

Readerly Writing by Tom La Farge

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Fiction in the United States has had such success that it's in crisis: it has become a normal art. Publishers do well off it, writers build careers on it, and any number of programs teach eager students how to handle metaphors and editors, how to build a character and a résumé, how to craft a sentence or a sex scene. The work being produced within this thriving market conforms to a paradigm very broadly held within the "fiction community" and which governs the practice of most current writers.¹ That practice has become so highly refined that reading contemporary US fiction is like listening to the music of the *bal musette*. You're struck by the charm of the lyrics and the brilliant musicianship, yet after a certain point you can't help wondering how so much energy and skill came to be locked up in the playing of waltzes on an accordion.

And yet this paradigm, narrow as it is, so dominates the field that writers wishing to play a different instrument cannot find a publisher able to pay them for their work or publish more than a few thousand copies of their books. The acquisition, over the last thirty years, of all the major publishing houses by large conglomerates is old news now. Where editors once answered to publishers with something of a vision and could therefore take risks in the authors they chose, they now must show a profit. Further, because of a change in the tax laws, bookstores can no longer afford to keep books on the shelf for long and accordingly return unsold copies to the publisher with great promptness. The result, of course, is that publishers favor authors whose work sells quickly, and the work that sells quickly is what the reader can easily recognize.

Difficult work, adventurous work, work that experiments with form, that uses dense or difficult language, requires to be absorbed slowly. How long did Joyce take to escape the ghetto of the avant-garde? Such work does not find much place in the current market.

While there is an alternative to the commercial publishers in the independent literary presses (New Directions, Sun & Moon, Dalkey Archive, McPherson, FC2/Black Ice, Station Hill, Overlook, Ecco, Coffee House, Serpent's Tail, City Lights, Black Sparrow) that are willing to take on unconventional books and keep them in print, few of these can arrange national distribution and reviews, and most are struggling to survive. Publishing with them brings the writer some prestige but little or no money. University presses, while publishing more contemporary fiction than in the past, have pulled away from any work that deviates from the norm. A fiction writer who wishes her work to be read, who dreams of being paid for it, must go to the commercial houses and must write the sort of fiction which they will consent to publish.

In the bookstores this work is usually shelved under "Fiction," sometimes under "Literature," together with Cervantes, Heliodorus, Can Xue, Lucian, Zamyatin, Sei Shonagon, Tutuola, Rabelais, Walser, Leskov, Borges, and Sterne, as if contemporary US fiction entered fully into the polymorphous, all-engulfing field of voices that Bakhtin describes. Elsewhere, nearer the cash registers, there are other shelves for what "serious writers" dismiss as "genre fiction," and yet "serious fiction" has become so strictly circumscribed that it is now as formulaic as any locked-room mystery. It is easy to blame the publishers for this, but the writers themselves are implicated. My purpose here is to show how this happens, next to describe the genre of "normal art" and the kind of writing it uses, which I call "writerly writing," and last to suggest an alternative to it, "readerly writing."²

A normal art represents the practice seen as solely valid within the dominant artistic community. It is rare in the arts that such a community should so totally occupy the range as to displace all other practices, yet that is what has happened with fiction in the United States today, for the economic reasons mentioned above, and perhaps for some other cultural reasons as well, some widespread complacency or else some pervasive terror, to account for which would carry me too far beyond my purpose. There is this monolithic “fiction community,” and it does not consist merely of writers. Perhaps the word “community” is too generous a choice; “industry” is really nearer the mark, for writers belong to an interest group made up of agents, publishers, publicists, book designers, distributors, booksellers, grants panelists, literary journalists, and writing instructors at every level from university Masters of Fine Arts programs through extension courses, summer writing workshops, to the “how-to” class offered in someone’s living room by a local “learning center.” If not a community, this is at least a network, and any practicing writer of fiction will find herself, at one point or another, working alongside a writing instructor, an agent, an editor, a publicist, and the people who organize readings and signings at bookstores, bars, and colleges. She will find herself aligning her interests with theirs. In any substantive disagreement, unless she is a very hot property, it will be she who makes the compromise. She will read the reviewers of her work and from them, whether she wants to or not, come to know what the market likes or dislikes about her writing. And most of these people will know each other, at least by reputation, and will interact as parties who have had, or may in the future have, business dealings. This is the “community,” then, that in fiction defines the normal practice, the central concerns, and the means to bring those concerns before readers in a form that will attract them and make them buy books.

