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I.

As novels change their form and melt into memoir, so these forms also merge with what we are still calling the personal essay, so that novel, memoir, essay, and even news reports begin to sound like each other, most often governed by the "I."

The *New York Review of Books* gave us this sentence back in April 2015, and even now I'm turning it over. It's followed by this one: "What explains this selfie-enhanced urge to testimony, and for privileging subjectivity over authority?" The question comes near the end of Diane Johnson's review of *Outline*, a recent and much-praised autobiographical novel by Rachel Cusk. Johnson never attempts an answer, and I won't either. I'd rather try coming at things from the opposite direction: What explains the ever-broadening reader appeal of this testimonial voice? And what does this tell us about the state of contemporary fiction?

The prose convergence Johnson describes is itself remarkable. Thumbing through the major magazines and newspapers, I often find myself adverting to the rubrics to tell the fiction from the features, the commentary from the news. Not long ago, I had the experience of reading a *New Yorker* piece called "The Children of Strangers" and thinking, fully a quarter of the way through, that it was the issue's short story. I peeked at the byline — Larissa MacFarquhar — and only then realized it was actually a profile.

That's a testament to the nimbleness of this voice. It has no trouble sounding sensible, antic, arch, or moody, among many other things. What holds constant across these variations, though, is the prose's immediacy. It reveres the easiness of speech, especially vernacular speech — the kind we are endlessly treated to on television, film, radio — and takes it as its guide if not its master. Even when it's transposed into the third-person, as it is in MacFarquhar's profile, it tends toward the plainspoken and personal, and shows a marked preference for bare facts and subjective impressions to ambitious analysis — which of course only makes it more approachable:

They liked being surrounded by teenagers, but the group home was depressing. In the two years they were there, twenty-three boys passed through — boys who had spent an average of eleven years in foster care. Some had been placed with more than twenty-five families by the time they were fifteen. Most of them, Sue and Hector knew, would never have a real family, and probably some would end up homeless. The more they thought about it, the more it seemed to them that foster care was a dreadful thing. A child who was kicked out of one home after another for his whole childhood — well, there wasn't much hope for a child like that.

This is an immediacy of style. But in much contemporary writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, this voice is coupled to topical subject matter, which yields an immediacy of its own. News value is one route to it. The casual prose voice documents or comments upon current affairs and the issues of the day, which readers are naturally likely to have antecedent or easily stimulated interest in. Treating subject matter of this sort is the very point of journalism, so there's nothing remarkable about it. But plenty of fiction too has been molded by its authors into a kind of colorful news supplement, a process the novelist Jeff Jackson has aptly described as NPRification. So we get John Lanchester covering the 2008 financial crisis (*Capital*), David Eggers chronicling the dominance of Google (*The Circle*), Phil Klay reporting on the aftermath of the war on terrorism for U.S. veterans (*Redeployment*), and so on.

Topicality also can take a more socio-cultural form. The personas and lifestyles detailed are ones audiences can be counted on to identify with or aspire to (Adelle Waldman's Brooklyn literati), or the locales recreated are ones they relish recognizing (Zadie Smith's London). As nothing captivates us quite like our own reflections, swift reader interest is assured.

At their most effective, these immediacies of style and substance can yield writing so absorbing it seems almost to read itself, like a book on tape or a piece of film inexorably unspooling before us. The reading experience comes to seem effortless, so that it is not the force or

curiosity of our minds that absorbs the work, but the writing that does the absorbing, pulling us in as essentially passive subjects. We are gripped. We feel compelled to turn the pages, and the work becomes, as it's sometimes said, *unputdownable.*

II.

Having just spent a few years on the editorial staff of a major American newspaper, and having done shorter stints at a pair of distinguished magazines, I can say with some confidence that most journalists, the good ones included, think of the creation of just this state of absorption and compulsion as an — even the — essential quality of "great writing." I can also confirm how modest editors' expectations of readers can be: they tend to tailor the prose and subject matter of their pieces for an imagined reader who's looking for reasons to flip or click away.

And though the long-form magazine reader might be willing to stick around for a few extra paragraphs, dive a little deeper than the typical newspaper reader, ultimately the feeling is that if the piece doesn't grab him by the lapels early and carry him away, he's not going to make it through the article. And that, as the *New Yorker*'s Louis Menand recently declared, is the ultimate failure, since "the job of the magazine writer is never to give readers a reason to stop before they reach the end."

