



Immigration is at its Center, But is it a Lyric Essay? A Letter

Mary Cappello (April 30, 2008)



A student at Hamline University named Julie Bach wrote to me with questions about my latest book, *Awkward: A Detour* (Bellevue Literary Press) which she is studying in a graduate creative writing seminar there. Julie wanted to know how I came to write a book on awkwardness, and if I considered the book a “lyric essay.” After answering her, it seemed to me that my meditations on “lyric essay,” especially, might be worth sharing blog-wisely.



Dear Julie,

Barrie Jean Borich sent your questions on to me about AWKWARD, and I'm happy to answer them. I'm so glad to know that you are enjoying the book!

How I came to write a book about awkwardness is a long story. For a fuller answer than I can provide in this e-mail, and if you have time, take a look at the interview that I did with Jan Wenzel available on the homepage of my website: www.awkwardness.org

There, you can also find/listen to an interview I did with Celest Quinn for National Public Radio WILL in Urbana--she devoted an hour to discussing the book with me, which was really quite gratifying.

Here, I'll just mention that I'm fascinated by how ideas for books come to us--because sometimes it's as though a subject falls into one's laps and begs to be written about, and other times the route to the subject is circuitous. The book I'm currently writing--about a collection of swallowed objects in Philadelphia's Mutter Museum--was one of those subjects that "came my way" and begged for a book. But with awkwardness, the process was much different. Once the subject announced itself to me, though, it greeted me with a kind of but-of-courseness; it seemed obvious both as an essential subject for the times in which we're living and for me personally. So, it had a kind of built-in dual impetus to it--personal and political. "Awkward" seemed the right descriptor for how I felt after returning to the United States following a year I spent living and working in Russia and Italy, but it also seemed relevant to the historical moment--I mean, the post-9/11 moment in which we chose to embrace self-certainty and "resolve" (Bush's favorite word) rather than dwell in discomfort and uncertainty a little longer (which we failed to do). The long version of how I literally came to the subject can be found in the interviews I mention above; the short version is that the subject was a gift from the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, and my grandfather, John Petracca. In which sense, immigration and immigrant identity are at the center of the book even though the book of course isn't reducible to those themes.

Anyway, once "awkwardness" announced itself to me, I followed it. I followed it as a language rather than as a concept (a distinction I borrow from the French writer/psychoanalyst, JB Pontalis), who, in his book *WINDOWS*, writes, "If you enter something as a language, you find it wants and need to travel; and it won't allow you to come to the point, but to wander toward multiple points, arrived at from multiple directions." I like to think my book initiates a new genre called "the detour." This following of awkwardness as a language rather than a concept led me to meditate on things I'd never have dreamed of writing about: tact, precociousness, stuttering, ambassadorial relations, to name a few). And I became more and more struck by how "awkwardness" seemed to apply to every aspect of human existence (!)-physical, psychological, social, ontological.

I think of the book as a funny kind of creature, formally. It can be read in parts and/or as a whole. On one level, it is an homage to the fragment. It can be dipped into, paused over (I like that one reader told me it was the first book she'd read in a long time that gave her pause). On this matter of



fragments, I'm very interested in the aphorism as a form that falls somewhere between poetry and prose but is not reducible to either. So, this is my way of saying that, formally, the book is meant to have an aphoristic quality. I'd be happy if someone wanted to read only one or two sections because of the thematic focus or because of the meditation it might give rise to. However, the book was structured at the same time to be read as a whole, in which case the pleasure I hope for it to yield emerges out of what I call "voluble returns": the book is structured as a series of concentric circles one inside the other, with recurring themes that become more audible as the book unfolds. I certainly wouldn't say this about all of the books I've written or am writing (ie. that they are meant to be read either in part or as a whole-most of the time don't we want a reader to read the whole book? I certainly do...and that leads me to your second question about "lyric essay.")

Do I consider AWKWARD a lyric essay? Yes, and no. Mostly no. But let me start with in what sense, YES, it can be thought of as a lyric essay and then get into the thornier matter of NO. Insofar as everything I write is indebted to poetry and to a poetics, yes, I compose lyric essay. I was trained as a poet, I'm extremely interested in prose poetry, and my prose moves by way of association and against linear narrative most of the time. I'm interested in essay as assemblage and collage, and I almost always work with a sense of musicality in mind (lyricism). Sometimes I have a literal piece of music or musical form that I am trying to imitate with language (this was the case with a piece I wrote called "The Trees are Aflame" that appears in *American Letters and Commentary*-I was trying to create a two-part invention, a discursive double portrait of a gay man and a lesbian, and I wanted to see if I could make language do what the piano does in some of Bach's famous 2-part inventions).

However, I'm interested in "troubling" the category of "lyric essay" as it has been bandied about of late and as it's been gaining ground and currency (so much so that maybe it's becoming meaningless.) While on the one hand, I find the *Seneca Review*'s definition of lyric essay to offer a mobility and liberatory possibility that I feel a kinship with-in fact, after I read their definition a few years ago, I realized that, hey, somebody else has the same idea I do about essay-writing-as-a-form-of-poetry--at the same time, I think to try to write a lyric essay is somewhat backwards. What do I mean by this? First of all, I'm interested in the fact that "lyric" is only one kind of poetry or poetics. It's maybe the most obvious poetic genre to map onto nonfiction because it is associated with a first person mode of address and the idea of an inner life (this isn't how it is used when people talk about writing "lyric essays," but I'm trying to say this is potentially the sub-text of how it came to be attached to nonfiction prose forms that are "poetic"). I think we can afford to be more daring, more precise, and more risky, even more tendentious with our essay-making than the term "lyric" allows for. By which I mean, why not, instead of trying to write "lyric essays," identify any number of OTHER poetic forms (there are dozens) to work a nonfiction prose piece from? To put this another, different way, I think it's more interesting and makes more sense for a writer of literary nonfiction to consider what form the question or problem they are addressing dictates, rather than start from "lyric" as the form, and try to make everything they write correspond to that. Does this make sense? (A writer I know told me that he was interested in "dubeyty" as a subject and that he was working in the mode of lyric essay. I replied, "why not try to write a 'dubious' essay rather than a lyric essay?")

Don't get me wrong: I'm not reacting against the lyric essay-for goodness' sakes, yes, I'm a lyric essayist. And I'm looking forward to reading the anthology that came out of *Seneca Review* on the subject, but it's always an interesting experience for a writer when someone announces a term for something she had been doing all along but without having named it. I want to understand what it means that we've now named what many writers have been doing for many years. And I also want to trouble the definition-because it seems to me that one of the most exciting things about working at the frontiers of nonfiction just now is that the genre is in definitional crisis. (One of my own prose inventions is something I call "discursive autobiography"-you can find a description of this also on my website). But maybe it's not really my invention because I'm just describing what I learned from reading Lyn Hejinian's poetry and applying it to prose.



Getting back to where AWKWARD is in all of this: I've just finished writing a short book about breast cancer and that's more in the tradition of a lyric essay than AWKWARD is. AWKWARD, as I've said above, I like to think of as a "detour."

I hope this helps not just with your reading experience of AWKWARD but with your own nonfiction writing journey, and I'm happy to have your questions.

Patrick Madden, an essayist in Utah, had his class read AWKWARD and pose 15 questions to me about it. After they transcribe the interview, it should appear on his website: www.quotidiana.com

Well, the transcription might take awhile, since, as you can see, I can and DO go on!

All my best,

Mary Cappello

p.s. If you are looking for me on the WEB, please note that my name has two "p's" and two "l's"

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