

Thrashing Out

John D'Agata and the Lyric Essay
by Brian R. Christian



We are heading into a restaurant with John D'Agata to have lunch. All of a sudden, we realize he has disappeared. We find him in the lobby, reading every plaque, inscription, and caption on the walls before finally coming to the table. For a writer "preoccupied with art, not with facts for the sake of facts," he seems, for the moment, to prefer the company of facts to our own.

D'Agata is a "lyric essayist": the term is a fairly new one and the subject of a certain degree of controversy, in part because everyone wants to be called by it. Nonfiction writers want to use the term to imply that they write in a "lyrical"—that is to say, "beautiful"—style. Poets want to use the term to imply that they're doing "serious intellectual work." But what does the term actually mean?

His essay is a list of facts. His essay is a compendium of sentences, and the sentences draw on the real. Attempts to collect without fashioning. What is he saying?
Strings of words, as Picasso sculpts a guitar with wire, wood box, whatever, or the unreadable newspaper strips of papier mache.
The essay is a comment, almost a warning: you need to arrange in order to survive. Yet we are staying aloft; we are laughing. The essay has its stride.
Cl: Do you see a tension between art and facts?
JD: Attention?
Cl: Yes, a tension.
JD: I'm not sure how—attention between...
Cl: No, tension. Not attention.
JD: Oh, oh, a tension.
Cl: No. No, a, just—
JD: Yes, no, I know. A tension.
Cl: Yes.
JD:

Classification systems are ways of dealing with information. They are useful, perhaps necessary. But there are always problems, always. D'Agata was fired from the "News" section of his fifth-grade newspaper because his teacher said he didn't know the difference between nonfiction and art. He visits a school that has put "creative nonfiction" in the English department, home of the "expository" writers, across an alleyway from the remarkably similar-looking building which houses the Literary Arts department, home of the playwrights, fiction writers and poets. It is categorization that in mathematics proved the destruction of "intuitive set theory," basically the idea that things can be put into groups based on a shared property. Imagine trying to divide the adjectives in the English language into two groups: "autological" words—words that describe themselves, like "pentasyllabic" and "adjectival"—and "heterological" words—words that do not describe themselves, like "long" and "monosyllabic." It seems straightforward enough. But where do we put the word "heterological?" If it describes itself, then it doesn't. The only thing that breaks this seemingly watertight classification scheme is itself. If sets do exist, said American mathematician Errett Bishop, they are "God's mathematics, which we should leave for God to do." D'Agata wanted the back of his collection of lyric essays Halls of Fame to just say "Literature." But if you go to a bookstore, notice that nonfiction books seem to be everywhere except the literature section. Would one find Beowulf in the Germanic Studies section? Gilgamesh in the Middle East section? "But this is what we allow to happen to our art.

"If I don't know the form it's going to take, I don't know anything about the essay. It tells 50% of the essay. It really just involves finding the form." D'Agata seems always to be searching for the form, even in the two pairs of glasses whose configuration on the table he incessantly adjusts by millimeters at a time. "There's a major issue for nontraditional forms, which is, 'Why and how is this particular form applicable?'" The edge of the reading glasses touches the sunglasses exactly halfway along their length, and makes a ninety-degree angle. "Do these wires have to be here?" he says, frightened by the degree of chaos he spots by the lectern. He shuffles his papers. Taps them on the table to square them. The essay he'll read is, he says, an exercise in non-arrangement. We realize, as he probably does, that it is doomed. He fidgets with the microphone. "Sometimes it's thrilling when the style is working in mimesis with the story that's being told. Sometimes the style is simply a template for the story." Sometimes the story being told is negated by the style: as his "non-arrangement" essay describes Armageddon in crisp, tidy, witty lists. I realize that this can be thrilling too.

He finds his way to the Faculty Club by consulting a map. We check our coats but he's still in the hall, fingering an engraved plaque about a trustee or someone, a plaque I might have walked by twenty times.
Did he do this or is it just what I would have wanted him to do?
In those video games where you are navigating a 3-D world you sometimes stumble on unusual objects, and when there is a pick-up function you always pick it up, because chances are you can use it later.
"Does Brown really not have any money," he asks, steady his glass for Perrier, "or is that a front?"

