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JOHN D'AGATA

We might as well call it the lyric essay because I don't think "essay" means for most readers what essayists hope it does.

Or, we might as well call it the lyric essay because "nonfiction" is far too limiting.

Or, we might as well call it the lyric essay because "creative nonfiction" — let's face it — is desperate.

Then again, as literary terms go, "lyric essay" is no less an example of lipstick on a pig — which I think is why you'll find that it has fallen out of favor with a lot of the writers in this book.

It has fallen out with us as well, its editors.

And yet, fifteen years ago, when I was a student in a nonfiction writing program, the term felt like an extraordinary gift. I was in grad school during the late 1990s, and at that time it seemed that memoir was all that anyone was talking about. I wasn't writing memoir, however, and because I was young and naive and phenomenally self-involved, I started to believe that I had made a mistake, that nonfiction was not the genre for me, that I didn't have a literary home. I joined our university's neighboring poetry program, yet because I insisted on submitting 20-page-long essays to my poetry workshops, it was clear that that genre was not going to be home either.

Nevertheless, I liked the challenge of writing in-between the two worlds of poetry and essay, and as these things go when you're fully immersed in a new and exciting passion, I started to see everything through the lens of that hybridity.

Anne Carson came to our program with her first American book, and I swear I heard her use the words "lyric" and "essay" in close proximity to one another, describing what she liked about some ancient Greek writer. Then Michael Ondaantje visited soon after, and he used the term "lyrical nonfiction" to describe what he liked about Carson. In class, one of my favorite professors often casually referred to "lyric forms of the essay," as if it were a loosely held secret that we were being let in on, like

directions to the world's swankiest bar that had no signage and only a back door. And then one day over email, my old college mentor, Deborah Tall, told me that the frustrations with genre that I was experiencing at the moment were not particularly new. She pointed me in the direction of a dozen or so texts from antiquity, the middle ages, and contemporary Europe that all toyed formally with lines between poetry and essays. "Check out these 'lyric essays,'" she wrote.

And soon enough, the term seemed to appear everywhere thereafter. Tom Simmons, our graduate school professor, offered a course on the lyric essay. *The New Yorker* referred to some new book as a series of lyric essays. And many of us started submitting new work in our classes with the willfully forceful subtitle *A lyric essay*.

Initially I liked the term merely for how it sounded, and then for its slight implication of literary nonsense, and later for how it seemed to eschew the story-driven ambitions of fiction and nonfiction for the associative inquiry of poems.

Eventually, I was sold. And within a year of first hearing the term I started editing a section of *Seneca Review* that was devoted to lyric essays. Fifteen years later, I am still editing that section.

During the intervening years, however, I've moved away from using the term myself. These days I don't refer to what I like to read or write as "lyric essays," even though I still read a lot of the same stuff. I don't teach the term often either, and hardly use it in criticism. It's not that I've stopped finding the term interesting or useful; instead, as I got older and started to explore the history of the good old-fashioned essay, I began to find that everything that I loved about "lyric essays" was already represented in much of the essay's past. What I therefore hoped, or what I naively assumed, was that if we could remind ourselves as essayists of the variety of essays that have been written in our genre, we'd have no need for terms that try to stake their claim on narrowly conceived interpretations of the genre.

But then something changed my mind. I wrote a book, *The Lifespan of a Fact*, that proved to be controversial. It upset people because it suggested that some kinds of essays don't always need to be verifiably accurate, that we can appreciate some essays for the experiences they are sharing, and the emotions that they are conjuring, rather than the facts or information they relay. I was shocked by some people's reactions, however. I was expecting some kick-back from journalists, who huddle with us beneath that big umbrella term of "nonfiction," but who clearly are

engaged in a sacred social service whose stakes are considerably higher, more timely, and thus more consequential — socially speaking, I mean — than the stylized recollections that we share in our memoirs.

Except, according to many other nonfiction writers, that “sacred social service” that journalists are engaged in also apparently applies to memoirs — and to travelogues, meditations, portraits, etc. If it’s called “nonfiction,” many colleagues insisted, then it needs to report the facts as accurately as the news.

One famous writer went as far to say in a tweet that if a nonfiction text does not adhere to the rules of journalism then that text is nothing but a “hoax” — thus swiftly rendering everything that’s huddled under that big umbrella term of “nonfiction” as either 100 percent verifiable . . . or not nonfiction at all.

And that’s what was most disturbing. Because what I love to read in nonfiction often exists between those poles of what’s verifiable and what’s simply not. 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 Borges, James Thurber, Natalia Ginzburg, Truman Capote, W. G. Sebald, Mary McCarthy, Sei Shonagon, and many, many others.

I don’t want to lose them, cast them out of this genre. And neither do I think we can afford to lose whatever writers are yet to emerge in our genre who might be inspired by those nonfiction forebears who have interpreted the rules differently. After all, is there any single term that could possibly describe how we each process the world?

In some ways, twenty-five hundred years ago, Plato asked the same. In *Symposium*, he tells us a relatively simple story about some friends at a dinner party who talk about love. Surrounding Plato’s story about that party, however, is the philosopher’s own story about how he heard the story.

