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Is Genre Ever New?

Theorizing the Lyric Essay in its Historical Context

In 1993, or so the story goes, the lyric essay was invented¹ by Deborah Tall and John D’Agata, her student who would go on to publish his own lyric essays and books of nonfiction as well as three influential anthologies, which together made him what Ben Marcus termed “the form’s single-handed, shrewd champion.”² That the debate surrounding the lyric essay has grown at times heated suggests that what’s at stake isn’t merely a small corner of a “fourth genre,” but rather a renegotiation of two crucial distinctions —verse and prose, argument and art—which a “hybrid” of poetry and prose brings into high relief.

As Amy Bonnaffons tactfully notes in *The Essay Review* of 2016, the singular style of the lyric essay’s “shrewd champion” thwarts efforts to write about the genre without winding up in a duel with D’Agata.³ Coupled with a relentlessly polemical tone, the enormity of his publication record makes it impossible to write about the lyric essay without addressing D’Agata’s claims. Most significant to this article, he has produced a trilogy of anthologies from one of America’s most prestigious presses in what Elaine Blair of *Harper’s* names “a large-scale canonizing project.” This article will be able to advance directions of inquiry that go beyond D’Agata’s work, taking a necessary step in the study of the lyric essay that is made possible by several excellent review essays, which have already dealt with the

¹ C.f. The Hobart and William Smith’s website, which does not report when the statement on their site was first published: “In 1993, the late Professor of English Deborah Tall and John D’Agata ’95 created what is now known as the lyric essay. In the *Seneca Review* special issue on the lyric essay (2007), D’Agata tells the full origin story: D’Agata wrote to Deborah Tall, his undergraduate professor, complaining that the then-current genre conventions in nonfiction constrained him. She wrote back: “What you’re looking for is a kind of essay propelled not by its information, but rather by the possibility for transformative experience. You’re talking about the lyric. A lyric form of the essay.”

² Ben Marcus, “On the Lyric Essay.” *The Believer* 2003.

³ Less gently, Elaine Blair exposes what has for years exasperated those of us who take nonfiction seriously: “Instead of arguing against themselves, D’Agata and Shields argue against ill-defined external antagonists: the armies who would defend fictional realism without reservation, the hordes who don’t give non-fiction its due as an art, the masses who read memoir expecting it to be true. Straw men, in other words, who allow Shields and D’Agata to assume the role of embattled underdogs, even though we live in an era when essays and memoirs flourish and fiction is regularly flogged.”

more troubling of D'Agata's claims. In her 2016 *Harper's* essay, Elaine Blair offered a thorough analysis of the way D'Agata's Graywolf trilogy operates within American letters. Her intervention filled in gaps left open by Lee Gutkind's 2012 "Doing a D'Agata," a highly specific rebuttal to suggestions that nonfiction writers are justified in concealing from readers the degree to which they are certain about their exposition's accuracy. Gutkind's article made up part of the art or argument debate, in the sense that D'Agata's oddest (and most notorious) claim of all is that an essayist is justified if he fudges basic facts to improve the musicality of his prose. In the February 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*, William Deresiewicz's review essay of D'Agata's trilogy further establishes the problematic nature of such claims, addressing both the facticity vs. art question, and that of the essay's complicated history.

Thus, this article is able to take for granted that work such as the *Harper's* and *Atlantic* review essays have satisfied the need to expose dangers posed by spurious claims in *The Seneca Review*, *The Next American Essay* (2003), *Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), and *The Making of the American Essay* (2016). Aiming to progress beyond the above-noted necessary correctives, I'll demonstrate the importance of theories of the lyric and theories of the fragment to advancing our understanding the lyric essay itself. I'll also show that advancing a theoretical analysis of the lyric essay as a genre with a unique history allows that history's implications about genre as a force within literary culture to emerge. I'll argue that the naming of the lyric essay as a genre ultimately *mattered* to readers and writers alike—at the juncture in history when the term emerged, readers and writers needed the name *lyric essay* to facilitate communication between them.

