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Both broken and joined: subjectivity and the lyric essay

Abstract:

The lyric essay is a protean form that allows writers to evoke and explore aspects of personal memory and individual subjective experience with great immediacy, while also addressing more general and abstract ideas. The use of the term 'lyric essay' has been questioned but still successfully serves the purpose of suggesting the kind of work that proceeds not as a conventional essay does – through logical argument – but rather through the juxtaposition of sometimes contradictory tropes, often presented as fragmentary, suggestive and even 'poetic'. Such essays render an impression of the happenstance and provisionality of lived experience. They raise questions about the coherence (or otherwise) of the multiple perspectives informing an individual's subjectivity.

The authors' practice-led *Mosaics* project examines the lyric essay's multiplicity of viewpoints, fragmentation and faceted nature through investigating the mosaic-like nature of its form and content, along with the extent to which such mosaic-like patterning may make the lyric essay especially well suited to the rendering of particularised subjective experience. In doing so the project references the example of Catalan architect Antonio Gaudí in his work on the Palau Guell and Parc Guell (with Joseph Jujol), where he incorporated fragmented and broken tile and stone pieces into his mosaics. Such mosaics, in creating extensive and ever-evolving patterns, may be seen as closely analogous to the lyric essay's own expressive patternings and techniques.

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1. Introduction

The use of the term lyric essay was adopted in the United States two decades ago, and made prominent by the *Seneca Review* in 1997 when Deborah Tall and John D'Agata created a section within the journal for the lyric essay and described it in an editorial that still sits on the *Seneca Review* website. While there have been many articles debating the usefulness of the term, D'Agata has written 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. (2014: 10)

We accept, as Phillip Lopate argues, that 'there is more room for mischief and circularity' in the tradition of the personal essay than some advocates of the lyric essay might allow (2013: 123). However, as D'Agata notes, while the lyric essay may not be a definitive generic term, it is a useful one to describe essays that push stylistic boundaries and inhabit a space between fully verifiable non-fiction (if this exists), creative non-fiction and poetry.

Despite many examples of published lyric essays there remains a view in some quarters that the form hovers uneasily between the conventional, discursive essay and various modes of poetic prose. Diana Wilson summarises the more negative views when she writes that it 'is often misunderstood, considered a self-indulgent, willy-nilly collection of disjointed thoughts and sentences that lead nowhere' (2016: n.p.). Yet while the lyric essay's methods and techniques have been debated, they have often proven hard to precisely articulate. Wilson writes of a 'cornucopia of connectors and structures rooted in both poetry and prose' before conceding that the 'definition of lyric essay remains elusive, for good reason' (2016: n.p.). And even when the lyric essay's methods and techniques are articulated, it is often in terms of the form being at odds with itself. P.M. Bernett has made this a defining characteristic, saying that the form embraces 'contradiction' (2012: 129).

Another way of understanding the competing or divergent features of the lyric essay is to understand it as Janus-faced, simultaneously looking two ways, as Tall and D'Agata suggest. They claim that it is poetic because of 'its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language'; and that it is like an essay 'in its weight', because of its 'overt desire to engage with facts' and its 'allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form' (1997: n.p.). This combination of the actual with the imaginative can be highly seductive. Lyric essays often present quotidian realities and narratives of self in elaborate and ambiguous ways. They frequently notate human experience in language that is at once poetic, complex and sensuous. They recognise that human experience does not always cohere and that, in rendering such experience, the lyric essay sometimes needs to court disjuncture and brokenness.

Because of these qualities lyric essays seem particularly well suited to registering subjective experience. When Nick Mansfield writes of subjectivity that, '[t]he "I" is …

a meeting point between the most formal and highly abstract concepts and the most immediate and intense emotions' (2000: 1), he might have been characterising the key preoccupations of many lyric essays. His comments are in important respects reminiscent of John D'Agata's statement that the lyric essay 'takes the subjectivity of the personal essay and the objectivity of the public essay, and conflates them into a literary form that relies on both art and fact, on imagination and observation' (2003: 436). Mansfield goes on to say that, 'we [human subjects] remain an intense focus of rich and immediate experience that defies system, logic and order and that goes out into the world in a complex, inconsistent and highly charged way' (2000: 4). Once again, he might have been speaking about the lyric essay, which values complexity, a charged suggestiveness and inconsistency as much as any formal coherence.

