

Legitimacy of Lyric Essays: Analysis of Genre

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Matters are neither stable nor consensual and they are not likely soon to become so. The interesting question is not how all this muddle is going to come magnificently together, but what does all this ferment mean ... The rising interest ... in the analysis of symbol systems poses ... the question of relationship of such systems to what goes on in the world. (Geertz 34-35)

“One might say that human consciousness possesses,” Mikhail Bahktin wrote, “a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality ... The genres of literature enrich our inner speech with new devices for the awareness and conceptualization of reality” (*Bahktin Reader* 179). The lyric has been a genre for poets since Ancient Greece, but the lyric as genre for essayists is relatively new. I intend to determine the lyric essay’s generic legitimacy by exploring whether lyric essays have cohesive applications and contexts that give us a framework for understanding literature.

Contemporary History

In 1970, Hobart and William Smith College founded the *Seneca Review*, an international publication with the purpose of promoting poetry, particularly “translations of contemporary poetry from around the world” (Hobart). Their contributors include laureates and other award-winning poets. In 1997, after twenty-seven years specializing in poetry, the *Seneca Review* began a foray into what editor Deborah Tall and associate editor John D’Agata termed the “lyric essay,” which their website says is a genre of “creative nonfiction that borders on poetry” (Lyric Essay), and that include the following characteristics:

- artfulness is more important than information
- meditation is more important than argument
- poetry or lyricism is more important than story line
- questioning is more important than conclusion
- suggestion is more important than exhaustion

Tall and D'Agata saw the recent establishment of the genres of creative nonfiction and personal essay as an opportunity for the sub-genre of lyric essay, "[straddling the essay and the lyric poem]" (Lyric Essay 7).

The 1990s was a time in which nonfiction was coming into its own, but by fits, bounds, and parallel tracks that didn't necessarily consult one another. Lines were drawn anew and crossed, and authors and editors, such as D'Agata, Tall, and Lee Gutkind were on the leading edge of this new frontier for nonfiction writing, picking up where the "New Journalism" of the 1960s and 1970s left off.

Around the time that D'Agata was working his way through graduate studies with Deborah Tall as one of his professors, the literary world was brimming with the "new" idea of creative nonfiction brought to life from and added to the "New Journalism" officially announced in Tom Woolf's collection titled *New Journalism* published 1975. In 1997, when Tall and D'Agata began trade in "lyric essays," author, Lee Gutkind, in *The Art of Creative Nonfiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality*, wrote, "This book ... will introduce the genre of creative nonfiction," (1) bringing fresh perspective to "New Journalism." According to Gutkind, the, "*New Yorker, Harper's, Vanity Fair, Esquire* [were publishing] more creative nonfiction than fiction and poetry combined. Universities offer Masters of Fine Arts degrees in creative nonfiction." Many established authors already wrote themselves into the creative nonfiction genre.

Creative nonfiction is a gateway of curiosity, throwing off bonds that formerly labeled itself not fiction or true. It opened the way for many creative nonfiction sub-genres not only to develop but to be recognized in the old guard of Aristotelian epideictic oratory through the personal essays of Michel de Montaigne to the lyric essays of Thomas DeQuincy, Virginia Woolf, and Anne Dillard, to name a few. D'Agata and fellow lyric essay promoters were part of the catalyst of literary change in their time and in the expansion of time to come of "passion for the written word; a passion for the search and discovery of knowledge; and a passion for involvement—observing both directly and clandestinely in order to understand intimately how things in this world work" (Gutkind 8).

Tall and D'Agata said the lyric essay's artist has the freedom to "reconcoct meaning" and "walk the margins" (Lyric Essay 8). This genre of lyric essay blurred demarcations between not just poetry and prose, but possibly between fiction and nonfiction. As Dinty Moore writes in *Crafting the Personal Essay*, "Perhaps because of our proximity to journalism, and ultimately to what is sometimes called the 'factual record,' writers of nonfiction felt constrained and limited ... Deborah Tall and John D'Agata have helped to champion a movement that encourages essayists to push the boundaries wherever they might lead" (93-94). Twenty-seven years after D'Agata and Tall introduced the lyric essay genre, D'Agata, in *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay*, writes,

