

ESSAYING "THE THING"

An Imagiste Approach to the Lyric Essay

by Joey Franklin

In 1911, Ezra Pound stepped off the Metro in Paris and entered a crowd of people that would change his life forever. "I got out of a 'metro' train at La Concorde," he writes: "And saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion."¹

That evening, Pound wrote thirty lines of poetry that he destroyed almost immediately. He tried and tried again, but it took him a year to adequately describe the experience, and, in the end, he produced this two-line poem, now as famous for its brevity as for its imagery:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.²

"In a Station of the Metro" has become the quintessential poem of the Imagiste movement, an early 20th-century aesthetic philosophy with three major tenets:

1. To treat the subject ("The Thing") directly;
2. To "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation," and
3. To compose according to musicality, rather than formal meter.³

The Imagiste philosophy, however vague, furnished artists with a new aesthetic that championed the descriptive primacy of the fragmented image over the hackneyed symbol, the emotional authority of brevity and directness over sentimental verbosity and roundabout storytelling, and the rhythmic significance of the creative impulse over the dogmatic adherence to form. Reading of Pound's experience at the Metro, the way the moment moved him, the way he worked and fought to get to the heart of the matter, coming at the experience again and again, trying to make not just emotional, but psychological sense of what the experience meant to him, I cannot help but think of the lyric essay and its practitioners, working in fragments of memory and experience, often in brief, barely narrative prose, privileging artful style, not at the expense of, but as the primary vehicle for conveying emotionally charged experience. And pondering about the lyric essay, I can't help but think of three masters of the form: Eula Biss,

Ander Monson, and David Shields. Applying the three tenets of Imagism to lyric essays from these writers, we can formulate a rationale for many of the structural elements common to the genre, and in doing so, identify ways other essayists can use the tenants of Imagism to approach their own moments of emotional significance.

Direct Treatment of "The Thing"

What distinguished Imagiste poetry from more traditional poetry of the time was the singular attempt to articulate the ineffable—not that Imagiste poets were merely interested in finding pretty ways to articulate challenging subject matter, but that they wanted to find the way to transfer the poet's emotional experience to the reader by tapping into what Pound called the "primary form"—the "thing" mentioned in the first tenet of Imagism.⁴ The goal became finding the right image—something more personal than metaphor, more complex than symbol—that would convey the interiority of the poet to the interiority of the reader. Pound described an Imagiste image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."⁵ In other words, a true image consists of language that recreates the interior emotional and intellectual state of the writer in the instance of its realization. Distinguishing Imagiste poetry from mere "symbolism," Pound wrote, "The symbolist's symbols have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The Imagiste's images have a variable significance, like the signs a, &, and x in algebra."⁶ The variable significance of an Imagiste's image means that it will get inside different readers in different ways while still pointing them toward the same "primary form." Pound's line about

that black bough is like an algebraic expression into which readers plug their own experiences, and though the results may be different, interpretations fall along the same curve of emotional truth.

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Like the Imagiste poet seeking algebraic complexity distilled into a single image, the lyric essayist seeks complexity in a single, short fragment. And like the Imagiste poet, the lyric essayist expects reader participation. David Shields practically quoted Pound (though I'm fairly certain he didn't, despite his predilection for orphan quotations) when he said that short-short prose reminded him "of algebraic equations or geometry proofs."⁷ And in that same sentence, Shields alludes to reader participation when he also refers to short-shorts as "lab experiments or jigsaw puzzles or carom shots or very cruel jokes. They're magic tricks, with meaning."⁸ The reader is the Petri dish in which the lyric essay foment, or the puzzler turning the pieces over in his mind, or the carom post off which that expert shot ricochets, or the unwitting butt of that cruel joke, pulled in briefly by

the trickster only to be left sitting on the curb wondering what happened to his wallet. A successful lyric essay and a successful magic trick (and a successful Imagiste poem, for that matter) depend in large measure on the same thing: the audience's willingness to go along with the conceit, to ask "how did she do that?"

Shields's essay, "On Views and Viewing," from his book *Enough About You*, consists of eighteen remarkably brief fragments that span only eleven pages. Most of the fragments are just a few lines long and include snippets from such a variety of sources that at first glance it is difficult to see any relationship between them at all. The main body of the essay consists of three multi-paragraph clips surrounded by shorter fragments of sometimes only a line or two. The first longer clip describes an artist who turns on a television to get his

wealthy New England clients to hold a pose. The second describes Shields's childhood obsession with a rocking horse upon which he would, in Lawrencian fashion, "buck back and forth until it hurt."⁹ The third clip is an anecdote about the feelings of inadequacy brought on by television, including Greg Brady's eight-year long depiction of a high school junior and "all the beautiful girls on MTV live."¹⁰ Surrounding these longer passages are the much shorter clips—a one-liner about the uniforms worn by travel agents ("we are stewardesses not yet in the air"¹¹), several lists of product slogans ("I believe in Crystal Light because I believe in me"¹²), and a few other odds and ends that point vaguely at the idea of "viewing." In fact, the title of the essay becomes the thread that readers must hold to tightly as they read. Shields provides very little in commentary

or explanation, but instead expects readers to fill in the blanks about why he's placed a Mr. Goodbar slogan in the same essay as a reference to Kafka's story "First Sorrow."

