

Reality Hunger: A Manifesto

Stuttering has had a profound influence on my aesthetic: a craving for articulation, conversation, and connection. It's created in me a yearning not only for communication but "seriousness" and "meaning." What follows is thus both manifesto and self-portrait — meant to be descriptive of myself more than it is prescriptive for anyone else. I'm not a critic or scholar; I'm just trying to stay alive as a writer.

A couple of years ago, a vituperative, rearguard review of my work ("Shields has betrayed the novel form," etc.) caused me to ask myself what is the literary tradition out of which I'm working? My answer: the form that releases my best intelligence — not the novel but the lyric essay. What the lyric essay gives you is the freedom to emphasize its aboutness, its metaphysical meaningfulness (attempt at metaphysical meaningfulness). There's plenty of drama, but it's subservient to the larger drama of mind. The motor of the novel is story; the motor of the essay is thought.

In the mid-1990s, after three works of fiction (two novels and a novel-in-stories), I thought I was working on my fourth novel, but the novel collapsed — I simply could not commit the requisite resources to plot and character — and out of that emerged my first work of "nonfiction," *Remote: Reflections on Life in the Shadow of Celebrity*.

While I was working on *Remote*, I was influenced and inspired by Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, George W. S. Trow's *Within the Context of No Context*, Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*, Errol Morris's *Vernon, Florida*, Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*, Sandra Bernhard's *Without You I'm Nothing*, Denis Leary's *No Cure for Cancer*, Rick Reynolds's *Only the Truth Is Funny*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and Anne Carson's *Plainwater*. What was it about these work I liked and like so much? The confusion between field report and self-portrait; the confusion between fiction and nonfiction; the author-narrators' use of themselves as personae, as representatives of feeling-states; the anti-linearity; the simultaneous bypassing and stalking of artifice-making machinery; the absolute seriousness, phrased as comedy; the violent torque of their beautifully idiosyncratic voices.

David Foster Wallace has said, "There's this existential loneliness in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you, and you don't know what it is like inside me. In fiction, I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way, even though the idea of mental or emotional intimacy with a character is a delusion or a contrivance that's set up through art by the writer. It doesn't happen all the time, it's there only in brief flashes or flames, but I feel unalone (somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do) and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction in a way that I'm not with other art." Wallace's description of the problem seems to me to be right, but I think his solution is faulty. After acknowledging the delusion and contrivance of fictional characterization, he still wants to persist in it; I want to eliminate that gap and thereby achieve as deep an intimacy between writer and reader as possible, making the conversation that much more significant, unnerving, loneliness-shattering.

Zola said that every artist is more or less a realist, according to his own eyes. To Whitman, the true poem was the daily paper. Georges Braque's stated goal was to get as close as he could to reality. Every artistic moment from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art. I and like-minded writers and other artists want the veil of "let's pretend" out. I don't like to be carried into purely fanciful circumstances. The never-never lands of the imagination don't interest me that much. Beckett decided that everything was false to him, almost, in art, with its designs and formulae. He wanted art, but he wanted it right from life. He didn't like, finally, that Joycean voice that was too abundant, too Irish, endlessly lyrical, endlessly allusive. He went into French to cut down. He wanted to directly address desperate individual existence, which bores many readers. I find him a joyous writer, though; his work reads like prayer. You don't have to think about literary allusions, but your experience itself. That's what I want from the voice. I want it to transcend artifice.

Which isn't to say that all literary works don't contain a considerable degree of artifice, of fiction. In Thucydides' foreword to *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, he acknowledges making up generals' speeches since he wasn't present at the events. In Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, dialogue from fifty years earlier is reproduced at

considerable length. In *Confessions of an Opium-Eater*, Thomas De Quincey claims to have recovered from his addiction (which wasn't remotely true; he remained an opium addict for decades afterward). George Orwell's classmates questioned many of the details of his long essay "Such, Such Were the Joys." James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* was used as a paper tiger to once again misposition memoir as failed journalism.

