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The imagined parakeet: invention and fact irrelevance in the speculative essay

Abstract:

Despite the ascendancy of the lyric essay as a form over the past two decades, the essay, whether lyric or otherwise, is still pegged to the category of nonfiction, an amorphous genre that includes everything from journalism to criticism. Any definition of nonfiction will include some variation of the idea that, foremost, nonfiction considers what is 'informative' and 'factual'. But are such definitions limiting where many essayists are concerned?

Must an essay, as a subset of nonfiction, entertain 'thing-ness' or the empirical world at all? Or is *the truth* of an essay sometimes speculative without the need to admit things or facts, existing simply as a tidal wave of strange imaginings? A Speculative Essay concerns itself with the figurative over the literal, ambiguity over knowing, meditation over reportage.

For some essayists, in all manner of subgenres, from nature writers to personal essayists, facts as such matter only in the path they open to speculation. While this kind of formal speculation is often conflated with the lyric essay, the lyric essay does not own speculation. Essays that tilt more towards metaphor than fact exist in a crack between genres that remains unclassifiable.

Biographical note:

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The essay, as commonly configured, is a subset of the larger genre of nonfiction. But is the category of nonfiction too limiting a genre designation to contain the imaginative possibilities of essaying? Must an essay as a subset of nonfiction entertain 'thing-ness', or the empirical world at all? Or is *the truth* of an essay sometimes speculative without the need to admit things or facts, existing simply as a tidal wave of 'strange imaginings', in the words of essayist Mary Cappello (2007: 14). Is the essay fact irrelevant?

Despite the ascendancy of the lyric essay as a form over the past two decades, as pioneered by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall when editors of *The Seneca Review* and later by D'Agata in his well-known anthologies, the essay, whether lyric or otherwise, is still pegged to the category of nonfiction, an amorphous genre that includes everything from journalism to criticism. Any definition of nonfiction will include some variation of the idea that, foremost, nonfiction considers what is 'informative' and 'factual', but such definitions seem limiting and false where many essayists are concerned.

Essays that are largely speculative in nature don't fail the form, the form fails them. They exist, or should exist, in a crack between genres that remains unclassifiable. Certain essays can be found across the various subgenres, from nature essays to lyric to meditative to occasional essays. These Speculative Essays can be recognised as essays that privilege the figurative over the literal, ambiguity over knowing, meditation over reportage. Facts are irrelevant and/or treated with irreverence in the Speculative Essay.

In the preface of *The Next American Essay* (2003), D'Agata playfully breaks down the contents of his anthology by giving the reader the facts we 'expect from nonfiction': how many men are represented in the anthology, how many women, how many Korean Americans, how many Mexican Americans, and so on. But he suggests that when encountering the essays in his book we should be 'preoccupied with art in this book, not facts for the sake of facts … Let's call this a collection of essays then, a book of human wondering' (D'Agata 2003: 1-2).

In subsequent work, D'Agata draws even sharper battle lines between fact-based nonfiction and the essay, laying claim to a different *raison d'etre* for the essay. With the publication of his highly controversial book, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), *ostensibly* a correspondence between him and a magazine fact checker, Jim Fingal, many writers and readers saw his insistence that the essayist has a different playing field than the journalist as a flimsy excuse. Journalists in particular were incensed by D'Agata's disregard of fact in favour of personal aesthetic choices, such as changing the number of strip bars in Las Vegas in an essay that later became part of his book, *About a Mountain*, from 34 to 31 because 31 sounded better to him; and making other changes for purely aesthetic reasons, such as changing the colour of a fleet of dog grooming vans from pink to purple because 'I needed the two beats in "purple"' (*The Lifespan of a Fact* 2012: 39). In an indignant front page review for *The New York Times Book Review*, Jennifer B. McDonald excoriated D'Agata for being 'precious', 'self-righteous', 'facile' and 'outrageous' (2012).

While one might disagree with individual choices that D'Agata makes, his overall reasoning is sound. The essay, or at least a certain kind of essay, *does* play by different

rules than conventional nonfiction. This distinction doesn't only apply to lyric essays, but likewise to essays that were written long before the term was carved out as a new territorial claim for prose writers such as D'Agata.