Those blanks to be filled are like the variables in an algebraic equation, a network of complex relationships, their meaning determined largely by superposition, juxtaposition, and a literary order of operations that requires the computation of successive disparate parts individually first, and then in small groups, and finally as one large whole—a lyric equation of the quadratic order, the results of which depended upon the data provided by the reader, but which all reside on the same curve of meaning, subjective iterations of the primary form envisioned by the author. It is as if Shields felt "the thing" inside of him and could only provide the fragments surrounding

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it in the hope that, like a series of Imagiste's images, those fragments would collectively provide the reader access to the "primary form" that Shields could not articulate himself.

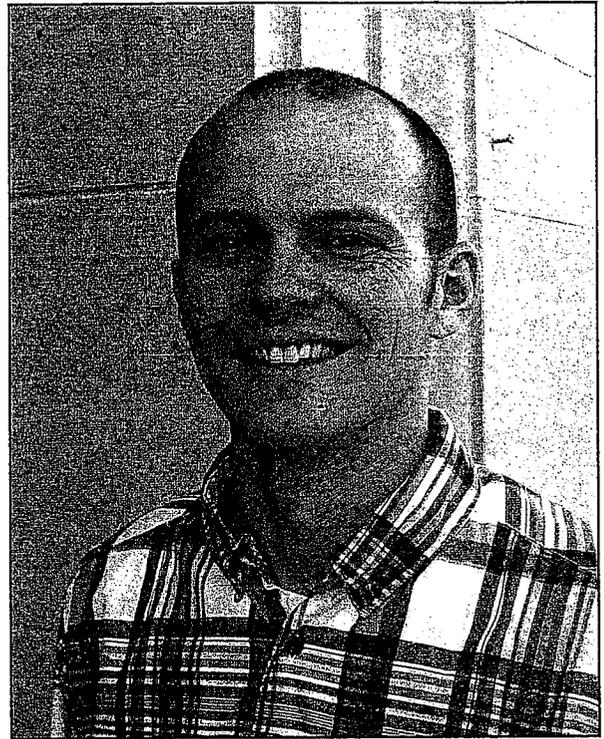
Ander Monson takes the mathematical metaphor quite literally in his essay "Cranbrook Schools: Adventures in Bourgeois Topologies," from his collection, *Neck Deep and Other Predicaments*. The essay starts off simply enough with Monson sitting in a courtyard at his former private school, admitting to the reader, "I am waiting here for a revelation."¹³ He's returned to the high school from which he was expelled "to try to face up to and recover something from my past from this place that holds so much of it."¹⁴ Monson's "something," like Pound's "Thing," hides somewhere beneath effable consciousness waiting to be deciphered, and like a mathematician faced with a complex problem, Monson sets out to generate a formula. "I am hoping for the slick results of the reconstruction of my past," he writes. "Epiphany, soliloquy; something that sounds rich, intellectual, and ends in γ ."¹⁵ His confession acknowledges his desire to fit into the intellectual aesthetic of the school he left, but it also suggests a desire for an answer that includes some concrete results, a fixed point, the Cartesian y ; and finally, the confession undercuts both those desires by suggesting that his exploration may inevitably produce the same question that instigated it: *why?*

With these three possibilities in the air, Monson sets out in the first few fragments of the essay to introduce the coefficients in the formula, the controlled, static elements—Cranbrook School, girls, upper-class sensibilities about "classical" education, hints at the deviant behavior that got him expelled—and then, in the third fragment, he breaks from the relatively narrative flow of

the essay: "Twelve years ago, I had not heard of the mathematical subfield of topology,"¹⁶ he writes, performing a hard shift that jars the reader out of any sense of story and warns the reader to pay attention—(parabolic) curves ahead. Monson uses the topology metaphor to describe the challenge of recovering that "something" from his amorphous, free-flowing past, and the metaphors of mathematical theorems and proofs as the process of reconciling that past with the present. The rest of the essay reads like a mathematical treatise on his high school years: fragments are

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individual proofs of certain elements of his past ("A proof: We lived in dorms, of course. We had rules"¹⁷), or else evidence ("Some evidence—A short list of Ander Monson's criminal history at Cranbrook schools"¹⁸), or theorems ("Theorem: Maybe this—my criminal and educational history, my life—is in the end about control"¹⁹), and he revisits and revises



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these proofs and theorems and evidence as he progresses through the essay.