My introduction to this portrait of the general-interest reader was probably especially jarring, as I'd joined the paper not long after finishing a doctorate in philosophy, where entirely different expectations held sway. My instincts had to be retrained. What the paper's readers wanted, I was told by veteran editors, was the "cocktail party version" of any story: simple, direct, intimate, lively. Never trying, never confounding. Readers should know, straight off, why they should care, and why they should care right now. No slow-burn intros, then. Get to the point before they tune out, and keep the pleasure coming if you expect them to see the story through. Nothing can be allowed to threaten the reader's state of absorption, so passages that cannot be rapidly digested should either be radically simplified or, if they prove irreducibly knotty, eliminated.

To be fair, if journalists expect little from us as readers, I think it's also true that we expect relatively modest things from them in return: some compelling details and insight about topical matters, framed in a vivid, engrossing way. It's precisely what "The Children of Strangers," a fine piece of magazine work, achieves. There is something unreasonable about expecting more. It seems silly, for instance, to be disappointed because a piece of journalism isn't also profound or, better, visionary. *Vision* calls to mind such a range of things: thought, sense experience, first principles, imagination, discernment, invention, prescience, revelation. It's this cluster of valences that explains the alchemical effects visionary works, fully appreciated, can have on us. Put simply — and I mean this as a retrieval of a critical ideal, not a novel proposition — such works are capable of reshaping our basic ways of experiencing and conceptualizing the world, ourselves, and the relation between the two. They don't merely present us with new objects of experience or new information, offering fresh fodder for the mind, but extend and refine our experiential capacities themselves, whatever objects we train them upon.

This is the barest sketch of the visionary — I'll fill it in as we go — but already it should be obvious that an expectation of this kind of transformative power isn't part of any tacit arrangement between readers and writers of general-interest journalism. That would be asking too much.

What of fiction, though? Clearly there are forms of fiction where an expectation of immediacy and absorption is entirely appropriate and one of transformative vision risible. Who would read an airport romance that wasn't eager to absorb you? And who would expect their sensibilities to be deepened by it? But what of fiction that aspires to the status of art, that imagines itself to be in dialog with, and hence in the same business as, works of world literature that are visionary in just the sense I've gestured at: the fiction of Murasaki Shikibu and François Rabelais, Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett, Gabriel García Márquez and Can Xue? Here, I think, the arrangement between reader and writer is altogether different from the one underwriting journalism.

III.

To fix ideas, it's worth revisiting two ways of understanding the aims of fiction that Jonathan Franzen sketched over a decade ago in his *New Yorker* essay-manifesto "Mr. Difficult": the contract and status models. Contract writers, he says, write books at least partly to satisfy "the audience's legitimate desire to be entertained," that is, to have "a pleasurable experience." Such writers think that a novel "deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust" in respecting this agreement. Though Franzen allows that this contract "sometimes calls for work," that "the pleasures of a book aren't always easy," he describes the contract model in a way that doesn't exclude airport paperbacks. It's awide category. Status writers — here Franzen lumps together "difficult" writers like William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gass — think that "the value of any novel, even a mediocre one, exists independent of how many people are able to appreciate it." They reject the idea of any tacit arrangement with readers, and write books with no thought of satisfying anyone's desires but their own. They simply create art objects they believe to be of inherent aesthetic merit. You read at you own risk, then, with no promises from the author. This, Franzen supposes, is the territory of art fiction.

The distinction, of course, is tendentious. As Franzen admits, he's a contract person at heart, so we shouldn't be surprised that he's drawn the distinction in a way that sells the status model short. Why should art-fiction writers have to be preoccupied, as Franzen supposes, with "genius and art-historical importance," that is, with status? Can't they be just as concerned with communicating with a readership as contract writers are? If we strip away the tendentiousness, what remains, I think, is not one contract but two. The first one — call it the leisure contract — corresponds to Franzen's contract model. Readers of leisure-contract fiction expect swift absorption and, if possible, page-turning compulsion. Naturally, they all but insist upon easily digested prose styles, like the ascendant testimonial one Johnson identifies, or Franzen's own third-personal version in much of his post-*Strong Motion* work.

The category of leisure fiction, being capacious, further divides. Readers of books by James Patterson and Danielle Steel presumably aren't looking for much else besides simple entertainment or diversion from their novels. But clearly many readers — readers like Franzen — are. Beyond being entertained, they expect the fiction they read to carry emotional and intellectual weight. Frequently that comes in the form of the kinds of cultural news and insight I described earlier, though so long as the style is accessible, readers will happily venture into more remote territory (Hilary Mantel's Cromwell-era England, say). What they do not insist on — though they needn't oppose it, if it comes with the rest of the package — is sensibility-shaping vision.