Some essayists admit not one fact into their essays while others use speculation as a matter of course in pieces that might indulge a stray fact or two. Let's consider, for instance, Virginia Woolf's famous essay 'The Death of the Moth', in which Woolf, at her writing desk on an autumn day, is distracted by the fluttering of a moth at her windowsill. Woolf first briefly describes moths in general, distinguishing day moths from night moths and butterflies, followed by a description of the activities of a farmer at the plough with his horses and a net of crows rising and falling through the sky. Her setting and context thus established, she moves her gaze to the distracting moth beating its wings against her windowpane, until it gradually loses its life force and dies. The temporality of the account suggests that this is all presumably in a single writing session. She writes:

> It was as if someone had taken a tiny bead of pure life and decking it as lightly as possible with down and feathers, had set it dancing and zig-zagging to show us the true nature of life. Thus displayed one could not get over the strangeness of it. One is apt to forget all about life, seeing it humped and bossed and garnished and cumbered so that it has to move with the greatest circumspection and dignity. (Qtd. in Lopate 1995: 266)

While Woolf's descriptions of the struggling moth are vivid and detailed, few would read this essay to understand the life cycle of a moth, or to glean any kind of empirical information about the physical world at all – to do so would be to miss the point entirely. The actual moth Woolf saw hardly matters, or if Woolf even witnessed the scene she described. What matters, of course, is the metaphor she quickly establishes: the imperative of all living things to fight against the death force, a strange but somehow noble struggle given that death is inevitable. The moth is important as a device to trigger the essayist's speculation and nothing more, a way of looking at the world outside of the binary of 'real' and 'not real', or, in D'Agata's words, a means of 'human wondering'.

Annie Dillard, in her own essay titled 'Death of a Moth' (1977)[1], similarly uses a supposed encounter with a moth to weave a metaphor that completely subsumes the importance of any actual moth she might or might not have observed. But the description of the moth is so vivid that at least the reader sees it (a yellowish moth with a two-inch wingspan) as it wanders into the candle by which Dillard is reading on a trip to the Blue Ridge Mountains. A long-ish paragraph in an otherwise brief essay is devoted to this moth's death as she describes in graphic detail what happens to the moth's body part by part (a vanishing that must have taken mere moments, but that in her detailed description is told in narrative slow motion): first the abdomen, then the wings, then the legs, the head, the antenna and mouth cracking 'like pistol fire' (6). In these moments, only the abdomen survives, stuck like a second wick in the candle, a flame rising through the body where the head used to sit.

The beauty of Dillard's language is worth quoting as she recounts the moth's spectacular transformation from living thing to a conduit of fire:

> And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth's body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into a flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like an immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical light, side by side. The moth's head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out. (1977: 6)

It's here that Dillard starts to make metaphor of the encounter. The essay turns on the metaphor of the flame as a kind of inspiration, or, more than that, the consuming obsession of the artist for the task at hand, the consumption of the artist by her art form. If you blink, you'll miss the segue, which is no segue at all – she simply pivots from moths to teaching a writing class:

> And that is why I believe those hollow crisps on the bathroom floor are moths. I think I know moths, and fragments of moths, and chips and tatters of utterly empty moths, in any state. How many of you, I asked the people in my class, which of you want to give your lives and be writers? I was trembling from coffee, or cigarettes, or the closeness of the faces all around me. (Is this what we live for? I thought; is this the only final beauty: the color of any skin in any light, and living, human eyes?) All hands rose to the question. (You, Nick? Will you? Margaret? Randy? Why do I want them to mean it?) And then I tried to tell them what the choice must mean: you can't be anything else. You must go at your life with a broadax. … They had no idea what I was saying. (I have two hands, don't I? And all this energy, for as long as I can remember. I'll do it in the evenings, after skiing, or on the way home from the bank, or after the children are asleep …) They thought I was raving again. It's just as well. (Ibid.)

This is not where the essay ends, but it ends soon after this transformative paragraph – this, in any case, is the point at which the essay reveals its true identity as metaphor, not entomological text.

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning meditation on the natural world, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Dillard invented an animal with which to open her book, a tom cat who would climb in her open window in midsummer, land on her chest and knock its head against her chin, purring loudly and leaving bloody paw prints on her body from its latest kill. Here she sought to construct a metaphor that would encapsulate a sense of baptism, blood, and mystery, and she found it in the image of the cat. Apparently, the cat existed – Dillard had heard the story from a graduate student whom she then asked if she could use it in her writing (Saverin 2015). As in Woolf's 'The Death of the Moth', and Dillard's similarly-titled essay, the cat was not meant to be taken literally and Dillard was not trying to write a science text on the predatory habits of house cats.