As a genre “normal fiction” is a rhetoric of intention, an intention described by Waldo Brown in Patrick White’s *The Solid Mandala*.³ Waldo intends to be a writer. The girl in whom he’s interested asks what he plans to write. He replies hesitantly and vaguely: “Sometimes I think novels, sometimes plays. It might even be some kind of philosophical work.” As he “abandon[s] a plan for luring her deeper into the garden by carefully chosen, oblique ways,” daunted by her question, he searches for the true answer and finds it: “It would have been so much easier if he had been able to tell her: I want to, and am going to, write about *myself*.”

Writers of “normal fiction” want to, and are going to, write about *myself*. In many cases these stories do in fact have a first-person narrator and tell a life-story, but I do not mean to say that *myself* is always to be identified with the writer or that all current writers of normal fiction are hopeless narcissists. *Myself* is generic, rather like the “I” of Puritan spiritual autobiography; it is a *myself* to which the purchasers of books must easily relate. The task is made easier by the fact that the concept of selfhood involved is very loose. Such stories imagine the search for identity within an arena of alienation; it is an amalgam of journalism with what one might call virtual autobiography, the first delivering the world, or rather its most salient insanities, as an assemblage of meaningless news-items within which the second traces a quest for authentic experience, searching among the simulacra for some fixed node to make a nucleus of identity. Characters typically begin as a chaotic bundle of impulses, defined unsatisfactorily by their situation in a structure (job, relationship, school, society in general) that is the extension of someone else’s power. Often they are marginalized as misfits and find no place for their languages, loves, or lives. The story will lead sooner or later to an epiphany, not always experienced by the protagonist, who may well remain an antic figure in a world impossible to come to terms with, but where the reader at least will touch some truth, make Forster’s

redemptive “connection.” The characters, when they succeed in gaining some substance, are not usually transformed, since a canon of journalistic verisimilitude governs this genre, but there is a suggestion of personal fulfillment or transcendence.

If this abstract sounds like a cliché, the stories themselves work to recess it deeply within a dense texture of journalistic noticing. Anybody’s story may be told, none too strange or “low,” and the research is far-ranging and meticulous. These writers shine a light upon the most exotic miseries and madneses, the most out-of-the-way corners of contemporary life, which they themselves have evidently explored in person. The energy that is drained from the fiction is poured into the writing, into imagery especially: rich, sensory, compelling images open windows into the landscapes and interiors of experience, to the point where a reader may wonder if the characters serve as more than vehicles to articulate a set of keen, often satirical observations.

It is an extraordinarily knowing writing, and this is my chief objection to it. These writers know their craft and their material and their readers far too well. Their address to readers is steeped in what looks like urbanity and democracy. “We are of one blood, ye and I,” they seem to proclaim: educated, hip, sensitive, liberal. Intensely, minutely aware of all the detail that goes to make up lifestyle, they create fictions shrewdly critical of lifestyle, and yet their address to the reader still is made within it, and “lifestyle appeal” is their main source of authority. The knowing writer addresses the reader very directly; the reader’s primary experience is of being known. Of course this may feel comfortable. The book in one’s hands, one senses, is not going to resist one. The story being told, however foreign to one’s own routine, will strike with careful calculation upon the sites of one’s attention, for the map of that attention is spread out in the author’s mental war room. Its limits too will be respected: no part

will go on too long. The stimuli playing upon one will be such as to provoke responses that clarify not confuse one's general state of feeling. In short, the writer practices upon the reader; the reader is trapped within the perceptual frame predicated by genre and the writer's too perfect command of it. The reader must read what the writer has written and cannot use the text as the sort of epistemological tool described by Proust in *Le temps retrouvé*:⁴

L'écrivain ne dit que par une habitude prise dans le langage insincère des préfaces et des dédicaces: «mon lecteur». En réalité, chaque lecteur est, quand il lit, le propre lecteur de soi-même. L'ouvrage de l'écrivain n'est qu'une espèce d'instrument optique qu'il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que, sans ce livre, il n'eût peut-être vu en soi-même.

