its many half-colours: 'arch of vessels gone grape under the lid / an army of red ants, a cast of shadows'.[52] (The title also suggests a source of light, foregrounding the idea that colours shimmer rather than remaining static.) Examples abound:

> slow-roasted greenery
> slim beige bird
>
> …
>
> low brown hills, empty-handed.
> Oh perfect silver bug
>
> …
>
> the slender gray cat
> sniffing at the violets[53]

In each case, the closeness of the two colour words brings attention to them as descriptions *of* colour, rather than simply descriptions of the objects (the bird, the cat, the hills) they pertain to: we picture the cat among the flowers as a meeting of gray and violet; we see a daub of beige among green, a dot of silver on brown, rather than hills or bushes. By having two colours in close contact, we become more conscious of colour itself as a phenomenon; it becomes detached, slightly, from its objects. In *Bluets*, this technique of shading one colour into another is adapted into prose, as when Nelson describes working in a 'bright orange' restaurant, only to have the space reappear in a dream as 'pale blue', its 'spectral opposite'.[54] Blue here is doubly removed from the object of the restaurant: not only does it reappear in the nighttime as a ghostly, detached presence, a floating patch of colour, but it is also only ever associated with to the restaurant to begin with as an absence, a negative; note how the word 'spectral' suggests both kinds of detachment through its double

[52] Nelson, *Shiner*, 11.
[53] Ibid., 35; 37; 45.
[54] Nelson, *Bluets*, 43.

connotation with both ghosts and the colour spectrum. Elsewhere, Nelson adapts the technique by replacing one of the colour words with an object:

> [Cornell's film] projected through a deep blue filter, so as to bathe Rose in the color he so loved.
>
> …
>
> The ink and the blood in the turquoise water: these are the colours inside of the fucking.[55]

At first, colours here appear indistinguishable from their objects: the word 'ink' is used for black, 'blood' for red; Rose is both colour and person. Yet really, the language — in using object-words as stand-ins for colours — *removes* the object, and leaves us with pure colour. For though we hear the word 'ink' or 'rose', the context of the sentence (and more broadly, the context of the book) transforms it immediately into colour, in a way that 'black ink' or 'red blood' would not — much as Stein's 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose' made the rose 'red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years';[56] and much as Dillard brought stoniness back to the stone in *Holy the Firm*.

Sentences such as these of Nelson's — bathing rose in deep blue; dissolving black, red, and turquoise in water, like a painter washing off her brush — follow Dillard and Stein in emphasising the materiality of the signifier as a source of sensual pleasure, rather than being pleasurable for its signification or meaning. Yet more than just pleasure, this lyric play is also a form of consolation for Nelson, who wrote *Bluets* as she was recovering from two shocks: a breakup (with the unnamed Prince of Blue) and the hospitalisation of a friend following an accident. Despite being mentioned infrequently, these two losses haunt the book. They are the animating event behind its unravelling impulse; Nelson undoes the book's gestured-at structures — the object-essay, the commonplace book, the numbered philosophical treatise — because she cannot face their solidity, their certainty, when she feels herself so empty and diffuse. By contrast, the 'shimmering mess' of lyric language is a form of solace, precisely *because* it lacks the solidity of these structures; an extension, perhaps, of the consolation offered by the shifting meanings of red in *The Red Parts*, in the face of the reality that the essayist could never truly know what happened to Jane. As David James writes in *Discrepant Solace*, his study of literature and consolation, 'finding a form to communicate experience's resistance to expression, to work through the very paradox

[55] Ibid., 68; 76.
[56] Gertrude Stein, *Four in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), vi.

of describing affects that escape signification, affords its own consolation'.[57]

In *Bluets*, the colour blue becomes one such form, an expression of the inexpressible, its own inexplicable code:

> That each blue object could be a kind of burning bush, a secret code meant for a single agent, an X on a map too diffuse ever to be unfolded in entirety but that contains the knowable universe. How could all the shreds of blue garbage bags stuck in brambles, or the bright blue tarps flapping over every shanty and fish stand in the world, be, in essence, the fingerprints of God? *I will try to explain this.*[58]

The colour blue here is depicted as a signifier itself, a language with its own lyric impulse towards a spray of signification. The way the colour blue seems to shimmer throughout the book with ineffable meaning — signifying everything and nothing; containing 'the knowable universe', and yet remaining 'diffuse', 'secret', and impossible to read — aligns the text with symbolist poetry, with its 'heightened sense of those aspects of language which cannot be reduced to arbitrary equivalences and oppositions'.[59] Mallarmé, in particular, who often used 'the image of the play of light to convey the kind of verbal activity he [was] trying to create in his poems', is an important influence — he, too, was haunted by blue, as in his famous lines from his poem on the colour, 'L'Azur', which Nelson quotes: *'Je suis hanté. L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur! L'Azur!'*.[60] Mallarmé's own negative poetics was stirred by an encounter with 'Nothingness' — his so-called 'Nights of Tournon', the spiritual crisis he suffered in 1866 — and his subsequent loss of faith.[61] Both Nelson and Mallarmé respond to crisis by turning to language play, and to the untranslatable language of colour, as consolation. That the meaning of blue is inexplicable is emphasised, in the passage above, in the closing '*I will try to explain this*', its italics conveying a sense of the statement willing itself to be true (almost willing itself into a performative utterance), while the silence that follows (for the statement comes at the end of a fragment) answers to its impossibility.

If blue things are their own language, then, it is ultimately an untranslatable one. Depression has often been associated with a withdrawal from language; it is something which brings us to the edge of the speakable. For Kristeva, 'the speech of the depressed is to them like

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[57] David James, *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.

[58] Nelson, *Bluets*, 2.

[59] Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 39.

[60] Clive Scott, 'Symbolism, Decadence and Impressionism', in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James Walter McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1976), 223; Nelson, *Bluets*, 45.

[61] Nicholls, *Modernisms*, 34.

an alien skin', its traditional signifying functions broken, 'experienced by the subject as *empty*'.[62] Kristeva's image of depression as a 'black sun' recalls Dillard's 'Total Eclipse': the 'abrupt black body out of nowhere', the 'hole where the sun belongs', experienced, like Kristeva's black sun, as an emptiness, one which makes Dillard feel 'light-years distant, forgetful of almost everything'.[63] The colour blue, in *Bluets*, behaves similarly, as a way of indirectly naming, and thus accessing, an unnameable depression in the wake of her breakup and her friend's accident. Once again we find Nelson using the lyric to extend a quality inherent in the essay: for depression is involved in the history of the essay from its very beginning, in Montaigne's retreat to Perigord following the death of his friend Étienne de La Boétie, and his inscription from Lucretius ('*nec nova vivendo procuditur ulla voluptas*': there is no new pleasure to be gained by living longer) above his door.[64]

Yet, importantly, Nelson also resists, at points, this kind of all-encompassing, Mallarméan symbolism. Her mantra, after all, is 'pluralize and specify'; whereas, to turn blue into something which means 'everything and nothing' is to pluralise only. Though Nelson is certainly attracted to the ineffability of blue, she is also aware that a total withdrawal from the ordinary function of language is too neat, too pure, and too distant from the mess of everyday life; she wants the ugly and the quotidian as well. Take this passage, where she scorns her ex-lover for leaving a letter she has sent him unopened, in order to preserve its mystery and romance:

> This may have served some purpose for you, but whatever it was, surely it bore little resemblance to mine. I never aimed to give you a talisman, an empty vessel to flood with whatever longing, dread, or sorry happened to be the day's mood. I wrote it because I had something to say to you.[65]

The unopened letter here bears a striking similarity to the way many of the other passages in the book treat the colour blue — as a 'talisman', an 'empty vessel' — as well as Mallarmé's 'perfect book' whose 'pages have never been cut, their mystery forever preserved, like a bird's folded wing, or a fan never opened', which Nelson praises just a page earlier.[66] Nelson here, taking on the self-contradictory role of the essayist, rebukes her own lyricism and reminds herself of the importance

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[62] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 52-53.

[63] Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 18.

[64] Saul Frampton, *When I Am Playing With My Cat, How Do I Know She Is Not Playing With Me?: Montaigne and Being in Touch With Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), 3. Note, though, that in 'Of Sadness', Montaigne claims that the essay has no place for 'that bleak, dumb, and deaf stupor that benumbs us when accidents surpassing our endurance overwhelm us', for such emotions do not 'allow themselves to be savored and digested'; hence, perhaps, the essay needs the lyric to access true despair, rather than the more moderate, 'mediocre' melancholy that befits the essayist (*Complete Works*, 7-9).

[65] Ibid., 71.

[66] Ibid., 70. The lines in turn recall Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is expressed inexpressibly in the expressed ('the expressed' here being the colour blue), a central notion of *The Argonauts*.

of clear, direct communication: 'I had something to say to you'.

Yet Nelson's own mistake, with blue, is also in some ways the opposite of her ex-lover's: while he makes the mistake of *not* realising Nelson has 'something to say' (that is, not realising he is being directly addressed), she erroneously thinks that the blues of the world are speaking to her. This comes through clearly at the end of the book, when the sense of blue as a shimmering, Mallarméan symbol is punctured by a moment of bathos. After reading an article about how scientists have discovered the overall colour of the universe, Nelson's reaction is initially one of rapturous epiphany:

> The colour of the universe, the article says, is 'pale turquoise'. *Of course*, I think, looking out wistfully over the glittering Gulf. *I knew it all along. The heart of the world is blue.*[67]

This could easily have been the final sentence of the book, but it is not. It is immediately followed by another, undercutting fragment:

> A few months later, back at home, I read somewhere else that this result was in error, due to a computer glitch. The real colour of the universe, this new article says, is light beige.[68]

This sense of crashing down from the symbolist heights of rhapsody to earth, to normality, to unsymbolic unloveliness, pervades the final pages of the book that follow. Nelson lays out her collection of blue things and is struck by their '*anemia*'; they are 'a pile of thin blue gels scattered on the stage long after the show has come and gone'.[69] She discovers, too, that the word *bluets* can also be translated as 'cornflowers': 'they are American, they are shaggy, they are wild, they are strong'.[70] This revelation feels like a rejection of symbolism, especially coming shortly after a passage discussing Emerson's displacement of God, who can be accessed only through symbol, with nature, which can be accessed directly.[71] These passages also feel like a return to everyday prose: there are no alliterations, no internal rhymes, and lots of plain, commonplace words ('strong', 'thin', 'beige'). While the shimmering blue objects of the opening pages seem to exist outside of time, as eternal talismans, here we are located firmly in time ('a few months in') and place ('back at home'). What blues do remain are material and pedestrian, drained of their symbolic

[67] Ibid., 90
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 91.
[70] Ibid., 90.
[71] Ibid., 86.

power: 'only tarps (always tarps!) pinned over stacks of firewood, a few blue recycling containers kicked over in the streets'.[72] The tarp here is 'pinned' rather than 'flapping', static and fixed rather than flickering with hidden meaning.

That these 'real' blues reassert themselves at the end of the text feels significant; for despite the essay's extensive play with the metaphorical associations of blue, it remains, nonetheless, what it says it is on the tin: an essay about the colour blue. This simpler essay never fully disappears; it is never fully destroyed by the anarchic, unravelling impulse that seeks to destroy it. Though she takes pleasure in the materiality of the signifier, Nelson, unlike Mallarmé, resists playing with language for its own sake. This is brought out further by comparing *Bluets* to William Gass's *On Being Blue*, another book-length essay on the colour blue from 1976, to which Nelson's work is to some extent a reply. *On Being Blue* is a quick-shifting patchwork of thoughts, but ultimately has a clear and explicit theme running through it: the language of eroticism and the eroticism of language. It opens with an extraordinary sentence that displays Gass's own particular way of lyricising the essay:

> Blue pencils, blue noses, blue movies, laws, blue legs and stockings, the language of birds, bees, and flowers as sung by longshoremen, that lead-like look the skin has when affected by cold, contusion, sickness, fear; the rotten rum or gin they call blue ruin and the blue devils of its delirium; Russian cats and oysters, a withheld or imprisoned breath… watered twilight, sour sea; through a scrambling of accidents, blue has become their color, just as it's stood for fidelity.[73]

Gass's list moves fluidly between blue objects (the cold skin, the oysters) and blue phrases (the things which are called blue, like movies and laws, but are not) making no obvious distinction between them, with some blues (the held breath, the blue noses) falling indeterminately between the two. The semi-colons do not separate different kinds of blue out, but act only as momentary pauses in the deluge, dwelling upon particularly fraught words — 'fear', 'delirium', 'sea' — words and things in which one can literally dwell. Sound is the guiding principle here: note how 'language of birds' reverses the sound of *b-lue*, which trills through the passage; how 'rum' and 'ruin' combine at the end of 'delirium'; how 'sung' is dismantled and reversed in 'longshoremen'. The sentence is a perfect example of a traditionally essayistic construction – the list – being made more lyrical simply by greater attention to the sounds of the essayist's language. Gass's exuberant verbal puns (for the text is full of them, including the ending of the opening list on a 'fin' and the sexual pun

[72] Ibid., 93.
[73] William H. Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: New York Review Books, 2014), 3-4.

of the title) are not merely the dominant formal quality of *On Being Blue*, but its true subjects: it is full of jokes, alliterations, ornate, elaborate sentences that dazzle, trick, and trap: of the blueing and blurring of language. In his introduction, Michael Gorra points out that Gass starts with the word 'blue', rather than the colour, quoting Gass himself in interview: 'the title and the word were what interested me, not the subject'.[74] There is, then, in Gass, a degree of difference between the apparent object of his essay (the colour blue) and its subject (the eroticism of 'blue' language): yet this gap is easily closed merely by putting quotation marks around the last word of his title: *On Being 'Blue'*.