I love the in-between, which is where I think the most truthful struggles with reality exist. The history of our genre attests to this, rich as it is with woefully unverifiable essays by Virginia Woolf, Plutarch, George Orwell, Herodotus, E.B. White, Cicero, Joseph Mitchell, Daniel Defoe, Jorge Louis Borge, James Thurber, Natalia Ginzburg, Truman Capote, W.G. Sebald, Mary McCarthy, Sei Shonagon, and many many others ... I [do not] think we can afford to lose whatever writers are yet to emerge in [lyric essay] who might be inspired by those nonfiction forbearers who have interpreted the rules differently. After all, is there any single term that could possibly describe how we each process the world? (8)

Many of the authors D'Agata mentions are labeled personal essayists or memoirists, now falling under the genre of creative nonfiction. Tall and D'Agata, like many authors have roots in poetry from which they draw prose. Lyric essay may grow from the grafting of poetry to prose as a sub-genre of nonfiction.

Many rhetoricians have pushed the boundaries as they followed or side-stepped Tall's and D'Agata's lead on lyric essays. The 1990s' beginning of the development of nonfiction in terms of creative nonfiction, personal essay, and lyric essay continued to grow and expand in new definitions of these genres or sub-genres. Over time, other voices added to Tall's and D'Agata's on the definition of the lyric essay.

- 2003, Ben Marcus wrote in “On the Lyric Essay,” “The loose criteria for the lyric essay seems to invoke a kind of nonfiction not burdened by research or fact, yet responsible ... to sense and poetry, shrewdly allegiant to no expectations of genre other than the demands of its own subject” (Marcus).
- 2005, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola write in *The Forms of Creative Writing*, “Lyric essays do not necessarily follow a straight narrative line ... are songlike in that they hinge on the inherent rhythms of language and sound ... favor fragmentation and imagery; they use white space and juxtaposition as structural elements” (106).
- 2007 *Seneca Review’s On the Lyric Essay*, Judith Kitchen writes, “The lyric essay must not only mean, but be. It is a way of seeing the world ... letting mystery into the knowing ... and part of the knowing is through sound—the whisper of soft consonants, the repetition of an elongated vowel that squeaks its way across the page ... the assonance and consonance of thought attuned to language. The internal rhyme of the mind. (Weiss 46)
- 2010, Moore, in *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*, wrote that lyric essays let, “the sheer musicality and evocativeness of language create part of the experience for ... readers ... [evoking] an emotional reaction ... [making] imaginative leaps and idiosyncratic jumps” (93,94).
- 2013, Phillip Lopate, writes in *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, of the lyric essay that there “tends to be a reliance on structural, conceptual devices, such as lists or repeating word-phrases, a welcoming stream-of-consciousness, surrealist disjunctive leaps from line to line, and a suppression of mounting argument, replaced by circularity or trance ... part of the larger rebellion against Western Enlightenment reason and linear, left-brain thinking” (123).
- 2016, Amy Bonnaffons, in “Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay,” writes, “The term ‘lyric essay’ brings poetry—[the] highest of the high literary arts—into the realm of nonfiction ... 1) it definitely means poetic and 2) nobody can agree on what else it might mean” and “It also seems well-suited for exploration of the disembodied, the

- fragmentary, the flashbulb immediacy and ephemerality of the internet age” (*Essay Review*).
- 2017’s 30th anniversary special edition of *Seneca Review* on lyric essays coincided with--
 - Travis Scholl, in “Reading Lyric: Essay and Archive,” takes the white space of interpretation by the reader literally, including “essays” that are mere “series of footnotes to an absent body copy,” (166) and “a final exam, the essay [containing] explicit instructions for how the reader can complete the exam.”
 - Claudia Rankine, in *Citizen*, causes the reader to ask, “Just who is the ‘you’ here? Its referent shifts throughout the passage ... heighten its unsettling disease” (167).
 - Beth Petersen, in “The Lyric Invitation,” “Meaning-making is downplayed; instead the reader is given authority to wade through the facts, experiences, and ideas to make their own meaning from them” (175).
 - Desirae Matherly, in “Prose, Essay, Lyric,” sums up lyric as “just another way of saying *poïetic*, which is yet another way of saying essay. And perhaps then, the lyric essay is a bringing forth of an attempt, or an attempt to become dialogic, that meets the reader halfway, but asks for more. If there were a literature of becoming, it would emerge from the liminal half-light of poem and essay, and from the space that exists between the reader and the writer. In this literature of becoming, things made but not defined, gestured toward, but still unfinished” (163).