According to Plato, a man named Aristodemus, who had attended the dinner party, told his friends Apollodorus and Phoinix about the conversation that evening. Phoinix then told his friend about the party, and that friend told it to Glaucon, and then Glaucon told it to Plato. But Glaucon isn’t sure that he remembers the story correctly, so he looks to Apollodorus to clarify some details, even though Apollodorus wasn’t actually at the party, but instead had only heard about it from Aristodemus,

who was.

Why is this important? At first it's hard to say why any of it is important, and so we temporarily forget about these elaborate machinations once Plato starts telling us about the party itself. What we learn is that several people made speeches at the party, and all of them had opinions about the meaning of love. Socrates too was at this dinner party, and when he finally speaks up he tells his dinner companions about a woman named Diotima, a priestess whom he knew while growing up in Athens and who had once shared with Socrates her own thoughts about love.

When we're young, she said, we begin by loving a body, and then we learn eventually how to love different bodies, and then how to love souls, and then customs, and then finally knowledge.

Love, it turns out, is multilayered, like most things. But by the time we learn this in Plato's *Symposium*, we're hearing it from a fifth-hand source, so the story is a little fuzzy. On top of this, the story comes from a party that took place back when Socrates was still alive — fifteen years earlier than when Plato is writing *Symposium* — and the crux of Plato's essay isn't even that story about the party itself, but the story that's told by Socrates at the party about his youth — a story within a story within an essay, it turns out — remembered from a moment in Socrates's life that happened sixty years earlier than when he shares it with his friends. So seventy-five years and six retellings later, what we learn in the *Symposium* is that knowledge is layered, too. It's complicated, multidimensional, unpredictable, very messy, and we probably couldn't agree on what it really is or how it's ever made or the best way it to frame it for someone else to appreciate.

And this is why the *Symposium* is itself so very messy, multi-dimensional, multilayered, and difficult to interpret with any kind of confidence. Knowledge, real knowledge, is problematic the moment we start trying to nail it down.

The lesson here, to my ear at least, is wonderfully applicable to the nonfiction world. If Plato were with us now, I'd like to imagine him intervening in the hothouse debates that fester in our genre, casting a simple question into the fever swamps of the internet: Do we really all believe there's only one way to make an essay?

Despite its clumsy title, then, this is not an anthology about the dangers or virtues of “nonfiction,” “creative nonfiction,” “flash” this, “long form” that, or any other terms we might throw against the genre in hopes of finding something that might finally stick. This is an anthology about the beautiful gangly breadth

of this unnameable literary form, and how nomenclature, while often limiting, polarizing, inadequate, and always stupid, can also be the thing that opens up our genre to new possibilities and new paths of inquiry, helping us to shape our experiences in the world in ways we have not yet imagined. We might as well call it the lyric essay, therefore, because we need as many terms as there are passions for this form.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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It turns out there is an awful lot inside a name.

In 1903, in the February issue of *The Library World*, a leading journal on library management at that time, the head of a public library in Hampstead, England, published an article titled “The Fiction Nuisance and Its Abatement.” William Doubleday was well-respected among his fellow librarians in England. He’d written a couple books on library science, as well as a decent work of criticism on Keats. So his article attracted some attention when it appeared.

“The Public Library is primarily educational in its work,” Doubleday wrote. “Education is in the air, and with its efficiency is bound up the welfare of the nation.”

At stake for Doubleday — besides the welfare of England — were the delicately impressionable minds of public library patrons, whom Doubleday noticed were starting to inquire about novels more than anything else at their libraries’ information booths. Doubleday suggests that as many as 80 percent of patrons were now inquiring about fiction over other kinds of literature, adding that “we recognise that whilst some novels have positive value, others are at best harmless.”

Hostility toward fiction was nothing new at the turn of the century. For hundreds of years throughout the English-speaking world, the growing popularity of fiction incited debates about the legitimacy of the genre: Would novels corrupt a nation’s youth, did they deserve a place in libraries, were they even worth the paper they were printed on? Etc.

And on each of these questions Doubleday insists the answer is no. He does acknowledge that a library completely devoid of fiction would be shirking its duties as a cultural institution (“fancy a library without ‘Don Quixote,’ with no Scott, no Jane Austen, no Thackeray, no Dickens!”), but he nonetheless insists that the genre is not as serious or as important as others. Literature that is truly worthy of our time, he writes, “is a special form of literature

read by young men.” Why by young men? Because studious and serious young male readers “recognize the sternness of the battle of life,” and they therefore “are resolutely preparing to face it” by applying themselves exclusively to “serious reading.”

Doubleday never defines what he means by “serious” or “special” — nor why he thinks young men are its only admirers — but he nevertheless makes clear that fiction is not it. “The more elderly folk are, as a rule,” he explains, “too hard-worked through the day to want to grapple with problems in their scanty hours of ease,” which is why he places the fault for fiction’s popularity squarely with those “leisured or semi-leisured people who not only confine themselves to works of fiction, but read them with astonishing haste and vigour. *Materfamilias* and her daughters, with some of the other sex, are to be found changing their novels three or four times a week with a zeal truly admirable were it employed in a better cause.”