In Nelson, there is no need for such quotation marks, for the word 'blue' is not the subject of *Bluets* in the same way as in Gass's text. There are no 'blue movies' or 'blue laws' in Nelson — its blues are all real shades. Nelson does not wander from her blues; she sticks close to them, writing not away from them towards other things but *through* them towards other things. The book is, as I have argued, about loss as much as it is about blue; yet while Gass would surely travel from 'blue' through 'the blues' towards sadness, the Nelson of *Bluets* does not take this path. Instead, she indulges her lyric impulses, taking pleasure in the materiality of the signifier, in order to capture the sensual, inexpressible solace that the colour blue brought her during a difficult period. She does not write literally of blue, as an art critic might, but nor does she write, like Gass, of 'blue' as a mere linguistic sign; she does not use 'the blues' as a simple metaphor for depression, and yet that experience nonetheless hovers behind every mention of the colour; her essay is neither 'on blue' nor 'on "blue"' but, like so many aspects of the hybrid form of the lyric essay, somewhere in the gap between.

Abjection and Ugliness in *The Argonauts*

I have shown how in both *The Red Parts* and *Bluets* Nelson follows her lyrical impulse towards the slippage of language to transform the essay, moving it away (or further away) from facts, interpretations, and objects towards that which is diffuse, elusive, and slippery. These are both, in many ways, archetypal lyric essays. Why, then, does it still rattle a little, still sound a little wrong, to call Nelson the archetypal lyric essayist? Why does she herself continue to resist the term? I think it is partially due to the fact that she comes *after* the lyric essay has been named, and thus sanctioned, made tasteful and fashionable, when Nelson, as a writer, is so interested in the tasteless, the unsanctioned, the dangerous. In many ways, the lyric essay suits her purposes perfectly, as we saw in *The Red Parts* and *Bluets* — *except* for the fact that it *is* such a perfect fit, when Nelson would

[74] Ibid., x.

rather it feel a little awkward, a little ugly. This is why Nelson is always trying to dismantle the lyric essay even as she puts it to use. Her primary method for doing this is to make her essays as uncomfortable and 'ugly' as possible, bringing in material that goes against what she identifies as the 'pretty' and 'song-like' qualities of the lyric essay she dislikes. Yet, importantly, she brings this material in not by diminishing the lyrical qualities of her essays, but by embracing them. In *The Argonauts*, she pushes this inclination towards abjection even further, continually using the lyric as a vehicle to transport abject material into the essay, playing with the boundaries of the essay's taste, making these boundaries felt even as she transgresses them.

The Argonauts is a text which is always aware of the pressure and presence of boundaries, even as it tries to resist them. Nelson quotes William James: 'We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, a feeling of *by*, just as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*'.[75] If *Bluets* was about the feeling of blue, then *The Argonauts* is about the feeling of these prepositions. That is, it is a book keenly aware of the complexity of the shifts and relations in which it tries to dwell, and the ways in which a preposition is both a shift and a boundary. Take this sentence, which, like the passage on breastfeeding quoted in this chapter's introduction, considers the need to resist the arrangement of thought into discrete categories:

> On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories — *predator, twilight, edible* — on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live.[76]

Initially *The Argonauts* seems, like most of Nelson's work, to be concerned primarily with the latter half of this construction: with the 'need to pay homage to the transitive', to that which slips between categories. The sentence itself seems to privilege this drive by placing it second, and thus creating a sense of the thought arriving at it. Yet the lyric force of the sentence in fact dwells in those italicised words in the middle: '*predator, twilight, edible*'. The strangeness of the word choices (which seem to have no obvious meaning within the sentence) as well as the delicate dance of dental consonants between two bilabial plosives, brings attention to them as pure sound. At the same time, they are also words with strong evolutionary connotations (hunting/being hunted; night; food), emphasising what Nelson herself describes as their 'evolutionary need' to fit into discrete, understandable categories: that is, firstly, that words cannot function without being discrete from each other, and so retain this discreteness even as the lyric drive of the sentence attempts to blur and make 'soup' of them; secondly, that the need to put things into categories

[75] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 54.
[76] Ibid., 53.

might itself be read as an evolutionary need to work out what we can eat, suggesting that 'taste' is a matter of survival. The separation of the three words from the rest of the sentence by both em dashes and italics plays into these contradictory traits: on the one hand, it further emphasises the words as discrete signifiers; on the other, it isolates them as a source of reading pleasure, seeming to linger and take care over them, until their meanings start to spread and leak, as when a child, delighting in speech, repeats a word *ad nauseam* and, thus, *ad absurdum.*

As well as prodding and probing the boundaries of individual words, *The Argonauts* is full of metaphors that trouble at boundaries and the idea of discrete containment. Two, in particular, stand out. The first comes via Irigaray through an image of the labial lips:

> They are the 'sex which is not one'. They are not one, but also not two. They make a circle that is always self-touching, an autoerotic mandorla.[77]

The book is continually interested in things like the labia which are 'not one, but also not two', and thus, as Rich Smith notes, trouble the 'received notion that something has to be one thing or another'.[78] Examples of these include scissors, pregnant women, Harry's gender — and, we might add, the lyric essay. A book like *The Argonauts* is neither wholly lyric, nor wholly essay, but neither is it fully both simultaneously. It is greater than one, but less than two. Indeed, we might even go as far as to say that the book is an essay which is growing a lyric inside it, as a mother grows a child. The very last lines of the book are pure lyric, as though the lyric is finally being given birth to: 'I know we're still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song'.[79] These lines could easily be written as an ABAB quatrain, with each line formed of an iamb followed by an anapaest.

The second metaphor comes from the book's title, which despite its apparent classicism again reveals, upon prodding, the influence of Barthes:

> I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase 'I love you' is like 'the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name'. Just as the *Argo*'s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the

[77] Ibid. 62.

[78] Rich Smith, 'A Brief Encounter with the One-of-a-Kind Writer Maggie Nelson', *Stranger*, 29 July 2015, https://www.thestranger.com/books/feature/2015/07/29/22612201/a-brief-encounter-with-the-one-of-a-kind-writer-maggie-nelson.

[79] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 143.

lover utters the phrase 'I love you', its meaning must be renewed by each use[80]

The *Argo*, here, represents Nelson's love for her partner, Harry Dodge, a love which is refracted variously, in the essay itself, through philosophical reflections, anecdotes, and lyrical passages. In each refraction it is transformed, its parts replaced — yet it remains the same love. This gradual *Argo*-like renegotiation of love is formally expressed in the book's treatment of language, its negotiation with certain words. This is true not only of the book's major keywords ('gender', 'queer', 'marriage', 'family') but even of smaller, stranger words in the text. 'Bubbles', for example, appears first as the title to Peter Sloterdijk's treatise on the discovery of the self, then transforms quickly from an abstract philosophical title to a tactile reality — 'an immersive bubble', a 'sonic bubble', 'this bubble'.[81] This produces the odd effect that, in the plural, as 'Bubbles', the word feels singular (in the sense of both 'specific' and 'strange'), but in the singular, as 'bubble', it feels plural, bubbling through the sentence, evoking bubble baths and spit bubbles. At the same time, each individual 'bubble' remains singular: the first is 'immersive', inhabitable, capable of becoming the whole word; the third is 'this' bubble and not any other bubble. Each bubble is, like each use of the word, both a specific, singular thing and part of a collective idea of 'bubbles'; each specific usage recalibrates, slightly, the meaning of the group. The next time the word appears it again refers to Sloterdijk's book: only now, transformed through the intermediate bubbles, the title has become 'ridiculous', comical. That ridiculousness then brings it, through association, to Michael Jackson's pet chimpanzee Bubbles; but the chimpanzee Bubbles also picks up the associated idea of mothering and caring, 'doted on' by its owner.[82] The final twist moves the prose into a place of self-awareness about this constant shifting and renewing of meaning: 'But Michael would also rotate the chimp out of service as it ages, and replace it with a new, younger Bubbles. (Cruelty of the *Argo?*)'.[83] That parenthetical suggests that each 'new, younger' use of a word replaces the previous one — a challenge to the idea that words or concepts can take on infinite new meanings without destroying the old ones. In fact, this passage suggests, they erase them — a concept that carries emotional weight in the book, exploring as it does the idea that the mother is erased by the child.

In both its treatment of individual words and its metaphors, *The Argonauts* continually evokes the inability of boundaries to fully contain that which they seek to contain, and thus explores the violence done to these boundaries by the things which break across them. In this, it

[80] Ibid., 5.
[81] Ibid., 36-37.
[82] Ibid., 38.
[83] Ibid.

continues a question first posed in *The Red Parts* about which spaces are 'zoned for living', and what happens when unwelcome things intrude on the living zone from outside of it.[84] Kristeva, in formulating her theory of the abject, writes of how 'refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live';[85] in *The Red Parts*, these thrust-aside things keep re-intruding: in the rubbish that pollutes the river outside Nelson's flat, and the corpse of her aunt that haunts her. One space that proves especially unpoliceable is the bedroom: the space, metaphorically, of the Montaignean essay, but here transformed into something more dangerous, not a cosy space of safety but one of openness and vulnerability. In a characteristic passage of things being mixed that taste would dictate we keep separate, Nelson engages in erotic asphyxiation with her boyfriend, only to have her aunt's murder intrude into their sexual game:

> [He] asked me if he could choke me with a silk stocking while we fucked. I assented; I even got the stocking out of my drawer myself. I have always had an erotic fondness for asphyxiation. It feels good not to breathe a short while before coming, so that when you finally come and breathe together, you get an astonishing rush: the world comes back to you in a flood of color, pleasure, and breath.
>
> I did not know that earlier that day he had read my journal, and had found out that I was in love with someone else, that I had made love with someone else. I had only told him that I was leaving. As we had sex I suddenly suspected that he knew more than I'd told him. I suspected this when I said, aghast, *This is how Jane died*, and he said, without missing a beat, *I know*.[86]

The passage makes viscerally felt Bataille's idea that the state of abjection results from a failure to exclude abject things, as well as his claim, quoted elsewhere by Nelson herself, that 'the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence'.[87] It is marked by a series of uncomfortable intrusions: of one kind of discourse into another (the linking in the first sentence of 'choke' to 'silk' to 'fucked' by the shared *k* sound; the juxtaposition of 'erotic fondness', with its hint of 'fondling', against the clinical and violent 'asphyxiation'); of one kind of action into another (violent choking into loving sex); of one kind of feeling into another (love into hatred; hatred into love). The pleasurable 'flood' that the first paragraph climaxes in is echoed in the flood of horrifying knowledge at the end of

[84] Nelson, *Red Parts*, 83.

[85] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

[86] Nelson, *Red Parts*, 84-85.

[87] Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 122; Nelson, *Red Parts*, 140.

the second ('suddenly', 'without missing a beat'), and the unstoppable, climactic, deeply uncomfortable intrusion of Jane's murder into the sexual play of Nelson and her boyfriend. The only space which remains free from intrusion is the asphyxiation, a kind of temporary silence, or aphasia (for language relies on breath); when breath (and thus language) returns, everything cannot help but mix in an 'astonishing rush', a 'flood'. This liquid language ('rush, 'flood') suggests a kind of knowledge that is impossible to control or variegate into different kinds, and is something carried over from *Jane*, a text which is full of leaking, slipping, watery movements: 'I know about gushing, how charming it can be'; 'a girl surging to herself as she writes into the night'.[88] So, too, is the obsession with things which contain, or fail to contain: the 'long raincoat' Jane was wearing, which does not fully cover her body; her mother's obsession with barricading doors; the 'bare brackets of a life' (Jane's birth and death dates) with which Nelson arrives at the public library to begin her research.[89] Indeed, the two obsessions — with liquids, and with containers — each try to undo the other, and together suggest the ways in which we are always both trying, and failing, to contain things.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson builds on these earlier flirtations with the abject and fully embraces the possibilities of the lyric essay to create unpoliceable textual spaces in which everything is mixed. The opening paragraph uses the lyricism of its language not only to continually resist discrete categories, but to bring together sex, violence, and motherhood in a deliberately distasteful raise of the curtain:

> October, 2007. The Santa Ana winds are shredding the bark off the eucalyptus trees in long white stripes. A friend and I risk the widowmakers by having lunch outside, during which she suggests I tattoo the words HARD TO GET across my knuckles, as a reminder of this pose's possible fruits. Instead the words *I love you* come tumbling out of my mouth in an incantation the first time you fuck me in the ass, my face smashed against the cement floor of your dank and charming bachelor pad. You had Molloy by your bedside and a pile of cocks in a shadowy unused shower stall. Does it get any better? What's your pleasure? you asked, then stuck around for an answer.[90]

Formally, the passage is full of quick shifts from density to lightness: from huddled small caps to italics bending in the wind (*I love you*); from the light 'incantation' into the coarse 'fuck me in the

[88] Nelson, *Jane*, 47; 48.
[89] Ibid., 33; 165; 33.
[90] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 3.

ass', that last syllable slammed into and reiterated in the 'smashed', 'dank', 'bachelor' and 'pad' that follow. The first image of shredded 'long white stripes', later referred to as widowmakers (a forestry term for detached or broken tree limbs), recalls the first Nude in Carson's 'The Glass Essay', who 'stands into the wind' as 'shreds of flesh rip off the woman's body and life / and blow away on the wind', as well as Nelson's own *The Latest Winter*, which opens with a man burning 'strip[s] of skin' off his arm, leaving behind a 'bright white streak'.[91] It introduces a sense of violence prevalent throughout the paragraph, but also a sense of lightness, with the shredded bark picked up by the wind much like the essay itself picks up and blows about its ideas. The essay is thus light but also dangerous. Going further, we might say that it is light about its danger, that it deals with heavy themes lightly, in a way akin to what Sontag describes as camp's mixing of playfulness and seriousness: 'one can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious'.[92] But it is also, as in the first half of Sontag's equation, serious about play: here, the sexual play of two lovers. The final line is surely a nod to the famous opening lines of Bacon's 'Of Truth': "'What is truth?" said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer'.[93] Nelson's love for Dodge comes from the fact he *does* stick around for an answer — not to the lofty question 'What is truth?' but to the apparently frivolous question 'What's your pleasure?', a pick-up line from a bar. That is, he takes her pleasure seriously.