Lyric essay as genre is plagued by confusion over what it is and if it is useful to authors and audiences. For example, Lopate, author of well-respected *The Art of the Personal Essay*, in “A Skeptical Take” in the *Seneca Review* 2007 issue, “In theory, it seems plausible and promising; in practice, thus far, less so” (30.) He admits to not understanding what the lyric essay is and calls it a “license for vagueness” (32). Eula Biss takes issue with genres as a complication that distracts and is “not at all useful as an evaluative tool” (58). She believes there is too much emphasis on knowing what classification the lyric essay is and not enough

“knowing what it is” (60). Patricia Vigderman in “Monkey Mind” reminds us of the need for narrative arc in essay. Otherwise “digression will lead both off the track and somewhere very interesting, depending on your tolerance for lyric or syntactical uncertainty” (61). Vigderman echoes Lopate’s need for a solid framework for the essay, going further to say, “Digression raises a problem of trust” (62). The essay, she writes, may digress, as exemplified by George Elliot, but they always end up at a point that the reader is satisfied by the truth of intention. In other words, the author fulfills the reader’s anticipation. Continuing in the *Seneca Review’s* 2007 issue, in “‘Brenda Miller Has a Cold’ or: How the Lyric Essay Happens,” Miller writes that the lyric essay is about becoming, not trying (Miller 25), “a happening” (27), not expectation. It is as if seeing images in a mirror. For Miller, it is lacking the narrative arc of story. It is simply a static scene that is ADD in attention span and direction. The confusion displayed by just a few authors destabilizes a lyric essay genre.

The lack of foundation for understanding the lyric essay as genre may explain the confusion of characteristics. Here we clarify whether the lyric essay has cohesive purpose and how generic theory provides order and intention to engage in any literature.

Generic Action

Michel M. Bakhtin, informs us that we can view the structure of a genre as both appearing at a particular point in time and as evolving historically. In “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel,” M.M. Bakhtin wrote about chronotope, which is literally “time space,” as it pertains to novel, but his chronotope which “expresses the inseparability of space and time” (84) also applies, as to other subjects, to the context of genre, “The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions” (84-85). From this we can say that the lyric essay’s rhetorical distinctions or characteristics *as* genre may change from within certain constraint as new work helps to define it and the lyric essay’s rhetorical context *of* genre changes depending on the historical relevance of any given moment. The two direction of contexts and the lack of a theoretical framework may explain how the lyric essay has become confused with a variety of changes in its’ characteristics, with definition and examples

becoming more or less inclusive. Rhetoricians are looking at lyric essays as seen from the period of the 1990s, without historical context of essays from the past or to come.

Genre is a potential shape-shifter, but only as genre serves a specific purpose relevant to the historical, social, and cultural context. Bakhtin might say that the history of pinning down the genre of the lyric essay has been “complicated and erratic” (85). After all, according to Bakhtin, texts are living things—a relationship between author and reader. That relationship changes with the variations of people and their societies, cultures, and histories. Texts, then, are also living things affected by the author and reader and their social, historical, and cultural contexts. This seems to indicate the genre’s characteristics within those contexts might change. However, I propose that the characteristics or distinctions of a genre once established may vary little but genre’s context or purpose changes with the changing needs of audience. Genres grow into establishment of a set of characteristics that to be recognized, have a history, even if applied after the fact of a text, of meeting a particular situation of an audience. It is the historical, social, and cultural context that dictates the purpose of any given genre. In Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, he writes,

Those things that are static in space cannot be statically described, but must rather be incorporated into the temporal sequence of represented events and into the story’s own representational field. Thus in Lessing’s familiar example, the beauty of Helen is not so much described by Homer as it is demonstrated in the reactions of the Trojan elders; these come to light simultaneously in the sequence comprised by the activities and deeds of the elders. (251)

We might say that the genre of lyric essay can only be described as it demonstrates the expectations of the audience for a genre in the audience’s own context. The lyric essay’s characteristics solidify in answering to the lyric essay’s purpose. If lyric essay is to be delineated as a genre, its distinctions or characteristics must stabilize without necessity of stasis to grow to answer to specific purposes.