Unlike Shields's "On Views and Viewing," Monson's "Cranbrook" holds to some semblance of a narrative line, but the drive to "recover something" almost immediately pushes the essay out of narrative and into this lyric, mathematical metaphor. Even at the end of the essay, when it has persisted in carrying the memory of school expulsion through to its final act (Monson driving away from Cranbrook for good), the essay fails to provide Monson with the epiphany he's looking for. "What will it take as proof to convince me, to connect these dots into something beautiful and continuous?" he asks. "Is everything disjunction, scattered Legos, logos, random blips and dots? What will remain after all the detritus has washed, has been cleared finally away?"²⁰ The answer to Monson's final question is "the reader." Monson has provided the

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coefficients and operators for the equation, and the reader must add value to the variables. At the end of the essay, Monson acknowledges that his efforts to “recover something” from his story would only be possible “if you believe in the deterministic universe, the universe as a colossal machine, every force and reaction knowable and understandable.”²¹ It seems that even a complex formula will not produce results, that the past is not a problem that can be worked out mathematically, that “the thing” he wanted to express, was not “knowable and understandable,” but that his lyric attempt at surrounding it and proving it is as close as he’ll ever come.

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to poetic words and rhythmic structure,

not merely for gimmick’s sake, but because

the musicality of the language plays an important

role in conveying both the idea and emotion

of “the thing” that’s driving the essay.

Eula Biss’s mathematical approach to the lyric essay is, on the surface, less complex than Monson’s, but no less an attempt at articulating the inexpressible. In an interview with *Gulf Coast*, Biss described in general terms the beginnings of essays for her as “vague tensions that won’t stop nettling me, or questions I don’t have the words for, or problems I can’t articulate yet, or clutters of feelings around certain words or phrases.”²² For Biss, essays are born out of questions without fixed answers, out of experiences with “variable significance.” The experiences that led to her essay, “Time and Distance Overcome,” from *Notes from No Man’s Land*, follow a line similar to Pound’s experience in

the Metro station, except that where Pound saw beautiful faces in a crowd in France, Biss saw one astonishing fact after another during what was supposed to be a research project on the history of the telephone.²³ Her notes filled with story after story of black men being lynched from telephone poles, and suddenly her childhood reaction to telephone poles (“When I was young, I believed that the arc and swoop of telephone wires along roadways was beautiful. I believed that the telephone poles, with their transformers catching the evening sun, were glorious”²⁴), became something much less awe-inspiring (“Now, I tell my sister, these poles, these wires, do not

look the same to me”²⁵). She does not explain how they look different because, I believe, she can’t—this is the indescribable “thing,” the emotional and intellectual complex Biss experienced, and the structure of the essay is the Imagiste image that attempts to make that experience accessible to her reader.

Where Pound compares the beauty of French faces to the beauty of flower petals, Biss compares the technological and social progression toward the telephone to the persistence of racism as realized through lynching—a one-plus-one-equals-three attempt at enlarging the emotional significance of both stories beyond their individual boundaries. This is no ordinary arithmetic. While

the essay divides itself neatly in two (fragments on the early history of the telephone and fragments on telephone pole lynching), the operator placed between them requires some advanced algebraic formulation, a notion suggested by the last line of the first section: "The telephone," Thomas Edison declared, "annihilated time and space, and brought the human family in closer touch," and the first line of the second section: "In 1898, in Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, a black man was hanged from a telephone pole."²⁶ By virtue of the bluntness of this juxtaposition, the "closer touch" Biss mentions at the end of the first section suddenly feels less like the stuff of an old ATT television spot and more like the plot of a Richard Wright novel. According to Pound, an Imagiste poem tries to "record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."²⁷ Biss's transition between sections mimics "the precise instant," when her research transformed into something "inward and subjective." And just like with "In a Station of the Metro," readers of "Time and Distance Overcome" are left the responsibility of internalizing the two components of the image in order to access "the thing" at the heart of the essay.

To "use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation"

The Imagistes' desire to capture "the thing" leads directly to their second tenant and its emphasis on the succinctness in artistic presentation. However, as Pound scholar Peter Wilson writes, this second tenant refers not merely to "economy of expression," but to "an absence or lack of interest in explanation, discursive commentary, superfluous verbal ornamentation, empty rhetoric, [and] elaborate

moral reflections."²⁸ The Imagiste presentation is poetry stripped down to its bare bones, giving it a primal quality that Pound would describe as the "sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were 'just coming over into speech.'"²⁹ The Imagiste is a language sculptor, chipping away at all but the essential bits until we're left with a poem like "In a Station of the Metro," where the absence of language plays as large a role as the language itself. Lyric essayists operate the same way, cutting away at the narrative of personal experience until they're left with the emotion, the memory, the moment, what D'Agata called "pieces of experience undigested and tacit,"³⁰ leaving nearly all commentary, explanation, and reflection to the reader. "The absence of thought leaves the reader room to think about other things,"³¹ writes David Shields, again practically echoing

Pound, who writes of his own desire for an active audience interested not in "the thoughts that have been already thought out by others,"³² but in exploring new, uncharted realms of thought.