Interestingly, reader expectations of leisure fiction of this second, substantive sort bear more than a passing resemblance to those underlying quality journalism. Which is to say, a *New Yorker* profile and a *New Yorker* short story fulfill curiously similar desiderata: an absorbing style, usually hitched to subject matter of topical import — with the natural addition, in the case of nonfiction, of an expectation of sentence-level, literal truth.

Franzen's status model is better described, I think, as the art contract. If anything, fiction written under this arrangement — art fiction — trades on reader trust even more greatly than the leisure variety, as the history of fiction qua literary art suggests there is no guarantee of immediacy or swift absorption made to readers. Rather, we are asked to trust in the writer's ultimate designs, without requiring him to deliver recognizable pleasure from page to page. Consider how many novels of agreed artistic merit — *Tristram Shandy*, *Moby Dick*, *The Man without Qualities*, *To the Lighthouse*, or, to take Franzen's chosen status-model exemplar, *The Recognitions* — make no attempt to hold us in a continuous state of absorption. Their authors could not have failed to understand, in writing them, that it would have to be the ravenousness of the reader's mind that drove her through these books, if anything did.

IV.

There's no need to look to the past, though. In fleshing out our understanding of the visionary, contemporary works serve just as well. Consider *Your Face Tomorrow*, Javier Marías's 21st-century trilogy, which is widely held to be as trying to read as it is visionary in its achievement. Nominally it is a work of noir, but the book's subject matter can really only be called recondite. Marías's protagonist, Jacques Deza, is as an interpreter not of languages but of human behavior, discovering through observation alone the "probabilities in our veins," for use in heading off or inciting events of strategic significance to his inscrutable MI6 bosses. Not uncharacteristically, much of the first volume, *Fever and Spear*, is given over to an arcane meditation by Deza's mentor on secrecy and propaganda during the Spanish Civil War.

This is hardly material readers might identify with or recognize as part of their lived world. The obstacles to immediacy are doubled by Marías's mandarin prose. The work is essentially written, in that it refuses to take its cues from "natural," vernacular speech. Marías's sentences tend to wind their way, clause to clause, through what can feel like an endless series of semantic refinements, their sense honed down to a cutting edge by the time they reach a full stop. In a way, there is much testimony in the book: like nearly all of Marías's novels, it's written in the first person. Yet Deza, our narrator, makes no attempt to ingratiate himself with us. He does not seek our sympathy, and he isn't especially modest about his erudition or his capacities of discernment. He's imperious, and he asks only that we try to keep up with him if we can. Rather than fishing for an empathic response from us, he positively invites our sternest judgment, knowing that most readers will come off worse for it. This is testimony of a different order, then, one that stares us down instead of shrinking into confession or other safely subjective postures we are meant to empathize with or take pity on, with an eye to disarming us.

Suffice it to say, these pages refuse to turn themselves. Marías counts on our tenacity as readers, our powers of concentration. It makes

the book eminently putdownable. I've yet to hear of anyone feverishly reading the trilogy through the night because they just had to see how it ends. Indeed, I can remember putting down each volume myself many times, within any given stretch of reading, whether to find my bearings or simply seek relief for a moment from the sheer intensity of the mind on display, the twisting maze of thought Marías continually has us run. There is simply no possibility of disappearing in these pages for long, of forgetting that you are having an encounter, and a somewhat intimidating one, with the written word.

But though all of this does tell strongly against the work's leisure value, critics seem to agree that none of these challenges speaks against Marías's magisterial achievement. This is, it seems, because Marías's thorny language, and his subject matter so far from the news, is just what his peculiar way of sense-making demands for its full expression. There is, as I said, the exhilarating and exasperating phenomenological richness of reading his prose, the continual sifting of the finest shades of meaning, not for its own sake, but because events of the greatest consequence, for Marías, can turn on apparently harmless misapprehensions.

There is also the contrarian challenge posed by what is perhaps the central theme of the book, which runs exactly counter to the tendency in postwar literature to be skeptical of our epistemic powers, to narrow the range of what we can know to what we can personally testify to, if that. There is freedom to be found in ignorance, Marías shows us. "No one knows anything, really" is a thought that can excuse a lot. Too much, in fact. He suggests not that knowledge is easy—certainly not—but that there is far more of it for the taking than we would like to admit, if only we were willing to attend to what it is that, in some sense, we already see:

How can someone not see, in the long term, that the person who will and does end up ruining us will indeed ruin us? How can you not sense or guess at their plotting, their machinations, their circular dance, not smell their hostility or breathe their despair, not notice their slow skulking, their leisurely, languishing waiting, and the inevitable

impatience that they would have had to contain for who knows how many years? How can I not know today your face tomorrow, the face that is there already or is being forged beneath the face you show me or beneath the mask you are wearing.