The 1997 description of the lyric essay, 554 words and still present on the *Seneca Review's* homepage, is often taken as dogmatic, leading the conversation to repeat itself, and to reiterate the complaint that in that text, little is said to make the lyric essay distinct from other literary work. What hasn't been quite clarified is that the 554-word much-read statement does two things: first, it describes what most scholars would identify as *literariness*, or what Roman Jakobson named the *poetic function* of language. What is proposed as distinguishing the lyric essay actually describes the kind of poetry, fiction, and essays that the New Critics considered literary, and worthy of analysis. For example,

we know that in few but the most journalistic or thesis-driven essays is “conveying information” given “primacy”; specific words in a specific order generate a meaning that is not, in any essay (or short story, or poem), “paraphrasable.” The failures of many schools of criticism to ever entirely lay the debate over literariness to rest are well known, as are the accusations of elitism that beleaguer their quests. But, because these 554 words have held such a prime position, their muddling of distinguishing formal features with descriptions of that ever-elusive, you-know-it-when-you-see-it idea of literariness has diverted focus away from questions of form. The muddling made readers rightfully suspicious that the term was being used by authors to attribute literary merit to their own work. (D’Agata asks, “Why is a text like William Blake’s ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’ a poem? Is it because it’s good?” (*Lost Origins* 265)).⁴ I would like to urge my fellow readers and writers of the lyric essay to look past all of the arguments about the lyric essay’s literariness, since they obscure what D’Agata and Tall actually *do* have to offer: helpful descriptions of the way a piece named a “lyric essay” is in fact distinct from its conventional—though just as literary—counterparts.

Given the failure of D’Agata’s many publications on the essay, and more specifically the lyric essay, to recognize the contributions of scholars like Kauffmann who made the same claims as he did ten years earlier, we must wonder whether it is appropriate to apply to his prose the readerly practices typical of scholarship. Perhaps it’s necessary to read each of the anthologies that D’Agata has produced as works of literary criticism that exhibit the formal features of the lyric essay. For example, perhaps he resists the convention of naming those who have gone before him in order to expose the way such conventions perpetuate false notions regarding the possibility of individual creation (just as Shields’s *Reality Hunger* has its reasons for resisting typical methods of citation). Juxtaposition, gaps, and requirements that the reader deduce the most salient aspects of the argument, not only through what has been left unsaid, but through contradiction and irony—this is arguably the way the trilogy of anthologies make their points.

⁴ William Deresiewicz writes, “and if D’Agata, who has himself published several volumes of what he refers to as essays, desires a single thing above all, it is to be known as a maker of art.”

Similarly, perhaps problematic binary oppositions are proposed in order to expose the absurd extent of our mind's dependence upon binary oppositions. In the introduction to *Last Origins*, D'Agata states: "this is a book that will try to offer the reader a clear objective: I am here in search of art. I am here to track the origins of an alternative to commerce" (3). Parallel to that, he says: "Do we read nonfiction in order to receive information, or do we read it to experience art?" D'Agata's crudely hewn binaries can only be read as an implicit means of calling these binaries into question, but he does not say this explicitly.

The enormity of the logical leaps demanded by such a reading of D'Agata's criticism-in-lyric-essays as criticism suggest that at present, however, it is not working as an effective mode of literary criticism. While many reasons may be at play, the chief seems to be that an aspect of the essay that Kuisma Korhonen calls Pyrrhonism, or the willingness to be defeated—give the reader space to disagree—is necessary to every essay, lyric or not, but it is not present in D'Agata's criticism. Pyrrhonism may in fact work at cross purposes with literary criticism. For the present article, it suffices to recognize that when John D'Agata writes criticism, he doesn't exhibit a willingness to be defeated, and so while they exhibit many formal features of the kinds of essays (I resort to the term *literary*) we've discussed throughout this article, they are missing one indispensable quality. Perhaps if he did exhibit a willingness to be defeated, he wouldn't be writing criticism, at least not in the twenty-first century (for further discussion of the essay as a vehicle of criticism, see Brian Lennon's "The Essay, In Theory" which offers an extended meditation on why essayistic criticism hasn't worked since Derrida, and might also explain why the 2007 special issue of *Seneca Review* is also quite unhelpful, even though its essays on the lyric essay were written by the very best practitioners of the form—rather than theorize, they provide slippery metaphors for what lyric essays do, and frequently dismiss wholesale the project of literary criticism).