The fact that a book about pregnancy starts with the mother being 'fuck[ed]… in the ass' is a fairly obvious middle-finger to traditional ideas of motherhood, a way for the book to immediately set out what it is not. More complicated are the book's many passages describing the games Nelson plays with both her stepson and, later, her own son, Iggy:

> Such little socks! Such little underwear! I marvelled at them, made him lukewarm cocoa each morning with as much powder as could fit in the rim of a fingernail, played Fallen Soldier with him for hours on end.
>
> …
>
> In this game he was Baby Bear, a little bear with a speech impediment that forced him to say B's at every turn (Cousin Evan is Bousin Bevan, and so on). Sometimes Baby Bear played at home with his bear family, delighting in his recalcitrant

[91] Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 9; Maggie Nelson, *The Latest Winter* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 2003), 13.
[92] Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 288.
[93] Francis Bacon, 'Of Truth', *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1985), 61.

> mispronunciations; other times he ventured off on his own, to spear a tuna.
>
> …
>
> My baby! My little butt! Now I delight in his little butt. I delight in pouring water over his head with a toy boat full of holes, wetting his blond curls, matted with butter from a plate he recently made into a hat.[94]

Repeated exclamations ('such little X!', 'my [little] X!', 'I delight'), unexpected details (the butter plate, the speared tuna) and mixed registers (such as the shift from the cutesy 'his bear family' to the technical 'recalcitrant mispronunciations') enact the play they describe by playing with language. Language here is slippery and changeable — 'marvelled' becomes 'made' becomes 'played'; 'baby' becomes 'butt' becomes 'boat' becomes 'butter' — suggesting the way that the lyric takes language towards Frye's 'babble', itself a word with the connotations of baby talk. The anus is also returned to in a very different context to the opening paragraph; it is a space where multiple games are played out (sexual games, childhood games) which taste would dictate are kept separate. Again she takes pleasure in both the materiality of language, and in its promiscuous signification, its inability to point to one and one thing only. Yet whereas in *Bluets* this pleasure is a form of consolation, here it is a form of provocation, a way for Nelson to open up and make more playful, more slippery, the role of 'mother'.

In some ways, *The Argonauts* is the apotheosis of Nelson's lyric essaying, her fullest realisation of an essay in which every word and idea is made slippery and dangerous through the lyric poet's close attention to language. Yet it also shows signs of her starting to move away from such prose, a trend which continues in her most recent book *On Freedom* (2021), a far more conventional work which almost entirely abandons Nelson's lyricism in favour of a more academic register and a sometimes turgid prose. *The Argonauts* devolves, occasionally, into such prose — as when she ponders whether 'rampant, "deviant" sexual activity [can] remain the marker of radicality' in 'an age all too happy to collapse the sodomitical mother into the MILF'[95] — lines which are content to mix academic jargon with trendy buzzwords rather than digging into the subtleties of either. Such moments are like the harsh white strip-lighting of a shopping mall, shining on everything and illuminating nothing; whereas, in moments like its subtle, flickering opening paragraph, *The Argonauts* is closer to the 'ultra-violet rays' that Lukács described the essay as in *Soul*

[94] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 10; 22-23; 42.
[95] Nelson, *Argonauts*, 110.

and Form.[96] Indeed, *The Red Parts* contains its own description of such light, and how it reveals things that normally remain hidden. Like Dillard's description of the immolated moth, it doubles as a description of what Nelson's writing is like at its most effective:

> I close my eyes and try to imagine what the whole dark laboratory of the world would look like if it were suddenly illuminated by a light, a light whose wavelength 'excited' the paths of our bodies through it, and all of our exchanges. If all the blood, shit, cum, sweat, spit, hairs, and tears we have ever shed — onto objects, or onto one another — suddenly started to glow.[97]

We see here the ability of ultra-violet light (and by extension, the essay) to reveal traces or impurities, suggesting the essay as something abject, as something that fails to exclude dirt. Objects under this light are neither simple nor pure — they are multivalent. At her best, Nelson's attention to the lyrical qualities of her language increases and extends this multivalence further — making the essay a dirtier, stranger, and more dangerous thing. The lyric essay, in her hands, is not pretty or songlike; it is unstable, spattered with bodily fluids, and glowing.

[96] Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 7.
[97] Nelson, *Red Parts*, 119.

CHAPTER FIVE

Claudia Rankine

The outside blistered the inside of you
— Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

Inside, Outside, U.S.A.

In 'The Resistance to Closure', the Language poet Lyn Hejinian describes a dilemma faced by anyone attempting to write poetry:

> The writer experiences a conflict between a desire to satisfy a demand for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world prompting a correspondingly open response to it.[1]

It is a dilemma we should by now be familiar with — this simultaneous and paradoxical desire to both open oneself up to the world while also containing and limiting it. We found it in Dillard's longing to become like Emerson's transparent eyeball, yet needing, in a corrupt and cruel world, to stay alert, self-conscious, and limited, to temper her lyric with essay; we found intimations of it in Carson's grappling with how erotic desire simultaneously dissolves the boundaries of the self while also binding the lover in its tendrils, as well as in her play with forms as both fixed constraints and fluid tempos to be picked up, freely, at will; we found it in the tension, in Nelson's writing, between safety and danger, and between discrete, contained categories and the tendency of lyric language to blur and babble beyond those categories. It is a conflict, we have discovered, which the lyric essay is particularly adept at handling.

There is a similar conflict, too, detectable in what is perhaps the most impactful and visible example of lyric essay published so far: Claudia Rankine's award-winning *New York Times* bestseller *Citizen* (2014). Subtitled 'an American lyric', *Citizen* typifies Rankine's continual probing, in her writing, of the relationship between inner and outer, private and public, and in particular how the inner lives of black American citizens are structured by, and mirror, events unfolding outside of

Epigraph: Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin, 2015), 156.
[1] Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 41.

them; how the body and body-politic relate.[2] This investigation leads her to the same paradoxical desires Hejinian describes: to write, on the one hand, what is often a very interior lyric poetry, evoking inner experience and feeling within the confines of a particular body, while on the other hand opening her work up — beginning with the proto-essay of 2001's transitional work *Plot*, through the collaged prose fragments of her first 'American lyric' *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and continuing after *Citizen* with the even more essayistic *Just Us* (2021) — to something like what Hejinian calls the 'encyclopedic impulse', incorporating found texts, images, and a searching, all-encompassing essayistic prose in order to depict the culture of America at large.[3] Yet there is an interesting shift in emphasis here from Dillard and, especially, from Nelson. Whereas for them, 'lyric' does the work of the adjective, transforming the noun of 'essay', here it is the opposite, with Rankine self-consciously and specifically writing 'lyric' but transforming it by bringing in the essay, by making it essayistic. The essay, here, is that which disrupts.

This disruption, however, is only one half of Rankine's project. While for the Language poets, the answer to Hejinian's dilemma was to resist closure as much as possible, using techniques such as repetition, disruptive textual gaps, and irregular arrangements to 'open' up poetry in what they saw as a political challenge to existing structures of meaning, for Rankine, the challenge has been 'to create transparency and access without losing complexity', to write work that feels 'simple, accessible, even conversational' while remaining 'as alive and mutable as possible'.[4] Having been at graduate school at Columbia at the height of the Language movement, where she developed a taste for the experimental writings of Gertrude Stein, Charles Bernstein, and Hejinian herself, Rankine shares with the Language poets a desire to question the political implications of everyday structures, including the structures of language. These ideas are particularly attractive for how they dovetail with her own thinking about race; as Kamran Javadizadeh notes, Language poetry's challenge to the assumed universality of the 'lyric I' 'resonates with whiteness's implicit claims to universality and unmediated identity', and 'what experimental poetics had diagnosed as the naïveté of the post-Romantic lyric begins to sound like a literary form of white innocence'.[5] Yet Rankine is unwilling to abandon the lyric entirely, having also taken from Louise Glück, with whom she

[2] While it is increasingly common to capitalise the word 'black' when using it in a racial sense, I have chosen to follow the example of Rankine herself, who does not capitalise the word, including in her most recent book, *Just Us* (2021). I make this decision solely out of a desire to respect the black writer who is my subject and defer to her preference. See Juliette Harris, 'Should "Black" Be Capitalized?', *Poynter*, 8 July 2021, https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2021/should-black-be-capitalized, for a discussion of the arguments both for and against capitalising the word 'b/Black', an article for which Rankine herself, among many others, was consulted.

[3] Hejinian, *Language of Inquiry*, 42.

[4] Ibid., 43-47; Claudia Rankine, 'The Art of Poetry No. 102', interview by David L. Ulin, *Paris Review*, Winter 2016, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6905/the-art-of-poetry-no-102-claudia-rankine.

[5] Kamran Javadizadeh, 'The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads: Claudia Rankine, Robert Lowell, and the Whiteness of the Lyric Subject', *PMLA* 134, no. 3 (2019): 476.

studied at Columbia, a love of Lowell and Berryman, of the directness, intimacy, and 'capacity for staging interiority' of confessional lyricism.[6] Rankine's central poetic project has been to bring together these two interests; like Nelson, she is interested in producing writing which is informed by the structural and political critiques of the avant-garde, but which remains nonetheless accessible to a wide audience. On the one hand she is aware that, as famously put by Audre Lorde, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house';[7] on the other, she wants to make sure that whatever alternative tools she *does* offer the reader are legible, practical, and useful. She wants to write clearly without denying ambiguity and complexity, without resorting to simplification — sometimes using the blank page itself as a response when no other will do.

Rankine's writing — particularly her two 'American lyric' books, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* (with *Just Us* to some extent completing the trilogy, though this latter book takes instead the subtitle 'an American conversation') — exemplifies the broader trend in late twentieth-century poetry towards hybridisation, a trend which the lyric essay genre can itself be understood as part of. Her books are examples of what Ben Lerner describes as 'purposefully accessible works that nevertheless seek to acknowledge the status of language as medium and the self as socially enmeshed', a description he also applies to Nelson's *Bluets*, as well as to Julianna Spahr, Rankine's co-editor for her revealingly-titled anthology *Where Lyric Meets Language*.[8] Lerner describes these works as 'occupying the space where the no-longer-new sentence was' and as 'instances of a consciously post-avant-garde writing that refuses — without in any sense being simple — to advance formal difficulty as a mode of resistance, revolution, or pedagogy'.[9] It is an in-between space captured in Cole Swensen's anthology *American Hybrid*, which includes Rankine's work alongside poets like Peter Gizzi, Jorie Graham, and Alice Notley, writers who challenge the long-ingrained divide of poets into experiment and traditional camps. Swensen writes in the introduction:

> Considering the traits associated with 'conventional' work, such as coherence, linearity, formal clarity, narrative, firm closure, symbolic resonance, and stable voice, and those generally assumed of 'experimental' work, such as non-linearity, juxtaposition, rupture, fragmentation, immanence, multiple perspective, open

[6] Ibid., 477.

[7] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

[8] Ben Lerner, 'After Difficulty', in *The Fate of Difficulty in the Poetry of Our Time*, ed. Charles Altieri and Nicholas D. Nace (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 137.

[9] Ibid. Lerner gestures here at Ron Silliman's 'The New Sentence' (1987), one of the essential theoretical texts on Language writing, in which Silliman proposes a prose that moves like poetry — suggesting, for example, that the disjunction between two sentences can behave something like a line break in a poem.

> form, and resistance to closure, hybrid poets access a wealth of tools, each of which can change dramatically depending on how it is combined with others and the particular role it plays in the composition.[10]

Such a description aims to do away with the so-called 'poetry wars' that characterised much of the twentieth century, the simplistic division of poets into two opposing camps whose contrasting styles necessitated a rejection of their opponents, suggesting instead that younger poets who have grown up with a greater variety of models can borrow freely from both sides, combining experimental and traditional qualities at will. The lyric essay is an interesting extension of this, one that suggests the essay itself as an alternative path forward out of the poetry wars. That is, the poet turning to the essay may find in it an already existing model for combining the stable voice, narrative impulse, and desire for clarity of traditional lyric poetry with the non-linearity, juxtaposition, and resistance to closure associated with the anti-lyricists — for the essay, as a form, already contains within it these apparently divergent qualities. Furthermore, the essay's dialectical history — its continual movement between its opposite poles of compaction and digression, digestion and rawness, selectivity and encyclopedic comprehensiveness — further challenges the dichotomies of the poetry wars, suggesting instead that a form is richer and more useful the more apparently irreconcilable its qualities are; hence, perhaps, its appeal to writers like Rankine seeking to move beyond such dichotomies.

In both *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*, Rankine develops her desired 'American lyric' — her combination of clear feeling with complicated thinking, of intimate interiority with social and political exteriority — by turning to the essay form. It is a turn that not only allows her to complicate the lyric without making it less accessible, but also to probe further into the relation of public and private selves that is the central concern of her writing. From its beginnings, the essay has struggled to decide if it is an inward-facing genre or an outward-facing one. It is a genre invented in a moment of seclusion: Montaigne retires from public life, withdraws into his bedchamber, and turns his attention to his own mind, his opinions, judgements, and memories. Yet, having retreated, Montaigne devotes his early essays not only to 'solitude' and 'prayer', but also the decidedly public topics of military tactics and educating children. The stereotype of the solitary essayist, withdrawn and alone with his thoughts, is illusory even at the essay's beginnings, for the essay is not a purely private form like autobiography, but a private response to public stimuli: to clothes and coaches, cannibals, commerce, and cruelty. Perhaps it is most accurate to

[10] Swensen, Introduction Cole Swensen and David St. John, eds., *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry* (New York: Norton, 2009), xxi.

say that the essay feels at home in half-private, half-public spaces. Bacon's study is used for both 'privateness and retiring' and for 'the judgment and disposition of business'; indeed we find these activities occurring, simultaneously, within the same sentence.[11] Hazlitt loves going on a journey for it allows him the solitude of the crowd, the freedom to be by himself in public, concluding: 'I am then never less alone than when alone'.[12] The essay is the ideal form for Rankine to explore how there is 'no private world that doesn't include the dynamics of my political and social world', for it exists at the point where private meets public, where society and the individual collide and interact:[13] a meeting the essay examines from both sides of the divide, sometimes from within, sometimes from without, and sometimes from both places simultaneously.