In thinking of Mansfield's characterisation of human subjectivity, while also considering form and patterning in the lyric essay, we soon began to think of mosaics (as indeed a number of theorists of the lyric essay have done, such as Fletcher 2008, Miller 2001, Tall and D'Agata 2007). Often elaborate, composed of small tiles and combining varying degrees of formality and informality, mosaics are a way of understanding the lyric essay in metaphorical terms. They are also an apt metaphor for various aspects of subjective experience, as we discuss below. Because of their rich history and associations with complex cultures, cities and buildings, mosaics also provide a way into connecting the lyric essay to things in the world.

2. The *Mosaics* project

In our practice-led *Mosaics* research project, we apply ideas and concepts associated with the making and structures of mosaics to the lyric essay as a way of examining why and how it defies easy generic classifications, why this might be important, and the ways in which the form might be understood as both unruly and 'made'. To this end, part of our project outline states that we will explore:

> the manner in which the lyric essay tends to be constituted of disparate events, associative leaps, gaps and silences (are narrative gaps where identity or 'story' form?); and its structures of association, aggregation and repetition; and use of juxtaposition, montage, listing and collage. (Robertson and Hetherington 2015: n.p.)

If, as a form, the lyric essay is made of nearly discrete parts which nevertheless, when joined, constitute an aggregated whole, an important question is: how might one characterise these parts and how do they function together? If a lyric essay may be part of a mosaic-like structure, how does the writer as maker of mosaics proceed and do they employ an identifiable logic or method in constructing their work? Further, if lyric essays frequently map aspects of their author's subjectivity, how might a mosaic structure relate to representations of self and personal experience?

In posing these questions our project also makes use of lyric essays we have written as part of our investigation. These are designed to exemplify the mosaic-like nature of the lyric essay and provide opportunities for us to explore the issues mentioned above through creative practice. We will refer to one of these essays as well as two other Australian lyric essays in this article in order to illustrate key points in our argument.

3. Antonio Gaudí's mosaics

When considering the mosaic-like qualities of the lyric essay, we were not especially drawn to the precisely shaped and carefully ordered patterns found in so many traditional mosaics. The lyric essays we read were not typically shaped in this way. Rather, they tended to proceed through sometimes surprising juxtapositions and through the association of disparate parts. The overall effect of such essays was frequently, as Tall and D'Agata observe, like:

> an uncharted course through interlocking webs of idea, circumstance, and language – a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning. While … ruminative, [they leave] pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader's participatory interpretation. (2007: n.p.)

The example of Antonio Gaudí, the revolutionary Catalan architect, was well suited to our purposes. In his work on the Palau Guell, and then to a greater extent Parc Guell with Joseph Jujol, he began to incorporate fragmented and broken tile and stone pieces into his mosaics. He encouraged his workers to smash bottles, ceramics and other material to combine bright colours, much as nature combines colours (Meisler 2002). This technique, known as *trencadis*, was used by early Arabs in Spain but Gaudí appears to have been the first to revive it (Meisler 2002). *Trencadis* disrupts the usual regularity and predictability of mosaic structures, and creates a variety of unexpected effects in doing so (Zerbst 1990).

While the use of fragments and broken mosaic pieces is fairly common now (used by many craftspeople and hobbyists), at the time it was considered surprising. Norman Foster noted: 'Gaudí's methods, one century on, continue to be revolutionary' (qtd in Meisler 2002: 3). His mosaics are structured and patterned but they also possess a sense of happenstance and joyousness that arises from an engagement with fractured forms, contributing to what architect Charles Jencks describes as 'ecstatic' architecture (Jencks 1999: 17). His mosaic techniques, particularly *trencadis*, emphasise that creative artefacts may have a significant element of the accidental and the informal within their constructed shapes and, indeed, that the 'constructedness' of the total mosaic form may be to some extent subverted or problematised by its component parts.