On Fragmenting

It is clear that not every literary essay "partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language" (*Seneca Review*). Joan Didion isn't particularly musical, and G. K. Chesterton isn't very dense.

Although an essayist like E. B. White may invite readers to participate in the making of meaning, “Once More to the Lake” doesn’t *depend* on gaps any more than other excellent, literary (not-lyric) essays do not *depend* upon the suggestion, juxtaposition, or accretion by fragments that is by now widely acknowledged as integral to the what the lyric essay does. James Baldwin writes a dense, luminous prose that is neither fragmentary nor interested in gaps. Baldwin’s voice is direct, explicit, self-possessed and bold, and his work permits a linear chronology, not a fragmentary one, to complement his essays’ powerful, meditative sections. Baldwin’s essayistic persona presents as a whole self, with full access to the memories that have shaped him. That unfragmented persona makes his conclusions explicit, as in the final paragraph of “Equal in Paris,” where he writes that “in some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter [of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched] is universal and never can be stilled” (257). The formal distinctions between essays like these and those we call lyric become especially productive when we theorize how a fragmented structure permits representation of selves that claim to be experienced as fragmentary, or as having restricted access to their own (frequently traumatic) memories.

In “Bathing,” Kathryn Winograd not only spends half her essay telling us why she takes showers rather than baths, she spends the fourth of seven paragraphs listing what she “will tell you” if you ask. Three sentences begin this way, citing height, pragmatism, social factors—then (again) cut-to: “What I won’t tell you is that I never loved my body enough. Once I read that young victims of rape will sometimes go through a stage of promiscuity.” This is the truth that the essayist has avoided for the whole essay, or rather, has been talking about—dream-like—through metaphor. The actual event is mentioned thus briefly, and avoidance is indicated with the fact’s burial under further discussions of swimming. The rape cannot be narrated in real time, for it was not processed during the event—it is not remembered according to the chronology of its occurrence. And so, it cannot be represented. Remaining faithful to the impossibility of representation permits the lyric essay, also, to convey the experience of the victim, whose violation often causes a rupture between self and world.

In “Soundtrack,” Lisa Groen Braner recounts her miscarriage (or stillbirth—it’s not clear which) in eleven sections, with years for headings, of about fifty words each. The 1996 section ends with Braner and her husband eating crêpes on a lamplit Paris street. The essay then cuts directly to the 1997 section, which begins “No heartbeat, says the doctor. No baby. I didn’t hear much after that” (35). Readers are left to gather for themselves that the form suggests the traumatic suddenness of the event, and that Braner was wrapped up in the delightful anticipation of her child when the doctor’s words arrived like the train wreck.

Addressing again the problem of unrepresentable pain, Susannah B. Mintz published in the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* what is to date the most incisive piece of scholarship on the lyric essay. Analyzing Eula Biss’s “Pain Scale,” Mintz explains that “By turns elusive, imagistic, ecstatic, associative, and melodic, more often circling and symbolizing life events than narrating them in linear ways, the lyric essay has a unique capacity to represent the self-in-pain” (243). This article’s investigation of pain, the limits of subjectivity and communication, and the lyric essay’s capacity to convey them more accurately than other forms illustrates the strong possibilities opened up when lyric essays are investigated on their own terms.