Bakhtin believed that texts are living things in the exchange or answerability between the author and the audience. That answerability changes with the variations of the context, giving it meaning and purpose for the audience. The text itself is given meaning by the context

in which the author and audience exist. That is not to say a genre's purpose will definitively change, only that a genre's use *may* change without forsaking a genre's essential makeup. In fact, it is essential for a proposed genre such as the lyric essay to establish that makeup in order to apply it to specific rhetorical situations.

Carolyn R. Miller continues in the same vein in more contemporary terms and times of this specific purpose in "Genre as Social Action" in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Inaugurals, eulogies, courtroom speeches, and the life have conventional forms because they arise in situations with similar structures and elements and because rhetors respond in similar ways, having learned from precedent what is appropriate and what effect their actions are likely to have on other people. (152)

It is not just the quarry of professional rhetoricians, but also the general public, or audience, who uses their common sense to understand rhetoric by means of the use of that rhetoric. That is genre as actionable practice—for rhetoric to be such that it serves a particular purpose. Somewhere in the middle where the action and reaction meet, both actions dependent on both the writer and the reader, is the genre that bridges them. Then, the characteristics of that genre, in this case, the lyric essay, is based solely on the ability for the bridge to be crossed. Miller writes, "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret: this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way" (159). Genre is not so much a definition (or a static set of characteristics) as it is a strategy or dynamic whereby an author within a given context answers a specific purpose of an audience's expectations within their given context. Bakhtin and Miller might agree that defining the lyric essay is dependent on each given societal, historical, and cultural context.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz proposes that society in general is prone to piecing together genre based on each individual's situation, thereby placing the emphasis of genres, such as the lyric essay, on what its' distinctions or characteristics are as suitable or not to individual purpose. Geertz's analysis of genres applies in what specifically has occurred with the lyric essay genre,

The properties connecting texts with one another, that put them, ontologically anyway, on the same level, are coming to seem as important in characterizing them as those dividing them: and rather than face an array of natural kinds, fixed types divided by sharp qualitative differences, we more and more see ourselves surrounded by a vast, almost continuous field of variously intended and diversely constructed works we can order only practically, relationally, and as our purposes prompt us. It is not that we no longer have conventions of interpretation; we have more than ever, built—often enough to jerry-built—to accommodate a situation at once fluid, plural, uncentered, and ineradicably untidy. (20-21)

In the lyric essay, this has amounted to confusion over what it is and if it is useful to rhetoricians at all. Geertz's anthropological perspective is that in all fields, categories such as the nonfiction sub-genre of lyric essay, may succumb to the societal pressure to begin, be, or end, "untidy" or uncertain as individuals impose their personal purpose on that sub-genre. Authors, rhetoricians, and audiences are only human in their tendency towards this. It is especially so in the historical context of now when we are accustomed to choices and versatilities. Our anthropological bent has created the lyric essay "as our purposes prompt" (21).

The strategy of developing the makeup of the lyric essay inspires rhetorical application or action. To drive a sub-genre such as the lyric essay, as with any genre, rules or characteristics are necessary if they are to inspire a specific action, and those characteristics, though boundaried, "create little universes of meaning." The capriciousness with which the lyric essay has developed in its' relatively short history is a product of uncertain purposes for the lyric essay. Like a kaleidoscope, each rhetorician wants to twist the colors this way or that to create an image preferable to their individual meaning or more particular essay. Geertz writes, "The game analogy is not a view of things that is likely to commend itself to humanists, who like to think of people not as obeying the rules and angling for an advantage but as acting freely and realizing their finer capacities" (26). Rhetoricians are trying to find the lyric essay's "finer capacities," and failing for lack of a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

If the lyric essay is to be legitimized, we must find a unifying theme to apply to the variations of historical, social, and cultural contexts or purposes. The characteristics given lyric essays by a variety of rhetoricians appear meaningful unto themselves, according to their individual historical, social, and/or cultural context. The definition of the lyric essay is like so many pieces of fabric, cut from various genres and individuals' historical, social, and/or cultural contexts, fulfilling no purpose except unto the individual rhetorician. Methodological discord in the study of art can be overcome not by creating a new method, still another method—one more participant in the general struggle among methods that will simply exploit the factuality of art in its own way, but only by way of a systematic philosophical grounding of the fact and the distinctiveness of art in the unity of human culture.