In the same way that Pound had to strip away nearly all the narrative from his Metro experience and replace it with a single Imagistic metaphor in order to avoid detracting from the presentation of that emotional moment, lyric essayists often strip away the narrative from their work, replacing it with a structural metaphor that does the work of an Imagiste's image. Ander Monson uses the Roman numerated "Harvard Outline" as a structural metaphor that frames his analysis of family history, mining history, and writing in his essay "Outline toward a Theory of the Mine Versus the Mind and the Harvard Outline." In the essay, even as he appears to



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follow the “top-down structuralist method of constructing writing,”³³ with his sentences broken down into headings and subheadings as they follow the hierarchical numerals and letters down the page, Monson simultaneously questions the “rigor and scaffolding” of both the academic writing process and the reconstruction of the past. He even suggests that his own quirky structural metaphor may be:

...a kind of architecture I am trying to erect
 ii. to protect myself against my family, meaninglessness, and the future
 1. an artifice to get inside my past.³⁴

The irony, of course, is that the “architecture” that Monson is “trying to erect” to insulate himself is the very architecture that allows readers access into his mind. Monson acknowledges the structure as both a rhetorical device for his commentary on human thought and a potential crutch, a potential dead symbol, the likes of which Pound and other Imagistes would shudder at. However, his unabashed openness about his use of form is endearing, and suggests an awareness of how the structure ultimately contributes to the presentation at hand:

...the structure
 a. either binds you in or wants to expel you like a sickness
 b. think the mine, the outline, as a body
 c. an ecosystem
 d. or a mechanical spring
 i. compress
 ii. release
 iii. repeat
 e. and that structure creates pressure; how
 architecture is the elegant distribution of stress.³⁵

The architecture of the mine (pier and beam), the architecture of the mind (memory), and the architecture

of the outline itself (numerals and tabs) distributes stress—physical stress in the case of the mine, emotional stress in the mind, and rhetorical stress in the outline. The language and the form of Monson’s essay work in tandem to produce no less than three readings of nearly every line. In an Imagiste act of cutting away in order to create more, Monson dispenses with superfluous narrative, explanation, or prescription, and leaves the reader to experience through the structural metaphor the

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mysterious relationship between his own mind, his familial history of mining, and his work as a writer and teacher. There is no neat story that will sum up the emotional reality Monson wants to convey, no memoir that won’t get in the way of his attempt to present the multifaceted, subjective experience of being who he is; instead he offers a structural metaphor, a capital “I” Image.

In “The Pain Scale,” Eula Biss employs a more subtle structural metaphor than Monson, though she hardly pulls punches in terms of creating a metaphor to get at complex personal questions. “I’m sitting in a hospital trying to measure my pain on a scale from zero to ten,” she writes in the second fragment of the essay, enunciating both the ostensible occasion for the essay, and

its structure. The essay consists of eleven sections, one for each step on the medical pain rating scale, and in each one she attempts not only to describe her pain, but also to describe the challenge of rating her pain. The structural metaphor of the actual pain scale seems both the obvious vehicle for exploring these dual challenges, and an ingenious Imagiste conceit; the pain scale, which gives the writer such emotional difficulty, becomes the vehicle by which the writer grants the reader access to that very difficulty.

Each section of the essay is a meditative free-association journey through Biss’s mind as she attempts to quantify and qualify the varying levels of pain she feels. Starting with zero, she explores the question of whether there can be an absence of pain and asks the reader to consider Kelvin’s absolute zero and a fragment about Dante’s icy lowest level of hell, beside a fragment about a chicken hung upside down, “zeroed” into submission. “I like to imagine that a chicken at zero feels no pain,” she writes.³⁶ As she moves up the scale, she explores different kinds of pain, tries to imagine the worst kinds of pain, and meditates on the challenges of rating one’s own pain subjectively. The meditative flow inevitably leads her to the issue of politics. “I am a citizen of a country that ranks our comfort above any other concern... I struggle to consider my pain in proportion to the pain of a napalmed Vietnamese girl whose skin is slowly melting off as she walks naked in the sun. This exercise is painful.”³⁷ The scattershot of pain-related thoughts represent both the subjectivity of pain and the cultural pressures and ethical dilemmas involved in rating pain. And though a friend tells her she doesn’t need to factor world suffering into her subjective rating of pain, any momentary relief was supplanted by the “terrifying” realization that “my nerves alone feel my pain. I hate the knowledge that I

am isolated in this skin—alone with my pain and my own fallibility.”³⁸

The essay’s moment of greatest impact occurs in section ten (as we would expect), where we read of Biss and her father (a doctor himself) joking about the idea of an alternate pain scale that rates “what patients would be willing to do to reduce their pain.”³⁹ They joke back and forth creating scenarios: “Would you give up a limb... would you surrender your sense of sight for the next ten years... would you accept a shorter life span?” They are “laughing, having fun with this game,” writes Biss. “But later, reading statements collected by the American Pain Foundation, I am alarmed by the number of references to suicide.”⁴⁰ This fragment records a moment when the subjective pain of others crosses over that wall of consciousness and becomes real to

the observer. In the fine print of those American Pain Foundation records, Biss finds the empathy necessary to convert a number on the pain scale into something tangible. She experiences what she wants her doctors to experience, and what she wants us as readers to experience as well.