“Autopsy Report,” the first essay of Purpura’s 2006 collection *On Looking*, begins with what Purpura sees when she observes an autopsy room. The description comes to us chiefly in simple sentences or sentence fragments paratactically arranged: “Their ears sludge-filled. Their legs mud-smear. Asleep below deck when a freighter hit and the river rose inside their tug. Their lashes white with river silt” (3). Such strong musicality suggests meaning, and the reader infers the meaning that is too strange for direct reflection to contain: Purpura’s argument about the uncanny majesty of a corpse.

Julie Marie Wade’s books *Wishbone: A Memoir in Fractures* (2010) and *Small Fires: Essays* (2011), promoted explicitly by publishers Colgate University Press and Sarabande as collections of lyric essays, supply examples of the generic distinction’s usefulness. The “fractures” of the first book’s title point to the images and moments, usually dramatized in present tense, that are not accompanied by any of the information or wisdom that the author must have acquired later. I’m confident that the information and wisdom was, indeed, acquired because it is detectable in

the gaps, palpable because it's been channeled into the choices of design and juxtaposition rather than explicit reflection. Those choices of design generate ironies and resonances, and these in turn serve to indicate to readers the child-protagonist's lack of agency over her own experience, and lack of access to a narrative through which to make sense of what was happening.

Also published in discrete sections, Brenda Miller's "A Brief History of Sex" alternates between vignettes from the author's love affair and descriptions of Japanese courtesans, Adam and Eve, and Krishna without commenting on the connection between these (129-136). The essay bears out what a chapter in Miller's craft book *Tell It Slant* claims: that the lyric essay requires "an allegiance to intuition" (107) and allows for "moments of not knowing" (106) that lead to meaning through subtle resonances and implication. I believe all kinds of essays are connected to not-knowing, and that this is how they are distinct from articles, which are driven by a thesis or explicit, known claim. But Joan Didion's not-knowing is in her contradictions, not in her silence. In "On Morality," which leaves us not knowing what the right answer to moral questions is, she makes clear and explicit exactly why the confusion of moral imperatives and pragmatic necessities means that the "whine of hysteria is heard in the land" (163). Didion doesn't let moments of not-knowing accrue via gaps and implication way Miller does—she equivocates in writing, and addresses explicitly the ways in which logical moral systems fail.

Implication through juxtaposition are critical to Eula Biss's *Notes from No Man's Land*, whose first essay presents a list of facts about the invention of the telephone, the spread of telephone poles, and the rampant lynchings that followed. The facts appear in chronological order, yet they do not quite tell a story, for the language of connection and causality is absent. The art is in the selection and the juxtaposition, and we are left to draw our own conclusions about the paradox of technological progress and moral regression; we must interpret for ourselves the final image: "One summer, heavy rains fell in Nebraska and some green telephone poles grew small leafy branches" (11). As a twenty-first century writer who presents as white, to write authoritatively about those who were lynched—to claim the power to express their suffering or even really *know* it—would be to perpetuate colonial

practices, and the lyric essay permits Biss to cede authority to the reader, and respect the inexpressible fullness of the atrocity.

The lyric essay's distinction from other forms is again employed to address unrepresentable atrocity in Sherman Alexie's "Captivity," which presents the story of Mary Rowlandson in fourteen numbered sections. These at first seem like disjointed rants ("Was it 1676 or 1976 or 1776 or yesterday when the Indian held you tight in his dark arms and promised you nothing but the sound of his voice? September, Mary Rowlandson, it was September when you visited the reservation grade school"). Section 8 is just a list of the "Language of the enemy: heavy lightness, house insurance, serious vanity, safe-deposit box, feather of lead" (296 emphasis in original). But by the end, the tragic comment on the way we teach history and literature becomes poignant and clear.