Yet this turn to the essay does not necessitate, for Rankine, an abandonment of the lyric, for as several recent critics have noted, the lyric poet too, with his 'ambiguous voice, straddling the line between public importance and private reflection', must 'worry necessarily at the boundary between public and private'.[14] The essay, in the American lyrics, is an extension of this worrying, as we shall see throughout this chapter, tracing Rankine's journey from *Plot* to *Citizen*. Furthermore, it is an example of how Rankine loves 'finding the lyric in nontraditional spaces', a statement she makes in direct response to the idea that *Citizen* might be read as 'lyric essay'.[15] Rankine rejects what Gillian White calls 'lyric shame', proudly using the term 'lyric' in the subtitles of her two most successful books; she follows White in 'neither attempt[ing] to rescue lyrics from themselves nor shame them out of the canon', instead seeking to 'find new modes of lyric reading and writing' by remaining 'aware that every private utterance is also constituted by its participation in discursive norms'.[16] By using the adjective 'American' to modulate the lyric rather than wholly embrace or reject it, as well as by bringing it into dialogue with the form of the essay, Rankine seeks a poetry that is neither lyric nor anti-lyric, but somewhere in-between. She also rejects the idea that the lyric itself is apolitical, following poets such as Adrienne Rich, an important influence, who insist that private, inward-focused lyric poetry can still play a pivotal role in social change. Rich writes in 'Blood, Bread, and Poetry' of how she felt driven 'to bring together in my poems the political world "out there" — the world of children dynamited or napalmed, of the urban ghetto and

[11] Francis Bacon, 'Of Studies', *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1985), 209.

[12] William Hazlitt, 'On Going a Journey', *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), 6:181.

[13] Rankine, 'Art of Poetry'.

[14] Ian Patterson, 'No Man Is an I: Recent Developments in the Lyric', in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 220; Paul Allen Miller, *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness: The Birth of a Genre from Archaic Greece to Augustan Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 126.

[15] Rankine, 'Art of Poetry'.

[16] Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 34-35.

militarist violence — and the supposedly private, lyrical world of sex and of male/female relationships'.[17] In fact, for Rich, as for Rankine, it is the very solitariness of poetry that makes it able to most truthfully speak of, and thus change, the outside world: 'poetry is liberative language, connecting the fragments within us, connecting us to others like and unlike ourselves, replenishing our desire'.[18] The lyric's public power may come, paradoxically, from its own privacy and inwardness — the power, as Adorno put it, to 'attain universality through unrestrained individuation', 'embody[ing] the whole all the more cogently, the more it expresses itself'.[19]

In this chapter, I show how Rankine uses the complicated relationship between the essay and lyric forms to explore the equally complicated relationship between the public and the private. Beginning with her three pre-'American lyric' works, I explore how her early poetry describes the hidden processes of both feeling and judgement, processes which take place inside the space of the body, but which are nonetheless subject to forces from the outside world. For Rankine, lyric poetry is the realm of feeling, and feeling is something which takes place within the body: poetry 'rushes in to the body feeling in the world'; it is language 'as it resonates up against bodies'.[20] She writes, in 2000, of how her early poems 'attempt to replicate the sensation of a sharp wind against the uncovered face, the open wound… the deafening silence enveloping the body in sensation', noting that 'nothing is before feeling' and that 'to live is to feel'.[21] Her poetry ventures inside this body, inhabiting the invisible, subterranean spaces of body and mind — spaces 'underneath the surface'. Yet this space is never free from outside influence, with even the most interior-focused lyric poems having suggestions of the outside world within them. In particular, I explore how *Plot* — Rankine's third collection, in which she tells the story of a pregnancy through nine sections of dense, punning lyricism — prepares us for the American lyrics by finding, in the womb of the mother, a space which is already fairly essayistic. Though a different kind of enclosed, cosy space than, say, Montaigne's bedchamber, the womb, in its privacy, intimacy, and darkness, its embryonic thinking, and its positioning of itself on the boundary between public and private, proves a suitable environment for hints of the essaying Rankine will later explore more explicitly in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen*.

I then turn to the first of Rankine's 'American lyrics', *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, to show how

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[17] Adrienne Rich, 'Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet', in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1994), 181.

[18] Rich, quoted in Rankine's introduction to Rich, *Collected Poems*, xxxvii.

[19] Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 38; 45.

[20] Claudia Rankine, 'Interview: Claudia Rankine, 2015 Forward Prizes Best Collection Winner', interview by National Poetry Day, YouTube Video, 28 September 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av2CGzVoMLQ.

[21] Rankine, quoted in contributors section of *The New Young American Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Kevin Prufer (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 235.

Rankine expands beyond the individual body to also include the glut of materials outside of that body, colliding into and assailing it. Though *Plot* shows some movement towards this — 'this assemblage, its associated distortions, bewilders me', the poet writes at one point, before collaging dialogue from the television, a technique used extensively throughout *Lonely*[22] — it is only with the American lyrics that this collision of outside and inside worlds, one of the defining and particular features of Rankine's writing, hits with full force. *Lonely* is a book simultaneously about the interior space of an individual consciousness and about the state of the United States: 'an American lyric'. To achieve this duality, Rankine expands her lyric, mixing it with more essayistic prose. This hybridisation is not done (or not only done) to convey the indeterminacy, confusion, numbness, and malaise of modern life — though it does have the effect of enhancing these impressions in the work, Rankine has already shown her poetry as capable of capturing such moods. Rather, it is done to explore the connections, parallels, and, ultimately, the codependency between the poet's thinking-feeling body, with its interior consciousness, and the external country, the outside world of America. The images and motifs throughout the book — damaged livers, noisy static, numbing drugs — are afflictions of both the body and the body-politic, of both individual and nation. *Lonely* shows how what happens on a large, public scale and what happens on a private, bodily scale can often reflect each other. There is a mirroring between the two throughout the work, which allows us to read one through the other, as though each are acting as the tenor and vehicle in a two-way metaphor. This mirroring is what allows us to read inner in outer and outer in inner, turning even the most private, insular lyric poem into a political statement, and even the most outward, public-facing essay into a revelation of the essayist's inner being. As evoked by the image of the United States with a failing liver, society's illnesses become people's illnesses, both real and metaphorical, and in turn people's illnesses become those of society. *Lonely* finds Rankine writing the kind of poetry that her co-editor, Spahr, calls for in the introduction of their anthology of *American Women Poets*: 'lyrics that reveal how our private intimacies have public obligations and ramifications, how intimacy has a social bond with shared meaning'.[23]

Ten years later, Rankine uses the subtitle 'an American lyric' again, for her landmark work *Citizen*. Only now, the overtones of that adjective 'American' have changed. Whereas in *Lonely*, there is a sense that the use of 'American' is almost ironising, mocking the very idea of a personal, individual lyric in an always-expanding, always-proliferating America, in *Citizen* the 'American' feels more sincere, making a claim for American citizenship for those who some Americans would

[22] Claudia Rankine, *Plot* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 20.

[23] Spahr, introduction to Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr, eds., *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Wesleyan Poetry (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 16.

(equating Americanness with whiteness) like to diminish as 'less' American: that is, black American citizens. I *am* an American citizen, the title seems to say, and thus this *is* an American lyric. In her introduction to *The Racial Imaginary*, Rankine writes (with fellow editor Beth Loffreda) of how it is important for poets '[t]o not simply assume that the most private, interior, emotional spaces of existence — the spaces that are supposed to be the proper material of the lyric and the fictive — are… somehow beyond race'.[24] *Citizen* finds Rankine using the form she developed in *Lonely* — one that shows, so effectively, how private and public, inner and outer, affect and mirror each other — to specifically challenge this assumption. It finds her using the lyric essay with a renewed purpose: to expose and reveal the realities of racism in a supposedly 'post-racial' twenty-first-century America. Ultimately, we find that, by the time of *Citizen*, the formal innovations of the lyric essay matter less than what this newly created form is used for.

Lyric as the Feeling Body in Rankine's Early Poetry

The seeds of Rankine's 'American lyrics' are present right from the first poem of her first book, tellingly titled *Nothing in Nature is Private*, which interrogates the possibility of true solitude. While her early poems do not engage directly with the essay form, they nonetheless find her exploring what Stephanie Burt calls the 'social phenomenology of place'[25] — the idea that where we are determines who we are — an idea that will later lead her, in the American lyrics, to combine the essay and lyric forms. These early poems lay the groundwork for her interrogation of how easily and unavoidably the outside world gets inside the body, is breathed into it like air, or taken into it like light. 'American Light' opens the collection:

> In the lit landscape, in its peeled
> back places, making the space
> uncomfortable, representing no fault
> in the self is a shadow
> of a gesture of wanting, coveting
> the American light.[26]

[24] Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap, eds., *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2015), 18. The book, an anthology of essays and 'open letters' about race, shares its name with an organisation created by Rankine using the money from her 2016 MacArthur Genius Grant, which she is also on the board of. See: https://theracialimaginary.org/about.

[25] Stephanie Burt, *The Poem Is You: 60 Contemporary American Poems and How to Read Them* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 350.

[26] Claudia Rankine, *Nothing in Nature Is Private* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1994), 2.

Nothing here escapes the notion of society, of America, which colours even the light. Like that light, it touches everything, peeling back the landscape and revealing what is underneath it. Nothing is hidden from it, so that even if the poet travels deep inside the self, into the shadow of their self, they will find America. Yet the central noun in the stanza, the actual subject of the sentence, is in fact that word 'shadow', the *absence* of the 'American light'. A sense of the subject as simultaneously not a part of America and yet unable to escape America — a sense which *Citizen* will later portray as the central paradox of being a black person in America — is present here in Rankine's first poem. On one level, that loaded word 'American' seems to dissolve any clear boundary between public and private: the American citizen carries America with them wherever they go, whether into their bedrooms or outside of the country. Yet they are also always outside of America, which remains elusive, an idea that cannot be concretised or even seen: like light, it is only sensed through what it touches and reveals, and, equally, through what it neglects, what it leaves in shadow.

Rankine's second collection, *The End of the Alphabet*, continues this interest in how interior lives are exposed to and shaped by exterior realities. She focuses here more closely on the body — the 'realm of feeling' which she identifies as the domain of the lyric — as she evokes, in a series of difficult, fragmented poems, a woman's body suffering through an abusive relationship, a pregnancy, and a separation. The woman's body is opened up by the poems to both world and reader; it is peeled back so that we can see inside it, as in the first poem, 'Overview is a place': 'left the body open for the moon to break into, / unspooling disadvantage.'[27] The moon breaking into the body recalls the American light from her previous collection, shining into 'the peeled back places'. Here that light is moonlight, nocturnal light, introducing a sense of the nighttime as the time of intimacy, in contrast to the public daytime, an association we find repeatedly throughout her work, as in the opening of *Citizen*, which invites us into the wandering mind of the essayist as she falls asleep. Again we find the lyric primed, here, for a later entangling with the essay, its candlelit lucubrations. Furthermore, we again find, in this private, nighttime space, unavoidable traces of the outside world — the 'disadvantage' (implicitly that faced by the woman *as* a woman, and a word which inevitably implies the social context from which it draws its sense, by comparison with others' advantage) depicted here as 'unspooling' (a word which suggests it both being revealed, unravelled like a mystery, but also, perhaps, partially undone, the knot of disadvantage loosened in this exposed, exposing space of the poem). A similar moment comes in a later poem, 'The Quotidian':

[27] Claudia Rankine, *The End of the Alphabet* (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 4.

I am cold. And in this next breath,
the same waking,

the same hauling of debris. I am
here in the skin of… otherwise[28]

We begin in the body (its coldness, its breath) and thus the space of the lyric; but *within* here, indeed within the space of the breath itself, the 'debris' of the outside world is 'haul[ed]' up, and the poet finds themselves 'in the skin of… otherwise' — a feeling of not being entirely in one's own skin, or of not having full ownership of it, which is again dramatised later on in *Citizen*. Throughout *Alphabet*, Rankine finds the outside world by burrowing into interior experience in this way. One is struck, repeatedly, by how exposed the poems feel, despite their interiority — like the woman who 'peeled her face off, ran / her hand over its last expression', these are poems of exposed nerves, of the 'sharp wind against the uncovered face'.[29]

As well as these metaphors of opening up the body, there are continual metaphors throughout Rankine's early poetry of diving under and into the body's hidden depths, something particularly detectable in her third collection, *Plot*. The book's nine sections track the nine months of a pregnancy, describing the thoughts and feelings of an expectant mother as she grows, within her, a baby. Beginning, tellingly, with the word 'submerged', the book reads as though unfolding in an interior, underwater space, filled with liquid imagery (pools, rain, streams) and images of being under the surface. In a poem about morning sickness, for example, we have a deluge of wet and watery language, connected by frequent, slippery ellipses, as though the words are flowing into one another: 'downpour', 'saturated', 'glossiness poured in', 'paddling, paddling', 'saliva… its silvery sick / slippery sickness sicks'.[30] The poet is in heavy rain, crossing a bridge, but she also feels wet and rainy on the inside, like 'a dripping leaf folded to fever's will';[31] again, what is outside and what is inside are connected. This equation of the body with water is something which again sets up Rankine's later thinking in *Citizen*, particularly the sections on Hurricane Katrina and the closing use of Turner's slave ship.[32] It also foregrounds *Citizen*'s reimagining of Lowell's *Life Studies*, in the line 'the Atlantic ocean breaking on our heads', an allusion which Javadizadeh argues has

[28] Ibid., 100. Ellipsis in original.
[29] Ibid., 76.
[30] Rankine, *Plot*, 32.
[31] Ibid., 33.
[32] See Bella Adams, 'Black Lives/White Backgrounds: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Critical Race Theory', *Comparative American Studies* 15, no. 1–2 (3 April 2017): 60-61, for a discussion of the water imagery in these two sections.

different resonance for black Americans, for whom the Atlantic ocean is not only something external but also something carried in their history, in their bodies, through its role in the Atlantic slave trade; thus, for the Atlantic ocean to 'break over' the black body is not purely symbolic, but has literal content: '[w]hat had been, for Lowell, a simile ("your old-fashioned tirade—/ loving, rapid, merciless—/ breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head") becomes, for Rankine, a memory whose content is literal and collective'.[33] Similarly, in *Plot*, the equation between the 'downpour' inside the pregnant protagonist's body with the wet, rainy environments she finds herself in has literal *as well as* metaphorical content: the liquid lyric evokes the amniotic fluid, as well as the amorphous, fluid feelings of the expectant mother.