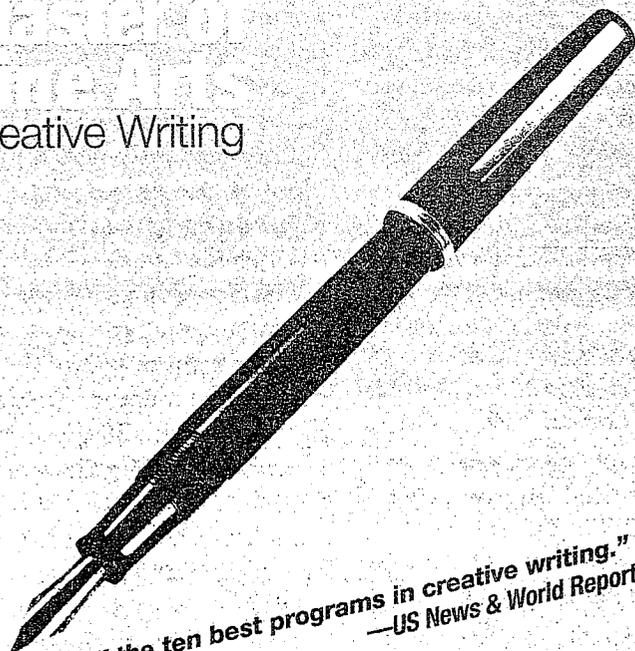
In narrative prose, plot tends to steer reader experience, but lyric prose like “The Pain Scale” often relies on structural metaphors to guide readers. Shields’s recent project, *Reality Hunger*, is a book-length lyric essay of such complexity and magnitude that it could bare no other subtitle than “A Manifesto.” The “manifesto” structural metaphor adds the clout of political pronouncement to Shields’s multifaceted attempt at an *ars poetica* for reality art. By writing his manifesto in 618 short fragments, Shields is able to do the

long work of *Reality Hunger* in the short-short form, the momentum of which is, according to Shields, “lyrical in nature.”⁴¹ The lyric fragments work on the mind of the reader like a series of Imagiste poems, each one an aphoristic stand-alone that in turn suggests and receives meaning to and from the fragments that surround it.

A look at one short chapter demonstrates how the book as a whole works on an Imagiste level to strip away excess language in order to get at the emotional heart of the essay. In chapter V, Shields begins with an aphorism from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*: “I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else.”⁴² The two-and-a-half-page essay made entirely from the pithy quotes of other people performs the project of the manifesto itself by challenging readers to accept

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such a literary mash-up collectively as the work of the artist.

For Shields, who has repeatedly invoked Joyce, saying, "I am quite content to go down to posterity as a scissors-and-paste man,"⁴³ the collage must do more than merely acquiesce to the minds of others. Rather the collage of these quotes about the importance of individuality becomes the shortest way for Shields to demonstrate the central emotional dilemma of life as an artist working in a movement that blurs "any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real." The chapter performs the blurring Shields seeks by saying at once that the self is central to literature, but that, the self is made up of all the literature it has taken in. Shields is "being himself" by lifting, repositioning, and juxtaposing the texts of others. The content and the form not only speak for him and define him as the scissors-and-paste man, but also create space for the serendipity and spontaneity that come from active reader participation. The irony, instead of creating a contradiction between the title of the chapter and the content of the chapter, creates a new definition of being—an Imagiste's image of being that includes Shields, his unwitting collaborators, and the reader who fills in the blanks with the "randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity" that are the "key components"⁴⁴ of the artistic movement championed by his manifesto.

To compose according to musicality, rather than formal meter

Pound believed that the best poetry came from that place of language where "music, sheer melody, seems as if it were just bursting into speech,"⁴⁵ and that it was the poet's job to find the rhythm and cadence that

matched the emotional truth of the poem, or more precisely, that the emotional truth of the poem would create the cadence and rhythm it required. Under this argument, "In a Station of the Metro" is no mere *vers libre*, but a poem of carefully wrought diction, lineation, and spacing, designed to give the reader access to the emotional moment the poet is describing. A lyric essayist pays similar attention to poetic words and rhythmic structure, not merely for gimmick's sake, but because the musicality of the language plays an important role in conveying both the idea and emotion of "the thing" that's driving the essay.

One of Monson's most musically significant essays is "I Have Been Thinking about Snow," which comes as close to reproducing the potential serenity and suffocation of snowfall as any piece of cold-weather literature ever has. The opening line of the essay implies an Imagiste approach to his subject. "I have been thinking about snow," he writes, "and how to get inside it."⁴⁶ For Monson, who grew up in Houghton, Michigan, snow is not merely a meteorological event, but an integral part of the world that he defines himself against. This essay is an attempt to "get inside" snow, but it is also an attempt to get inside Monson himself and to give the reader access to that interior place where snow has piled up into deeply personal meaning.

Experimental in both structure (the essay consists of short fragments separated by ellipses that stretch for several lines, filling the page, as it were, with falling flakes of snow) and content (Monson rides a flurry of thought that blows through from his early childhood jaunts down ice tunnels to his snowless days in Alabama to meditations on blizzards and asteroids, as well as the shifting weather patterns of the north, of the family, and of the human heart), the essay has the rhythmic qualities

of a blizzard, each fragment a flake blowing sideways, bouncing off one another, but always falling down the page, both constant and chaotic all at once. Sometimes multiple ideas crowd a single fragment: "Culture is the opposite of weather. A hedge against it. Is a fight beneath it. Is a losing fight a boxing match a match struck in hard wind and extinguished immediately;"⁴⁷ And in one place just two words, "such," and "isolation," float alone in a whiteout of ellipses that fills two adjacent pages.