The formal features of the lyric essay that make it suited to experiences of large and small scale violation and atrocity also permit it to convey encounters with the sublime, or reckoning with cosmic magnificence, during which language tends to fail. Annie Dillard's "Total Eclipse" tells the story of her trip to watch a lunar eclipse, but interrupts the telling with information about astronomy, and the juxtapositions allow the images in her journey to take on a cosmic resonance that make possible this ending: "One turns at last even from glory itself with a sigh of relief. From the depths of mystery, and even from the heights of splendor, we bounce back and hurry for the latitudes of home" (110).

On the opposite end of the cosmic spectrum, Virginia Woolf's 1942 "Death of a Moth" attends to a tiny creature, and meditates on the inevitability of disappearance—of the moth, of the self, of the artist, and (debatably) of the work of art. The essay's meaning is again implied by the juxtaposition of the moth's fate and the author's attempt—with a pencil—to help him: "It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death" (448).

On Newness

Woolf's "Death of a Moth" conforms well to the *Seneca Review* description, with its musicality, its dependence on implication, and especially its reticent persona, who in direct contradiction to the persona of memoir, says nothing of her own life outside the minutes during which the essay's action takes place. Like "Total Eclipse," Woolf's work precedes the "invention" of the lyric essay. This points to a question that has come up often, and has remained unexplained: while distinguishing the lyric essay from other nonfiction is useful for readers and writers, it remains to be asked whether it is in fact *new*. In his 2009 *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, D'Agata allows this modest question to turn into something of a hornets' nest by naming as essays texts that predate by millennia the term (predate, indeed, the French language from which *essay* comes), and also by insisting that the lyric essay is at once revolutionary and as old as time.

D'Agata accounts for this confusing situation in his 2014 "We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay," which explains that when the phrase "lyric essay" was coined back in 1993, the recent explosion of memoir and literary journalism had been obfuscating the essay's multitude of other possibilities. The term "lyric essay" thus served as a necessary corrective to restore a capaciousness that had been forgotten or suppressed by the explosion of essays that demanded different readerly practices, and raised different readerly expectations.⁵ A few years after the success of that corrective, D'Agata "began to find that everything that [he] loved about 'lyric essays' was already represented in much of the essay's past" (7). Having the generic marker in mind caused him to read through its lens. Like many writers, I employ the term in cover letters for this exact purpose of raising the very readerly expectations that my essays will meet, rather than those of memoir or journalism, which they will not.

D'Agata's account of his late realization is instructive: that what felt like a revolutionary act of invention was later configured as an act of restoration is itself an important discovery about genre. "We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay" concedes what many reviewers found *Lost Origins* to ignore, namely that long before 1993, essayists were already employing the formal features of what was later declared to be the lyric essay, yet these were *not* actually

⁵ Before arriving at the conclusions presented in this article, I long disagreed with qualifiers such as "personal essay," "narrative essay," "memoir essay," and even "lyric essay" because I believed they ignored the true capaciousness of the essay, as it was written by Montaigne and Bacon, Ozick and Epstein.

lyric essays—they read that way to us only with hindsight. These events reveal the mechanism of genre naming as one that opened up avenues of essay writing and reading that had almost closed.

What the existence of a name gave writers was license to ask even more of their readers, push the boundary between the essay and the prose poem even further than before. Also, once there was the name “lyric essay,” readers were better equipped and likely to do the work of collaborating in meaning-making with authors, and find this reading experience rewarding. With a better prepared audience, writers went on to write more, and more intensely “lyric,” essays of their own. And it is to this cycle that we can attribute the proliferation of more experimental, segmented, understated essays following the 1993 coinage. Just as Purpura, in her “Autopsy Report,” sees bodies in the grocery store through the lens of open corpses, so we, after the decade in which lyric essays have grown popular, can’t but read an older essay like “Total Eclipse” as a lyric essay. Therefore, while naming the lyric essay did not precipitate the production of totally new kinds of essays, and did not lead to totally new formal features, the naming did constitute a necessary step which facilitated the rejuvenation of readerly practices that Modernists like Woolf may have taken for granted.