[It is only by a habit derived from the insincere language of prefaces and dedications that the writer says, "my reader." In truth each reader is, when he reads, his own reader reading himself. The author's work is no more than a sort of optical tool that he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what without this book he might not have seen in himself. (My translation.)]

Later (428) he speaks of "un égoïsme utilisable pour autrui." This is just what I don't find in "normal fiction." It is an instrument to be used in one way only, and when one of these writers says, "My reader" (though never in so many words), it's with an emphasis on the possessive. The reader is given the task of locating, by careful inferential reading, the pattern of numinous details—numinous when seen in their place in the pattern. In effect the writer reads the text for the reader. The reader is not permitted to be different, several, perverse; is not permitted to be in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason"⁵; despite the flourishing strangeness of the matter, is not allowed truly to travel.

This is the paradigm of fiction I call "writerly writing" and which I claim so predominates within the "fiction community" that it has become the "normal art" to the exclusion of other kinds. I have not named the writers I have in mind; I have characterized their

work without supplying instances; yet I am more afraid of having repeated what is too well known than of having distorted the case.

To this paradigm adhere even those whom one might think eager to find alternatives, the members of oppressed minorities. There is a vogue, in fact, for books by those whose story has not hitherto been told that may suggest how weary the reading audience is growing of the stories that have been told and continue to be told. Graphic accounts of exclusion, victimization, and abuse are much in demand, and are the most explicitly autobiographical-journalistic of all, driving very near the line of nonfiction. But why are writers who have undergone such treatment so willing to submit to the orthodoxies of “normal fiction”? They of all writers adhere most narrowly to its generic canons, “showing not telling,” “finding their own voice” which sounds just like a voice from the oppressor’s camp, only with a special edge of anger. But their purpose is to represent and thereby validate the experience of the group to the culture as a whole. There is a territory the reader must be shown, and it must be mapped beyond any question. These stories more than any other bring forward the central intention to forge identity: “I want to, and am going to, write about *myself*.”

Myself! “Every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Emerson in “Self-Reliance”⁶ defines a heroic task of self-exploration using the world as mirror to penetrate and actualize those deepest regions where the distinction between Me and Not-me falls away; where Self, reaching out all ways in sympathetic identification with what it perceives, becomes ever more inclusive. This is the sort of egoism usable for others that Proust speaks of, whereas the sort of self-exploration I see in normal fiction is just the reverse. The voices and stories occupying fiction now demand not identification but recognition, acknowledgment, acceptance, and what they offer the reader in return for the dismantling of prejudice is images of other lives, striking, detailed, and exotic. The

intention to write about *myself* leads now to the invention of a world that reflects the author's face (the structure of her experience, her concerns) and brings it into being in the mind of the reader. What looks like a desire to share experience in face becomes an effort to impose it by immobilizing and imprinting the reader.

Edgar Allan Poe speaks chillingly in an essay⁷ of the advantages that short forms have for the writer, since short forms—the poem and the tale—operate within the span of a reader's full attention (Poe sets this at the generous figure of an hour) to produce their impression. They must not be too long, for "...all excitement is, from a psychal necessity, transient." They must not be too short either. "There must be the pressing steadily down of the stamp upon the wax."

In the brief tale...the author is enabled to carry out his full design without interruption. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer's control.

I don't find "writerly writers" to hold any other purpose than this, or any other relation to their readers. What is impressed in the wax of the reader's attention is something to be recognized, something to be respected: an experience of mine that you can enter: *myself*.