This fragmentation is normal for Monson. In "Essay as Hack," he writes, "I believe in the fragment. It's the most honest representation of anything. It acknowledges gaps, its lack

of comprehensiveness, its ability to surround and control a subject, an idea."⁴⁸ Monson writes that a fragmented essay "must jump through gaps and continue on, an elision of white space on the page."⁴⁹ Rhythmically, the juxtaposition of fragments forces a reader to omit the white space and pull two disparate fragments together and make meaning of them, invoking a syncopation that layers one fragment on top of another, and in turn creates a literary access point to fragmented and disjointed consciousness that a more linear, narrative approach to the same material could not. "I Have Been Thinking about Snow," is both the impetus for the essay and the guiding principle behind its structure, and the structure itself allows the reader the dual sensation of getting inside the author's mind and of being lost in a snowstorm of sorts that promises

neither escape nor resolution, but only to keep falling.

Breaking the narrative in favor of rhythmically organized fragments is a key element to accessing the emotional truth of both the Imagiste poem and the lyric essay. Speaking of painting, and referring to the larger aesthetic goals of the Imagiste movement across artistic genres, Pound writes, "The organization of forms is a much more energetic and creative action than the copying or imitating of light on a haystack."⁵⁰

The Imagiste is a **language sculptor**, chipping away at all but the essential bits until we're left with a poem like "In a Station of the Metro," where **the absence of language** plays as large a role as **the language itself**.

Likewise, a lyric essayist might say, the organization of fragmented text is a much more energetic and creative action than the recording of chronological events. We see this attention to organization in "A Station of the Metro":

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

with white space marking off the rhythm, each fragment getting its own beat. This attention encourages lingering on individual words and images that might otherwise get glossed over, glommed into the larger image. Similarly, in Eula Biss's "Babylon," a braided lyric essay that compares the ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon to the state of California, the interwoven strands of detail, memory, and history each have a beat of their own, continuing

and changing the rhythm of the essay as it progresses.

The comparison to ancient Babylon gives historical depth and relevance to Biss's discussion of contemporary versions of exile, captivity, and immigration coursing through California today. But the comparison also gives the piece a syncopated rhythm that sets in counterpoise the longer fragments of four, five, or six lines that develop complex ideas and images about the histories, mythologies, and day-to-day realities of both California and Babylon, and one-line aphoristic fragments that resonate like the voice of a narrator, a commentator, or perhaps a preacher, creating a call and repeat between the essay's two rhetorical perspectives.

The constant swing back

and forth between the personal and political, the local and the global, and the emotional and the philosophical allows for a line like "Nonnative plants are sometimes called 'invaders.' Or, if we like them, 'exotics,'"⁵¹ to be simultaneously a straightforward statement about botanical nomenclature and a poignant commentary on the treatment of immigrants in the United States. Likewise, she can tell us, "Palm trees are not native to California. They come from Mexico, from Brazil, from Australia, from Costa Rica, from China, from Africa, from India, from Cuba—from, it seems, everywhere in the world except California,"⁵² and in doing so comment on both the botanical and human realities that makes up the present-day Golden State.

But what is the image Biss is trying to present? We get clues

throughout the essay in words like “homesick,” “exile,” and “stranded,” and fragment introductions like “My first disappointment in California was the park,” “I came to the fantasy of California early,” and, “The iconic Palms that line the streets and boulevards of Southern California are dying of age and disease.” The dissonance between the myth of California and the reality of California pulses through this essay like a steady beat, with riffs and notes about historical Babylon and urban decay and the human process of

stepping on and over one another as we attempt to make homes for ourselves. Reading “Babylon,” one gets the feeling that Biss feels both responsible for and a victim of the social forces that have created the space in which she is trying to make a “home” for herself. “The two great migrations of the twentieth century,” she writes, “the migrations that made the landscape I was born into, were the migration of blacks to the cities and the migration of whites to the suburbs,”⁵³ and it is this landscape that reveals itself at the heart of her

presentation. “Babylon” compares not only the physical landscapes of California and Babylon, but the economic, social, and racial landscapes as well. And like Biss, the reader feels victim of and party to the landscape she describes.

In the same way that Biss derives her musicality largely from the rhythm created by her juxtaposition of fragments and control of pacing, Shields often creates his own sense of “music” by careful and creative selection of material, and through genre-bending experimentation that suggests a privileging of the creative impulse over any dogmatic adherence to “truth” in nonfiction. We’ve already looked at essays where Shields has used “found” prose in the form of advertising copy and quotes from other writers, but in the chapter, “Possible Postcards from Rachel, Abroad,” from *Enough About You*, Shields creates a strikingly personal essay about longing and obsession out of a collection of prose he describes as “complete fiction”⁵⁴ culled from the diary entries of another writer.