Authors of lyric essays and articles about lyric essays created “a new method, still another method,” sometimes and not in disagreement, not only because of a lacking unifying theoretical framework, but because their theoretical framework does not consider “human culture.” Genres such as the potential lyric essay genre of creative nonfiction need a rhetorical theoretical framework that includes analyzing the genre from the context of humanity. According to Bakhtin, texts are living things affected not only by the author, but also by the readers' social, historical, and cultural contexts. True meaning in literature is only in what Bakhtin calls its answerability—that is in how the author writes for and how the reader understands the writing. That life or the audience that answers the text is in turn influenced by contexts. To be legitimate the lyric essay cannot simply be a method or a description, as D'Agata and Tall gave us in their 1997 *Seneca Review*. Meaningful or answerable literature comes from audience expectation.

On the subject of genre, Bahktin wrote,

- An artistic whole of any type, i.e. of any genre, has a two-fold orientation in reality, and the characteristics of this orientation determine the type of the whole, i.e., its genre.
- In the first place, the work is oriented toward the listener and perceiver, and toward the definite conditions of performance and perception.
- In the second place, ... Every genre has its own orientation in life with reference to its events, problems, etc. (*Bahktin Reader* 176)

If texts are living things oriented not just toward the author and their text, but also to the purpose it serves the reader, genres such as lyric essays must encompass Bahktin's two-fold orientation of contextual purpose and generic definition.

Lyric essays may be defined as a genre when its characteristics becomes distinct in a way that may be applied to specific situations. Answering the lyric essay's purposes comes from looking through history at how such prose developed. Bahktin writes,

Any creative point of view ... becomes convincingly necessary and indispensable only in correlation with other creative points of view ... From within itself alone, outside its participation in the unity of culture, it is merely naked fact, and its distinctiveness may present itself as simply arbitrary and capricious. (Bahktin 274)

Genre is actionable practice—rhetoric serving purpose. The characteristics of that genre, in this case, the lyric essay, is based solely on the ability for the author and audience to meet in crossing the bridge of genre. Genre is not so much a static set of characteristics as it is a strategy whereby an author answers the audience's expectations. In Bahktin's answerability, literature, such as lyric essays, may find their meaning in the context of the creative points of the author and the audience together.

Genre is a potential shapeshifter. That is not to say a genre's purpose will definitively change, only that a genre's use *may* change without forsaking a genre's essential makeup. In fact, it is essential for a proposed genre such as the lyric essay to establish that makeup in order to apply it to specific rhetorical situations.

The strategy of developing the makeup of the lyric essay inspires rhetorical action. To drive a genre such as the lyric essay is to create practical application. The capriciousness with which the lyric essay has developed in its relatively short history is a product of uncertain purposes for the lyric essay. Like a kaleidoscope, each author wants to twist the colors this way or that to create an image preferable to their individual meaning or more particular essay. Bahktin writes,

The device of vagueness ... is possible. But this external vagueness only sets off the inner thematic finalization more strongly ... Every genre represents a special way of constructing and finalizing a whole, finalizing it essentially and thematically (we repeat), and not just conditionally or compositionally. (*Bahktin Reader* 176)

Authors argue that writing that delineates characteristics is against what the lyric essay stands for—the freedom to realize the “finer capacities.” However, it is in developing a theoretical framework of characteristics and context that lyric essays become meaningful genre. To give genre meaning from singular compositions destabilizes its chance to be a genre at all.

