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If a Body

If, as some of my students insist according to fashion, genre doesn't exist, and yet, as I remind them, we have still for millennia behaved as if it does, the idea of genre must be useful, even if only by giving a piece of writing something to pretend to do, or to resist doing, while it's actually doing something else.

In the writing I've done about the difference between work I call "narrative," even when it relies on lyric devices, and pure lyric, I use "lyric" as a noun differently than I do "lyric" as an adjective, where for me it indicates a reliance on dense musicality and imagery. As a noun, "lyric," like "narrative," participates in a system of operation. The difference between the two does not inhere in the difference between prose, which keeps time in the sentence, and verse, which marks time by line. If we assume the sentence to be inherently narrative in structure, and the line inherently lyric, we err, at least in part. Though the line may more easily lend itself to recursiveness, and the sentence to forward movement, either may turn to either purpose.

Rather, for me, the difference is that narrative works operate structurally through narrative gesture, the "if/then" movement of cause and effect, about which lyric cares not. The pure lyric may gesture or hint at narrative possibility, which it nonetheless sequesters *outside* itself, operating instead through the this-and simultaneity we recognize in metaphor and metonymy, which purports to move us along while still keeping us from getting anywhere.

We might, in thinking how lyric proses might yet be narratives, consider the lyric passages in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, specifically the temporal anomalies in the scene in which Lily finishes her painting, or perhaps the ways in which Alice Munro's story "Carried Away" deploys the poetic device of

metonymic substitution across its surface, often as a replacement for more conventional narrative movements. Think of how the title, "Carried Away," is an already metaphoric synonym for the also-metaphor of losing one's head, and how it is during the course of the story gradually replaced with an actual beheading, which in spite of its narrative inevitability nonetheless comes as a surprise. My larger argument, then, is that both of these works are essentially narrative in nature, because their lyric devices are deployed in the service of if/then narratives contained within the works themselves, operating on the principle of cause-and-effect through time. The moment in which Lily finishes her painting shimmers and gains its significance within the context of a larger narrative progression, just as the *events* in "Carried Away" lead to the beheading as inexorably as the metaphor does.

Contrast these with the famous Bly poem, "Driving Toward Lac Qui Parle River," the first stanza of which reads:

> I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota.
> The stubble field catches the last growth of sun.
> The soybeans are breathing on all sides.
> Old men are sitting before their houses on car seats
> In the small towns. I am happy,
> The moon rising above the turkey sheds.

Here, though the poem presents events, mostly in the form of still images, one at a time as language requires, they do not lead one to the other, but rather replace each other in lyric sequence within the poem's single ongoing present moment.

My favorite exemplar of pure lyric is of course Emily Dickinson. A game of mine is to see which lines of hers I can replace with lines from other poems with similar textural consistency, which inheres in the vocabularies, tones, and imageries being deployed. It's possible, for example, to swap out the first and third lines from "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant," where the second line is "Success in Circuit Lies"

with those of "To be alive is power," to get, "To be alive—is Power—/Success in Circuit lies –/ Without a further function—/The truth's superb surprise."

Nonfiction, as we know, may and often does follow the if/then structure: in argument, in instruction, in telling a story; an essay may, like a story or a novel, include lyric elements in service to the if/then that drives it, in which case it is not *a lyric*, however it may try to dazzle and distract you with its lyric subterfuges. But unlike with fiction, which is almost never purely lyric, the essay in its purest sense may like a poem operate through lyric simultaneity and so become lyric not just in the descriptive sense but in the actual sense: "lyric," as with some (not all) poetry, shifts from the adjective space to the noun space.

Of course, many nonfiction lyrics flaunt their hybridity; a work like Bhanu Kapil's *Humanimal* absolutely refers to an external narrative—several, in fact—without indulging much, if at all, in the satisfactions of cause-and-effect or its resolution. Working through substitution and recursion, the book enacts a constant reexamination of the assumptions at the bottom of narrative: that we can re-construct the "what happened" to discover the "how" or even the "why" it happened. It also indulges in wildly lyric language, by which I mean language that is intensely musical, sonically and rhythmically dense, performing its substitutions in the ear, word by word.