This prevalence of watery and liquid imagery also gives us the metaphor of the surface, which in turn acts as a metaphor for the surface or skin of the body, the point of contact where inner meets outer, which will later become the focal point of the 'American lyrics'. *Plot* continually invites us under this surface, into spaces which are 'subdued, subsumed, sub… / merge[d]'; if 'the surface is meant to be the concealer', then the poet is interested in revealing what is concealed.[34] At the same time, the poems emphasise the surface itself, bringing attention (through the continued breaking of it) to how it conceals, and to how what is *at* the surface structures what is *under* it. That is, these are poems which are both on and under the surface simultaneously — preparing us, again, for the American lyrics, where the same duality is explored through the meeting of essay and lyric. Take the poem 'Eight Sketches', which features large boxes occupying the page, with text appearing both within and below the boxes: both 'on' and 'under' the representation of surface.[35] The word 'surface' itself also appears in each of the eight sketches making up the poem, mostly underneath the boxed text: that is, underneath the surface represented graphically on the page. Even under the surface, the 'surface' remains present; the surface itself always remains (like the body of the pregnant woman, or the bodies of black Americans in *Citizen*) visible; what is experienced at the surface (on the skin) is also experienced inside the body, carried within the body. At the same time, the word often appears in the context of being broken or pierced: 'the smoldering other surfacing up'; 'opens on to surface'; 'erupts the surface'; 'the ruptured surface'.[36] Rankine suggests here that her poetry is itself doing a kind of violence to surfaces, revealing under the skin of the body what some would prefer to stay there — revealing, perhaps, what Audre Lorde called, in 'Poetry is Not a Luxury', the 'woman's place of power', which is 'neither white nor

[33] Rankine, *Citizen*, 73; Javadizadeh, 'Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads', 487.
[34] Rankine, *Plot*, 32. Ellipsis in original.
[35] Ibid., 37-45.
[36] Ibid.

surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep'.[37] Or, to draw on another of Rankine's influences, what Adrienne Rich called the 'wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth' — that is, the reality of what dwells under the surface, beneath the water's reflective sheen, or what Rankine herself, writing of Rich, describes as the reality of other people's lives 'echo[ing] past the silences'.[38] For all three poets, lyric poetry's power is that it can take us under surfaces, into otherwise hidden spaces, permeating even the darkest, most forgotten corners.[39]

Both the liquid imagery and the recurring metaphor of being under the surface take us inside the body, specifically into the space of the womb. The 'hormonal trash heap' in which the foetus develops acts as an ideal metaphor for lyric poetry itself, as a space in which Rankine can capture the development of thoughts and feelings as they occur, tracing them from their earliest, nascent stages.[40] Her poems are lively interior spaces, full of puns and wordplay, in which words themselves behave like cells, proliferating, duplicating, mutating. In one sequence based around the idea of 'Proximity', she uses close internal rhymes as a linguistic analogy for pregnancy itself, nestling one word inside another like an embryo inside a mother's womb: 'clock to lock', 'stuck to tuck', 'able tables'; 'blink and the link is gone'.[41] It is an example of a kind of wordplay which begins with the book's subtitle, 'inverse', which acts a pun on 'in verse' while also suggesting the underworld, the world beneath the surface, of the foetus. It also, as Caitlyn Newcomer has noted, suggests an 'inversion' of the usual movement of 'plot', reversing it so that it ends not in death but in life.[42] If narratives traditionally move towards endings, towards a kind of death, then lyric poetry here moves towards beginnings: towards the surface, which it eventually breaks in the moment of birth. The pun on inverse appears again in the poem '7:23 AM': 'oh Liv, must you insist on rot in the plot to continue? Must you turn your life on its head, inverse the process, live its evil'.[43] These lines are thick with wordplay: 'invers[ing] the process' is both the poet's writing about the process of motherhood, but also a description of poetic thought, in which meanings and their opposites can co-exist. This is picked up in the play with the word 'live', which reversed (turned on its head) is 'evil', as well as in 'turn' which, like 'verse', has a double, poetry-specific connotation. 'Live' also

[37] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 37.

[38] Rich, 'Diving into the Wreck', *Collected Poems*, 55; Rankine, introduction to Rich, *Collected Poems*, xxxviii.

[39] Like Rankine, many of Rich's poems take place at night — see, for example, 'Nightbreak', '5.30 AM', and 'Orion' from *Leaflets*, as well as 'After Dark' from *Necessities of Love*, 'Dreamwood' from *Time's Power*, 'Darklight' from *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, and the whole collection *The Dream of a Common Language* — again suggesting an equation of the lyric with the privacy of the nighttime, as well as an overlap with the lucubrations of the essay. The lyric's revelation of what is hidden under surfaces is, perhaps, analogous to a light shone into the darkness, taking us back to the 'American light' of Rankine's first poem.

[40] Rankine, *Plot*, 6.

[41] Ibid., 25-34.

[42] Caitlin E. Newcomer, 'Casting a Shadow from Flesh to Canvas: Claudia Rankine's *Plot* and the Gendered Textual Body', *Genre* 47, no. 3 (1 September 2014): 363-64.

[43] Rankine, *Plot*, 25.

picks up on 'Liv', the protagonist's name, which is itself a pun on the pregnant woman as the mother of life, and foreshadows the 'liver' motif in *Lonely*.

The self-consciously playful, punning style of this verse is, to some extent, later eschewed (we might say, submerged) by Rankine's turn to the prose essay in *Lonely* and *Citizen*, and her desire to move towards greater clarity and accessibility in those works. Yet the continuities between these early books, especially *Plot*, and the 'American lyrics' that follow it are greater than the dissimilarities. As I have suggested, the relationship between inner and outer, public and private, is there from Rankine's first poem, traceable through her play with the ideas of surfaces and depths, and her continued interest in the adjective 'American'. In *Plot*, we find her experimenting with visual arrangements on the page, in poems like 'Eight Sketches' and later the 'Beached Debris' series, using boxes that are not unlike the television screens that litter the pages of *Lonely*; we also find her experimenting with prose fragments, albeit in a more condensed and difficult prose that largely avoids the essayistic tone later adopted in, for example, the Serena Williams essay in *Citizen*. Yet even these bits of wordplay-dense lyrical prose arguably find her preparing for her later adoption of the essay form — for there is something notably essayistic about their unfinished, embryonic way of thinking. Though there is a play throughout the book with the idea of the imagined baby as an ideal or a perfect example — 'the exemplar felt and seen as one'[44] — the text itself is filled not with ideal, perfect poems but with suggested, temporary ones, with thoughts and feelings as they come into being. That is, the poems have a live, developing quality that renders them already somewhat essayistic. As such, the essay's interjection into the lyric in *Lonely* does not feel like a disruption but a deepening of Rankine's earlier work: a continuation of the same under-the-surface, thinking-and-feeling space of the body, caught between private and public, inner and outer, which her early poetry lays bare.

The Overload of the Essay

What, then, *is* different about *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the book which followed *Plot*? What caused this book, in particular, to be grouped together with other lyric essays, in a way in which Rankine's earlier work had not been? Why, when her first three books had comfortably been labelled as 'poems', did the genre of her work come into question when she came to write her two 'American lyrics'? Maggie Nelson, for example, describes the book as 'genre-defying', arguing that it 'seriously challenges' traditional definitions of the lyric as short, personal, and song-like, and instead 'presumes that a "lyric" should or can be big enough to house a disjunctive prose meditation which

[44] Ibid., 39.

incorporates photographs, elaborate footnotes, and plenty of white space, and which weighs on everything'.[45] Indeed, the apparent challenge that the work presented to conventional ideas of lyric appeared to be too much for some readers, with Anthony Reed noting that many 'critics have shied away from Rankine's subtitle, referring to the work either as "poetic prose," neither lyric nor even poetry, or, owing to its strategy of textual and visual citation, as a "multi-genre text" somewhere between verse and essay, punctuated and augmented by images'.[46] Yet if, as I have argued, the book is a continuation of her earlier experiments with the lyric form, rather than something radically different from them, then why this sudden panic over its genre?

One possible answer is that *Lonely* introduces a huge volume of material external to the body. Though books like *Plot* and *Alphabet* contain a swirling mixture of eclectic material, there is always a sense that this material is contained within one consciousness, one body — that is, within the traditional site of, or voice of, the lyric. *Lonely*, by contrast, bombards this body with the outside world, while simultaneously continuing Rankine's exploration of what goes on under its surface. We see this in the two covers under which the book has been published. In its initial run, on Graywolf Press, the title is spelled out on a large billboard, towering over a field of sunflowers; in its run on Penguin, the image of a static-filled television, repeated throughout the book itself, takes centre stage. Both images suggest what Graywolf in their press release describe as the 'the rapacious and media-driven assault on selfhood that is contemporary America', the post-9/11 world with which the book reckons.[47] It is a book with several overlapping concerns — death, television, medication, the war on terror, loneliness — which, together, give a sense of contemporary everyday life and its overload of information, colliding with the eyes, ears, and skin of the contemporary body.

To present this bombardment of outside media, Rankine draws from the tradition of the essay, a form which has continually reckoned with the world's haphazardness and arbitrariness. The repeated opening of sections with the word 'or', for example, are decidedly essayistic, progressing with the feeling of the essayist picking up materials as she finds them: 'Or one begins asking oneself'; 'Or say the eyes are resting when the phone rings'; 'Or say a friend develops Alzheimer's'.[48] The self-consciously poetic form of *Plot*, in which new material is generated through the language itself, through rhymes, puns, and wordplay, is abandoned. Instead, Rankine creates

[45] Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 216.

[46] Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 108.

[47] 'Don't Let Me Be Lonely', *Graywolf Press*, accessed 22 October 2021, https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/dont-let-me-be-lonely.

[48] Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin, 2017), 7; 8; 17.

the feeling that her material is thought of on the spot, plucked from the air — or, perhaps, beamed through the television screen, or else glimpsed flitting past on a roadside billboard. We move, in one section, from a story about an artificial heart to a conversation about Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* to a Caribbean vacation; in another, between brief and apparently unconnected meditations on Mahalia Jackson, dreams, Auschwitz survivors, and Arafat.[49] Such disjunction demonstrates, again, Rankine's continuity with the Language poets, and might be read as an example of Silliman's 'new sentence' — which placed things loosely together, neither fully autonomous nor fully joined-up, and always resisting what Silliman called 'syllogistic movement', the building of one idea upon another towards a conclusion[50] — expanded to the length of the paragraph: a kind of macro-parataxis. Certainly, *Lonely* repeatedly fails 'to escape from atomized subject areas, projects, and errands into longer, connected stretches of subjectively meaningful narrative', a description originally used by Bob Perelman to evoke the 'postindustrial experience' of which the paratactic sentence was, he argued, the 'dominant mode'.[51] Yet there is also something particularly essayistic about Rankine's unwillingness to connect, or make subordinate, one part of her text to another; as Jeff Porter notes, 'the essay is famous for rambling, its paratactic structure favoring breaks and digressions over continuity'.[52] There is a lack of deliberateness, in *Lonely*, a sense of happening upon its various subjects, which suggests the essayist's improvisational thinking, its making do with what is to hand.

Alongside this bombardment of essayistic material, through which she conveys the fractured society of post-9/11 America, Rankine continues to draw on the lyrical techniques of her earlier work, particularly its ability to take us underneath the surface of the body and into the realm of private, inner feeling, to capture what it feels like to live in this America, in its crushing flows of information, its cognitive and sensory overload. The mood is, overwhelmingly, one of uncertainty and confusion. Just a few sentences in, the poet describes her mother with the line: 'deep within her was an everlasting shrug'.[53] The phrase not only suggests uncertainty (the shrug of not knowing how to respond) but is, itself, uncertain, conveying overlapping contradictions: the shrug is 'everlasting', yet a shrug, a movement, must happen in time. The shrug, too, happens 'within' her, yet by its nature is an external movement, a gesture of the shoulders. A similar effect is found a few sentences later, when the poet comes home to find her father in tears after the death

[49] Ibid., 71-73; 97-100.

[50] Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof Books, 1987), 91.

[51] Bob Perelman, 'Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice', *American Literature* 65, no. 2 (1993): 313.

[52] Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter, eds., *Understanding the Essay* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012), ix.

[53] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 5.

of his mother:

> He had a look that was unfamiliar; it was flooded, so leaking. I climbed the steps as far away from him as I could get. He was breaking or broken. Or, to be more precise, he looked to me like someone understanding his aloneness. Loneliness.[54]

The odd addition of 'so' in the phrase 'it was flooded, so leaking' (not needed for the meaning, which would in fact be clearer without it) combines two possible interpretations: 'so' as a qualifier (that is, 'it was [very] flooded, very leaking') and 'so' as an explanation (that is, 'it was flooded, therefore leaking'.) *Lonely* is, like *Plot* before it, full of this lyrical wordplay: adverbs where we would expect nouns ('a momentary lapse of happily') or muddlings of past and present ('what the hell do you think you were doing?' — a phrase which seems ordinary but which through Rankine's repetition of it and heightened attention to it starts to become strange).[55] Such examples are both symptomatic of and resonant with the feelings of indeterminacy which are the chief response in the book to the poet's sense of information overload.

Lonely, then, uses the essay to give us the raw materials of life as they hit the palate, as they collide with the thinking-feeling body, while simultaneously using the lyric to evoke the uncertain feelings this deluge of material creates, to capture the body trying (and failing) to navigate the essayistic detritus around it. Whereas in *Plot* these materials might have formed the seeds of new ideas, developing into poetic embryos, in *Lonely* there are simply too many stimuli, too many materials, for them to latch onto anything. Instead, they drift around the poet, and the poet drifts around among them. They are not worked through or processed; at best they are 'worried', a word Rankine brings back to its original meaning: 'a dog's action of biting and shaking an animal so as to injure or kill it'.[56] The verb captures how materials are dealt with throughout the book. This is not the embryonic blossoming of ideas but rather ideas shaken until numb, the subject desiring to stun each new stimulus so that it cannot hurt the body. It is the re-reversal of the 'inversed' *Plot,* so that death (to 'kill') again becomes the end-point of all action, with each section of the book ending in the same image of grey static: a still TV, a dead picture. This action may be, as Adam Phillips writes of worrying (again bringing it back to its original sense), an 'attempt at simplification', 'a defence against dreaming'.[57] Fearful of what might enter their dreams when so much is rushing at them, the dreamer shuts down entirely, worrying everything to death.