Bahktin’s “thematic content,” as applied to lyric essay, is so many individual scraps of fabric, leftover from various projects which by themselves have no purpose. However, if the various people with their various scraps agree on a pattern, a quilt results that then serves the purpose of warming whomever uses it. Bringing together the various scraps of fabric of the characteristics given to lyric essays by various authors and cutting them down to one pattern, results in their having a unifying purpose by which the audience may all be served in the same way. Purposes, holding to the suitability of trends, tend toward different patterns of quilts as time goes by, still by using those various scraps of fabric. The rhetoric of genre cultivates thematic unity which contributes to the meaning—literature applied to audience purpose. Lyric essay develops with the purpose of meeting historical, societal, and cultural expectations of the audience is Bahktin’s “orientation in life.”

Lyrical Context

Going back to the historical context of the genre of lyric essay we find that original defining point is that the essays were lyrical. What does that then mean as a descriptor? Phillip Brewster, in *Lyric*, writes of the lyric's characteristics across history and purpose, "There are certain consistent features in definitions of lyric: it is characterized by brevity, deploys a first-person speaker or persona, involves performance, and is an outlet for personal emotion" (1). These characteristics, as used over time and context from poem to contemporary songs, may be what Tall and others of her time were accustomed to "lyrical" meaning when they gave some prose this descriptor. There seems to be room in the creative non-fiction genre for a sub-genre of lyric essay, according to the 1990s context in which Tall and D'Agata saw it forming, the context of the lyric poem as understood at that time, and the context of essays in history. The "lyric" of the lyric essay informs the dynamic of the lyric essay as that "straddling" of poetry and creative nonfiction first suggested by D'Agata and Tall.

Brewster writes of the historical context of lyric that, "demonstrates the prevailing connection between words and music in definitions of lyric forms across almost three millennia" (16). Performance speaks of the origins of the lyric in ancient Greece which referred to the intention of the poet for the accompaniment of music, specifically the lyre. Brewster writes, "Even after poetry became primarily a matter of writing rather than an oral performance, however, musicality continued to be regarded as a signature feature of the lyric," and he quotes W.B. Sedgwick from 1924 who said the lyric was, "above all, perfect harmony in diversity of metre, freedom of construction and apparent spontaneity, checked and held together by the binding force of musical rhythm" (16). If essays of the 1990s were routinely being called lyrical, we may apply this "musical rhythm" to the lyric essay as within the historical, societal, and cultural context for the characteristic.

Lopate writes of Anne Dillard that she, “came to essays through poetry, and her prose has the unmistakable imprint of a trained poet” (Lopate 692). Read out loud you find rhythm, a stepping to a beat, throughout the lyric essay. Dillard’s prose comes not only from an origin in poetry, but her poetry of prose is lyric, as can be felt in “Seeing,”

Some days when a mist covers the mountains, when muskrats won’t show and the microscope’s mirror shatters, I want to climb up the blank dome as a man would storm the inside of a circus tent, wildly, dangling, and with a steel knife claw a rent in the top, peep, and, if I must, fall. (704).

The rhythm may be more easily heard if her prose is outlined in verse form, from “Seeing,” as well,

- I didn't know whether to trace the progress of one turtle I was sure of,
- risking sticking my face in one of the bridge's spider webs made invisible by the gathering dark,
- or take a chance on seeing the mudbank in hope of seeing a muskrat
- or follow the last of the swallows who caught at my heart and trailed it after them
- like streamers from directly below, under the log, flying upstream with their tails forked, so fast. (697)

The way Dillard writes show not only Dillard's first love of poetry, but it is one of the things that some rhetoricians might say make this a lyric essay. She could revise and par down to communicate a beautiful essay in plainer language. She might, but poets and some lyric essayists don't care as much for correctness of language as much as for the sound of lyric—the musicality or rhythm—as if intended to be read out loud to an audience even of just yourself—a “performance,” as Brewster might say.

Considering the historical, social, and cultural context of the lyric essay also means learning from possible earlier origins. Tall and D’Agata mention a variety of authors from the time of Plutarch until now; however, we have yet to see the grid of the dynamic of lyric essay laid over specific older texts. This leaves it open to interpretation. Brewster writes of David Lindley from Lindley’s *Lyric*, that he, “stresses the importance of historicizing lyric practice: ‘the

only proper way to use the term 'lyric' is with precise historical awareness ... As critics we can only attempt to be scrupulous in always using a generic term like 'lyric' with the fullest possible historical awareness'" (8).

