

Origins of the Species

1.

Beginning among scraps, notations, something "to exert one's power or faculties upon." *Webster's International Dictionary* (1898), defining *essay*, the verb, as in:

Byron: *What marvel if I thus essay to sing.*

Emerson: *Essaying nothing she cannot perform. . .*

2.

Torn, stained, ruled or unruled, in a Lisbon flat he scribbles, tosses them into a chest where after his death they are found.

What marvel if I –

The boy hands his professor blanks, rising sediment of footnotes, and sits bemused as she protests the incomprehensible.

Essaying nothing s/he cannot perform.

In New England, a woman makes sentences that insist on simultaneity, on thinking while being, as a bride does not.

To exert one's power or faculties. . .

An arm that will not move, but with the addition of water, the body asserts as does utterance: lake, mountain, sky.

What marvel if I thus essay. . . ?

3.

When something is named, conversation. Scraps tossed into a chest, then freedom. What shall I do, he wondered in Lisbon, opening his trunk? What shall I do, asked the boy at the professor's desk? What if I thus, thought the woman as she shouldered her hidden language. *Essaying nothing she cannot perform*: she performs one novel, then another.

I want to sing and think at the same time, the boy thought, as mind and language zinged. I want a sentence that eschews what I cannot believe, insisted the woman in the wedding dress. If a poem forces a break in a sentence, how will I keep moving, my arms pulling against water?

4.

A lyric: "fitted to be sung to the lyre; hence also appropriate for song: — said especially of poetry which expresses the individual emotions of the poet."

5.

With rigor that matches prosody, prose syntax becomes for the lyric essayist, the vehicle of individual emotion. It is no accident that our contemporary aficionado was trained as a classicist. When one reads Latin or Greek, the symphonic logic of grammar "breaks like the Atlantic Ocean" (Lowell) on the curious adolescent mind.

A girl sits at a wooden desk in an Indiana classroom in 1959. The teacher is Josephine Bliss, and the ligaments between words, therefore unidentified and mysterious, are: Cases: "I," Nominative. "Me," Objective. "Of the sky," Genitive. "To the lantern," Dative. And so on. And tenses: "I go," Present. "I will go," Future. "I went," Past.

And many mornings she led a chorus of verb endings. It is the future I remember: *-bo, -bis, -bit, -bimus, -bitus, -bunt*.

6.

If you take syntax and twist it, paragraph, that force field of prose unity, learns discontinuity without sacrificing power. As a towel is twisted, or a licorice stick. The consequence is not disguise, but alternative coherence.

7.

“Lyric: of or pertaining to a lyre or harp; fitted to be sung to the lyre; hence also appropriate for song: — said especially of poetry which expresses the individual emotions of the poet.”

8.

In a folder marked “poetry working,” sentences, paragraphs, pages. Each by itself complete, but to break its lines, ill-advised, precious, plain wrong. Or: each is complete but not a unit of prose thought. Of one of these, make a piece of prose with some characteristics of a poem: recurrence, satisfaction of return, assonance, repetition. Another? Slip it into a book of narrative prose.

9.

The question: Does this piece of language slide into the DMZ between poem and essay?

10.

What is breaking a line but cracking apart a sentence to release for other uses the force that ordinarily bonds article to noun, subject to verb, verb or preposition to object, conjunction to noun or clause. The lyric essay may reserve for prose some of the violence held within a poem.

11.

If an essay is built on argument or story, its paragraphs rely on sequences that assure resolution, conclusion. If a paragraph is a unity, attempt disunity. Forego sequence of argument or story and some of the associativeness of poetry is returned to prose.

12.

In a Lisbon archive, the most recent translator reads scraps saved for decades, ruled, unruled, lined, unlined, stained with coffee. A masterpiece! At first he attempts to lend coherence where there is none, but understanding literary loyalty must be to origins, he attempts another kind of ordering, spatial correspondences of cursive, relation of one word to another, how dissonance of one sentence succeeds harmonies of another. But then, understanding he is attempting logic, he reshuffles, starts over.

13.

In the American mountains, it is raining. The lake has turned luminous gray, the same gray as the sky. The summit of Iron is smudged to near invisibility by the fog or a low-hanging cloud. The metallic computer case is also pale gray, the notebook is red, the desk white. The larger Post-it pad is ruled pale yellow, a smaller one is unruled and vivid yellow. Outside the only colors: ungray green of grass, almost-black green of old white pine, near gold of a new boardwalk.

14.

On her iPod, the Melos Quartet of Stuttgart performs Schubert's String Quintet, D. 956. Returning to the dictionary: "Lyre: a string instrument of music. . . the peculiar instrument of Apollo, the tutelary god of music and poetry. It gave name to the species of verse called lyric, to which it originally furnished an accompaniment."

15.

The bride is dressed for her wedding. In the photograph I have seen, her wedding dress has a very short skirt and she looks up at the man she married first. At weddings like that, you danced to rock and roll.