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 7; 36.
[56] Ibid., 41.
[57] Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 55; 58.

The poet's failure to process the deluge of raw material from the outside world finds its clearest expression in the book's discussion of liver failure. Initially introduced as a purely medical phenomenon ('I am writing a book on hepatotoxicity, also known as liver failure'[58]), the idea soon gains metaphorical potency. This is most explicitly conveyed by an image of a liver attached to a map of the United States, which in turn is contained within a person's body.[59] The image meshes together citizen and state, suggesting that as one gets sick, so too does the other: a visual representation of what the 'American lyrics' are doing as a whole. Indeed, hepatotoxicity here is not just a social but also a textual problem. One of the liver's jobs is to filter the blood and remove toxic material. *Lonely* is a book (and a consciousness) without such a filter: everything is let into it. It is telling that, immediately following this passage on the liver, the poet is overwhelmed again by the onslaught of television news, specifically how it lets into the private home the horror of racist violence: 'I go to my bedroom to put on socks because my toes could be cold and on the TV is Abner Louima'.[60] This is the daily noise that American citizens, especially black American citizens, must live with. There is no escaping this noise, but nor is there any way to filter it into something meaningful, to understand it, as captured on the next page: '[a]ll the shots, all forty-one never add up, never become plural, and will not stay in the past'.[61] The line captures the poet trying to process information — to 'add [it] up', to historicise it as 'past' — but failing, able only 'to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut' in response.[62] Mind, body, text, and country are all afflicted here by the same sickness. This is a departure from *Plot*, whose protagonist, Liv, not only recalls the liver through her name but also acts as a functioning filter for her baby, a baby which relies on her body to filter 'what comes through the bloodstream'.[63] Both Liv and liver are life-givers. In *Lonely*, that life-giving power of the liver continually fails, leading to a kind of death, or half-death.

Indeed, throughout the book we find a continual confusion over who is dead and who is alive — what we might think of as a failure to 'filter out' life from death, or more broadly a failure of the liver to give life. This is a book in which it is difficult or impossible for both reader and poet to determine who is really dead. Examples abound. Within just a few pages we find: rescue workers in 9/11 who 'shadow the dead, are themselves deadened'; Antigone who is living but 'already dead'; a stranger who remarks that he has no regrets about his life, to which Rankine responds: 'I

[58] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 53.
[59] Ibid., 54.
[60] Ibid., 56. Louima was brutally attacked and sexually assaulted by New York police officers in 1997.
[61] Ibid., 57. The 'forty-one' shots refer here to the 1999 killing of unarmed street vendor Ahmed Amadou Diallo by four New York police officers, who were later acquitted at trial.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Rankine, *Plot*, 11.

think he means he could live with his own death'.[64] Collectively, they create a sense of a consciousness (and a country) in a kind of limbo, unable to settle, half-dead and half-alive. The book opens with a similar run of moments of confusion around death, beginning with the poet's uncertainty as a child about how dead actors could still be alive on screen: 'every movie I saw in the third grade compelled me to ask, Is he dead? Is she dead?'.[65] Shortly after, she hears a dialogue on television:

> Man: He is deceased?
> Boy: He is dead to me.
> Man: So he is not deceased?
> Boy: I don't know. He could be dead.
> Man: Is he or is he not dead?[66]

The poet then responds with her own dialogue:

> I thought I was dead.
> You thought you were dead?
> I thought I was.
> Did you feel dead?[67]

This is not the Socratic dialogue on which the essay is based, zig-zagging its way towards truth, but something more like a circular monologue, arriving nowhere; though spread across multiple voices, the lines feel like the looping, interior thoughts of a single thinker. The cycling, repetitive sentences suggest a continual flickering into death without arriving at it, as though the poet is straddling the line between life and death, undecided about which side they fall. It is a feeling later linked to race through the poet's observation that black people are 'too close to dead' to be fully living, a feeling drawn out more explicitly in *Citizen*, as when she writes of Rodney King's murder: '[b]efore it happened, it had happened and happened'.[68] The confusion between life and death finds a visual representation, too, in the repeated image of a TV displaying static. Is this an image of life or death? It is difficult to tell: the picture is dead, but the TV is still technically on; the static is the erasure of the picture, the end of the broadcast, but it is also noise, information, buzz, hiss: kinds of life, or at least kinds of activity. In contrast to the ultrasound images described in *Plot*,

[64] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 82-85.
[65] Ibid., 6.
[66] Ibid., 15.
[67] Ibid.,16.
[68] Ibid., 23; *Citizen*, 116.

which are visually similar ('the screen inked in, black and white'[69]) but contrastingly sharp with a clear sense of life, these images are unreadable, indecipherable as markers of either life or death; they are literally untranslatable into words, and so simply printed, without captions, on page after page.

These three ideas — the poet worrying her materials; the idea of the hepatotoxic liver failing to effectively filter those materials; the subsequent sense of the poet in limbo, not quite living and not quite dead — collectively suggest a consciousness whose thinking-feeling body is no longer able to function in the way we saw in Rankine's earlier works. Put simply, the poet is no longer able to think or feel clearly. Throughout *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the poet finds her senses dulled and numbed. In response, she turns to drugs and television — the book's two dominant motifs; the only things which make sense to such a numb body — to dull and numb her body further. Drugs and television are both causes and effects of the modern malaise the book investigates: both numb the body but are also turned to in response to the body's numbness. Liver failure, specifically, is both treated with drugs and also often caused by drugs: '55 percent of the time liver failure is drug-induced'.[70] The same is true of the metaphorical hepatotoxicity which afflicts both the book and America: it is the result of a cycle of cause and effect. We sense this in the circularity with which Rankine writes about both drugs and television in the book, as in sentences like '[t]ry to convince your doctor that taking a pill every day for depression is depressing', a slogan which Mark Tabone notes 'punctuates the way in which such commoditized health "products" often encapsulate both disease and cure at once'.[71] The poetic self-consciousness previously exercised more openly on the level of sound and pun is here translated into the parroted-back language of television ('ask your doctor about…'). While in *Plot* this wordplay continually introduced new ideas, here it can only circle back round and languish in place, verging on tautology. This sense of circularity, in which cause and effect are folded together like an ouroboros, is also present when the poet watches television: 'In the night I watch television to help me fall asleep, or I watch television because I cannot sleep'.[72] Television is 'a toxic or atonal part of the book's lyric surround', writes Christopher Nealon, picking up on that conjunction ('or') with which Rankine opens so many of her paragraphs (even critics, it seems, are unable to stick to a single reading of this uncertain, unstable book).[73] It is a conjunction which continually brings us

[69] Rankine, *Plot*, 12.

[70] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 53.

[71] Ibid.; Mark A. Tabone, 'Narrative Wreckage: Terror, Illness, and Healing in the Post-9/11 Poethics of Claudia Rankine', in *Terror in Global Narrative: Representations of 9/11 in the Age of Late-Late Capitalism*, ed. George Fragopoulos and Liliana M. Naydan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 108.

[72] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 29.

[73] Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

backwards, going over the same territory; whereas 'and' allows ideas to accumulate, and 'but' allows them to develop, 'or' simply wipes them off and tries again, or else re-inscribes another idea over the top, in a palimpsest of jumbled notions. The effect continues to the book's final pages, with it ending not in *Plot*'s release of birth, but in a more diffuse, continuous state of simply being 'here': 'here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of', the text leaving us dangling on that preposition, the final noun never coming.[74]

Nealon's word 'atonal' also brings us back, yet again, to the images of television static that appear throughout the book. I have continually referred back to and drawn on these for they are such a potent metaphor for what the text is doing. If the lyric is normally melodic, then one of Rankine's fundamental moves in *Lonely* is to expand it, by combining it with the essay, to include this unfiltered, unmelodious noise as well — a noise which captures, simultaneously, both the disorienting overload of modern American life and the benumbed senses of a populace self-medicating through drugs and television in response to it. Returning to the book's subtitle, we might insinuate that it is this noise that, above all, makes the lyric 'American'. In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Cornel West argues that America often defines itself to itself following moments of crisis, a tradition he traces back to Emerson and his response to the 'identity crisis of the first new nation'.[75] To some extent, *Lonely* fits into such a tradition, capturing the numbness of America as it still reels from the impact of 9/11. Yet the book also comes three years after that crisis, which exists in the text mostly as a looming context, only discussed explicitly towards the end. Instead, this might be more accurately described as a book which *lacks* a crisis, which never isolates, never pins down, the crisis it is responding to. The sharpening, clarifying effects of crisis are absent, leaving only a dull, atonal roar.

The Public-Private Spaces of *Citizen*

By the time Rankine uses the subtitle 'American lyric' again, for 2014's *Citizen*, this dominant image from *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* — of a chunky, cathode-ray tube TV, displaying fuzzy static — feels entirely antiquated, a remnant from another time. The interval between the two books, released almost exactly a decade apart, saw the launch of YouTube, the release of the first iPhone, and the explosion of social media.[76] Whereas in *Lonely*, 'web site' is still two words and Google is a noun

University Press, 2011), 152.

[74] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 131.

[75] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 37-38.

[76] In September 2004, when *Don't Let Be Me Lonely* was released, Facebook was just seven months old. It was still known as 'thefacebook.com' and was restricted to students from certain American universities. Twitter was still more than three years away from its debut; Instagram more than six.

rather than a verb ('[p]erhaps this is the kind of thing I could find out on Google'), by *Citizen*, the internet has become an inextricable and invisible part of our daily lives.[77] Advertisements no longer reach us from towering billboards at the side of the road, but slip imperceptibly between family photos on our Facebook feeds. The most intimate details of our private lives our now shared, voluntarily, on public social networks: as Laurence Scott writes in *The Four-Dimensional Human*, 'our bodies cross through the screens with everything else'.[78] Inversely, news from the outside world is liable to ping to our phones at any moment, all of it equally close to us at all times: a friend having dinner in a restaurant across the city; the President tweeting from the White House; the murder of another black teenager hundreds of miles away. These changes have radically upended our conventional understanding of the categories of public and private. In such a context, the terms 'American' and 'lyric' are not so obviously opposed. What felt both textually and conceptually exciting in *Lonely* — the blurring of the boundaries between private and public, through the combination of essay and lyric; the expansion of the lyric to include the essayistic noise of the outside world — now feels commonplace.

Moreover, this erasure of the boundary between private and public creates problems for the book's investigation into its chief subject: the effects of anti-black racism and racial violence on the lives of black Americans. While race was one of many topics discussed in *Lonely*, the diffuseness of that book is swapped out in *Citizen* for a sustained consideration of what it means to be a black American citizen in the twenty-first century. Moving in the text from private moments of microaggression — defined by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic as 'stunning small encounter[s] with racism, usually unnoticed by members of the majority race'[79] — to publicly-witnessed instances of racism such as the discrimination faced by Serena Williams and Zinedine Zidane, *Citizen* takes Rankine's longstanding interest in the relationship of private and public and applies it to the issue of how black American citizens are, as Baldwin wrote, 'trapped in history and history is trapped in them'.[80] Yet understanding how the private, inner lives of black Americans are affected by the social phenomenon of racism becomes more challenging if the categories of private and public have been dissolved into each other. Such a dissolution strips away both the private and the public self: neither can be seen without the other overlapping it, and so both are

[77] Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, 145; 72. Indeed, the word 'website', with or without a space, now feels antiquated, as though the internet were still a 'site' to be visited, to be travelled *to*, rather than something which is always already there.

[78] Laurence Scott, *The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World* (London: Windmill Books, 2016), 23.

[79] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 179.

[80] James Baldwin, 'Stranger in the Village', in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 119.

made invisible. This is compounded further by the fact that such a dissolution is also one of the effects of racism itself, which strips the black individual of both their private and public selves. One of the paradoxes of racism is that it renders the black body both invisible and too highly visible. When made invisible, black people are denied a public self; when made too visible, when only their skin colour is seen, they are denied a private self. We might read the book's repeated question 'Have you seen their faces?' as a resistance to both of these actions: resisting invisibility by asking 'Have you *seen* their faces?', but also resisting the reduction of a black person to their skin colour, their body, by asking 'Have you seen their *faces*?' Indeed, *Citizen* is full of examples of both sides. On the one hand, it describes how black people are often not seen in public spaces, turned invisible: the poet stands outside a conference room, 'unseen by the two men waiting'; a woman cuts in front of the poet in the drugstore and apologises: 'I didn't see you… I really didn't see you'.[81] On the other hand, it describes occasions where black people have felt 'hypervisible' because of the colour of their skin, a feeling that pervades the book in ways both small (as when an associate blurts out, upon meeting the poet for the first time, 'I didn't know you were black!') and large (as when James Craig Anderson is made into a 'black object' by his killer).[82] Together, both of these actions strip away the boundary of public-private: the same boundary stripped away, Scott suggests, by the devices bringing our private lives online, and beaming the public world into our most private spaces.

In its opening pages, *Citizen* tries to re-inscribe this lost boundary. The opening paragraph re-solidifies the margins of the body, and thus re-establishes the boundary between public and private, putting us back at this specific margin, one which, as I have suggested, the genre of the essay is particularly at home in:

> When you are alone and too tired even to turn on any of your devices, you let yourself linger in a past stacked among your pillows. Usually you are nestled under blankets and the house is empty. Sometimes the moon is missing and beyond the windows the low, gray ceiling seems approachable. Its dark light dims in degrees depending on the density of clouds and you fall back into that which gets reconstructed as metaphor.[83]

Rankine begins here by turning away from 'devices' — away from the very technologies, the phones and tablets, which threaten to dissolve the public-private boundary and make impossible

[81] Rankine, *Citizen*, 50; 77. Elsewhere, we sense such invisibility through the poet's resistance to it: 'you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen' (17).

[82] Ibid., 49; 44; 93.