Translating the Lyric

Because I read Greek, I can comment on D’Agata’s methods in *Lost Origins of the Essay*, and can see that the anthologist-translator takes astounding liberties, omitting whole sentences, and changing others entirely. The syntax of the resulting text gives it the unmistakable ring of D’Agata’s own English prose: “If someone were to give him a coin in order to repay him for something, this is the type of guy who’ll say the coin is worn too thin. He often sings in the street. He once seduced the kitchen maid” (23). Similarly, Plutarch’s “Some Information about the Spartans” is obviously formatted in a way that resembles the segmented essays that appear later in *Lost Origins of the Essay*. At first, this struck me as deceitful, an underhanded editorial trick. However, it is also possible to say that D’Agata really reads this way, and sees this as a faithful translation, because of his immersion in the lyric essay. When he states that Heraclitus’s “essays only exist for us in fragments,” he exhibits no doubt about what we can glean nevertheless: “but

it is still clear that he was a writer who relished instability: not only in ideas and things, but also in the words that we might use to represent them” (17). I’ve never heard Heraclitus referred to as an essayist before, but when I look at his prose, there’s nothing that *doesn’t* seem essayistic to me, a reader just as steeped in essays as D’Agata. What I at first thought of as manipulation of the text might simply be a result of how genre works. From this perspective, it’s understandable that D’Agata can’t help but read through the lens of what he calls the lyric essay, and in so doing is more disposed than others to read texts against themselves, and to see connections and resonances where others see disjointedness. It seems reasonable to attempt a reading of the anthology *Lost Origins of the Essay* as a study of what happens when the principles of reading a contemporary poetic text are applied in the reading of ancient prose.

His reading of Plutarch stands as representative of the many headnotes that label as “essay” everything from a handful of surviving Sumerian proverbs (“Ziusudra’s list is the first essay in the world,” (4)), to a short story by Borges (“And it’s possible that some essayists just make their information up” (503)). Of the Greek historian, D’Agata writes: “Plutarch simply just presents this information and moves on, reminding us that sometimes the longevity of a tradition is almost just as sacred as what it represents.” He goes on, “He is not a journalist, therefore, but he is also not a prophet. *He’s an essayist* who’s in love with the myths that move us all, and simultaneously with the myths that underlie their power” (28, emphasis added). In contrast, William Hawley Davis in 1916 explained that “writings resembling modern essays may be traced at least as far back as the epistles of Seneca” (1). D’Agata asks us to question whether it’s really possible to approach a historical text without the influence of contemporary genres. D’Agata goes on to tell us that in the first forty years of Plutarch’s life, “he’ll compose some of the most formally radical essays in the history of the genre” (27). Anachronism is thus not a violation of scholarly ethics, for which D’Agata should be punished. Rather, it’s a real and interesting function of language and genre.

This is what the anthologies and new essays on the lyric essay suggest. Once D’Agata retracted earlier claims that he had invented a new genre, he permitted a more interesting phenomenon to emerge: Once the essay-that-works-like-a-poem was given a name, it became possible to read all sorts of texts through that lens. Scholars of nonfiction can now move forward investigating that form’s origins in the histories of the lyric, the fragment, and the

prose poem, and refine our understanding of how genres function in a dialectic relationship to the writing that takes its name.

Theorizing the Lyric

Why, then, did D'Agata's practice, in his anthologies, of finding lyric essays deep in literary history—before Montaigne's coinage of the term—have on the one hand enough appeal to publish and sell so many anthologies, and on the other hand, enough irritating qualities to ignite outrage among writers and scholars to whom the anachronisms were an affront? Perhaps that affront comes from an orthodoxy regarding genre and anachronism that requires interrogation. Perhaps now that we have the term "lyric essay," it is no longer possible—or necessary—to look back on earlier writing without seeing through the lens of the present moment, in which the lyric essay exists.

