Reading "The Case Against Babies"

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The essay has long been thought of as an agreeable art form. To speak of a genre's amiability, of course, is to speak only of a tendency. There are all kinds of essays, just as there are all kinds of people. And yet the essay that often gets asked to dance is the essay that *behaves*. Flip through the anthologies, riffle through the syllabi, and you'll see essays that show up shaved, know the dress code, don't raise their voices. On my desk a yellowed etiquette guide, bought chiefly for amusement, advises me to "talk about things which you think will be agreeable to your hearer. Don't dilate on ills, misfortune, or other unpleasantnesses. Too much wit is apt to produce a feeling of mistrust." Oddly, Emily Post's guide to conversation doesn't seem all that different from the essay's long-standing ideas of decorum. Listen to Virginia Woolf as she pauses to regret the civilized tone of her early essays: "I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their side-long approach on my tea-table training: I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream or sugar?" ("A Sketch of the Past"). If Woolf was guilty of masking her anger, if Woolf was conciliatory when she might have been provocative, well, she knew her essayistic forebears—Montaigne and Addison, Lamb and Hazlitt—who understood civility as the essay's aim: to flatter, to amuse, to offer a tour of the genial, skeptical mind as it trips lightly over small subjects. What is the essay anyway? Not a meal but a snack; not an errand but a ramble; not a voyage on a whale-infested sea, but a wander around the grounds to see the koi pond. Big heart, small stakes. A pretty conversation to fill an idle hour—though gaze long enough into the pond's algae-clad surface, and you might glimpse a koi tearing its small fry's throat.

In 2002 Joy Williams published a book of essays under the title *Ill Nature: Rants and Reflections on Humanity and Other Animals*. Several of these essays had been published in magazines, to the joy of literati and to the annoyance of subscribers who strenuously objected to the essays' unfriendly, even unseemly, tone. "Save the Whales, Screw the Shrimp" originally ran in the magazine of the *Orlando Sentinel*. One reader objected to its obscene headline: "How disappointing to have the challenging essay of Joy Williams in the July 16 issue of Florida magazine given a crude and vulgar heading."

Williams's vocabulary, belligerently lowbrow, violated the contract of civility. And that was the least of her offenses. Williams also wrote in a frankly accusatory tone. If Virginia Woolf is part of the tradition of *belles lettres*, Joy Williams is part of the tradition *lettres laides*, a contemporary strain of writing in which the essayist admits, frankly, that she can no longer abide us. And while we're sketching Williams into her tradition, pinning her felt figure to the bulletin board of essayistic tradition, it may please us to remember that Michel de Montaigne, the original affable essayist, thought of his essays as letters to a friend. Joy Williams's essays are less like letters and more like flaming e-mails she wrote late at night, and then hit "send."

The book's title—*Ill Nature*—nods at Williams's bad temper, but the subject of the essays is the natural world and how humans have connived to make *it* sick, abusing animals, ruining habitats, wreaking havoc on the water supply. Reassess your culture and its agendas, Williams says, and it's partly the way she says it that raises hackles. So much of an essayist's efforts—in the wider, more conventionally practiced tradition—comes from the effort to practice a balanced, reasonable, even-minded voice. Did you consider both sides of the argument? Good. Now find the *third* side. Michael Pollan, for example, has been hacking his way through the overgrown thicket of culture and nature for years, and though his conclusions point to a need for cultural reform, most readers find his essays "fair-minded," "charming," "entertaining," "a wonderful, life-changing experience." *Ill Nature*, in contrast, is unwonderful: one-sided, implacable, relentless, and hilarious—but its wit "produces mistrust" (that's our host, Ms. Post) because the jokes are all at your expense. Tea will *not* be served, and don't even think about being offered a bun. Joy Williams thinks you've eaten enough already.

"The Case Against Babies," which first appeared in *Granta* magazine in 1996—not under the editorial header "Non-Fiction" but under the header "Hating"—provides us with a neat little study in ethos. It argues that overpopulation poses the greatest threat to all life on earth. Why

then do we fetishize babies, encourage women to seek personal fulfillment through motherhood, and ignore the ways we despoil the planet of its vital resources? Because we are selfish, immature, and prefer to play God than to wrestle with larger spiritual questions whose answers might not place us at the world's center. That's Williams's argument in a nutshell, and assume that the nut fell not too far from a tree in a forest that is being stripped and burned, or logged to destruction. The planet is in trouble, Williams says. "Yet we burble along, procreating, and in the process suffocating thousands of other species with our selfishness."[1] Williams indicts us for our childishness—did you catch that babyish verb, "burbled"?—and warns that we had better grow up before the planet dies down (105).