This stands often in contrast to *Bird Lovers, Backyard*, by Thalia Field, another narrative refusenik. Like *Humanimals* made not of lines but of sentences, *Bird Lovers, Backyard* nonetheless often declines to use its sentences to make narrative or rhetorical order; it pretends to narrative, or instruction, or explanation; or it reaches for technical or scientific discourse, frankly flat on the sentence level, that it doesn't fully enact. Like *Humanimals*, it too creates a sense of recursive movement through its often rapid substitutions. It is at the moment of refusing its own discourses that it rises to the level of lyric.

At a recent reading, the poet David Trinidad presented poems alongside several pieces in prose. The vignettes, while linked by a life and speaking to each other across the gaps between them, stand alone as narrative moments rather than pieces of a larger work reaching toward narrative logic. He hesitates,

clearly unconvinced, to call them "prose poems," though some others have. To my mind, he is right to resist: they are clearly *not* prose poems but essays one might better call "flash memoirs" or "pulse memoirs" (I suspect people call them poems simply because David is a poet and the pieces are fairly short). Each piece tells a brief true story in fairly flat if compressed narrative if/then prose. Each performs a sort of narrative integrity. Here is the opening to "Pea Coat":

> Laureen, a friend from my high school drama class, called and said she'd heard that Western Costume, the company that supplied costumes to the music studios, was selling off a large part of its inventory. Did I want to go? My mother gave me permission, and ten dollars.

This beginning places us firmly into the realm of narrative cause-and-effect, and the piece remains there until its final, small paragraph, which ends in a series of questions, the last, mysteriously, "Was I a sailor in a past life?" Here, the memoir gestures provocatively into a realm beyond narrative, in which time itself becomes subject to question.

Trinidad says that when the pieces have finished with him he will arrange them lyrically, by association and image, and not temporally. In that case, the larger work could plausibly be considered a lyric comprising internal narrative components, a sort of inside-out version of what Woolf does in *To the Lighthouse*.

A number of nonfiction prose writers, like poets, aggressively experiment with the page and with forms that resist and undermine the narrative impulse. Lance Olsen's *[[there.]]*, which the writer describes as a "trash diary" of his year in Berlin, seems to declare itself outright as a narrative, or at least as a text that will proceed in an orderly way through time. However, as its meditation unfolds, it continuously repositions its "[[there.]]" as ongoing temporal and spatial presence, at once all we can rely on and destabilized by its ever-shifting relationship to the constant future and the constantly expanding past. The book's collage-like form, moving from Seybold to Heidegger, from Kafka's grave to the palace that was

the site of the Wannsee Conference, refuses to let it proceed in the expected way of a journal, producing instead the sense of the continuous now-ness of mind-in-body engaged with place, movement, and ideas both previously and just now received. Poet-like, Olsen uses the page in a gestural way, deploying oddments of punctuation, announced by the title but perhaps most active in his use of colons placed together to indicate not omissions but "what cannot be articulated accurately," especially at speed-of-mind. Via these and other methods, mashed-up from various genres and Olsen's own innovations, entries operate under the logic of substitution, contradiction, and association, thus placing themselves under the umbrella of the lyric even as they work through, around, and under their theorizations.

Jenny Boully, in *The Body: An Essay*, deploys white space as formal device as well as a maker of meaning. Comprising blank pages undergirded with footnotes to an absent text, *The Body: An Essay* doesn't so much sequester as neglect to bring narrative under its surveillance at all, positing even what it leaves out not as a sequence of events but as an organism or body singularly occupying the space and time marked by blank pages. Likewise, the footnotes that make up what text we have themselves do little more than suggest, if that, what might be missing, what might be or might have been transpiring, refusing not only to sequence it but even to give it sense.

My own new memoir will be described as a lyric memoir, which it is. Whittled down from 2000 pages to under 300, it relies on compression and density, and in substitution within sections and across sections. However, all of this substitution serves a narrative knit from action and consequence; the overarching construction, despite the temporal play and recursion, moves forward, from a clear if arbitrarily chosen beginning to an equally clear, also arbitrarily chosen end.