The Sophists were known for oratory that emphasized an elevated style over the Aristotelian stricture of content for persuasion. Tall and D'Agata mention some lyric essays, dating back to Plutarch, and Lopate writes of Cicero "'grand style,' a beautiful but wordy, florid oratory that rounded out sentences on the basis of sound" (Lopate 4). One text of the well-known Sophist, Gorgias, survives as "Encomium of Helen,"

The order proper to a city is well-manned; to a body, beauty; to a soul, wisdom; to a deed, excellence; and to a discourse, truth—and the opposites of these are disorder. And the praiseworthy man and woman and discourse and work and city-state and deed one must honor with praise, while one must assign blame to the unworthy—for it is equal error and ignorance to blame the praiseworthy and to praise the blameworthy.

After the poetically persuasive Sophists, Brewster picks up the line citing Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, when he writes, "lyric ... must 'not be confused with the modern term,' and our recent understanding of lyric is largely a product of the nineteenth century, when it became the 'dominant mode' of literature" (8).

From this nineteenth century comes Thomas DeQuincy's essay, "The English Mail-Coach," DeQuincy specifically writes of his essay, "Then was completed the passion of the mighty fugue," referring to the preceding parts of the "Dream Fugue." Dr. Milton Haight Turk, in his introduction of *The English Mail-Coach and Joan of Arc*, wrote,

De Quincey seems to have believed that he was creating in such writings a new literary type of prose poetry or prose phantasy; he had, with his splendid dreams as subject-matter, lifted prose to heights hitherto scaled only by the poet. In reality, his style owed much to the seventeenth-century writers, such as Milton and Sir Thomas Browne. He took part with Coleridge, Lamb, and others in the general revival of interest in earlier modern English prose, which is a feature of

the Romantic Movement. Still none of his contemporaries write as he did; evidently De Quincey has a distinct quality of his own. (5)

DeQuincy, though writing in the nineteenth century, was influenced by earlier poets of the Romantic period, choosing to turn his flair for poetry towards prose, in turn forming a generic bridge.

Testing “The English Mail-Coach” against what we find so far of the lyric essay—that it is related to the musicality of rhythm, we may find it is an early example of contemporary lyric essay. It may also exemplify yet another aspect of the historic lyric—“an outlet for personal emotion” (Brewster 1). Brewster writes of the historical context of the contemporary lyric, “Since the Romantic period, the dominant understanding of lyric has postulated an isolated speaker abstracted from specific historical conditions who can convey an immediacy of experience, ‘personal’ thoughts and feelings,” and quotes Barbara Hardy from *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry*, “the advantage of lyric in itself is its concentrated pattern of expression of feeling” (30). The lyric essay then also includes the individual’s subjectivity of emotional expression. It is how I feel at this very moment expressed lyrically on the page in poetry, and, also, in lyric essay, and my feelings are subject to the whim of metaphor, connotation, and imagery. We sometimes may imagine a falling amber leaf the trumpeter, calling forth the end times of the year, and it is but an expression of our feeling in imagination.

For example, in “The English Mail-Coach,” DeQuincy writes in “The Dream Fugue,”

The sea was rocking, and shaken with gathering wrath. Upon its surface sat mighty mists, which grouped themselves into arches and long cathedral aisles. Down one of these, with the fiery pace of a quarrel from a cross-bow, ran a frigate right athwart our course. “Are they mad?” some voice exclaimed from our deck. “Do they woo their ruin?” But in a moment, as she was close upon us, some impulse of a heady current or local vortex gave a wheeling bias to her course, and off she forged without a shock. (36)

Here is that border between fact and fiction that Tall and D’Agata liked about lyric essays as they saw them. Facts take on the appearance of fiction when subjected to DeQuincy’s obvious

grip of emotions as a frigate bears down on them, passes closely by, and moves on in their shared storm at sea. DeQuincy's description is fraught with emotional subjectivity, speaks as if in the moment without consideration of what has come before or what may happen after, and moves with rhythm. Though as a lyric essay sub-genre of creative nonfiction, the boundaries between fact and fiction in "The English-Mail Coach" may be blurred, questionable as to its base veracity, it may serve as a link to the very fundamentals of rhetorical theory.