In the case of the lyric essay – especially as compared to more conventional, discursive essays – the accidental and the apparently spontaneous are joined into tight, suggestive structures of abuttal and aggregation that rarely seem 'finished' or fixed. Instead, the lyric essay is suggestive rather than conclusive and tends to ramify rather than provide a linear narration, precisely because it is made of material which will not be subdued. Typically this is the unruly material of subjectivity and memory; of happenstance and the accidental. The lyric essay is a bringing-together of divergent material that only 'belongs' within its structure for the temporary purposes of that essay. This material has various proliferating associations and origins that do not demand the shape that the lyric essay gives them. Rather, as they carry their accidental and sometimes unruly forms and associations into the lyric essay's field – like broken tiles into a Gaudí mosaic – they tend to remain rather lumpy and untidy, still also belonging to other fields of association, and to other, sometimes quite separate notions.

4. The brokenness of subjectivity

Because of the features noted above, the lyric essay may be understood as a form that has developed in part to map and understand human subjectivity. While other literary forms, such as novels and short stories, also explore individual subjectivity, they do so without necessarily being linked to their author's subjective autobiographical experiences. Only overtly lyrical utterances – most obviously lyric poems, but also some lyric prose works, such as prose poems – speak in a way that is similar to the quality of utterance offered by a lyric essay. Such utterances recognise that the specific, the particular, the fragmented and the broken stand-in for the whole – and, indeed, that there is no 'whole' immediately and completely available to the writer who wishes to accurately register what might be understood as the lyrical nature of subjectivity. Jan Zwicky observes that:

> Lyric utterance touches the world in several places, typically by focusing on particulars … In understanding lyric utterance, the work is seeing the face in the leaves: grasping the whole that the selection and attunement of particulars suggests … Lyric utterance enacts the conviction that the relevant particulars (and, in some cases, patterns or structure) are, so to speak, right there in front of us – we need only recognize them as such. Its aim, then, is to get us to 'see' a whole that is not, in fact, hidden – to overcome blindness or inattention, to make sense of what may appear chaotic or random. (Zwicky 2015: 114-15)

Many lyric essays claim to document specific aspects of life as directly experienced and understood by the author, but they never give *all* of that experience. Instead, they implicitly recognise that subjective experience is ungraspable except through the suggestive incompleteness of selected and aggregated particularities. The lyric essay may be said to be the preeminent vehicle for direct subjective articulations, so tied is it to the personal, the shifting and the contingent.

The complex and elusive nature of human subjectivity continues to be debated. Hume, in the 18th century, characterised the self as 'a bundle or collection of different perceptions' (1826: 321), which he described as 'broken and interrupted' (275). He struggled with the idea of how subjectivity may be centred, given his conviction that:

> the identity which we attribute to the human mind, however perfect we may imagine it to be, is not able to run the several different perceptions into one, and make them lose their characters of distinction and difference. (329)

His solution was to characterise the human soul as akin to 'a republic or commonwealth' (331). Numerous modern theorists, particularly after Nietzsche and Freud, have not accepted this attempt by Hume to grandiloquently unite the self; have questioned whether the self is fixed; and have debated whether there is any kind of stable subjectivity at all.

For example, almost all contemporary theorists of human subjectivity, to a greater or lesser extent, recognise that it does not consist of a single and unified whole but, rather, that subjectivity is an aggregation of many, frequently conflicting impulses, ideas, perceptions and emotions. Roger Kennedy distinguishes between 'subject as foundation,

the fragmented subject and the subject of narrative' (2014: 81), and characterises post-Nietzschean contemporary subjectivity as preoccupied by a 'multiplicity of … viewpoints, the absence of a unified sense of subjectivity, the shifting centre of a system of thought, and the notion that subjectivity is not a given but is created' (99). Further, a number of theorists who have studied autobiographical memory believe that the creation of a sense of coherent subjectivity is like creating a story or work of fiction. Jerome Bruner, for example, writes that the self is 'narrative, in structure' (1994: 43) and that the 'continuity and inherent congruity' attendant on people's accounts of their lives reflects a human need 'to reduce cognitive dissonance' (47) through self-narration.

