

It Is What It Is

All living matter, and anything derived from living matter, is organic. In the slightly more specific terms of chemistry, organic compounds are those that contain the element carbon. The word *organic* can also be used to describe a harmonious relationship between parts of a whole.

In some definitions the word *lyric* has something to do with feeling. In others it has something to do with musicality. When used to describe a voice, it means “characterized by a relatively high compass and a light, flexible quality.” As a noun, it means the words of a song or a kind of poem. “The range and variety of lyric verse is immense,” writes J. A. Cuddon, “and lyric poetry, which is to be found in most literatures, comprises the bulk of all poetry.” And so lyric might, when applied to the essay, seem to mean poetic. But that is an open jaw, meaning we fly into one city and out of another.

Organic can refer to a natural development.

Arthur Rimbaud called his prose poetry “pure prose.” James Joyce called his “epiphanies.” William Carlos Williams called his “improvisations.” With each new title, the form felt new. And it seemed to belong to the man who named it.

In 1940, the same year that the British agriculturalist Baron Northbourne first used the term *organic* to describe a farming practice, the British botanist and Agricultural Advisor to India Sir Albert Howard proposed that the best new methods for growing food were old methods. He argued that rejecting the current system of scientific agriculture for the traditional techniques of Indian farmers was the only way to “safeguard the land of the Empire from the operations of finance.”

Naming something is a way of giving it permission to exist. And this is why the term *lyric essay* was so important to me when I first learned it.

Not long after I stumbled across the *Seneca Review's* description of the lyric essay, I found myself, by some accident of fate, in a crowded stairwell next to Joyce Carol Oates. To make conversation, she asked me how I would classify the writing I had just read to the people who were penning us into the stairwell with little plastic cups of wine. I told her that until recently I would have called it prose poetry, but that now I was inclined to call it lyric essay. "Oh, good," Joyce Carol Oates said to the laughter of someone who nodded knowingly next to her, "because, really, who wants to read prose poetry?"

When Baron Northbourne used the term *organic farming*, he meant "the farm as organism." Applied to any ecosystem, the metaphor of the organism reveals the danger in forgetting the whole for its parts. "The health of soil, plant, animal and man," Sir Albert Howard said, "is one and indivisible."

My students ask me what the difference is between prose poetry and lyric essay. I tell them that there isn't always a difference. I hear myself saying "artificial categories" while I try to think through all the problems with the question and, then, all the problems with my answer. I suggest that not everything that falls somewhere between prose and poetry is prose poetry, and that the term is associated with a particular tradition that has been developing its own conventions for a hundred and fifty years. I talk about Bertrand and Baudelaire and I say "lineage," but my heart isn't quite in it.

I suspect that genre, like gender, with which it shares a root, is mostly a collection of lies we have agreed to believe.

In the decades after the atom bomb and *Silent Spring*, when the possibility that we might destroy our own world seemed likely, the question of sustainability defined the organic movement. Any practice that could not be sustained indefinitely — such as the massive cultivation of a single crop that would inevitably become vulnerable to diseases and pests, or the use of fossil fuels to ship produce thousands of miles from where it was grown — was to be avoided. This philosophy was in direct conflict with the conventional thinking of the time. To farm on a small scale was to disregard efficiency, and to sell produce locally was to reject the mass market.

One unintended consequence of calling my writing *essay* instead of calling it *poetry*, I discovered rather quickly, was that it would be much more frequently subjected to the conventional expectations of the essay — it would be expected to operate logically, to be cohesive and thorough, to have a clearly supported argument...

Holes in an essay, I tell my students, flaws in the logic, contradictions, unanswered questions, loose associations may all be necessary because of what they ultimately make possible. I believe this, but I also have my doubts. I am suspicious of gaps, of silences, of contradictions because I know how easily they hide unfinished thinking and insufficient research.

Organic, to some, is a philosophy. To others it is a product.

The USDA standards for regulating the commercial use of the word *organic* came into full effect in 2002. Like most organic standards, they allow for the limited use of several substances that are toxic to humans, fish, and, in one case, honeybees. And because of fees and paperwork requirements, among other things, the USDA certification process inadvertently favors large-scale producers. Under the USDA standards, Stonyfield Farm, which is majority owned by the French dairy giant Groupe Danone, sells organic yogurt made with strawberries from China, apples from Turkey, blueberries from Canada, and bananas from Ecuador. This global sourcing violates, for many, the spirit of the organic movement. But the USDA is not in the habit of regulating spirit.