Let's begin with the essay's opening sentence: "Babies, babies, babies" (90). If you recall what your eighth-grade teacher said about grammar—sentence equals subject plus verb—you will note right away that this *isn't* a sentence; its predicate has gone missing. An apt way to begin: grammatical imbalance mirrors ecological imbalance. Williams is fed up enough to fragment, and fragments are just the beginning; she breaks many rules here about "fine writing." The well-tempered essayist, for example, is not supposed to use italics for emphasis; italics are a tool for the crude, for people who can't shape their sentences so that emphasis falls naturally where it should, who instead of wielding syntax have to resort to *fancy fonts* and underlines. Italics are the mark of the *crazy person!* As poor a choice, rhetorically, as using too many exclamation points for an exclamation, or, worse, for a sentence that technically is not an exclamation at all!!! And the funny thing is—I'm sorry, I don't know how to say this politely—in "The Case Against Babies," it's *your* words she's italicizing. Joy Williams narrates, but she is trying to make a portrait of you, trying to capture how the American psyche (if there is such a monolithic thing) thinks about children. And so her sentences

1 Joy Williams, "The Case Against Babies." *Ill Nature: Rants and Reflections on Humanity and Other Animals* (New York: Lyons, 2001), 93–105. Subsequent references to the essay appear in parentheses throughout the text.

imperceptibly slide in and out of *your* idiom, glide from her voice to the American voice and back again without perceptible transitions. Just in case the technique is too subtle, she uses *italics* and "scare quotes" to mark out your idiotic habits of thought:

> Some would have it that not having a baby is *disallowing* a human life, horribly inappropriate in this world of rights. Everyone has rights; the unborn have rights; it follows that the *unconceived* have rights. (102)

> ... women think of themselves as being *successful, personally fulfilled* when they have a baby.... Having a baby means *individual completion* for a woman.... (94)

> Other species can "strain their environments" or "overrun their range" or clash with their human "neighbours".... (93)

Emphasizing keywords isn't an argument, you might note; it's just a time-honored, down-and-dirty way of condemning a thing by mentioning it. I quote your language in a withering tone; you hear how stupid it sounds. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't; at any rate, we're not going to clog up the essay with tedious claims and counter-arguments. Elsewhere Williams mocks your world-view through syntax whose simplicity recalls Mother Goose rhymes: "What do boys have to do to be men?" she writes. "Sleep with a woman. Kill something" (94). By this point in the essay, the reader may be thinking, who does Joy Williams think she is? (Irrelevant question. Next!) No, really—it's a credibility question. Does *she* have babies? I don't know. Joy Williams doesn't want you to know. She deliberately leaves herself out of it. Readers may try to uncover her "biography," because we like to know the details of our favorite writers (it makes them more cuddly), or because we suspect a writer's personal conduct could be used to dismiss her larger claims. Below, for example, a reader of *Florida Magazine* sleuths from Williams's contributor note:

> I noted with interest her "home"—Key West. This is as far away from the rest of the United States as one can get without living in Hawaii or Alaska. Evidently she believes in fleeing from the problems, rather than living in a community which must deal with them on a nationwide basis.

But I'm not so sure what we know about Williams. The only time "The Case Against Babies" uses autobiographical information is when Williams mentions a fleeting encounter in a restaurant:

> I once prevented a waitress from taking away my martini glass which had a tiny bit of martini remaining in it, and she snarled, *Oh, the precious liquid*, before slamming it back down on the table. It's true that I probably imagined that there was more martini in the glass than there actually was (what on earth could have happened to it all?) but the precious liquid remark brings unpleasantly to mind the reverent regard in which so many people hold themselves. (98)

This figures Williams as selfish, hoarding, but only in a small way, and the anecdote is shorn of any context (who, if anyone, she was drinking with, why she wanted that drink, what kind of day she'd had at the office, blah blah blah etc.), such that the martini serves a purely rhetorical function: it gives her some fresh bitter language to talk about *you* again, specifically your cultural anxiety that men's sperm count may be going down. Note how swiftly the concern about men's health is dismissed; rhetorically it's reassigned to the drunken discourse of a barfly. "Those eggs, that sperm, oh precious, precious stuff!" But we were talking about Williams, right? The Williams who has zero interest in folding her psyche into the batter of this larger cultural dilemma. Therefore we get no stories of how she came to realize we were screwing over the planet, no humanizing admissions of guilt (I use paper towels; I eat feedlot meat), no flattering

keyhole revelations as we overhear an "I" thinking to herself. If Williams struggles with the ethical issues her essay explores, those struggles are in cold storage. This is another way in which Williams departs from the friendly tradition of the personal essay. In his critical introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate writes:

> The enemy of the personal essay is self-righteousness, not just because it is tiresome and ugly in itself, but because it slows down the dialectic of self-questioning, what [E.M.] Cioran calls "thinking against oneself." Of course, personal essayists may write from powerful moral or political conviction, so long as they are willing to render a frank, shaded account of their own feelings.[2]

Williams is *un*willing. She doesn't want to do "feelings," let alone a frank, shaded account of them. The idea that, emotionally, an essayist may dawdle and dangle and hem and haw, but ultimately must pay up—as if the reader were some foot-tapping waiter who had indulged the customer all night and now slaps the bill on the table—stems from the mainstream tradition—not the tea-table essay I spoke of earlier, but a more overwrought, confessional variety of essay that simulates the probing, late-night conversation between two intimates. "The Case Against Babies" isn't attending the tea party or the tête-à-tête. It really, really, really doesn't want to be personal. I wonder if that's why the essayist's spiritual longing, which seems to pass through the essay like a current, is never stated explicitly. Williams's preoccupation with God only comes on side-long when, for instance, she remarks parenthetically, and again, not necessarily in *her* voice, "It's sort of cute to hear God invoked, sort of for luck, or out of a lingering folksy superstition" (99). Or when she rails against an idiotic remark, simply by echoing it in capital letters: "And many women at the multiple-possibility point, after having gone through pretty much all the meddling and hubris that biomedical technology has come up with, say demurely, *I don't want to play God*

2 Phillip Lopate, ed., *The Art of the Personal Essay* (New York: Anchor, 1994), xxx.

(I DON'T WANT TO PLAY GOD?)...." (101). Too late, perhaps; these women are already playing God. Williams wants you to feel not only the hubris of the noun ("God"), but the menace of the verb ("play"): why are they playing when the planet is going to hell?

Sometimes Williams's relentless scorching vision—her steady refusal to settle down and be just, you know, one of the girls—calls to mind the Greek Furies, those avenging goddesses of darkness who, blood dripping from their eyes and snakes writhing in their hair, fly at you shrieking. That comparison's a little over-the-top, you might say, a little misogynistic even (wait, *who* wrote this essay?). Then again, the Furies weren't bad gals. They sprang from Gaia, the original Earth Mother, and were guardians of the law when the state failed to intervene, when the crime was a crime of ethics. They protected beggars and strangers; they punished those who stole the birds' young; they looked out for dogs. Sure, they never stopped hounding people, even when their victims went crazy. But their vicious bite was the bite of conscience. Like Joy Williams, they had strong teeth.

The art of the toothless essay often depends on the digression—a structural move that gives the reader the sense that the essayist is not so anxious to get her message across that she won't go off on amusing little tangents. You can *relax*; we're all friends; there's room for an aside. Williams and you *aren't* friends, but even so, she remarks, "Now it is *absolutely* necessary to digress for a moment" and tell you about the Cabbage Patch Children, those "fatuous-faced soft-sculpture dolls [that] were immensely popular in the eighties" (96). The Cabbage Patch Dolls smell like tangent, but prove to be main course. Just as the Cabbage Patch Dolls were marketed to children as the must-have toy, babies are being marketed to us as the locus of all hopes and dreams, as the accessory that no grown-up can do without. Williams mocks America's love affair with technology ("Assisted reproduction is cool") and positions the fertility clinic as one big monster toy, but at the essay's end she returns the reader to the child position so that our babies are figured themselves as toys, used to distract us from the mess our species made in the other room (105). Running up to her rant's conclusion, Williams sums up the problem with a narrative tableau in which an unexpected visitor comes to "the Door of our Home." The full text is quoted below, but before I unleash the hounds, it's worth noting that Death is not, in Williams's vision, a hair-raising Grim Reaper, but a gardener—and if you find his little black seeds "creepy," that's *your* problem. Why are we so frightened? If we could reckon with our own deaths, might we not now face a planetary crisis? Well, our disappointment stems from our expectation that the Door of our Home would swing open to "a friend." How strong the longing—in life and in literature—for an agreeable, easy, pleasant, well-mannered conversation! Here is Joy Williams, right before she slams the door of her highly unpleasant essay:

> It's as though, all together, in the waning years of this dying century, we collectively opened the Door of our Home and instead of seeing *a friend* standing there in some sweet spring twilight, someone we had invited over for *drinks and dinner and a lovely civilized chat*, there was Death, with those creepy little black seeds of his for planting in the garden. And along with Death we got a glimpse of ecological collapse and the coming anarchy of an over-peopled planet. And we all, in denial of this unwelcome vision, decided to slam the door and *retreat to our toys and make babies*—those heirs, those hopes, those products of our species' selfishness, sentimentality and global death wish. (105)

The italics are mine, but the toys, I think, are yours.