In addition, memory's individual parts are often obscured through such self-narration, or one part is used to stand in for other parts. Conway and Rubin claim that there are three broad types of autobiographical knowledge: lifetime periods, general events and event specific knowledge (1993), and Conway writes that 'a general event such as sharing a bottle of wine with a friend in a cafe in Paris is a summary of a whole sequence of more minor events of which the general event is comprised' (1996: 69; and see Hetherington 2012 for a more extended discussion of these ideas). In other words, autobiographical memory and individual identity is frequently composite, its details drawn from divergent occasions. Helen Williams, Martin Conway and Gillian Cohen remark on a diary study of autobiographical memory which found that for a subject, Linton:

> memories of particular trips became indistinguishable from each other, and she found she had only retained a generic composite memory. The specific memory of a particular occasion had been absorbed into a generalised event memory or, in other words, she had acquired a script for these events. (2008: 40)

This does not mean that composite memories are necessarily vague. They can be precise in their details while speaking for months or years of a person's activities.

The lyric essay, like memory itself, and in the manner of many of Gaudí's mosaics, recognises that in order to narrate subjective experiences, essayists must employ inconclusive and broken structures as much as whole forms. Indeed, there may be no whole forms where the self is concerned, with every attempt at asserting a unified or complete self being – at best – a provisional foray into self-narration. Jacques Lacan posits that the idea of a whole self is, in any case, an 'Ideal-I' and that 'this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction' (2001: 2-3). The 'Ideal-I' is based on an infant's early specular image that contrasts with the reality of an uncoordinated and fragmented body:

> The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (2001: 5)

Subjectivity may not be structured in a strict mosaic pattern, but it is certainly mosaic-like in many of its features, and the lyric essay's mosaic-like patterning – broken, indeterminate, suggestive, and tending to work through association and the effects of

juxtaposition – may be the best literary form we have for suggesting and to some extent mimicking haphazard and associative processes of mind and subjectivity; and for conveying the sometimes tantalising and elusive relationships of subjective impressions to the quotidian and the real.

5. Constructing the self: 'Dancing'

Lyric essays possess structure but their component parts do not necessarily connect through the logical development of ideas. Much like poems they tend to proceed by association and, to some extent, through what might be called the juxtapositioning of happenstance. And when we say 'happenstance', it is not that we mean that the parts are not conceived of deliberately and as different aspects of the same exploration of themes and ideas but that, in finding and retrieving aspects of experience that *now* seem to connect, or at least to have a potentially illuminating relationship, lyric essays frequently search out what was originally unconnected, or only connected by chance or accidental association.

The lyric essays we have written for the *Mosaics* project may all be said to be a reassembling of what has long since been broken and fragmented, and what may never previously have been consciously joined. They make a provisional coherence and connection out of linking and juxtaposing the unlike as well as the like; by evoking contrast and dissimilarity as well as by summoning related instances. Their lyricism consists partly in plucking episodes or instances from memory's insistently narrative-driven frame, not in order to disable memory's stories, but to recognise the complexity, multivalency and multi-faceted suggestiveness of so much of memory's material. In this way lyric essays tend towards the symbolic, emblematic and metaphorical and their material, extracted from larger narratives and isolated or decontextualised, stands in for many other episodes that, it is implied, are of a similar kind.

Each instance or episode privileged by the lyric essay is thus a broken thing that speaks on behalf of larger concerns. It is a construction assembled from fragments abutted against other fragments to make a new and ramifying pattern. The whole is a pattern of assemblage or aggregation that is unlike that of any other lyric essay precisely because its details – and their connections – belong only to their particular and individualised 'mosaic' context.