It's a credit to Marías's artistry, to the richness of *Your Face Tomorrow*'s "literary thinking," as he calls it, that there is really no satisfying paraphrase of it worth the candle. Its effects are concrete and must be felt directly. But it's not risking much to say the book, as an intellectual experience rather than an argument, is a tonic against the gauzy postmodern skepticisms about truth and knowledge still prevailing, perhaps especially among those trained in the humanities. And as the passage above demonstrates, the effect is not achieved, as one might assume, by suggesting certainties (Marías does not traffic in those) where only ambivalent belief now exists, but by the unexpected means of unraveling our uncertainties, doubting our doubts. For these aesthetic effects — and there is much else one could say about the book in this regard — it's hard not to see *Your Face Tomorrow* as having visionary import, even if the work we must do as readers to experience it is not insignificant.

V.

If a lack of immediacy needn't diminish a novel's artistic merit, as *Your Face Tomorrow* suggests, a lack of visionary power seems always to count against a novel qua art. "It's an excellent work of art, it just lacks real vision" isn't just an odd thing to say, it's incoherent. Substitute "immediacy" or "immersiveness" for "vision," though, and you get a perfectly intelligible assertion. It suggests that the idea of visionary power is baked directly into our concept of art, at least as we understand it today: a successful work of art simply cannot afford not to have a visionary dimension, in just the way a quality magazine or newspaper piece cannot afford not to be absorbing. (It's also worth remembering that if certain novels of the first order don't seem visionary to us now, it's usually because we have absorbed their visions so fully. The liberal use of free indirect discourse in Jane Austen's work comes to mind

in this regard.) This gives us the materials to formulate the essential, visionary clause of the art-fiction compact: if the reader will commit the energy necessary to carefully work through the book, the writer will deliver to him a sensibility-shaping experience.

Clearly more is asked of the reader by this agreement, as there's no guarantee of entertainment or immediate reward (just as there is none in the other fine arts — think about how much contemporary visual art is thought, even by its advocates, to be aggressively ugly or pointedly unspectacular). But then, something more is promised to her too, something that extends her apprehensive capacities rather than simply absorbs or informs her.

Plenty of "difficult" fiction, of course, doesn't hold up its end of the bargain, in that it fails to deliver anything transformative in this sense. (We can all think of novels that strike us this way.) The reader's trust that her pains will be compensated is thereby betrayed. But then, much leisure fiction betrays us too, when it fails to absorb and entertain us. It's also true that immediacy and vision needn't be in conflict. There are transformative page-turners. Consider the uncanny complexion put on human relationships, and especially the singular coolness of desire — desire that for all that remains inexhaustible — animating Haruki Murakami's questing protagonists in novels like *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore*. Modern life is given to us as a not-quite-futile, not-quite-successful hunt for the extraordinary (often some form of love) within the ordinary, a bleak evocation of Paul Éluard's words: "There is another world, but it is in this one." Murakami articulates both worlds in casual, slightly wry prose, all the better, he seems to say, to reveal the banality of even our most profound desires. Because of his accessible, immediate style, many people read Murakami's novels simply for their immersive pleasures, not for any alchemical properties that might inhere in them. But it's arguable — and many critics have argued as much — that *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and certain other of his books have a significant visionary dimension, one defining an entire cast of mind that is bequeathed to the sensitive reader.

VI.

The growing dominance of the testimonial prose voice I described at the start bears, in a worrying way, on the distinction between the art and leisure contracts. If good journalism, as I suggested, answers to a version of the leisure contract, and if more and more fiction, including our would-be art fiction, has become formally indistinguishable from journalism, we can, without our noticing it, drift as readers toward bringing a similar set of expectations to both, as if the same arrangement underwrote them.

Leave aside precisely what effect this conflation of expectations is having on journalism (I take it some loss of authority and trustworthiness). In fiction, it seems we've grown increasingly accustomed to expecting, even from those we consider our most ambitious literary artists — a previous generation's list would have included challenging writers like Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon, and Gass — to deliver many of the rewards of contemporary narrative journalism: immediacy, a conversational tone, swift absorption, topicality. At the same time, our expectation of, and even our appetite for, profoundly transformative vision in fiction seems to have waned. The less-than-immediate authors just mentioned, and many other "difficult" writers besides, were often celebrated in their own time: Gaddis himself won National Book Awards for his second and fourth novels. It is hard to name nearly so many such writers today who are as widely read or discussed.