How could one ever imagine art coming from a process that didn't involve arranging or shaping in any way? Besides: not to arrange is impossible anyway, D'Agata asserts. We shape as soon as we begin perceiving. His is a phenomenological point of view, then. Philosopher Daniel Dennett, among others, attacks phenomenology as being anti-scientific; if everything we perceive is being shaped by us, then where do facts about the world—and not just our experience of it—come from? What, then, is a fact? So the notion of "nonfiction" is itself a fabrication. D'Agata prefers the term "essay" for what he and others are doing.

"Etymologically," John D'Agata tells his crowd, "nonfiction derives, obviously, from the Latin for fiction, *factio*, meaning to arrange or fashion." The implication being that *nonfiction*, the commonest name for the genre in which he works, is offensive. Not only because it is apologetic, but because it is inaccurate.
Art is premeditated. It mirrors back the world, fashioned. Point taken.
But he doesn't want it taken; he wants it demonstrated. He will demonstrate it, over the course of the next forty minutes, by reading aloud his essay, "Creative Non-Arrangement: An Essay on the Ethical Uses of the Genre." Dedicated to Oprah Winfrey, Who, On January 26th, 2006, Saved America From End-Time Destruction."
(Or something like that. I didn't take notes.)

The Word Question

by Andrew Marantz

"I don't think I've ever started at the beginning of something." —John D'Agata
Things John D'Agata likes:
Lists
Lists that arrest
Lists that progress
Lists that have authority
Lists that sound desperate
Lists that promise to get somewhere and perhaps don't
Cicero
Mispronouncing "Ivy."
Eye contact
Emotional truth (as crutch?)
Collage
Plaques
Instructions
Wonder(s)
Old stuff
Ancient stuff
Stuff
Essay (as noun)
Essay (as verb)
Things John D'Agata has no use for:
Stubbed-toe stories
Irony, as excuse
"Facts"
"Nonfiction"

If artists have "an eye for," he has prehensile eyes. He notices things, he sticks, they stick to him, he makes them stick, they stick together in a gummy wad, he rolls the wad over and over itself, it picks up inertia, it hits your brain and sticks.
The Harper's review said, "John D'Agata is an alchemist who changes trash into purest gold." I say, "John D'Agata is an artist who curates trash into beautiful piles of trash."
He picks from things-out-there. His words share a relatively stable correspondence with the world. Relatively. So if you have to call it something, call it essay. The materials come from somewhere, on the ground, and drove to, somewhere in the real world, or relatively real.

He is fond of etymological analysis. In *The Billionaire*, he traces "memoir" back to "the Indo-European root for all that we think about that is not present: *memor*, to vividly worry," he anxious about, "exhaustingly ponder." It is important to him that "memoir is an assaying of ideas, images, and feelings...an impulsive exploration....It is not knowing."
As if there were "Indo-European" who left behind dictionaries. As if, if the memoir has strayed, it has strayed from its origins in the Indus Valley.
We cannot authenticate a memoir by word roots any more than etymology will tell us the difference between a physician and a metaphysician. If anything, the word roots give us wiggle room.
Still, ultimately, we must know essays, as something more than what they are not. And John D'Agata is as qualified as anyone to tell us—to show us—what they are.
In an anthology, *The Next American Essay*, he quotes Emerson as saying: "So I shall essay myself to be." And also: "There are no facts, only art." And he says:
"Or: Maybe every essay automatically is in some way experimental—less an outline traveling toward a foregone conclusion than an unmapped quest that has sprung from the word *question*."

John D'Agata has an essay that will be published this spring about a suicide that took place in Las Vegas. The magazine publishing the essay hired a fact checker, who determined that nearly every single sentence in the essay contained some sort of factual error. Appended to the forty-page essay will be a seventy-page document written by the fact checker that describes each of these errors. But what effect will two versions of the truth have on the truth except to erode it further? Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel" is unambiguously fictional. But D'Agata is putting it in his forthcoming anthology on the history of the lyric essay. "Borges is trading in information," says D'Agata, "and that's what makes the piece tick. It doesn't matter that the information's false." That's Borges' point as well. In the story, he postulates a human race living in a seemingly infinite library: "the Library is total and . . . its shelves contain all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols; that is, everything which can be expressed, in all languages." People go mad looking for the book that contains a veridical account of their own life or death (though innumerable false accounts exist elsewhere in the library) or of the creation of the universe, or of the creation and nature of the library itself. Some end up committing suicide, or feverishly destroying books before they are killed by others. The narrator gets by through the act of writing. But each person in the Library of Babel is up to the same thing: the desperate effort to cope with information. And by including this narrative, however fictional, D'Agata seems to be saying: "Their story is an essay." Or: "Their story is the story of the essay."