Occasionally, I use the word *organic* to explain why I write the way I write — as in, “This form is organic to the way I think.”

“An organic farm,” writes Wendell Berry, “properly speaking, is not one that uses certain methods and substances and avoids others; it is a farm whose structure is formed in imitation of the structure of a natural system that has the integrity, the independence and the benign dependence of an organism.”

“Icons beget iconoclasm,” Steven Shapin writes of some recent critiques of the organic industry. And this might explain why I feel the need to resist all the current attention to the surface of the essay,

and to the shape of it. Empty essays that throw up formal smoke screens ought not to be celebrated any more than overpriced, mass-produced spinach.

"Consumers like boutique brands," the head of the organic unit at General Mills, which owns two major organic names, Cascadian Farm and Muir Glen, told *Business Week*. "There's a feeling of authenticity."

This is often implied but rarely said: Lyric essay is the new designation for what qualifies as high art in nonfiction writing. Rarely said, I think, because the idea is ugly.

A lot of euphemism and categorization and shuffling of feet goes into the project of making a clear distinction between the kind of nonfiction that deserves to be regarded as art and the kind that does not. Never mind that such a distinction cannot be made, such a project is destructive to our environment.

Organic is commonly used as a synonym for *healthy*. By one account, 90 percent of frequent organic buyers believe they are buying "health and nutrition." But there is very little evidence that organic food is any healthier than other food — organic produce has not been proven to offer superior nutrition, and the pesticide residues on conventional produce have not been proven to be harmful. Several studies, however, have found that organic farming uses considerably less energy and produces less waste than conventional farming. So, some organic food is healthier for us in its production, but as consumers we aren't accustomed to buying process so much as we are to buying product. And we want to buy our own health, not someone else's.

Genre is not at all useful as an evaluative tool, but we seem to be tempted to try to use it that way. And we seem to be tempted to rely on just about anything but our own reading of a text to determine its value.

"How to Avoid a Famine of Quality," was the title of one of Sir Albert Howard's articles. In it he suggests that we think a little bit harder about our food.

The supermarket chain Whole Foods sells produce that is classified as either *organic* or *conventional*. This terminology is misleading, in that many large organic producers now use methods that could best be described as a hybrid of organic and conventional practices. Horizon organic milk, for example, is produced without the use of antibiotics or hormones, but Horizon cows are confined in large metal barns that hold 4,000 cows. The result is less expensive organic milk, and more of it. One of the undeniable advantages of conventional agriculture is that it feeds more people.

There is no reason that a work of prose cannot be both lyric and narrative. As categories, we might like to believe they are distinct, but as qualities, they are not mutually exclusive. This is the point at which my students begin to get frustrated with me. I have failed to adequately explain the difference between any number of kinds of nonfiction by now, I have failed to explain the difference between poetry and nonfiction, and I have even failed to explain the difference between fiction and nonfiction.

Conventional agriculture might be better termed *experimental agriculture*, in that it is a radical departure from just about the entire history of agriculture and the outcome of this new approach is still entirely uncertain.

A student asks me what *lyric essay* is. She is holding her pen above a pad of paper and looking at me expectantly and all I can think is, "It doesn't matter."

Experimental once meant, "based on experience as opposed to authority."

The fine points of the official standards for organic produce become irrelevant if you know where your food comes from and how it was grown. This was once a slogan of the organic movement: "Know your farmer, know your food." But that's easier said than done.

"Nobody doubts the pure wholesome milk of the early American heritage dairy farms," the overseer of the Horizon organic brand told *Salon*. "We are marketing the very myth about early milk."

As the meaning of the term *organic* becomes increasingly complicated, alternative terms are emerging. *Authentic food* is one. "*Authentic*," writes Eliot Coleman, who authored the term, "is meant to be the flexible term *organic* once was."

The word *authentic*, Coleman notes, is derived from the Greek *authentēs*: one acting on one's own authority.

Old names beget new names, and genres beget subgenres. But knowing what a thing is called — how it is classified, how it is packaged, how it is marketed — is inevitably a poor substitute for knowing what it is.