On the other hand, my current work, in what I call "reckless poetics," though it comprises some scholarly pieces also includes some that are lyrics in the sense I've been talking about here. The newest, "Filament," starts like this:

> Light as air, nearly, the filament in a lightbulb is made of tungsten. Jar it, shake it, step wrong while climbing the ladder toward the chandelier—even if you don't fall or you land holding the bulb high, cradled in your palm—it might break inside for any reason, no apparent reason. Even if you see no trace of soot, if the glass ball remains perfect, you can tell the bulb is gone by shaking it gently and listening for bright music.
>
> Tungsten is one of our hardest elements. It burns at very high temperature, not melting even then. Inside a closed globe, deprived of oxygen, it gets hotter and hotter but won't flame. Incandescent bulbs can burn your fingers; they waste themselves.
>
> ~
>
> Light as air, or nearly, so we think—only, most women know, hair is anything but, even when, as mine once did, it "Flits — glimmers — proves — dissolves —" (Dickinson), glancing where the sun touches it.
>
> Hair can hurt you if you sleep on it funny or it dries wrong or has somehow grown a little askew. Barrettes hurt, elastics hurt, hairpins ornamented or not. Cowlicks hurt. Imagine being a sister in a famous set, performing the hair hang for one circus or another. Imagine braiding the steel cable into your hair— "Filament, filament, filament," says Whitman, "Launch'd . . . out of itself"—then allowing it to loft you above the rings and into the upper reaches of the tent while you hold your pose under hot lights, toes pointed, arms flickering.
>
> As *The Guardian* puts it, "That's not a torture technique, that's entertainment."
>
> You, too, would keep your weight down—115 pounds for the heaviest Alaya sister, 90 for the lightest, so whittled, so feminine. You would approach your spin knowing its physics: it will double your weight, the pressure on your scalp.
>
> Which is nerve rich, exquisitely tender, as if in close communion with the brain, though apparently the brain, where we process a pain for every finest wild hair, is oddly insensate: a surgeon can cut into it without administering anesthetic, can touch the actual brain to create a sensation or a tremor elsewhere in the body, displaced. Perhaps hair acts as the brain's otherwise absent sensory system, so hurts, as it were, in the brain's place.
>
> I know, hair doesn't hurt, itself; it hurts a direct object. Many women, I'd warrant, maybe most, have had their heads forced back by the hair, been brought to ground by pain.
>
> My childhood friend calls her hair her "dead matter," but I imagine the brain's electricity reaching the skull and, instead of turning back on itself, extending outward, follicle by follicle, hair raising.

All this, I note, in service of an essay that will become an elegy for my father's failing mind.

Lately, in my poems, I've also been working from an exercise of Lynn Kilpatrick's, who for years has adapted poetic forms into prose as a way (as I read her) of thinking about narrative. What might it

look like, I wondered, to try to bring such forms into prose without also importing the sequestered narrative? We've already considered how sentences may be arranged in such a way that they operate collectively along the principle of lyric substitution, disrupting the if/then of syntax through their arrangement. Likewise, sentences that are rigorously arranged according to poetic forms like villanelles, pantoums, sonnets, and sestinas, which are elaborately woven and often obsessively recursive, may be persuaded to occupy the noun-space of lyric. If a piece of writing moves itself forward by substituting one word for another that sounds almost but not exactly like it, or by repeating the same word in a way makes it mean differently, or by repeating a phrase or sentence within a new context, it may progress entirely through substitution even if it does so in sentences. With a poem like a sestina, which marks its lines through the repetition seven times each of the same six words and so actively impedes narrative movement through repetition, it may not matter if the poem is lined or not. Taking Kilpatrick's work as an example, her "Francis Bacon Sestina," uses its lines to manage its sentences (which often ignore their boundaries) and sequester its narrative, which it elides; while her prose work "Miss America: A Story in Sestinas," keeps its time explicitly through sentences, which move the narrative forward even as each returns us at its end to one of the six repeating words that would otherwise end a line. Both sestinas use their lines or lack of them, their sentences or sentence failures, explicitly to think about tensions between narrative and lyric operations. In my own "Sestina in Prose," I allow the repeated words to occur at almost even intervals, whether in the middles or at the ends of the sentences, inviting (I hope) the reader to imagine the ghosts of lines among the sentences. The result is a flash essay I would call "a lyric."