The rhetoric with which the stamp is crafted is that rhetoric of embedded point of view, which is one of the chief literary achievements of the twentieth century. It is a composition of selection and arrangement to create a hierarchy of experience-bearing images around whatever point of view is up and running at that point in the project. It will normally be that of a character engaged in the action, or more than one. What is represented is seen from that point of view; naturally some images will be foregrounded by being placed nearer to it, and so, by the attention paid them, become enchanted and ask to be taken as symbols, crystallizations of the experience diffused tonally through the whole episode. Much is left out or only sketched in, to clear room for these major images.

This is a rhetoric of compression and control. Writers of “normal fiction” make it a virtue that their prose is spare, with no waste language to it. But here I ask the reader to imagine an alternative rhetoric of dilation, containing those more opaque, textured passages that are so pleasurable because so surprising. Their place in the intentional structure is not at once seen, so that, for a while at least, the reader can play there, oblivious to the awful edifice of subtext looming behind. The play consists of following other directions of meaning in the words and phrases that the writer installed. “Normal fiction” rarely permits this; readers have hardly begun their play when it is snatched up and set in a niche of the façade, as a sort of ornament. “Writerly” language is overdetermined, a tool or toy only for the writer, and by its means the writer crafts her true material, which is the attention of the reader. The world of the fiction, however hideous, is not ambiguous. The text achieves a clear and shapely design, a structure erected in the memory of readers, who can now feel that in their response to it they too grow clearer and shapelier.

It is in the nature of paradigms that have achieved this degree of dominance, this degree of clarity and internal consistency, that they make their alternatives very hard to imagine. Even to formulate a critique, one wants a secure position outside the paradigm, and there is none. From here on we grope.

A poet writing fiction says: “...there is no childhood, there is no such thing.” She repeats the same idea a page later: “There is no childhood—people are the same. Or they’re not at all the same.” And once again: “There is no childhood.”⁸ If so, it’s very bad news for the writers who want to, and are going to, write about *myself*, since *my childhood* is normally essential material to this project. But in what sense are these statements true?

“There is no childhood” as there is no adulthood. There are only lives in time, and really “people are the same” as they ever were, continually in flux, though perhaps not always at the same rate. The sense of a gap that makes us feel we were different people in our childhood comes from a fallibility of memory, a discontinuity in the experience relievable at will. “There is no childhood” because “childhood” dies so easily, never becoming self-aware, self-composing, but absorbed in what it plays with. In the United States children must be trained to conform to what we could call “normal childhood,” to take on the distinctive behaviors of “children,” cute and precocious, wilful and honest. The training comes at them out of television and movies, advertising in all its forms, “children’s books,” comic strips, everything that the Disney Corporation sets its hand to, and even the teachers and parents who want to show a well-turned out product. The result is a performative “childhood” designed to stamp a crisp personality upon the attention of others. The appeal of writerly writing to the young adults who have received this training must be evident, since what it offers is precisely this gesturally achieved identity, erected in memory that excludes the formless absorptions of play.

“Or they’re not at all the same”—perhaps as one another, or perhaps simply in their experience of themselves in time. Compare Beckett:

We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. A calamitous day, but calamitous not necessarily in content.... We are disappointed at the nullity of what we are pleased to call attainment. But what is attainment? The identification of the subject with the object of his desire. The subject has died—and perhaps many times—on the way.⁹

To compose a continuous identity, writerly writers need to fit an image of childhood into the portrait of *myself* they propose to create. The “coming-of-age” narrative is the most familiar form and the tritest cliché within the genre of “normal fiction,” and it absolutely requires the real

existence of “childhood,” for a state of becoming must precede a state or even an instant of realized being. For the possibility of a momentarily immortal subject, an identity, is axiomatic in normal fiction.