Jo Ann Beard likewise employs speculation as well as invention in her essay, 'Werner', which originally appeared in the magazine *Tin House* (2006) and was later reprinted in *Best American Essays of 2007* (2007). Beard's essay, told completely in the 3rd person, concerns an event that happened to an artist friend of hers, Werner Hoeflich, who, in the 1990s, awoke in the middle of the night to find his New York City tenement apartment engulfed in flames. His only escape, from the fifth story of the building, was to dive across the gap between his building and the next, through a closed window.

Beard wanted to tell Hoeflich's remarkable story entirely from his perspective, and to do so she interviewed him extensively over several days, taking linear, chronological notes as well as posing questions about his thoughts, feelings, artwork, and background so that she could 'plug into those events what I thought of as possibilities for metaphorical meaning' (2016:Interview with author).

> So for instance, when he said to me, 'I crouched on the windowsill in a swimmer's diving position,' I would say to him, 'What's your experience with that word? Did you dive?' And he said, 'Not really, I was a swimmer.' And then he described to me what it was like to be a swimmer as he was growing up, as I asked him questions. And then later, when he talked about getting ready to jump and being five floors up, I said to him, 'Have you ever been five floors up and thought about jumping before?' And he said, 'Oh yes, once I stood on this trestle bridge in Eugene, Oregon and jumped down into the water,' and then I asked him to describe that to me in great detail. And because he was Werner and a visual artist and articulate, he was able to really tell me what that looked like. (Ibid.)

As she questioned him, he revealed that he hit the water so hard it stung the bottoms of his feet, and his arms at his side, fists balled, rose involuntarily above his head as he descended. Beard pictured a kind of Christ-like image in that descent, though she wasn't interested in portraying Werner as a Christ-like character per se. But the image took hold of her imagination all the same:

> I became Werner and I looked up through the water I saw a kind of column of pale light that followed him down through the part of the water that was bubbled and boiling [sic]. That's the writer injecting her imagination, or her memory of having done that in the past. (Ibid.)

In the essay Beard uses the combination of Werner's details and her own imagination to create a powerful metaphor of clinging to life as one descends into unconsciousness. The image takes on this meaning because of where she situates it in her essay: she sets up the image of Werner on the trestle as he's on the ledge of the building about to jump, and she follows it through when he's in the hospital, shot up with pain meds and drifting in and out of consciousness.

The fall from the trestle all those years ago had been long enough to entertain regrets, although Werner had gone in just right – perpendicular, arms at his sides in tight fists, chin down. The impact was an explosion from below, like being hit with a plank on the soles of his feet and socked in the jaw at the same time. He plunged down and down, like a bullet shot into the water, the force of it lifting his arms. In the last moment of his descent, before he began to rise naturally and then to kick, Werner had looked up to see a pale green pillar of light leading to the surface. (2007: 20) It's that green pillar of light Beard wants us to experience right before Werner awakes.

For the most part, Beard insists, the essay relies on details supplied by Werner himself, though there's at least one other moment of pure invention. Like Dillard, Beard frontloaded the image of an animal in her essay, in this case, a parakeet. She wanted an image to establish right away that Werner was an artist and that he had an artist's sense

of detail and colour, so she reached somewhere in her imagination or memory and produced a parakeet in a city tree.

> Once he had seen a parakeet in one of those trees, staring down at him, shifting from foot to foot. The bird had sharpened both sides of its beak on the branch and then made a veering, panicky flight to a windowsill far above. Most of Werner's metaphorical moments were painterly – the juxtaposing of the wild bird and the tame tree, the shimmer of periwinkle, the splurt of titanium white that fell from it onto the pavement. (2007: 1)

Here, Beard employs invention to suggest aspects of Werner's consciousness, his character. Werner later claimed that he had actually seen a parakeet and that he had told Beard about that parakeet when, according to Beard, he had not. In her detailed notes there wasn't one mention of a parakeet – if he had mentioned such an incident, she would have seen it as a gift. Did Werner, when he read it, create an image in his mind which he confused with memory? A kind of reverse speculation, the invention becoming fact in the mind of the subject of the essay.

While essayists such as Woolf, Dillard, and Beard employ speculation and invention in their essays, the playing field, as it were, still resembles a place of fact. The reader of any of these essays might be forgiven for stubbornly wishing that Werner truly saw a parakeet in a tree. D'Agata's gentle mockery of a fact-obsessed reader in his preface to *The Next American Essay* notwithstanding, most readers still consider the essay as fact-based because of its traditional place within the genre of nonfiction. Despite D'Agata's wish to the contrary, not all essays value aesthetic considerations over reportage, in the same way that not all essays should be considered reportage or 'nonfiction'.