Aristotle provided for three basic types of rhetoric—judicial, addressing the need to accuse or defend a justice or injustice or deal with the past; deliberative, addressing the need to exhort or dissuade or deal with the future; and epideictic, addressing the need to praise or blame virtue or vice or deal with the present. The lyric essay's thematic content, as allowed by Aristotelian theory, is not worried about an injustice or justice of the past or the exhortation towards a future. Lyric essay is not concerned with argumentation or narrative arc. It is concerned with the present and the praise of the virtuous, noble, or noteworthy and vice, the base, or the commonplace. George Jensen, in "Habit, Habitus, and Modernity," writes of Aristotle what may be applied to lyric essay,

He defines and discusses three types of rhetoric ... but he is clearly more focused on showing speakers how 'to see' all available options, those inherent in rhetoric at large as well as those specific to these three genres. He is in short, focused on the *tekhnē*—the art, the socially and historically evolved practice—of producing texts. He wants to provide the speaker with 'the available means,' or options, that enable rhetorical acts. (Jensen).

Lyric essay is an option that acts rhetorically in the meditative praise of existence—of being. In the bustle of life, moment by moment, slipping by without notice, except as part of one long parade, the lyric essay calls for the reader to stop and consider this very moment, the pen they hold, the melody they hear in wind chimes on the patio, the lines and colors of a picture, and how the coffee tastes—in short, the noteworthy and the common, the quotidian.

Brewster recounts the dynamics of the genre of lyric poetry within changing historical contexts. He writes, "The lyric self can be seen as historically situated, a self that speaks, albeit often in muted form, to the moment" (33). This argues for a characteristic supported in prose as

of the present, as in passing, not contemplative or persuasive, except to cause us to stop with the author to meditate on the present. Brewster goes on to conclude that with the lyric, “The reader is arrested by the invitation to clasp an outstretched hand and is caught in a moment of time when something *might happen*” (40). For example, Virginia Woolf, who is often cited as example of lyric essayist and was influenced by DeQuincy, in “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” writes,

But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins and trumpets in response; the army of human being may rouse itself and assert all its oddities and sufferings and sordidities. Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendor of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple streaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ windows. (Lopate 258)

Woolf constrains herself in the moment—the present—when things “*might happen.*” She does not attempt to persuade or adjudicate. This is a meaningfulness in the meditations of the present.

Woolf’s presence in now, an observer who does not resolve, evolve, or solve means that genre’s, such as lyric essay, as Bakhtin writes, “Plastic arts give width and depth to the visual realm and teach our eye to see, the genres of literature enrich our inner speech with new devices for the awareness and conceptualization of reality,” (Bakhtin Reader 179) and the lyric essay opens for the reader the space to contemplate for themselves what each moment or thing means to them.

Analysis Conclusion

In conclusion, historical context is a thread around which audience purpose may be spun to create as Bahktin wrote, “The genres of literature [that] enrich our inner speech with new devices for the awareness and conceptualization of reality.” These devices help us conceptualize the lyric essay’s characteristics which encourage the audience to experience musicality, moment, emotion, and the white space left in-between.

Tall and D’Agata may have been prone to a shaky kaleidoscope view of essays, but they did at least, introduce us to the quilt scraps that when the answerable meaning of author and audience is considered leads to a truer construct—a theoretical framework—for the genre of lyric essay. Lyric essays then give author’s and audience’s ever-fresh perspectives of the world of literature found in the theoretical framework of Bahktin’s answerability, Brewster’s historic lyric characteristics, and authors’ application of lyricism.

We benefit by not taking for granted bases by which we understand the literature we teach or learn. It opens doors of thoughts for “conceptualizing reality” in perhaps newer, greater, and more distinct ways. We benefit from the genre of lyric essay as it encourages us to be mindful, meditative, praising the noteworthy and the common in our busy lives when we think of what we need to do next rather than in this moment. This very moment of meaning of just being.

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