Against the face of *myself* we may set the world and history as an unimaginable field of objects, creatures, events far too multifarious for memory and try to imagine the sort of writing that addresses it. So, as writerly writing tries to make the field imaginable as a configuration of selected details, growing to a point around which everything appears to arrange itself, light shining from that point to irradiate the whole design which is then to be lifted whole out of the puzzling field and placed as a monument in memory—as writerly writing does this, “readerly writing” attempts a narrative within the field, a chameleon narrative hard to distinguish from its surround. “When we open the door to a constellation of memories, they come very quickly, leaving us no time to hone and curtail our sentences.” When sentences are to be honed or curtailed, it is implied that they were not keen, too long. The writer knows, the writer leads. When memories, the constellation of them, the field, history, when all these write the sentence, the writer must follow. Must read. The readerly writer is “readerly” not in the sense that she is very literary, saturated with the work of other writers—on the contrary, it is the writerly writers who slavishly copy from successful models—but in the sense that the process of composition is for her an experience of reading. Where is the sentence coming from? The experience is of its coming, not as a form to contain a meaning but as a lively creature. It may travel from a center, it may advance upon a center, but the first will be lost and the second will be new. To find them, it is necessary to release writerly control, to relax the attempt to impose a memorable architecture.

Readerly writing is *memorious* rather than *memorable*. Instead of extracting and isolating its objects, to utilize them to incarnate some meaning, it revisits them within the field of the world. Borges illustrates the difference:¹¹ “We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table;...” and it is easy to guess to what work a writer writing fiction in the United States today would put these three glasses: as the residue, the summary icon, of some action—a love triangle!—and there would be precise attention paid to smears of lipstick on the rim of a glass, the vintage of the wine, the disposition of the glasses on the table.

We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table;
Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine.
He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at
dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare
them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the
design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only
once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised
in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho.

Funes’ objects are far more like creatures, moving, travelling, blending with contexts that turn out to be illimitable. “Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day.” It is not just a matter of memorial reconstruction. “He could perceive I do not know how many stars in the sky.” One does not always want to be selecting out one’s constellations, those familiar figures of known signification, even though to do so relieves us from the anxiety, which the whole field always arouses, of knowing ourselves incapable, through sheer insufficiency of span, of perceiving many stars.

Readerly writing proceeds by exfoliation. The reading is guided not by will seeking order but by the instructions and directions inherent in the matter, which must be followed and must be followed out rather than in, to a center. Such a method dissolves the Theatre of Memory and the Realized Voice declaiming within its precincts. It crawls across the field of innumerable events, the matter exfoliating in creaturely gestures of language that reify the directions and

energies without subjecting them to thematic triage. At the end of the story there is a story—something has been written. Clarice Lispector, Anna Maria Ortese, Can Xue, Stacey Levine, writing on four different continents, have all found the way to do this. They do not write stories about *myself*, and yet they do write stories, and those stories have endings.

John Hawkes' fugues, Kathy Acker's rants, Wilson Harris' tissue samples from the flesh of Guyana: the experience of reading these is the experience of walking in the forest. Events in the forest do not take their meaning from the structure of the forest. The forest is where you lose yourself, go mad, like Tristan. These writers' events aid us to recollect the fear and confusion the field of the world inspires, the doubts it raises about our own coherent existence. They deny, as cubism did and Gertrude Stein, the single integral point of view from which objects can be successfully composed and evaluated. Their stories are endless: matter that exfoliates always suggests the possibility of further exfoliation. What is worked out is an impulse, or else the hand grows tired. This writing is not made by finished masters.

Writerly writers assume that they can control language and direct the reader's use of it, but this depends on the reader's willingness not to pursue the directions, always present in words, that do not fall into the thematic reticulation. A strong narrative pull can keep readers from lingering too long in any one place and carrying their reading in unintended directions, but in some moods readers resist narrative pull. The language is there. The writer, despite her impressive knowingness, cannot control the reading situation since impotent to fix the contexts in which readers encounter language. The attempt of many contemporary writers to do just this, by limiting themselves to the uniform discourse of popular culture, succeeds only in limiting their readership to those for whom this discourse still seems enchanted. The willful reader's play

with and within language creates an accidental history whose value will not at once be evident to those who desire an extraction of essence.

But history is essentially accidental, a welter. Everyone can feel the need to sort through it; we like our world to have a face, our own—*myself*—since the sort of knowing we prefer is recognition. But sometimes we prefer not to: we ask to be lost. The face of things grows too familiar, a mask. We go look at the sea. That history is a welter of crossing paths that instantly fade is the truth that readerly writing embodies. Left to play where language has not been subjugated to intention, the reader is free to become memorious.