If this is the case, we can employ the lyric essay as a test case for the way Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson theorize the lyric in their 2014 *The Lyric Theory Reader*: "Rather than... a straightforward line of influence... we emphasize a loopier logic that attributes later ideas about lyric to earlier moments in literary history and discovers in these historical moments the latent possibilities of later ideas" (6). This explanation builds on Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, which had in 2005 examined the lyricization of American poetry, according to which theory it was only in the wake of Emily Dickinson's printed poems that a nineteenth and twentieth century concept of the lyric was projected back onto earlier poetry. This work demonstrates the way notions of lyric and other generic markers exist in a dialectic relation to time, so that we read contemporary texts according to reading practices developed while reading earlier texts clustered under the same generic marker, and at the same time someone like D'Agata can gather together a cluster of ancient Greek proverbs and see them through the lens of his own, or Brian Doyle's, or some other contemporary's essays, and thereby see a lyric essay where their author and contemporary readers saw proverbs.

Having established that the lyric essay is something that was invented (i.e., named) in 1993, but of which older examples can be retroactively identified through the lens of the new name, it's possible to locate in the history

of the fragment a particularly fertile ground of inquiry. In *The Literary Absolute*, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy discuss Friedrich Schlegel's argument that the fragment makes a mockery of containment, as a dialectic between the fragment and the whole is produced. In "Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and the Fragment of Romanticism," Timothy Bahti demonstrates just how key Schlegel's work on the fragment is to Romanticism, a time during which the essay finds Lamb and Hazlitt, two of its greatest practitioners. Other scholars of the fragment include Camelia Elias, who demonstrates the paradox that if we were to understand a fragment, we'd just be suppressing its fragmentariness (26).

If we are going to think about the lyric essay as a form that "Accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically"—if we are going to refer to this statement on *Seneca Review's* website in almost every article we produce—we must take into account the possibilities opened up by work on the fragment and its importance to the postmodern moment in which the term—if not the genre—*lyric essay* was born. In addition to offering new possibilities to essayists who want to convey a complexity greater than what can be stated directly, the lyric essay's ability to collect together fragments is perhaps especially necessary in the current moment in the history of technology, when the data deluge leaves most of us seeking a means of managing the anxiety produced when we have access, in one day, to more text than we could read in our entire lives. Reckoning with fragments (and the elusive illusion of wholeness) is something the lyric essay can do, and its connection to the history of the fragment both before and after the Romantic era merits further attention.

The prose poem, like the fragment, is another close cousin to the lyric essay that has been overshadowed by the cousin that gained fame in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, i.e. the memoir. Marguerite Murphy's *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (1992) shows that the subversion of preferentiality and other generic markers of the prose poem can enrich our understanding of the lyric essay. Similarly, Fabienne Moore brilliantly demonstrates that "early experiments in prose poetry prove that this [prose and poetry] duality had become arbitrary, and that a *formal* definition of poetry had become impossible" by the seventeenth century. Moore argues for "a radical new understanding of rhythm as a non-formalist notion that

escapes the sterile opposition prose/poetry” (9) and it would be a great loss if we continued to struggle to make theories about the lyric essay’s occupation of the border between poetry and prose without taking into account Moore’s ideas. The interest in the lyric essay demonstrates that we have once again arrived at a moment when the distinction between prose and poetry does have meaning, but the boundaries we took for granted a few decades ago no longer suffice.

Moore furthermore questions the assumption that “Romanticism liberated poetic expression when it favored lyric poetry” and proposes that “it is the direct confrontation with the question of poetry’s essence that enabled the prose writers’ emancipation.” Furthermore “when the essence of poetry is no longer believed to reside in its external features but rather in the intensity of the response it elicits in the reader, the possibility exists for something like the prose poem” (1-2). In their theory of lyric reading, Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson refer to the lyric as containing ideas about the essence of poetry—which is probably the reason why D’Agata and Tall’s *Seneca Review* description muddles questions of merit and of literariness with a description of form—by naming a piece of prose *lyric* they were implicitly collapsing the distinction between poetry and the prose a lyric essayist writes.