"I don't know about Frey's—Frey? Is that how you...Frey?—Frey? anyway, again, I haven't read his book. But the problem, I think, is that we have conceived of nonfiction as a space for information and not for imagination. And when the art is so tied to the subject matter, so much that they're not even talking anymore about whether it was a good book or not, no wonder Frey—how the fuck do you say it? does anyone know? Frey?—he takes the million dollar advance and runs, maybe without paying enough attention to language."
Yet, it's only lying if you swear you're not lying, so the question remains: why didn't Frey, Frey, whatever his name is, call it fiction and be done with it?
"Well, it's easier to write a memoir than a novel," says the editor of the Paris Review.
"Memoirs sell better than novels," says the cynic among us, and she is right.
But the real reason, D'Agata implies but will not explain, is that to slap novel on a memoir's cover is to misname the beast. James Frey's book, good bad or ugly, is a memoir; and a memoir is not simply a novel where the names are changed back to the real names. If I take a photo and paint over it what is it? If it has a drop of paint on it what is it? As long as there are borders, we must keep them porous.

So: an "essay" is a plan, a strategy for dealing with an onslaught of information and experience. Its fundamental gesture might be one of "thrashing out," in both senses: the essay is both a productive discussion with and a hopeless flail at something invariably "chaotic, amorphous, and phantasmagoric."
And a "lyric essayist," then, might be someone more interested in the plan than its subject, more interested in the beauty of the struggle than victory.
Joan Didion, in D'Agata's anthology *The Next American Essay*: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. . . . But writing has not yet helped me to see what it means." And narrative is only one plan of many, the most popular one but not necessarily the most appropriate. "Narrative is just as much a construction as the kinds of whacked-out experimental things we have now; very few things in the world fall comfortably into a narrative," he explains. "I don't have a clear sense when I go to bed at night about what that day meant."

He makes roughly the same face whether you have said something clever or something stupid. Or something with maybe a hidden agenda.
Again the same face when he is curious, or biting his tongue. He makes this face a lot. Head cocked, brow low, neck drawn down, lips parted, eyelids fluttering. Smirk.
He is humble.
He is one of the few massive intellects around whom you have felt comfortable.
He is deep in debt.
He wants an extra sandwich in a doggie bag.
He articulates—but cautions.
He is surprised to find himself a poster boy for the genre.
He has trouble eating and talking at the same time.
Passion derives from the Latin *passio*, meaning to suffer.
He is too smart for his own good, caught in the uncomfortable position of wanting to be both critical and earnest.

There's a paradoxical quality to John D'Agata swearing his disinterest in facts and wearing his obsession with them on his sleeve.
Yet perhaps there is a way out of this contradiction. I don't think John D'Agata is obsessed with information; I think he's obsessed with how humans deal with information. Fellow lyric essayist Eliot Weinberger calls ours the Age of Proliferation: "For the last twenty-five years, those who are not poor in the First World have been [like Borges] 'men of the Library'" under siege by armies of [information] production. [. . .] The Western consumer lives in the guilt of excess, the dizziness of choices, the identification of self through one's selections, the doubts about one's self as seen through one's selections, the continual belief that one has made the wrong choice when there are so many others."
If this is truly the defining dilemma of our age (by "our" I mean the non-poor First World-ers)—and I believe it is, if we really are in the Library of Babel, then the solution just might come in the form of an artist, one for whom "to produce implies a conscious decision not to consume, if only momentarily." And it just might come in the form of an artist that both loves and hates the fact, one who can't stop collecting them and can't stop thinking about them to do with them all. One who finds a way to make them, ultimately, both irrelevant—what a relief!—and beautiful.