[83] Ibid., 5

the moment of retreat on which the rest of the book, and its exposure of hidden forms of racism, will depend. Counter-intuitively, the poet must turn away in order to look, must switch off in order to switch on, must retreat from the world, nestling 'under blankets', in order to engage with it, to make it 'approachable'. Similarly, the poet implicitly turns away here from the 'devices' used by black people for dealing with racism, the 'techniques of evasion and compromise that let the poet exist in the present', techniques she will later discuss throughout the book: humming, sighing, staying silent, running, wearing headphones.[84] In order to make these devices visible later in the book, she must first step away from them, just as she must switch off and find a place of true privacy in order to make visible again the relationship between private and public. The turn from devices is also a turn towards the essay, a form which exists at the point where private meets public, at this same moment of retreat: just after the bedroom door has been closed, just as the sun has gone down and the candle has been lit. The OED gives four definitions for device: 'a thing made or adapted for a particular purpose'; 'a plan, scheme or trick'; 'a drawing or design'; '(archaic) design or look'.[85] To turn away from devices, then, is to turn away from purpose, from plans, from designs, and towards their antonyms: purposelessness, the unplanned; that is, towards qualities strongly associated with the essay; towards a free, uninhibited thinking at night. The essay is, we might say, a form but not a formal *device*: it has no design on any purpose, and it proceeds with no plan.

Having turned from devices, we fittingly arrive at the sentence's first verb, to 'linger', to slow down and spend time over, perhaps even waste time over. This 'lingering' occurs in a moment of transition, the day becoming night: the moment of being just about to fall asleep, just about to slip from the waking, outer world into the dreaming, inner world. This is the particular, liminal, part-private and part-public home of the essay form: not just the body but the place the body touches on history. The image of 'a past stacked among your pillows' again suggests this conjunction of the private with the public, the personal with the political: for here we have a past, a history, 'stacking' among — that is, not only nestling among but also constructing, becoming involved in the architecture of — that private, intimate space into which we have been invited, symbolised here as the pillows. Note how this conjunction is conveyed in something as simple as Rankine's pronoun choice: not 'your past' (the purely personal life-history of the subject) nor 'the past' (a claim at an objective history of the world) but rather 'a past': a particular experience of collective history. Having first established this essayistic space, Rankine then brings in the lyric to, once again, take us under the surface of the body, here into sleep: 'dark light dims in degrees

[84] Nick Laird, 'A New Way of Writing About Race', *New York Review of Books* 62, no. 7 (23 April 2015): 39.
[85] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2008), s.v. 'device'.

depending on the density of clouds and you fall back'. The series of close dental alliterations drops us gently, like a fluttering eyelid, into sleep, with the 'fall back' freeing the speaker from both this alliteration and from wakefulness, like a head dropping onto a pillow.

So it is that we arrive, finally, at 'that which gets reconstructed as metaphor', a phrase which, like the turn from devices, sets up the book on both a formal and conceptual level simultaneously. Building on the sense of travelling into sleep, it suggests that we are arriving at thoughts before they are socialised or verbalised, before they are even turned into poetry, suggesting a continuity with the embryonic language of *Plot*. Perhaps the more important meaning, though, is how the phrase introduces the idea that black experience, in a supposedly colourblind, post-racist society, is 'reconstructed' in order to keep it hidden. Much recent critical race theory has argued that colourblindness (the idea of not seeing people's race) does little to alleviate racism, and in many cases has in fact been used to strengthen it, with 'proxies for race' such as eligibility for citizenship used to achieve 'colorbound ends through colorblind means'.[86] For example, since the 1960s, mass incarceration has put a disproportionate number of black people in prison, where they are 'banished to a political and social space not unlike Jim Crow, where discrimination in employment, housing, and access to education [is] perfectly legal'.[87] Black people are discriminated against not as 'blacks', argues Alexander, but as 'criminals'. The word 'criminal', then, is one example of the word 'black' 'reconstructed as metaphor'. *Citizen* begins by resisting these concealing reconstructions, from its title's insistence on black citizenship, through its epigraph's provocation that 'at least they'll see the black' (taken from Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil*), to the moment here, at the close of the opening paragraph, when we travel beyond and behind concealments (underneath 'blankets', underneath the 'low, gray ceiling' of clouds) and into real black experience, into the collected stories and moments of black experience that follow. It is a book where naming things exactly is important, something captured most powerfully in the list of black murder victims at the end of Part VI, with each reprint of the book updating the list with new names underneath it.

Having located herself once again at the boundaries of the body, and having remade those boundaries visible for the reader, Rankine is then free in the rest of *Citizen* to continue her longstanding project of showing how what goes on inside the body and what goes on outside of it are connected. That is, she takes up again the idea of 'American lyric', in which the (lyric) body

[86] George Lispitz, 'The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserves White Supremacy', in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw et al. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 31.

[87] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012), 58.

of the poet and the (essayistic) body of America are one. Following its opening, the book uses the essayistic movement of free association ('the route is associative'[88]) to gradually suggest the full network of ideas and experiences around the issue of race in which the falling-asleep individual participates, in both their public and private lives. It traces lines from the edge of this body into history. In doing so, it makes visible the invisible network in which and through which this body tries to define itself, and through which its citizenship is or is not conferred. The gradual movement of the text, from the individual falling asleep in her bed, through the many smaller moments of privately-experienced racism that make up a large portion of the text, to the high-profile examples of racism featured in Part VI, implies a direct connection between the microaggressions experienced, invisibly, by individuals, and the extreme, highly visible, newsworthy instances of racism; between a white person skipping ahead in the queue at a drugstore because they have failed to see the black person standing in front of them and the killing of Trayvon Martin. At the same time, it also continues to travel *into* the body, under its surface and into the inner experience of the sleeping subject. Rankine uses essayistic techniques to lay out the invisible network of racism, while using lyrical techniques to bring us into this network, this lived reality, which black Americans navigate daily. Though the thinking of the essay takes us continually outwards, to other examples, other images, other names, other stories, the poet reminds us that all these examples are experienced, by those encountering them, inside the body itself, in the effects on the heart, tongue, and lungs that experiences of racism create:

> Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough. After it happened I was at a loss for words.[89]

We are invited, here, into the body itself, with the prose even becoming like a body, not describing a cough but merely coughing: 'cough'. The passage presents us with one of the central paradoxes of racism as it is experienced within the body: that though it has a numbing effect, it is also always sharply felt. The language here mixes together words that suggest painful, sharp feelings and paroxysms ('adrenaline', 'lightning', 'strike') with words that suggest a lack of feeling, an emptying ('dry out', 'clog', 'drown', 'loss'), evoking the paradox of a body which is both sensually heightened and sensually dulled by its experiences of racism. It is one of many such paradoxes in the book: the way racism makes the black subject both invisible and too visible, for example; the way that private spaces have gone public, and public spaces have turned private, leaving both in a kind of

[88] Rankine, *Citizen*, 5.
[89] Ibid., 7

nowhere-land. *Citizen* does not offer any easy responses to these paradoxes, or attempt to prescribe an easy solution to the paralysis they engender. Rather, it attempts only to lay them out as clearly as possible, to see things in their full complexity, and to repeatedly make what is invisible — what is blurred or erased by the continual bleeding of one thing into another — visible again.

Citizen also finds Rankine finding new ways to extend her idea of 'American lyric', such as the book's unique combination of lyrical and essayistic address. We see this hybrid form of address throughout the book, but its effect is perhaps most identifiable in the collages of microaggressions: stories of everyday, often unseen or unnoticed racism, collected from friends and colleagues, as well as from Rankine's own memories. Here is one such example:

> Despite the fact that you have the same sabbatical schedule as everyone else, he says, you are always on sabbatical. You are friends so you respond, *easy*.
>
> What do you mean?
>
> Exactly, what do you mean?[90]

The social dynamic here revolves around the uneasy meaning of that word 'easy', which acts as a gentle warning to the friend that there is an implicitly racist suggestion of laziness in the casual observation about being on sabbatical, but which has other, submerged meanings too: the narrator telling themselves to take it easy, play it cool; the suggestion of how easily such racist sub-tones can creep into conversation between friends. The uneasy address of the poem complicates this social dynamic further. The use of the second person is a reversal of the standard 'lyric I' for the pronoun 'you', a reversal which has the odd effect of turning the reader into the lyric subject of the poem, as though they were (to use Mill's image of the lyric) overhearing their own experience. At the same time, for the many readers who have not experienced such encounters, the 'you' reminds them more sharply than an 'I' would of their distance from the material, demanding, as Raquel Kennon notes, that readers 'contemplate their own subject position and bridge the difference between "you" and "I"'.[91] The address simultaneously invites empathy and invokes distance, without the two necessarily cancelling each other out. This unusual reverse-lyric address also has shades of the direct, intimate address of the essay, with the reader feeling themselves addressed by the 'you', as though in a moment of conversation (like that between the friends); at

[90] Ibid., 47.

[91] Raquel Kennon, 'Uninhabitable Moments: The Symbol of Serena Williams, Rage and Rackets in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*', in *Challenging Misrepresentations of Black Womanhood: Media, Literature and Theory*, ed. Marquita M. Gammage and Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers (London: Anthem Press, 2019), 29.

the same time, it has contrasting shades of an essayist's interior, self-dialogue, the implied ghost of an 'I' addressing *themselves* as 'you' as they relive and remember their own experience. The address itself is a bundle of contradictions, one that evokes the many ways racism itself splits and distorts the self; suggesting, for example, the 'possibility that the "I" might be owned internally but not with the same ease socially, because of the pressures of prejudice, and the erasure of self that is systematic in the face of racism'.[92] Often these effects are furthered by the twisting contradictions of the sentences themselves, as in the example above, where the speaker pivots from 'you have the same sabbatical' to 'you are always on sabbatical', two statements that cannot coexist and yet, in the mind of the friend, do. Even more difficult to parse is the closing question, the repetition of 'what do you mean?'. This might be read as a second line of dialogue, spoken in response to the friend (who would then become the 'you', in this line); or it be might read as a direct address from the narrator (the phantom 'I') to the reader (the 'you'), asking them to consider the 'easy' to which the friend's question (the first use of the question) refers; or it might be the speaker (who is also, because of the reversed lyric address, the reader) addressing themselves in the second person, in a moment of self-dialogue, in response to the friend's initial phrases. Such complex tangles of address are drawn on throughout the book, and give new layers to the book's many repeated questions ('have you seen their faces?', 'what did you say?') and phrases ('you are not the guy and still you fit the description'), through which this ambiguous 'you' rattles.

Citizen then, advances further the lyric essay template established in *Plot* and *Lonely*. It uses the mirroring of outside and inside worlds, which Rankine has been developing since her first book, in order to achieve a very specific purpose: to make the issue of racism visible, at a time and in a country in which it is increasingly difficult to isolate, or even locate, despite its ongoing reality in the lives of many people. By re-establishing the margin between the private and the public in its opening, Citizen re-establishes both sides of this margin as categories for discussion, investigation, and, ultimately, reform. While *Lonely* was perhaps content simply to capture the feeling of living in the modern world, *Citizen* seeks to change it — a trend that continues in Rankine's most recent book, *Just Us* (2021), which even more directly addresses, engages with, and challenges its readers (specifically, its white readers), shifting even more fully to the essay form to do so, a shift which comes, too, with a change in subtitle: 'an American conversation'. Each of the 'American' books continues the thread of the previous, becoming more specific and essayistic as it does so: *Citizen* pulls out the implicit theme of racism that is present in *Lonely*, while *Just Us* repositions the work of *Citizen* and directly addresses its white readers, asking them to engage on a personal level (rather

[92] Owen Bullock, 'The Successful Prose Poem Leaves Behind Its Name', in *British Prose Poetry: The Poems without Lines*, ed. Jane Monson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 231.

than an abstract one) with its ideas — that is, asking them to join in the conversation. Yet this turning further and further *towards* the essay should not be read as a turn *away* from the lyric. Rather, the essay is Rankine's method of expanding the nerves of her poetry, so that they become the nerves not only of a single body but of all bodies, all citizens, all of America. Yet those nerves still do what she has set out to do since the beginning: they register the 'sensation of a sharp wind against the uncovered face, the open wound'.

CONCLUSION

The Lyric and the Essay in Montaigne

The lyric essay was always meant to be an open-ended question — as much a prompt to thought as a category in its own right. There is no single, definitive answer, then, to the question of what the lyric essay is. Yet having put the term to the test on the writing of Dillard, Carson, Nelson, and Rankine, it is worth pausing, finally, to see what overall answers might be ventured to the questions I posed at the end of my first chapter. That is, to see if we can finally deduce what the most distinctive and interesting qualities of the lyric essay are. And the most helpful way of doing this is, I think, to go back — as so many questions about the essay encourage us to do — to Montaigne, and compare the lyric essays we have been examining to the essay as it was first invented.

The Montaignean essay makes plenty of room for both the thinking and language of others, including poets. Montaigne was fond of quoting Latin poets in particular: he draws frequently on Horace, Lucretius, Anacreon, and most of all Virgil, who is threaded as an essential textual presence through not only 'On some verses of Virgil' but also 'Of idleness', 'Of fear' and dozens of other essays. Such quotation is part of Montaigne's thinking, as it was for Plutarch and Seneca before him. He thinks through the words of others, as well as through his own words, moving fluidly into and out of quotations mid-thought, sometimes mid-sentence. There is a symbiosis between his own writing and the writings of others, and thus, already in Montaigne, a symbiosis between the essay and poetry. The essays are not just what happens around this poetry but incorporate it as part of both their texture and their argument: each essay is happening as much in the moment of quotation as it is around and about it.