It's a category mistake to think of memoir as belonging to journalism; it belongs to literature. When a lyric poet uses, characteristically, the first-person voice, we don't say accusingly, "But did this really happen the way you say it did?" We accept the honest and probably inevitable mixture of mind and spirit. I think the reason we don't interrogate poetry as we do memoir is that we have a long and sophisticated history of how to read the poetic voice. We accept that its task is to find emotional truth within experience, so we aren't all worked up about the literal. We don't yet have that history or tradition with the memoir. We persist in seeing the genre as a summing up of life, even though that's not typically how the genre is used in the great rash of memoirs that have been published in the past twenty years or so. When we house memoir under the umbrella of nonfiction, we take the word "nonfiction" very seriously. We act astonished, even dismayed when we find out the memoiristic voice is doing something other than putting down facts. We know that memoirists reimagine the past, but we're constantly struggling with this inevitability as if with the transgressions of a recidivist pedophile. I think we need to see the genre in poetic terms. The memoir rightly belongs to the imaginative world, and I think once writers and readers make their peace with this fact, there will be less argument over the ethical question about the memoir's relation to the "facts" and "truth."

My picturing will, by definition, distort its subject; it's a record and embodiment of a process of knowing; it's about the making of knowledge, which is a much larger and more unstable thing than the marshalling of facts. What I want to do is take the banality of the form (the literalness of "facts," "truth," "reality"), turn it inside out, and make it a staging area for the investigation of any claim of facts and truth — an extremely rich theater for investigating the most serious epistemological questions, starting and perhaps concluding with confusion as to where the proscenium starts and stops.

I want to assert the importance of positioning the writer and

reader in an unstable position in relation to each other and to the text, as, say, W. G. Sebald does in *The Rings of Saturn*. Every work should find its own form; how many, though, really do? It's crucial, in my formulation, that both the writer and reader not be certain what the form is, that the work be allowed to go wherever it needs to go to penetrate its subject. My recent misreading of David Remnick's profile of Bill Clinton in the *New Yorker* as the first page of Miranda July's short story was more interesting to me than the story itself; the excitement last summer of the Lonelygirl15 phenomenon resided entirely during the period when you couldn't tell what it or she was.

When writing "A Brief Survey of Ideal Desire" (from *Handbook for Drowning: A Novel in Stories*), I had the sudden intuition that I could take various fragments of things — aborted stories, outtakes from novels, journal entries, lit crit — and build a story out of them. I really had no idea what the story would be about; I just knew I needed to see what it would look like to set certain shards in juxtaposition with other shards. All literary possibilities opened up for me with this story/essay. The way my mind thinks — everything is connected to everything else — suddenly seemed transportable into my writing. I could play all the roles I want to play (reporter, fantasist, autobiographer, essayist, critic). I could call on my strengths (meditation and analysis), hide my weaknesses (plot and plot), be as smart on the page as I wanted to be. I'd found a way to write that seemed true to how I am in the world.

Novel qua novel is a form of nostalgia. Jazz as jazz — jazzy jazz — is pretty well finished. The interesting stuff is all happening on the fringes of the form where there are elements of jazz and elements of all sorts of other things as well. Jazz is a trace, but it's not a defining trace. Something similar is happening in writing. Although great novels — novelly novels — are still being written, a lot of the most interesting things are happening on the fringes of several forms. I write stuff from life, but all the art is in that inch; tell all the Truth but tell it slant.

Genre is a minimum-security prison. All great works found a genre or dissolve one. E.g., Brian Fawcett's *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow*, V. S. Naipaul's *A Way in the World*, Eduardo Galeano's *The Book of Embraces*, Joe Wenderoth's *Letters to Wendy's*, Edmund Carpenter's *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!*, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

If plot-based fiction seems suspect, straightforward memoir strikes me as equally problematic. Memory is a dream-machine, a de facto fiction-making operation. The essay consists of double translation: memory translates experience; essay translates memory.

We want work to be equal to the complexity of experience, memory, and thought, not flattening it out with either linear narrative (traditional novel) or smooth recount (standard memoir).

We have no memories from our childhood, only memories that pertain to our childhood. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Nabokov's *Invitation of a Memory*, Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* foreground these issues by emphasizing the flawed processes of recollection of their narrators. Especially, though, cf. Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*: a naively straightforward recounting of childhood — dialogue recalled verbatim from thirty years earlier (ironic, since the book is about a pathological liar) — and Geoffrey Wolff's *The Duke of Deception* — a multivalent, self-contradictory recount of somewhat the same childhood.

The world exists. Why re-create it? I want to think about it, try to understand it. What I am is a wisdom junkie, knowing all along that wisdom is, in many ways, junk. I want a literature built entirely out of contemplation and revelation. Nonfiction is a framing device to foreground contemplation. Fiction is "Once upon a time." Essay is "I have an idea." I don't seek to narrate time but to investigate existence. Time must die.