This is the history of many small creatures provoked by the text and now at large in the reader's imagination. Do they go somewhere? Or is fiction to be reduced to an armature for lyrical meditations? Merely by posing such questions, we may understand at last how deeply the writers of autobiographical-journalistic fiction dislike and mistrust *fiction*. All their skill and labor are directed towards blending the myth of *myself* with the facts of contemporary life and lifestyle. Fiction is neither of these things. Its radical purpose is not to shape or escape the world—not transcendence, not correctness, not immortality. Fiction is a reading of how things go in the world, and to have any value it requires its readers to read. To read is not to be the wax prepared for the stamp, it is not to be the stamp either. Reading is using, respectfully, the tool of the writing for the reader's own purpose, on the understanding that the writer was the first reader and constructed the tool respectfully of the world that both inhabit.

De sorte que je ne...demanderais pas [de mes lecteurs] de me louer ou de me dénigrer, mais seulement de me dire si c'est bien cela, si les mots qu'ils lisent en eux-mêmes sont bien ceux que j'ai écrits.¹²

[Such that I would not ask my readers to praise or blame me

but simply to tell me if that is indeed it, if the words that they read in themselves are indeed those which I wrote. (My translation.)]

If the writer of fiction is not articulating purely personal associations, is really a reader of the field that contains that other reader the reader; if she lets the language of the field marry with her own language, as any reader must, then her story will tell a truth, and any reader will be able to trace the inevitability of its telling.

Notes

¹ These terms are borrowed from Thomas S. Kuhn's great work of the history of science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). Kuhn defines "normal science," the dominant practice in any scientific period, in terms of the community that subscribes to the "paradigm" that defines it. A paradigm consists of the basic assumptions about what science is and what it is for. The success of a new paradigm, he argues, lies in its power to attract scientists away from a competing model of science to the questions it proposes as central and the practice it devises to answer those questions. The near-exhaustion of a paradigm is shown when an established science pursues ever narrowing lines of investigation into increasingly subtle questions; then a revolutionary new paradigm overturns it and the whole institutional structure grown up around it. Of course its defenders fight a rear-guard action to maintain their authority and sources of funding. The struggle is Darwinian, two competing populations within a range that has changed to favor the intruder, as any field of human culture must, by an alteration in the fundamental concerns that define it, grow open to a different view of things. Having said so much, I should like to add that I am not intending to proclaim "readerly writing" as the next paradigm, but to argue that the dominant paradigm, "normal fiction," seems so close to exhaustion that its alternatives are beginning to take clear form.

² I am not using this phrase in the same sense as that of Roland Barthes which has been translated as "readerly writing." While the argument in this essay is entirely mine, with all its errors and weaknesses, I would never have written it unless Wendy Walker and Fiona Templeton had started me thinking, both by their conversation and by their own writing.

³ 1966; repr. New York: Penguin, 1969, pp. 93-4.

⁴ Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1954; Folio paperback, p. 276.

⁵ Keats' definition of the state of "negative capability" in his letter to George and Thomas Keats conjecturally dated 21 or 27 December, 1817; in Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959; Riverside paperback) p. 261.

⁶ *Essays. First Series* (1841).

⁷ "Twice Told Tales" (1842), in *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Davidson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956; Riverside paperback), pp. 447-8.

⁸ Leslie Scalapino, "A Novel" in *The Return of Painting* (New York: DIA Art Foundation, 1988; Reed Foundation Poetry Chapbook series), pp. 10, 11, 12.

⁹ *Proust* (1931; repr. New York: Grove Press, n.d.), p. 3.

¹⁰ Tina Rotenberg, "No Name, No Number, No Address," Part XI, *Sulfur* 42 (Spring, 1998), p. 128.

¹¹ "Funes the Memorious" in *Artifices* (1944), reprinted in 1956 as Part Two of *Ficciones*, ed. and trans. Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), pp. 112-13.

¹² Proust, p.424.