Just as theories of the lyric have received too little attention in often-repetitive conversations about the lyric essay, so has theory of the essay been quite absent. R. Lane Kauffmann’s 1988 article “The Skewed Path” addresses the connection between schools of theory and the history of the essay in ways that have significance for what we call the lyric essay. Kauffmann assembles comments by Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, Alfred Kazin, Friedrich Schlegel, members of the Frankfurt School, as well as many the post-structuralists, and together these also show that scholarship that is rarely referred to now already made many of the points John D’Agata presented as new. Among Kauffmann’s many crucial points is the idea that “like the German theorists (the later Lukács being the obvious exception), the French post-structuralists have resisted the systematic temptation by privileging fragmentation as an aesthetic and methodological principle” (83). Kauffmann concludes, “the essay becomes anti-method; its position to systems is its form-determining principle. Radicalizing a position adumbrated by the German Romantics and developed by the early Lukács and then by Benjamin, Adorno embraces fragmentation as the essay’s very source of

truth” (79). As early as 1988, Kauffmann argued that essayistic fragmentation has a twofold purpose: it “preserves freedom of imagination” and “signals that the knowing subject in the process no longer plays the constitutive role reserved for it in idealist systems, but that that it defers instead to the object of cognition, following the logic of its *aporias*” (84).

Conclusions

D’Agata frequently cites the essay’s etymological root in the French for *attempt*, but I’m not sure enough is made of the observation that the true *essay* is an attempt and, as such, is open to failure. D’Agata’s dogmatic tone in his anthologies and essays on the lyric essay suggests that he is not actually open to being wrong. He only *seems* to be inviting, essay-style, the reader to partake in the meaning-making process. His purpose is persuasion, and by draping his argument in the trappings of an artistic form, the project smacks of coercion. This is why scholarship on the lyric essay has gotten so caught up with spurious, enigmatic claims made by D’Agata in *Seneca Review* and the trilogy of anthologies, and why the present article has only partially made good on its promise to go beyond the duel with D’Agata that comprises most other scholarship on the lyric essay.

Thus, recognizing the exact nature of the problem produced by writing lyric essays about the lyric essay permits the brief, contentious history of the lyric essay to illustrate this well known truth about genre: a certain cluster of formal features does certain work – can be put to certain work – better than it does others. Moreover, the ease with which D’Agata seems to have published three expensive, expansive volumes of a largely anachronistic history of the essay exposes the contingency of genre, and the dependence of genre distinctions not only on what else the reader has encountered, but on the decisions of a translator and redactor—and therefore, of everything they have read, as well.

Soon after that “invention” (or at least coinage) twenty years ago, there ensued a proliferation of essays that behaved a little differently, asked more boldly that their readers fill in gaps, attend to subtle intimations of word choice and placement (as if the text were poetry), and wait until the essay’s end for meaning, because meaning arrives

only when the fragments are considered as a whole. An author's original "intention" (of writing, for instance, an epistle, a short story, a poem, or a set of proverbs) has little influence over the way readers' prior experience will shape what they believe they are reading. That a hybrid form, which partakes of both essay and poetry, has garnered so much interest suggests that our literary moment is invested in renegotiating formerly strict boundaries between verse and prose—perhaps bringing to the fore conversations about the prose poem that have remained fairly esoteric until now. We have never been certain about the line between art and not-art, or about the essence of poetry, and the growing interest in subverting formerly held assumptions about genre classifications shows that standing delineations no longer matched the culture's imaginative needs.

What remains certain, however, is the importance of the lyric essay as a distinct, identifiable genre whose usefulness is clear, as it permits us among many other things to grapple with matters such as Purpura's questions about the body and about the power of the one who looks, Winograd's personal trauma, Dillard's eclipses, and Biss's pain. We need the lyric essay to address ideas about which we *don't* already have conclusions—ideas about which the last word must be horror, reverence, or awe.

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