A work of literature should allow you to escape existence or endure it. I want work that not only allows you to endure it but shows you how it got there. Serious plumbing of consciousness, not flashing of narrative legerdemain, helps us understand another human being. The former is boring in a good sense; the latter is boring in a bad sense. Not "the world is boring; I want to escape it" but "the world is interesting; I want to investigate it." I have a strong reality gene. I don't have a huge pyrotechnic imagination that luxuriates in other worlds. People will say, "It was so fascinating to read this novel that took place in Greenland. I just loved living inside another world for two weeks." That doesn't, I must say, interest me that much.

The essential tension of serious essay is the ambivalence of the author-narrator toward a given subject — for me, a more compel-

ling way to talk about being alive than through the surrogate selves of fiction. There's often something terribly contrived about the standard novel; you can always feel the wheels grinding and going on. My medium is prose, not the novel.

Great art is clear thinking about mixed feelings.

Whether we're young, or we're all grown up and just starting out, or we're getting old and getting so old there's not much time left, we're looking for company, and we're looking for understanding: someone who reminds us that we're not alone, and someone who wonders out loud about things that happen in this life, the way we do when we're walking or sitting or driving, and thinking things over. The play *Hamlet* is, more than anything else, the person Hamlet talking about a multitude of different topics. I find myself wanting to ditch the tired old plot altogether and just harness the voice, which is a processing machine, taking input and spitting out perspective — a lens, a distortion effect. Hamlet's very nearly final words are "Had I but the time. . . O, I could tell you." He would keep riffing forever if it weren't for the fact that the plot needs to kill him. The real story isn't in the drama of what happens; it's what we're thinking about while nothing, or very little, is happening. The singular obsessions, endlessly revised. The sound of one hand clapping. The sound of a person sitting alone in the dark, thinking. Michel de Montaigne wore a pewter medallion inscribed with the words "What do I know?" — thereby forming and back forming a tradition. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*. St. Augustine, *Confessions*. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. Rousseau, *Confessions*. Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*.

A related lineage is the secular version of the Jewish exegetical tradition: Marx, Proust, Freud, Wittgenstein, Einstein. Some contemporary manifestations of Jewish exegesis are Harold Brodkey's "The Last Word on Winchell," Phillip Lopate's introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*; Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, Leonard Michaels's "Journal" from *Shuffle*, Bernard Cooper's *Maps to Anywhere*, Melanie Thernstrom's *The Dead Girl*, Wallace Shawn, *My Dinner with André*, Jonathan Safran Foer's "Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease."

The poem and the essay are more intimately related than any two genres, because they're both ways of pursuing problems, or maybe trying to solve problems. E.g., John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, Kurt Vonnegut's prologue to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Philip Larkin's

High Windows, Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*. Maybe these works succeed, maybe they fail, but at least what they all do is clarify (attempt to clarify) the problem at hand. One could say that fiction, indirectly, is a pursuit of knowledge, but the essay and the poem more directly and more urgently attempt to figure something out about the world. Which is why I can't read novels anymore, with very few exceptions, the exceptions being those novels so meditative they're barely disguised essays: J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Michel Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles*, Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story*.

Only the suspect artist starts from art; the true artist draws his material elsewhere: from himself. There's only one thing worse than boredom, and that's the fear of boredom. And it's this fear I experience each time I open a novel. I have no use for the hero's life, don't attend to it, don't believe in it. The genre, having squandered its substance, no longer has an object. The character is dying out; the plot, too. Maybe that's why the novels that interest me most as novels are precisely those in which, once the universe is disbanded, nothing happens: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, Thomas Bernhard's *Correction*, Camus's *The Fall*, Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*, Barry Hannah's *Boomerang*. The lyric essay is the literary form that gives the writer the best opportunity for rigorous investigation, because its theater is the world (the mind contemplating the world) and offers no consoling dreamworld, no exit door. The most intellectually, emotionally, and artistically exciting books among the following writers are — for me — their most essayistic works: David Foster Wallace's essays more than his novels or stories, Hawthorne's "Custom-House" more than *The Scarlet Letter*, Jonathan Lethem's *The Disappointment Artist* more than his novels, Richard Stern's "orderly miscellanies" (*One Person and Another*, *What Is What Was*, *The Position of the Body*) more than his novels.