A poem like Bly's, which proceeds via a succession of substituting images, has its feet in an American tradition of imagism associated with poets like Pound and Amy Lowell, who drew heavily on Asian forms like the Haiku. These two haiku of Issa's demonstrate the importance both of juxtaposition and also of the line as brief measure in enacting the poems' slips and sleights:

Under the evening moon

the snail

is stripped to the waist.

[Trans. Robert Hass]

On a branch

floating downriver

a cricket, singing.

[Trans. Jane Hirschfield]

Even without recourse to the original Japanese, we can get a sense from these versions by two different translators how the haiku works in Issa's hands. Unlike the Hass translation, which gestures toward regular syntax by including the verb "is," Hirschfield's version represses the verb to present more explicitly a series of snapshots suspended one after the other. But the completion of the sentence in Hass's translation doesn't undermine the underlying action of substitution in the poem; the verb "is" in itself acts not as an agent of action or even progression through time, but rather as a mechanism of enforced stasis. Likewise, the punctuation in both versions, like Hass's verb artifacts of the poems' movement into English, is finally irrelevant to how we experience the poems' syntax. What matters in both translations is their lines, each of which allows the image it contains to float independently of the others even as it at once replaces and extends them. In these poems the lines could occur, could indeed be substituted for one another, in any order, and the poems would still make sense, though the sense that they would make would differ depending on the order in which we encountered the image each line unfolds.

In a similar way, Pound's famous "In A Station of the Metro," which I've written about elsewhere at length, also demonstrates the way in which tools available to the sentence may work against narrative

syntax rather than for it. Drawing from his extensive study of Japanese Hokku, "Metro" is one of a collection of poems in which Pound experimented with image and substitution as ways of controlling movement and stasis in the poem. Since we have several published versions, we have a good idea of how the poem progressed through its revisions. For me, an important moment in its composition occurred when Pound changed the punctuation mark between the two lines from a semicolon to a colon, to get this:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
>
> Petals on a wet, black bow.

In replacing a mark that indicates temporal/logical progression from one thing to the next with a mark that, like an equals sign, suggests radical reciprocity, Pound makes the two lines, as in the Issa poems, interchangeable. Rather than moving the reader inexorably forward, they allow the reader to move backward and forward at once, achieving a kind of vibrating stasis between the two lines.

I've treated the haiku at such length in this essay on lyric and essay because of my sense that here the presence of the line, often though not always alongside the repression of the sentence or at least any action verb, is often what drives the haiku into lyric-as-a-noun. As we've seen from the Bly poem, the whole of which is much longer than the stanza I've included here, terseness and elision become essential to this action, which brevity might help without being essential or sufficient to it. Within this compression, Hirschfield's translation so completely keeps its time and also its sense by the line that removing the breaks would almost deprive it of legibility. Because they gesture toward syntax in a way the Hirschfield version does not, the Hass translation and Pound's "Metro" can be shaken out of line, but in this case both would lose enough of their intactness and so their sense that they would then more explicitly invite a reader to imagine a "what came before" and "what comes after," inviting narrative inside.

To press the point, I offer my own attempt at a "Haiku in Prose," three short (5-7-5) sentences that treat both images and syntax very differently than Issa's, Pounds, or Bly's poems. In the end, "Haiku in Prose" looks like nothing so much as an aphorism, gesturing broadly toward a narrative so pressing that, though it lives not in but between the sentences, it fails to remain sequestered, beyond the poem, which is, therefore, not a lyric, but might be the flashest of essays:

HAIKU IN PROSE

I feed you a line. You feed me a longer one.

Do we both swallow?

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