Although the poetry present in Montaigne's essays is not necessarily 'lyric' (with the possible exception of Horace's odes), Montaigne himself was a keen reader of lyrical poetry, including the sonnets written by his close friend Étienne de La Boétie. Indeed, twenty-nine of La Boétie's sonnets were initially included in the *Essais*, then subsequently removed; thus, not only does La Boétie's literal death haunt the essays, but so too does the death or absence of his lyricism. Elizabeth Guild argues that the sonnets, 'while no longer presented, nonetheless make their presence obliquely felt'.[1] In part, then, the lyric is present in the Montaignean essay as an absence, a presence-as-absence which foregrounds the importance of gaps, white spaces, and silences in the lyric essay: gaps both literal (the continually paused rhythm of *Bluets*; the black body erased from

[1] Elizabeth Guild, *Unsettling Montaigne: Poetics, Ethics and Affect in the Essais and Other Writings* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 74.

the lynching photograph in *Citizen*; the turned-off television screens in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*) and conceptual (the gap between signifier and the signified which is so crucial to understanding Dillard, and later Nelson; the gap between the desirer and desired that Carson's erotic lyric essays depend upon). One of the lyric essay's central contradictions is that it is both noisier and more polyvocal than the essays which came before it — as seen in the crush of impossible-to-absorb information flowing through *Lonely*, or the many theoretical voices intruding from the margins of *The Argonauts* — but also that it makes more use of silences, leaves more unsaid. The absent presence (or present absence) of La Boétie's lyrical voice in Montaigne gives us one way of reading this contradiction: that one of the many voices in the many-voiced lyric essay is the voice of silence, the voice and weight of the unsaid, which is allowed room to be heard as clearly as any other voice in the essay. All four of the writers I have examined listen out for what Kitchen called the 'music of silence':[2] Dillard listens for it in nature, trying to become like the silent weasel she is watching; Rankine (who shares her mentor Louise Glück's attraction 'to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence')[3] quiets the noise of the outside world as she turns off her devices at the start of *Citizen*; Nelson hears it in the untranslatability of her blue objects, or in the silence of her murdered aunt's inability to speak back to her; Carson, in the moment of longing when, like Sappho in 'Fragment 31', ' no speaking / is left in me'.[4] That there are hints of this silence-as-voice already in Montaigne seems to reiterate the point that the lyric essay is not a decisive break from the traditional essay, but a natural development of it, one that reduces the amplitude of the essayist's own distinct voice to allow other voices — including mute voices, or the absence of voice — to be heard.

As well as entering through these absent sonnets, lyric feeling enters into Montaigne's essays through the poetic fragments themselves, even when they are taken from pre-lyric Latin sources. Montaigne draws on poetry when he wants to express an idea more clearly, more succinctly, and most of all more forcefully than his own naturally garrulous voice allows for. Ullrich Langer argues that he is most attracted to moments of Virgil and Lucretius that express a lyric (specifically, a Petrarchan) singularity and intensity: 'the most forceful moments of Virgil's and Lucretius's poetry are those that put on stage, as it were, render alive, certain vital features of Petrarchan lyricism', and it is these moments Montaigne tends to focus on.[5] He harnesses the power of these poets' voices, bringing their singular force into his essays, quoting poetic fragments

[2] Judith Kitchen, 'Mending Wall', *Seneca Review* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 48.
[3] Louise Glück, 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', *American Poetry Review* 22, no. 5 (1 September 1993): 30.
[4] Sappho, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Anne Carson (London: Virago, 2003), 63.
[5] Ullrich Langer, *Lyric in the Renaissance: From Petrarch to Montaigne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 145.

for their visceral impact on the reader as much as he does to draw on their meanings. In the co-presence of these two voices — the essayistic tone of Montaigne's own prose and the lyrical intensity of the quoted poetic fragments — we again find some of the tensions at play in the lyric essay are there from the essay's beginnings: those bathetic shifts from lyrical rhapsody to pedestrian, postlapsarian ordinariness we find throughout Dillard; the sudden compression of the essayistic sprawl of Rankine's *Citizen* into the powerful compression of the lines: 'because white men can't / police their imagination / black men are dying'.[6] Montaigne himself remarks on the difference between the two styles, comparing his own 'groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering' style to the contrastingly musical compression of a poem: 'just as sound, when pent up in the narrow channel of a trumpet, comes out sharper and stronger, so it seems to me that a thought, when compressed into the numbered feet of poetry, springs forth much more violently and strikes me a much stiffer jolt'.[7] The many-voiced, panharmonicon-like lyric essay, as written by figures like Carson and Nelson, Rankine and Shields, is a natural extension of this — not just a trumpet and a chatterbox, but a whole orchestra.

Even more important is how these two distinct voices — the intensity of the poetic fragments and the loquacious ease of Montaigne himself — interact and affect each other, for it is in this interaction that we see the distinctive form of the lyric essay in utero in the classical essay. One such moment is in 'Of Practice', where Montaigne describes his near-death on the battlefield:

> I saw myself all bloody, for my doublet was stained all over with the blood I had thrown up. The first thought that came to me was that I had gotten a harquebus shot in the head; indeed several were being fired around us at the time of the accident. It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, but in truth not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling that people have who let themselves slide into sleep.[8]

Montaigne's prose here reaches a pitch of intensity that seems to be influenced by his poetic

[6] Rankine, *Citizen*, 135.

[7] Michel de Montaigne, 'Of the Education of Children', *The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Everyman's Library, 2003), 129-30. Montaigne here demonstrates here his love of poetry, yet elsewhere he dismisses it: in 'Of Three Kinds of Association', he calls poetry 'an amusement', 'a wanton and subtle art, in fancy dress, wordy, all pleasure, all show', and claims it is suitable only for women (757). Being Montaigne, his views are changeable, never consistent.

[8] Montaigne, 'Of Practice', *Complete Works*, 327.

readings. Langer notes that Death or Sleep here occupies the position of the lyric lover, and that the 'the image of the soul escaping the body, still tethered to the lips… is a profoundly lyric topos'.[9] The mingling of bitterness and sweetness here (the pleasant languishing among harquebus shots, the implied red of both the spilt blood and the lips), as well as the erotic treatment of death, are remarkably close to the depiction of lyric given by Anne Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet*; death, sleep, and the lyric lover are all key aspects of Carson's ideas of the lyric, as they are for Montaigne. The depiction of something like an out-of-body experience is also reminiscent of Dillard's more ecstatic moments, recalling in particular 'Total Eclipse' and the 'out of nowhere' epiphany of the sun's disappearance.[10] We see here how the presence of the poetic fragments begins to transform the prose of the essay itself. As it is quoted, the lyric begins to bleed, like dye from out of the cloth, into the rest of the fabric of the essay — a bleeding in which we find the deep origins of the lyric essay.

Yet there is also a bleeding from the essay back into the lyric: the poetic fragments are themselves transformed by the act of their quotation. We see this in 'Of Cato the Younger', where a snatch of Virgil closes the essay with a final blast of poetic forcefulness, an apparent abandonment of the essayistic voice: 'And the master of the choir, after displaying in his painting the names of the greatest Romans, ends in this wise: *And Cato giving them their laws*'.[11] Yet even here there is still a complex relationship between the voices of essay and lyric. As Langer notes, there is a 'series of demonstrations' going on in Montaigne's quotation of Virgil — Montaigne showing us Virgil showing us Cato showing us his law — which reverses the process of the poem's creation, the 'Platonic chain of inspiration, Muse – poet – actor – audience' which Montaigne himself describes earlier in the essay.[12] The moment of quotation makes visible the decidedly essayistic production — the moments of responding to stimuli, the process of drafting — of the poem. The poem in its final version may have a voice which is entirely distinct from that of the essay, but there are other, more essayistic voices hidden silently behind it. It is an insight that reveals a key difference between the lyric and essay forms. The essay we tend to think of as moving *forward* in a chain of inspirations, one which is analogous to the inspirations that create a poem; but in a poem all those workings out are erased, and we are left with just a final, impactful thing. When an essay quotes a poem, though, it re-inscribes that chain of inspirations, reminding us of how the poem exists not *ex nihilo* but as part of a potentially never-ending chain of inspirations and responses.

[9] Langer, *Lyric in the Renaissance*, 149.

[10] Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 17.

[11] Montaigne, 'Of Cato the Younger', *Complete Works*, 209. Virgil's original Latin (*His dantem jura Catonem*) is not preserved in Donald Frame's translation here, so the effect is slightly lost.

[12] Langer, *Lyric in the Renaissance*, 139.

Such a moment both makes the poem essay-like, by emphasising how it exists not independently but in a network of relations, at the same time as it makes the essay poem-like, by bringing in some of the force and immediacy that comes from the final, end-object-only poem. Something similar happens in many of the lyric essays we have looked at: think of how Carson's *Beauty of the Husband*, for example, brought renewed attention to the textual, writerly qualities of its fragments of Keats, gesturing to their dynamic and developing compositional histories, even as it also drew on their passionate intensity.

Perhaps the most important way the lyric and the essay interact in Montaigne, however, is that the latter reigns in the former, and maintains control over it. Though the pithy, poetic fragments often inject life and energy into Montaigne's prose, this is balanced by a different, contrasting kind of energy — the sceptical, questioning energy of Montaigne's own voice — which keeps the essay from becoming wholly lyrical. This sense of balance is important to the early essay, with its emphasis on 'weighing up', something captured in the image of the essay as scales: when poetry is present in these essays, it is something to be tempered with and by the essayistic prose into which it is brought. Crucial to keeping this sense of balance or harmony is the centring role of the essayist himself, whose sense of self holds firm at the heart of every essay. The essayist is always the conductor, in control of the symphony, bringing in other instruments only when he wants to. This strong sense of an 'essayistic I' is what holds the Montaignean essay back from becoming fully lyrical. It is a steadying presence that continues to hold fast in the essay right up until the twentieth century, found, for example, in the Romantic essay, which might otherwise have easily tipped over into the full-on lyric sublime. Jillian Hess notes how Hazlitt, though he quoted from poetry extensively, kneading it into his prose, always remains firmly in control of the lyrical presences in his essays:

> Hazlitt's 'I'… acts to unify discordant parts, that without the strength of Hazlitt's personal voice, his essays would crumble into so many incongruous extracts. Hazlitt's 'I' is not beholden to the lyric mode. It is an 'I' that upholds the dialogism of the periodical essay, and carries with it multiple voices and multiple genres.[13]

Hess depicts here how the central 'I' of the essayist keeps the different voices — of poetry, essay, and other genres that might find their way into the text — apart, separate, remaining in dialogue

[13] Jillian M. Hess, 'Reframing Poetry: The Romantic Essay and the Prospects of Verse', *European Romantic Review* 24, no. 3 (June 2013): 349. See also Hazlitt's 'On the Prose Style of Poets', in which he describes how prose 'differs from poetry… like the chamois from the eagle: it climbs to an almost equal height, touches upon a cloud, overlooks a precipice, is picturesque, sublime – but all the while, instead of soaring through the air, it stands upon a rocky cliff, clambers up by abrupt and intricate ways, and browzes on the roughest bark' (*Complete Works*, 12:10)

with those voices rather than overlapping with them. It is particularly notable that she stresses how Hazlitt's I is *not* a lyric I. It is a strong personal voice, like Montaigne's. Though there are other, more lyrical voices in these essays — moments of intense emotion conveyed in poetic language, as well as moments where we hear the sounds of silence or absence — these other voices are never allowed to rise above the volume of the essayist's own voice. It is the essayist who holds the power, who keeps the other voices in check.

In the lyric essay, the essayist's own voice is no longer the loudest voice in the room. This, perhaps more than anything else, is the key element that separates the lyric essay from its predecessors. I have shown how the Montaignean essay, merely though quoting poetry, introduces many of the qualities associated with its modern descendent the lyric essay: intensity of language and emotion, attention to gaps and absences, polyvocality. These qualities are already there in the essay — indeed, we need go no further than Montaigne to find them. It is only, however, when the centring self of the essay is removed — when it abandons its strong personal voice — that the lyrical voices inherent in the essay are allowed to take over, to become fully prevalent in the text. Without the strong personal voice of a stable 'I' to keep the tide of the lyric at bay, lyric qualities are freed to engulf the essay, to wash over every facet of it.

Furthermore, as we have repeatedly seen, this happens in the lyric essay even when the poetry of others is not being quoted from: for it is not just the voices of others but the language itself that rises to become audible over the voice of the essayist. Language, in the lyric essay, is its own voice. Think of the lyric babble that keeps brimming over in Nelson, as she plays with her bubbles and bullets, bluets and baby butts; of Dillard returning us to the stoniness of the stone through the word 'stone' itself, its concrete materiality as a signifier; of the section titles in Carson's *Beauty of the Husband* gathering volume as they assert themselves through their capitalisation; of the way words seem to evolve and proliferate in the womblike spaces of Rankine's early works, growing from Liv to live to liver, and how she adapts this, as she turns her lyrics inside-out in her later books, so that other words like 'citizen' and 'American' similarly crackle with accumulating meanings. Language itself, in these works, rises to such a pitch and a prevalence that it seems to exist separately from the essayist's own voice.

The essay is, says Virginia Woolf, 'primarily an expression of personal opinion', a place where 'one can indulge one's egoism to the full' — a form which begins, always, 'with a capital I'.[14] The lyric essay's key move is to replace this capital I with a lyric one: it uses the I in a way akin

[14] Virginia Woolf, 'The Decay of Essay Writing', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 1:25-26.

to the I of a lyric poem. That is, these are essays with a lyric speaker, partaking in an act akin to that of the lyric address: its I is not a stable personality, but something that can be inhabited at various points by others, including by us as readers. All of the writers I have examined attempt, in different ways, to dethrone the self from the centre of their essays and their thinking. Whether through an Emersonian attempt to open oneself up to the natural world and become like a transparent eyeball, as in Dillard; through the self-splitting woundings of eros, rending the self into opposites, as in Carson; through the deliberate courting of danger and pollution in order to break down the boundaries of the self, as in Nelson; or through the continual revelation that the outside world is found deep inside the individual body, as in Rankine; in their different ways, each of these essayists finds some way to trouble the boundaries between self and other and thus trouble the idea that the essay is authored by a stable, singular voice. It is an idea which is, in some ways, contiguous with the lyric essay's own development in anthologies and classrooms: teachers not telling students what to think, but opening up discussions, asking questions; anthologies which succeed when their selections are themselves given room to speak, and fail when the voice of the editor becomes too audible. Rather than telling us what the lyric essay is, D'Agata, Tall, Kitchen, and Shields invited us to explore what it could be. That particular theoretical move — not to close but open, not to speak but make a space for listening — turns out to be the most distinctive, emblematic quality of the lyric essay itself.

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