I want the critical intelligence in the imaginative position: Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet*, Nicholson Baker's *U & I*, Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage*, Terry Castle's "My Heroin Christmas," Gornick's *The End of the Novel of Love*, Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat*, Jorge Luis Borges's *Other Inquisitions*, Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Autobiographical biography-biographical autobiog-

raphy, such as William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Nabokov's *Gogol*, Beckett's *Proust*. Oral biography, such as James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Jean Stein's *Edie*. Life isn't about saying the right thing, and it's certainly not about tape-recording everything so you have to endure it more than once. Life is about failing. It's about letting the tape play: E. M. Forster's *Commonplace Book* (more compelling to me than his novels), Alan Bennett's *Writing Home*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* (his most intellectually substantial book), John Cheever's posthumously published journals (his best book, by far), Edward Hoagland's diaries, Chekhov's diaries, Kafka's *Letter to My Father*.

To think with any seriousness — as all these books manifestly do — is to doubt. That is to say, thought is synonymous with doubt. To be alive is to be uncertain. I'll take doubt. A conversational dynamic is built into the essay form: the writer argues with himself; the writer argues with the reader. The essay enacts doubt; it embodies it as a genre. The very purpose of the genre is to provide a vehicle for essaying. The definition of "essay" is "trial," "experiment," "attempt." It must go further still: that soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp. Which could and should serve as the epigraph to all of Nietzsche; all of E. M. Cioran; Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, Grégoire Bouiller's *The Mystery Guest*. I bear in my hands the disguise by which I conceal my life. A web of meaningless events, I dye it with the magic of my point of view.

First person is where you can be more interesting; you don't have to be much but a stumbling fool. The wisdom there is more precious than in the sage overview, which in many writers makes me nearly puke. In the end one experiences only oneself. I want to use self as locus and divining rod. But not self per se; I'm interested in self as theme-carrier, as host. When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse — it does not mean — me — but a supposed person. See, for example, Larry David's "Curb Your Enthusiasm," Chris Rock's "Bring the Pain," and Sarah Silverman's "Jesus Is Magic."

A novelist-friend, who can't not write fiction but is flummoxed whenever he tries to write nonfiction directly about his own experience, said he was impressed (alarmed?) by my willingness to say nearly anything about myself: "It's all about you and yet somehow it's not about you at all. How can that be?" Autobiography can be

naively understood as pure self-revelation or more cannily recognized as cleverly wrought subterfuge. One is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish. We all contain within ourselves the entire human condition. We learn that in going down into the secrets of our own minds we have descended into the secrets of all minds. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. For instance, Alphonse Daudet's *In the Land of Pain* and Michel Leiris's *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*.

No more masters, no more masterpieces. What I want (instead of God the novelist) is self-portrait in a convex mirror. *Reality Hunger* features extensive quotations without quotation-marks. Most readers will know only some of the quotations, recognize that a lot of paragraphs are quotations without being able to place them (as when the "I" has a recognizably different biography from my own, or the phrasing is in the language of another century), and come to regard the first-person singular whenever they meet it as a floating, umbrella self, sheltering simultaneously one voice (my own) and multiple voices. The possibility arises that every word in the book might be quotation and not "original" to me. My goal: continuous uncertainty, ambiguity — trying to get the reader to feel on his own pulse the dubiety of the first-person pronoun. It's me (you thought it was); no it's not, it's Leiris; no, in an important sense, it's neither of us. It's all of us. Some models for me of the floating, quote-crazy, umbrella self: Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*, David Markson's *Reader's Block*, *Vanishing Point*, *This Is Not a Novel*, and Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip*.

The mimetic function is replaced by manipulation of the original: stealing but making a point of stealing — conscious, self-conscious, conspicuous appropriation. Art is a conversation between and among artists; it's not a patent office. The citation of sources belongs to the realms of journalism and scholarship, not art. Reality can't be copyrighted. Part of what you enjoy in a documentary technique is the sense of banditry. To loot someone else's life or sentences and make off with a point of view, which is called "objective" because you can make anything into an object by treating it this way, is exciting and dangerous. Let us see who controls the danger.

When the mimetic function is replaced by manipulation of the original, we've arrived at collage. The very nature of collage demands fragmented materials, or at least materials yanked out of context. Collage is, in a way, only an accentuated act of editing: picking through options and presenting a new arrangement (albeit one that, due to its variegated source-material, can't be edited into the smooth, traditional whole that a work of complete fiction could be). The act of editing may be the key postmodern artistic instrument.