Perhaps heeding D'Agata's clarion cry of 2003 (the year *The Next American Essay* was published), a number of essayists, some whom could be classified as lyric, some experimental, aphoristic, some unclassifiable, have wilfully built their essays purely on speculation, on 'human wondering', admitting not one fact (or, those admitted are made to sit in a corner of the essay and behave). This is an age of fact-irrelevant essays, which should not be confused with the term 'post-factual', a negative term meant to characterise the plethora of fake news, gossip, and innuendo that plagues the internet and influences public opinion despite being demonstrably false. Post-factual refers to false reportage; for D'Agata (and others) the essay's project 'is a process of discovery, not reportage' (2000: 9). The Speculative Essay privileges ambiguity, meditation, and imagination over fact, even casting facts aside despite the ease with which one can accrue them in this overloaded information age, perhaps as a rebuke of facticity itself. Such essayists write in extreme close-up fashion, close-ups not of things, but of the mind in relation to things. The mind always has primacy over the thing in the Speculative Essay. Such essays, while enjoying a renaissance in the current literary landscape, date back as far as essaying itself and give themselves away by their titles. They're often occasional essays, such as Montaigne's essays and Seneca's: 'On Monsters', 'On Asthma', or, more recently, Lia Purpura's collection *On Looking*, Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation*, Mary Cappello's *Awkwardness*, and Brian Blanchfield's *Proxies, Essays Near Knowing.*

More than any other writer of note, D'Agata has built his literary career on the irrelevancy of fact and the primacy of speculation. In his anthology, *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), he even claims certain works that have previously been categorised as stories, poems, and parables as essays. In this anthology he introduces 'Conversation in the Mountains', by Romanian author Paul Celan, with the heading, '1945, Romania', contextualising the date with a Thedor Adorno quote from 1945: 'The thinker does not think … Rather he transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience' (Adorno qtd. in D'Agata 2009: 20). True, 'Conversation in the Mountains' was written in response to Adorno, actually an encounter with Adorno that never happened, a missed meeting in Switzerland. But the prose piece was written in August of 1959, fourteen years after the end of the Holocaust, in Paris where Celan lived, not Romania. Some readers might feel misled by the heading 'Romania, 1945', assuming that, as editor, D'Agata is historicising the essay, which in a sense he is doing, but in an aesthetic fashion rather than a factual sense. D'Agata likewise insists that Celan has written 'an ancient dialectic form of essaying, addressing himself in two different voices …' (Ibid.: 451), an interpretation that ignores some of the other formal aspects of the piece. 'Conversation in the Mountains' closely resembles the parable form, or a Talmudic tale, a pedigree that D'Agata either ignores or is unaware of. 'Conversation in the Mountains' can also read as a parable of two Jews, Klein and Gross, who have a kind of Beckett-like exchange, all form and formality, an exchange that collapses on itself and shows the emptiness and absurdity of any wisdom-seeking in the modern world, yes, after the Holocaust. If this is an essay, so are all parables in the Jewish tradition, from the Talmud to Kafka.

Perhaps D'Agata believes he has to make such hegemonic claims for the essay's claim as an unbridled art form in order to defend any sliver of holy land at all. For D'Agata, all facts are as irrelevant to the essayist as they are sacred to the journalist, and completely subservient to his aesthetic claims. As an essayist, D'Agata wants to shake the fact loose from the essay and let it fall and shatter.

Brian Blanchfield, in his essay collection *Proxies, Essays Near Knowing* (2016), troubles the facticity of his essays in a less obfuscated manner than D'Agata, playing with the mind's tendency to transform things into phantasms which ultimately carry more meaning than the thing itself. While this kind of formal speculation often is conflated with the lyric essay, the lyric essay does not own speculation. Essayists such as Blanchfield, who are speculative but not necessarily lyric, have as much claim to the Speculative Essay as the lyric essayist.

How we transform and what we transform experience into, and the connections and associations we make as we invent meaning, is what intrigues Blanchfield in *Proxies*. Here, he meditates on a number of disparate subjects: 'On Owls', 'On House Sitting', 'On Withdrawal', 'On Foot Washing', 'On Dossiers' … the overarching obstruction of the book being that he will write about each of these subjects without relying on factual source material: no internet, no authoritative sources. Each essay has as a subheading, a kind of invocation giving the essay permission to be wrong: 'Permitting Shame, Error, and Guilt, Myself the Single Source'. Additionally, he pursues the subject associatively until it lands on a place of personal vulnerability and then begins 'unpacking from there'

(vii). Dropping into rabbit holes of inquiry, *Proxies* follows each idea associatively, from memory alone, and possesses a surprising degree of authority despite the contingent nature of the ideas and events recalled in each essay. The essential nature of the essay as proposed by D'Agata, Blanchfield, and others, holds firm: the essay as investigation into the mind, not reportage, and the externalised investigation subservient to the interior one.