To help set the nation straight in terms of its reading tastes, Doubleday proposes that librarians start discouraging patrons from reading fiction by actively suggesting that they read something else:

Selections of any books but novels may be produced upon request for the reader’s choice . . .

or,

In some libraries, borrowers have been allowed open access to all the bookshelves except those containing novels . . .

or,

One common plan has been to allow borrowers to use a supplementary ticket, ‘not available for works of fiction’ . . .

and,

Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases

— all of which Doubleday says he has tried at his own library, but with varying degrees of failure. “It is sad,” he reports, “but not altogether surprising, to have to confess that most of the confirmed novel-readers are quite impervious to such

allurements, and to reach them something more drastic will have to be tried.”

Doubleday goes on to propose a bigger scheme in his article, but I'd rather not follow him down that hole. My interest in Doubleday lies in that final suggestion that he makes, which appears on page 207 in *The Library World*, volume V, issue 56, February 1903: “Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases.” According to some linguists, this might be the very first use of the term “non-fiction” in the English language.

Now, before we lay a plaque here, it's worth noting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the term “non-fiction” wasn't actually used until six years later in a different publication, *The Westminster Gazette*, in which a librarian reporting from a South African town claims to have succeeded in circulating a larger percentage of “non-fiction” and “more serious books — science, art, travel, biography, history, philosophy, essays, and the like — than novels.”

But whichever publication wants to take the credit, it's clear that “non-fiction” emerged as a term among librarians in response to the perceived threat that fiction posed at the turn of the century in England.

Let me suggest that we forget the fact that Doubleday doesn't seem to have coined the term “non-fiction” in order to help him passionately explore the nooks and crannies of a peculiar new literary form, but rather so that he may dismissively refer with catchall efficiency to “everything that is not fiction.”

And let's forget that every literary form that's included in that catchall — “science, art, travel, biography, history, philosophy, essays, and the like” — has its own origin story, as well as a complex aesthetic history that has developed over centuries, making it nearly impossible to reasonably conflate any one form in that list with anything else in the list.

And let's finally try to forget that if “fiction” comes from *fictio*, the Latin word for “make,” then “non-fiction” essentially means “not art,” precluding as it does the possibility of doing what art is supposed to do: *make*.

Instead, what bothers me most about the term “non-fiction” is that it emerged as a tool to defend provincialism — not to mention misogyny — and like most apophatic terms its purpose was entirely negative from the start, deployed by a didactic man with a small plot of turf he wanted to defend, interested less in celebrating what this genre actually is than in demarcating a

border across which nothing else could pass.

Somehow, however, within the span of a single century, “non-fiction” has overshadowed half a dozen other literary terms to become the bland *de facto* banner that flaps above everything from journalism to memoir, imposing the same aesthetic standards and expectations on everything that falls beneath its shadow.

I am writing beneath its shadow now, in fact. As the director of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa, I grapple with the implications of the term on a daily basis. Whether it’s dealing with inquiries from people who want me to proofread their cookbooks, or battling with university administrators so that my “non-fiction” students can receive the same “arts” fellowships as poetry and fiction students, by accepting the term “non-fiction” our community signals to the world that what goes on in this genre is at best utilitarian and at worst an utter mystery. I doubt any of us in the genre intended this to happen, but our adoption of “non-fiction” has done to our genre exactly what Doubleday had hoped it would: it has segregated us from art.

So a couple of years ago, when the editor of *Seneca Review* pointed out that I’d been editing the journal’s lyric essays for about fifteen years, I asked if he’d give me his blessings to teach a yearlong course about *Seneca*, in which my class would explore how relevant lyric essays still are. From January 2013 through December 2013, my graduate students and I read and discussed every lyric essay that has appeared in *Seneca Review*, noting recurring trends, my embarrassing editorial ticks, and any peculiar aesthetic anomalies that emerged throughout the years, all in an effort to try to figure out what the lyric essay is, how it might be different from other sorts of “nonfiction,” and whether there’s still a place for such a thing in our culture.

And to help make our classroom conversations a little more consequential, I asked *Seneca* if it would allow the students to select their favorite fifteen essays from the journal, conduct interviews with the authors of all the selected texts, write their own critical essays to accompany each selection, and then package it all together in a special volume of *Seneca*. The result is now in your hands: a special issue of *Seneca* that is doubling as a book, and a book that has recorded our extraordinary year together.

A lot of students came to the course with suspicions about “lyric essays,” and by the end of the year I think as many of them had become born-again believers as others had flipped over to

skepticism. And that's the point. We ought to be questioning all of the ways that we talk about this art form — from the various names we give it, to the parameters that we think our texts ought to follow. We don't have a solid history of criticism in this genre. So what we think of it, and what we make of it, and what we know of it is up to us. If we want off the sidelines of literary history, we need to start producing our own criticism about the genre.

And then perhaps we ought to consider changing the genre's name.