As a work gets more autobiographical, more intimate, more confessional, more embarrassing, it breaks into fragments. Our lives aren't prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, "reality"-based art — unprocessed, uncut, underproduced — splinters and explodes.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Ghosts in the Mirror*, which he calls a "romanesque," is a quasimemoir with philosophical reflections, intimate flashes, and personal addresses to the reader. The problem of scale is interesting. How long will the reader stay engaged? I don't mean stay dutifully but stay charmed, seduced, and beguiled. About this length, I think. In his case, 174 pages.

Deborah Eisenberg says, "The task is not primarily to have a story, but to penetrate the story, to discard the elements of it that are merely shell, or husk, that give apparent form to the story, but actually obscure the essence. In other words, the problem is to transcend the givens of a narrative." She makes the same mistake Wallace does; if she sees story as artistically unnecessary, why does she want to retain it? Making up a story or characters feels, to me, like driving a car in a clown suit.

As a moon rocket ascends, each successive stage of the engine does what it must to accelerate the capsule. Stage after stage is exhausted and jettisoned, until only the capsule is left with the astronauts on its way to the moon. In linear fiction, the whole structure is accelerating toward the epiphanic moment, and certainly the parts are necessary for the final experience, but I still feel that the writer and reader can jettison the pages leading to the epiphany. They serve a purpose and then fall into the Pacific Ocean, so I'm left with Gabriel Conroy and his falling faintly, faintly falling, and I'm heading to the moon in the capsule, but the rest of the story has fallen away. In collage, every fragment is a capsule: I'm on my way to the moon on every page.

When plot shapes a narrative, it's like knitting a scarf: you have this long piece of string and many choices about how to knit, but we understand a sequence is involved, a beginning and an end, with one part of the weave very logically and sequentially connected to the next. You can figure out where the beginning is and where the last stitch is cast off. Webs look orderly, too, but unless you watch the spider weaving, you'll never know where it started. It could be attached to branches or table legs or eaves in six or eight places. You won't know the sequence in which the different cells were spun and attached to each other. You have to decide for yourself how to read its patterning, but if you pluck it at any point, the entire web will vibrate.

Collage is not a refuge for the compositionally disabled; it's an evolution beyond narrative. The novel is dead. Long live the anti-novel, built from scraps. Absence of plot gives the reader the chance to think about something other than turning pages. What in the traditional novel is plot in collage is supplanted by idea. In collage, we read for penetration of the material rather than elaboration of story.

I'm not drawn to literature because I love stories per se. I find nearly all the moves the traditional novel makes unbelievably predictable, tired, contrived, and essentially purposeless. I can never remember characters' names, plot developments, lines of dialogue, details of setting. It's not clear to me what such narratives are supposedly revealing about the human condition. I'm drawn instead to literature as a form of thinking, consciousness, knowing. I like work that's focused page by page, line by line, on what the writer really cares about rather than hoping that what the writer cares about will somehow mysteriously creep through the cracks of narrative, which is the way I experience most stories and novels. Collage-works are nearly always "about what they're about" — which may sound a tad tautological — but when I read a book that I really love, I experience the excitement that in every paragraph the writer is manifestly exploring his subject. Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*, and Sven Lindqvist's *A History of Bombing* are four collage-books that have had a particularly strong influence on me. These fragments I have shored against my ruins. A great painting comes together, just barely.

Collage implies brevity. You don't need a story. The question is

how long you don't need a story. Omission is a form of creation. The line of beauty is the line of perfect economy.

Cut to the chase. Don't waste time. Get to the real thing. (Sure, what's "real"? Still, try to get to it.) My ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a whole book — what everyone else does not say in a book. I remember in grad school telling my girlfriend that I wanted to forge a form that would house only epiphanies — such presumption — but now, twenty-five years later, I feel as if I've stumbled into something approximating that. I want the overt meditation that yields (at least an attempt at) understanding, as opposed to a lengthy narrative that yields — what? — I suppose a sort of extended readerly interest in what happens next.

When I was seventeen, I wanted a life consecrated to art. I imagined a wholly committed art-life: every gesture would be an aesthetic expression or response. That got old fast, because, unfortunately, life is filled with allergies, credit-card bills, tedious commutes, etcetera. Life is, in large part, rubbish. The beauty of "reality"-based art — art underwritten by "reality"-hunger — is that it's perfectly situated between life itself and (unattainable) "life as art." Everything in life, turned sideways, can look like — can be — art. Art suddenly looks and is more interesting, and life, astonishingly enough, starts to be livable.