The essay began as a collaborative work of fiction between Shields and Samantha Ruckman, titled, “Outside: Postcards from Abroad,” and first appeared in *Web Conjunctions* in 2000. Shields explains that the actual content of the “postcards” came from “diary entries Samantha wrote” that Shields later “reworked” for the book.⁵⁵ And while he did place “Hi David,” at the beginning of the first postcard, and “Love, Rachel,” at the end of the last post card, and while he did cut out one longer fragment from the *Web Conjunctions* version and add in the occasional parenthetical commentary in the flirtatious, teasing voice of Rachel, the text is largely unchanged. However, the similarities between the “complete fiction,” version and the version that appears in *Enough About You* belie the significance of what Shields has done. With an almost hip-hop

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sensibility, Shields has sampled the work of another artist and remixed it, over-laying it with the voice of a gone-but-not-forgotten girlfriend in order to create a completely original, completely personal Imagiste access point for exploring his feelings of longing and nostalgia associated with that old girlfriend who, at least according to the book, still mesmerizes him.

For the *Enough About You* version of "Possible Postcards," Shields adds an epigraph from Ann Carson, in which she discusses the Latin nuances of the word "Eros": "The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting."⁵⁶ This epigraph hints at how to read the following fifteen "Postcards." Shields wants what he cannot have (Rachel), and he must deal with the past they had together, which leads to this experimental speculation about what she might be doing, how she might write to him if they were still in contact.

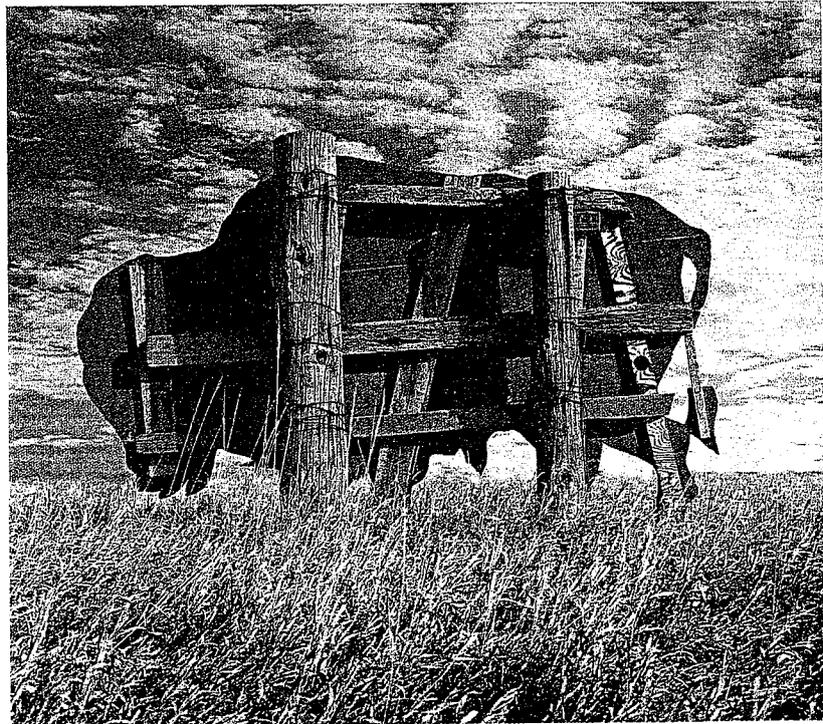
To the fictional letters, Shields has added a series of flirtatious comments that give us a glimpse not only into Shields's perception of Rachel's personality, but also into Shields's own longing. The hypothetical Rachel writes of a strip search in Tel Aviv that involved standing "in my underwear while the inspector checked me out. (Jealous?),"⁵⁷ and she writes of the Hungarian women who "wear such short shorts that there's not much left to the imagination (even your overheated one)."⁵⁸ Her playful tone reveals a level of sexual tension in their relationship that apparently still lingers, at least for Shields.

But Shields's parenthetical inserts get beyond physical longing. Rachel describes her observations of Muslim women and dealing with her own cultural assumptions and then writes "I miss talking to you about stuff

like this."⁵⁹ She writes of taking a job for the International Organization for Migration because "I'll actually be having an effect on people's lives," and then she teases: "I'm sure this seems hopelessly idealistic to you, but the world is a real place, *monsieur*."⁶⁰ These insertions paint Rachel and David's relationship as passionate, playful, friendly, and emotionally deep. Interestingly, some of the interjections Shields puts into Rachel's words sound as if they are coming from Shields himself: "I am chock-full of longing and envy; I'm

sure you can relate," and "Nothing is permanent," and "Um, why didn't you and I ever get married? Because being with each other we scared ourselves." Shields speaks both for himself and for Rachel, simultaneously recreating a past he cannot recover and confessing a present he cannot suppress.

Of course, all of this is extra-textual, what Pound calls "the word beyond formulated language."⁶¹ Throughout the piece, Rachel is the only one with a voice. We must extrapolate Shields's persona from in-



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between the lines, and the result is an Imagiste image of the longing Shields still feels for Rachel.