At the heart of this kind of essay is uncertainty. This is what separates speculation from reportage. For the Speculative Essayist, uncertainty and ambiguity can be its own end, the answerlessness of the 'something, anything', that refuses 'to break through', in Mary Cappello's words (2007: 14). Blanchfield, coming to a full stop in his essay 'Confoundedness', recognises the mystification that attends essaying. He writes:

> For a long time, nothing went here, in this essay, which is trying to locate its subject. What is absolute answerlessness anyway? Is it like a dark *place*, whose contours I am sounding? Is it a kind of *guide* appointed to tour the mystified through the premises, keeping much concealed? (2016: 74)

In his essay 'On Dossiers', Blanchfield begins with an anecdote of Roland Barthes beginning a series of university lectures in the 1970s as 'merely opening a dossier' (Ibid.: 97). From there, Blanchfield wrestles with the meaning and etymology of the word 'dossier', leaping from one connotation to the next until he settles on the notion of 'dossier' in the academic sense. Here the essay comes to rest for a while, doing as Blanchfield promised in his prologue, unpacking 'an area of personal uneasiness' (Ibid. vii). In this case, his disappointment with the academic job market is unpacked and catalysed by the word 'dossier', in particular an incident in which an inside candidate at Rice University was chosen over him for a position.

The bulk of the essay enters into even more fraught territory as Blanchfield describes his relationship to his adoptive father, and the dossiers he found in the home office after his father's death – including one thin dossier the father kept on Blanchfield. The dossier essay, however, comes together in an office at Rice University. Blanchfield is waiting to present a lecture as part of the interview for the job he won't get, when he sees, outside the office in the branches of an oak, an owl that holds his gaze. The owl's gaze leads him to a memory of the last time he saw his father:

> … late, after a difficult conversation of unprecedented openness with him and my mother, a night when I moved from needing to know where I stood to wanting to stand on what I knew. It was a turning point that is very nearly a trope in father-son relationships. I saw him see me. As if for the first time. Not so much approving as noting for later use the way another person was managing his struggle. (2016: 108)

Once again we see an animal become the object that triggers speculation, in this case an owl, conveniently landing in the tree outside the narrator's window precisely when it needs to land. Perhaps it's the liminality of the animal world that lends itself to metaphor in the human realm that allows, for the Speculative Essayist, the animal to become totemic in a metaphorical rather than a spiritual way.

At the end of *Proxies*, Blanchfield includes 21 pages of 'Corrections', small nodes of facticity that would be important in a series of academic essays, but less so in the kind

of essay that privileges meditation and speculation. The facts – as presented in the 'corrections' – are like an asteroid shower in the night sky. They have a relation to the essays at hand, but flicker out once noted. What's important is not that Blanchfield has his information wrong, but the transformation of the fact into something else, the contradictory or speculative space between fact and fiction. In the case of Blanchfield's telling of the Barthes anecdote, Barthes did not state, 'I am merely opening a dossier,' at the beginning of his lectures in the 1970s. As Blanchfield notes in his 'Corrections', Barthes actually said that each of his courses at the College de France had 'at its root, a fantasy' (qtd in Blanchfield: 174).

What Blanchfield imagined Barthes saying sounds so much more Barthes-like, and is much more intriguing at any rate. For the sake of the essay and its internal logic and rules, what Barthes said or didn't say has as little relevance as it would in a poem, if we are not reading the essay for information but for tracking human wondering through a particular person's internal and aesthetic investigation. What's important in Blanchfield's essay is its associative and speculative qualities, his 'strange imaginings', as Mary Cappello would have it. His essays, and other Speculative Essays, belong neither to fiction or nonfiction, but represent a shift in our understanding of form, a detour off the flat roads leading to either nonfiction or fiction.

Endnotes

[1] Annie Dillard's 'The Death of a Moth' originally appeared in a slightly different form in *Harper's Magazine* (May 1976). It was later incorporated into the book *Holy the Firm* (1977), in the form I quote in this essay.

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