An example is the lyric essay 'Dancing', by Rachel Robertson. This begins:

> He hands me words like a bunch of flowers – finesse, equilibrium, divergence. They seem to scent the air with optimism. We talk into a topic, and through it. He is lyrical and philosophical; I am ironic and teasing. I take his words, though, hold them close.
>
> We drink French wine with Thai food and his fingers itch to take notes as we talk. Then he sits at his computer and types away with his hands splayed in an odd position that must be from never learning to touch type.
>
> Later, I find three pumpkin seeds scattered on the floor, slipped from his fingers like green confetti.
>
> The next day he is gone. (2015: 11)

Imagined as mosaic tiles, the phrases and words in these short paragraphs are disparate and even strangely shaped: 'a bunch of flowers' (a conventional image, but unusual as a description of words); 'finesse, equilibrium, divergence' (a somewhat surprising juxtaposition); and 'scent the air with optimism' (a suggestive and ramifying phrase). Such language creates a subdued narrative but the words are primarily imagistic and reflective rather than narrative-driven, establishing a scene and associated concerns in metaphorical terms. As they focus on the life of hands, and their connection to language, they take the reader into a space of reflection.

Later in this essay, Robertson writes:

> Occasionally, I catch myself repeating another of my mother's characteristic hand movements, where she lays her right hand across the left side of her neck, clasping the collar of her shirt. I remember her standing, staring out of the kitchen window for long periods of time, one hand at her neck, the other flat on the sill. We could call her name or even tug her skirt and she would seem unaware of our presence.

In this passage the pattern of imagery and the shapes of language make an appealing whole just as the details suggest other associations and narratives that the paragraph does not address. For instance, a complex mother-daughter relationship is alluded to but not explored; the subject of ageing is raised but not pursued; and subjects such as presence, isolation, sadness and human connection (or the lack of it) are also evoked. The reader knows enough from this passage to sense the power of the connections across generations in families, and to connect that sense to this essay's exploration of a mother-son relationship, without being taken into details.

The reader is asked to move forwards with the understanding that what has been suggested and evoked also remains opaque. Readerly satisfactions in such writing are about an engagement with moments and occasions, and with the way different instances and their evocations relate, do not relate, or relate imperfectly. Readers are brought into a close relationship with the lyric essay's text, aware that they are closely complicit in construing meaning from what they read. Even so, significant mystery remains and, as it does so, the unknowability of others and their experiences is beautifully brought into play. Brokenness and completeness are in tension with one another and contradictions begin to emerge as – like artefacts and shards – different and incomplete shapes of experience are foregrounded.

The purpose of the lyric essay 'Dancing' is to explore memory, apprehension and sensuous experience. It is to quiz the nature of a particular mother-son relationship, and the protagonist's connected relationships with her father and lovers. It also foregrounds the nature of intimacy and ageing, and notices some of the ways in which different kinds of intimacy share features with one another. It even possesses an implicit meta-narrative that questions how one may even express in language such complex and shifting issues.

The yoking together of parts and fragments into a lyric whole partly replicates memory's methods – finding a way back into byways and obscure recesses that allow the construction of an account of the self. Robertson's essay journeys through broken and puzzling apprehensions of space and time, trying to retrieve – to re-collect – sufficient parts from her experiences to make some sort of provisional whole or

tentative thesis. It is an attempt to make a readable structure out of disjunct experience; and to construct an analogue for a great deal that remains lost or enigmatic. In doing so, the essay makes considerable use of visual imagery, and of sensory perception in general. Much as in memory, we 'see' a great deal of what Robertson talks about. Every image might be thought of as akin to another piece of a mosaic, fixed in place, flickeringly suggestive in the light that it attracts and shapes.

6. Memory's mosaics: 'Mary'

Lucy Dougan's lyric essay 'Mary' (2015) explores similar themes of subjectivity, memory and family relationships. Mary is Dougan's great-grandmother, a professional seamstress in Melbourne in the 1890s before she moved to Western Australia and married Ted Coade. Mary's daughter married a Hewett and was mother to Dorothy Hewett, the poet and playwright, and to Lesley Hewett, Lucy Dougan's mother. Dougan's essay explores Mary's life, the traceable influences she had on the narrator, and the narrator's sense of being part of a large and complex family, dominated by strong women. The essay also tells a tale about the narrator's self, and her movement into mid-life.

Dougan's essay is energised by an ability to re-invent the present through revisiting the past. The layering and textural nature of the lyric essay, its elusive and disruptive non-linear narrative, allows an engagement with the narrator's past that can be constitutive of new meanings and understandings. The juxtapositions that occur in the essay make surprising connections and encourage the narrator (and reader) to reconceptualise the material traversed.