Like an Imagiste poet, Shields appears to be interested not in following the same familiar melody of the memoir, but rather in charting his own musical course—a melody that dictates the form, rather than the other way around. When Pound wrote, “Behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music,”⁶² he was concerned with writers breaking free from the rigidity of the iambic pentameter. When Shields behaves as a [hip-hop] musician, it’s as if he’s concerned with overcoming the narrative baggage associated with traditional memoir. “Everything I write, I believe instinctively, is to some extent collage,” Shields writes in *Reality Hunger*. “Meaning, ultimately, is a matter of adjacent data.”⁶³ Pound makes a similar point: “The ‘one image poem’ is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another.”⁶⁴ Both Shields and Pound find their meaning in super-position, in the power of adjacent data. Shields’s appropriation of found text and his speculative act of putting words in the mouth of an old girlfriend are more than gimmick, more than ornamentation, they are music—art, not quite for art’s sake, but for the sake of the demonstrating how disparate pieces work together synergistically to orchestrate a whole greater than its parts.

Conclusion

Pound was, perhaps to a fault, dedicated to, obsessed with, and overcome by the power of the image. “It is better to present one image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works,” he wrote in “A Retrospective.”⁶⁵ Few other poets, I think, would make such a claim, though I think I understand the

impulse, for the “image” Pound is referring to is not merely a clever analogy or word play, but a literary attempt to grant a reader access to the interiority of the writer’s consciousness. And bridging the gap between writer and reader is the greatest challenge of any writer of poetry or prose. For Imagiste poets like Pound, and for lyric essayists like Shields, Monson, and Biss, that bridge is built of stripped-down nuggets of memory, emotion, history, and observation. By offering one aphoristic fragment after another, constantly teetering on the edge of epiphany, the lyric essayist brings the reader to the same place that Pound and the Imagistes want to bring them, to the edge of the membrane-thin boundary between the reader’s mind and the writer’s.

In the end, however, the lyric essay is not an Imagiste poem, so the comparisons eventually break down. Essayists like Biss, Shields, and Monson allow themselves room for meditation and reiteration that an Imagiste poem could never allow. In a lyric essay, we get much more than just the primary impression, but every fragment ultimately serves the presentation of that primary impression—what might be called the “heart” of the essay.

Reading an Imagiste poem is like watching the crest of a single wave, while reading a lyric essay is more like fifteen minutes on the beach, a taking in of the rise and fall, the build-up, the swell, but ultimately and always the crest. Pound the poet captured his “metro emotion” with those two superlative lines, but if he had been a lyric essayist, perhaps he would have shown us the mental process that brought him from the station platform in La Concorde to “In a Station of the Metro,” with all the attempts at getting it right, circling and surrounding the moment until he’d produced a formula that not only presented the emotion, but

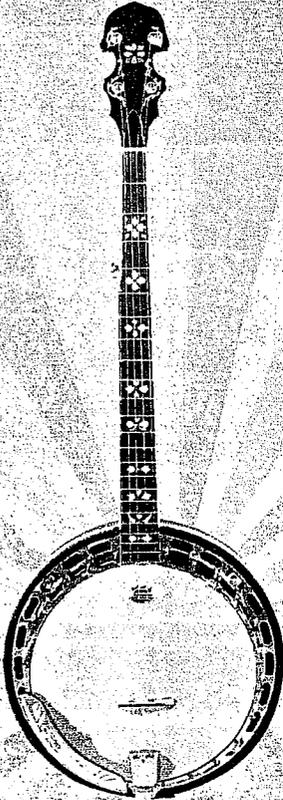
the persona behind the emotion as well. “In the search for ‘sincere self-expression,’” writes Pound, “one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says ‘I am’ this, that, or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing.”⁶⁶ Perhaps, then, ultimately, the most elusive and enticing “image” for any lyric essayist to attempt, is the “Thing” that essayists have been after since Montaigne—the unfettered image of the self. AWP

Joey Franklin’s essays have appeared in the Normal School, Florida Review, American Literary Review, Waccamaw, and elsewhere. He is an assistant professor of English and Creative Writing at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT.

Notes

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3. *Ibid.*, 96.
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11. *Ibid.*, 122.
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13. Ander Monson, *Neck Deep and Other Predicaments* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2007). 29.
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23. Eula Biss. *Notes from No Man's Land* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2009), 203.
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25. Ibid., 11.
26. Ibid., 6.
27. Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 103.
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29. Ibid., 91.
30. Qtd. in Shields, *Reality Hunger*, 131.
31. Ibid., 114.
32. Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 101.
33. Monson, *Neck Deep*, 3.
34. Ibid., 11.
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36. Eula Biss, "The Pain scale," *Seneca Review* 35.1 (2005): 5-25.
37. Ibid., 12.
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42. Ibid., 181.
43. Ibid., 112.
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46. Monson, *Neck Deep*, 13.
47. Ibid., 17.
48. Ander Monson, "Essay as Hack." [Http://otherelectricities.com/swarm/essayashack.html](http://otherelectricities.com/swarm/essayashack.html).
49. Ibid.
50. Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 107.
51. Biss. *Notes from*), 109.
52. Ibid., 110.
53. Ibid. 107.
54. David Shields, in email conversation, 11/18/10
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57. Ibid., 107.
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62. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" and "A Few Don'ts" (1918). <http://poetryfoundation.org>.
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