'Mary' may initially appear unstructured – as rambling as the old family houses Dougan describes. However, a series of images act as a narrative scaffold and connective tissue within the work. Images of faces – photographs, a cloth mask, the face of Dougan's first born, and a smiley face a nurse draws – are a key motif, gesturing not just to the family line from Mary to Lucy Dougan but also to the family fractures – half siblings, the post-war inclusion of a German child in the family, and a cousin who was sent to an orphanage in America. Juxtaposed with the motif of faces is the motif of material – an 'unfinished purple silk garment' (103), a list of haberdashery words no longer in daily use, a 'great floating dowry of cloth' (98) – as if to clothe the faces Dougan has summoned from the past. The third structuring shape in the essay is family houses and their gardens, intimate and wild spaces that Dougan describes as 'an estate of places belonging to three women in a row – safe places you could skip to, one from the other, spaces that held their own particular light and dark, aromas, domestic routines' (101).

Dougan's essay takes the broken moments of the past and reinterprets them by laying them alongside other events or ideas. For example, she writes about her mother's memory of a major argument between Dorothy Hewett and her parents, one that was later the subject of a Dorothy Hewett poem. Dougan juxtaposes this with lines from another Hewett poem: 'nobody said *You're girls*/*You can't do these things*' (qtd in Dougan 2015: 102). She hypothesises that Mary (the grandmother) might have encouraged Dorothy's rebellion: 'And I think of Mary's resourcefulness, her creativity and everything it gifted to her descendants' (102).

Mary, Dougan claims, waits for her, residing in the 'digital sea' (96), returning to her through story and a sea of material. By the end of the essay, Mary is no longer stranger, a great-grandmother never met, but rather a living presence, creator of the spaces her female descendants inherit – spaces like *Cathay*, with its wild garden and under-the-house secrets, and the Wickepin farm, remembered in Hewett's poetry. It is as if Mary has created a Winnicottian maternal safe space to allow play, and its adult corollaries: love, rebellion and poetry.

For all its weaving, reclaiming and reinventing of the past, Dougan's essay ends with indeterminacy. Her discoveries lie alongside things unknown and she is content to allow this: 'the unfinished purple silk garment eludes me. I've learned to love the potential granted from its unlocatable, partially made state' (103). She alludes to another branch of her family tree, and 'the mother house with the ghostliest coordinates' (103), gesturing beyond the 'housing' of her immediate family (those faces and bodies she has clothed and housed in her essay) to the lost and unruly family histories, a house in Portici and a child sent to an orphanage. Like the deliberate use of accidental mosaic pieces in *trencadis*, these reminders of the disconnected and disorderly both foreground and subvert the constructedness of the essay.

7. The subject's metamorphosis: 'Alive in *Ant and Bee*'

Where Robertson constructs a self and Dougan reinvents her family history, Gillian Mears, in her long lyric essay 'Alive in *Ant and Bee*', creates a body and self in metamorphosis. This essay tells of the author's solo camping journey around New South Wales in an adapted ambulance called *Ant and Bee*. The essay was written in 2007; Mears had multiple sclerosis (MS) and had survived a life-threatening heart infection followed by open heart surgery only a year before her journey began. There are many threads woven into Mears' essay: the diagnosis of MS; reading; memories of the operation; the art of forgiveness and self-forgiveness; connection to the land; and spiritual beliefs. Weaving these threads together through narrative allows Mears to construct an altered identity. The self who camps under the trees in an old ambulance is also the self who once travelled to hospital in a modern ambulance, close to death. The body which now contains a ticking carbon valve is the same body that once held a healthy heart, the same body that was cut open by a doctor with a jigsaw and then sewn back together with wire.

Such major changes in the body can disrupt and threaten our sense of spatio-temporal continuity, what Caroline Bynum describes as our sense of 'oneness': 'the fact that I am the same person I was a moment ago' (2005: 163). The urge to narrate is partly an urge to understand such spatio-temporal disruption and repair it, and the lyric essay form provides a very good mechanism for demonstrating both disruption or brokenness and repair – or, at least, a provisional joining together. As she describes her solo journey in *Ant and Bee*, Mears dips back into the past – the years struggling to understand why her balance was failing, the months in love with a macrobiotic practitioner, the days before and after her operation and the weeks of recovery living in a block of flats with frail, aged neighbours.

Her story is structured, not by chronology or the linear path of a road journey, but by

shape, her own damaged and disabled body, like the disparate shapes of an uneven mosaic trail. The narrative travels back and forth in time and place, it lingers on some moments not others, and uses extracts from other works of literature to help make sense of certain troubling experiences. There are many repeated motifs used in this essay, including vehicles, birds, books, Persian poetry, the shape of the heart, making bread, and sewing a quilt. These motifs act to signal the metamorphosis of Mears' body and sense of self, from her memories of being close to death and her despair at the limitations on her imposed by MS, to her joy at living in the ambulance, able to embrace the life she can achieve and the uncertainty of her condition.

Here the lyric mode explores darkness and works against certainty, predictability and closure. There is no argument, no overt philosophising, and almost no abstraction in this essay and, as with Robertson's and Dougan's lyric essays, this essay eschews the typical movement of the personal essay from the presentation of personal experience to universal commentary or reflection. And yet, the reader still has a sense of Mears' essayistic persona, someone who has reflected deeply about the wider implications of what she has lived through. The meaning the reader gains is primarily delivered through juxtaposition, the 'collisions between image and scene' (Mintz 2010: 3), and through repetition. The work is reflective and imagistic rather than narrative-driven, asking the reader to create meaning and story across gaps and silences. Present and past are presented side by side, sometimes without clear transitions, making the reader perform mental time travel with the narrator. The narrator's subjectivity continues to change and the reader is obliged to follow this ongoing act of metamorphosis.

8. Conclusion: found objects

When Gaudí, Jujol and those who worked with them broke glass, ceramics and other material in order to 'shape' raw material for their mosaics, they used a great deal of 'found' material – literally what they had to hand. The lyric essay also does this. Instead of purposefully constructing a specific framework in which quotidian details may be 'placed' and connected within an overarching narrative framework, the lyric essay looks to what the author already possesses in their store of memory and lived experience. This material does not necessarily cohere because the shapes of a life tend to be unruly and involve a great deal of accidental accumulation.

The point of the lyric essay is not primarily to reinvent this material but to locate and mobilise such memory material in the first place, and to place the various fragments judiciously into the lyric essay's overall structure in ways that will allow its various facets to illuminate one another, or its different patterns to 'speak' to one another. 'My son's hands … are not my hands … but remind me of my sister' is an important statement in Robertson's essay because it points immediately and directly to issues of human connection and disconnection central to her essay. 'Hands' stand in for a great deal in such a context: they imply nothing less than the complex intersections of three human lives. Similarly, cloth in Dougan's essay works to yoke separated family members into a temporary conjunction, and Mears' singing birds represent subjective experience and the contingent, ever-changing body.

While lyric essays convey a sense of a whole – however elusive and unrealisable the

essays acknowledge that to be – and while they move between their parts with purpose and fluidity, often possessing considerable forward momentum and development, they are typically ruminative, digressive and sometimes halting. They tend to circle back to reconsider themes and ideas. As with the lyric essays discussed here, they are often punctuated by gaps and fractures and frequently disrupt the flow of narrative time, foregrounding techniques of evocation and suggestiveness more typical of poetry than conventional prose. Indeed, they often move in ways that are characteristic of poetry – not so much in a linear development but in reiterative and accretive motions.

That is to say, while each lyric essay may be examined in formal terms, the lyric essay, *in general*, will not conform to any predetermined mode. It is an artefact that seeks its own occasion and patterning, even within the general characteristics of its genre. Like Gaudí's and Jujol's continually divergent mosaic forms, the lyric essay's tendency to summon up its own difference is part of the point. You can see long patterns of mosaics at Parc Guell, for example, but no particular mosaic aggregation is the same as the previous aggregation – or any other at all. The broken, quotidian happenstance that informs their construction insists that their expressiveness is shifting and individual even within the larger, flowing patterns that frame them.

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