It suggests, I think, that the art contract has been quietly displaced by a kind of all-purpose leisure contract spanning fiction and nonfiction. Our language, though, has not yet caught up to this shift toward the leisure contract and away from a more demanding conception of literary art. Many of the novels now held up as among the boldest contemporary expressions of artistry in fiction — as on a par, for instance, with Marías's, which, at least in Anglophone literary circles, are more admired than loved, and rarely discussed with broad fervor — seem to fall so far short of fulfilling anything resembling the art contract that one presumes fulfilling it was never among their authors' aims. They squarely occupy an expanded leisure-contract space, delivering

many of the same pleasures as good journalism. Yet almost out of habit, or else a desire to preserve our sense of ourselves as lovers of serious art, we continue to describe them as forward-looking, deeply inventive literary works.

Take the recent fashion in putative art fiction that most plainly instantiates Johnson's observation about the novel's melding into essay, memoir, and reportage: the autobiographical novels of Sheila Heti, Tao Lin, Ben Lerner, Geoff Dyer, and perhaps most notably, Karl Ove Knausgaard. Much of the critical establishment has concluded that these are among our most imaginative literary artists, Knausgaard most of all, it seems. Knausgaard's memoir-novel, *My Struggle*, offers up all the pleasures of the leisure contract — immediacy in both style and subject matter — in great heaps. No one can doubt how absorbing, and how "unputdownable," it can be. In this respect, at least, Knausgaard must be the anti-Marías.

There are, in fact, other curious relationships between their multi-volume projects. Both *My Struggle* and *Your Face Tomorrow* are written in the first person, draw freely on autobiography (Knausgaard almost exclusively), and are not at any pains to demarcate the fictive from the real. Both books have been called Proustian (though that might only suggest the bankruptcy of the term). Yet the results couldn't be more different. Even Marías's advocates agree that *Your Face Tomorrow* and its intimidating narrator put near-continuous pressure on the reader's attentive capacities. *My Struggle*, by contrast, with its hapless neurotic writer for a narrator, engrosses most readers who dip into it, even casually. It is difficult for readers to find correspondences between Jacques Deza and their own lives and minds — they are there, I think, but there is work involved in unearthing them. But any middle-class first-worlder will struggle very hard not to see such correspondences in Knausgaard's book, chockfull as it is with documentary evidence of our moment, and with a bumbling confessor to bourgeois anomie at its center. What, after all, could be easier to relate to?

Now, *Your Face Tomorrow* is a visionary work if any contemporary novel is. It satisfies the art contract. *My Struggle*… well, where does it

figure on the score of vision, that distinctive condition of the art contract? For anyone with a good university education and an introspective bent, it's hard to argue there is much that is deeply revelatory in *My Struggle*'s ruminations on childhood, marriage, death, and so on. Though there is an irreducible pleasure in working one's way through the narrator's timeworn thoughts, and in recognizing these beliefs as ones one either holds or once held, it is difficult to disagree with the *Slate* critic Katy Waldman when she describes Knausgaard's chronicle as being wrought from "insight-resistant material." William Deresiewicz puts it even more sharply: "Knausgaard's ideas, like his language, tend to run toward cliché: the expulsion of the numinous has drained the world of meaning; modern art is emptily self-referential; we are surrounded by death but everywhere conceal it — the familiar educated talking points." Even if one could conjure a more charitable take on Knausgaardian thought, it seems unlikely to draw it especially close, for ruminative profundity, to *Your Face Tomorrow*, as that must be the book's signal (indeed, monumental) strength.

Suppose, perhaps, that Knausgaard's essayistic reflections are meant to be banal, as some critics have claimed. Where then are we to locate what is genuinely visionary or profound about the book, assuming such is to be found here? One candidate safely set aside is the blending of fact and fiction, or of the writing of fiction about writing fiction. After the 1970s fashion for "autofiction" in France, the development of the Japanese "I-novel," a century-old tradition now, and Truman Capote's "faction" and the American metafictionalists of the postwar period, there's nothing especially clever or fresh, never mind transformative, in blurring fact and fiction or fictionalizing one's autobiography. Even if we can find some new twist on these well-worn themes in Knausgaard or the rest of the current crop of autobiographical novelists, it seems unlikely that this alone could thrust their books into genuinely visionary territory.

Suppose, though, it's neither the explicit ruminations nor the metafictional antics that are supposed to carry the load. Perhaps its profundity is to be found directly in the experience of reading *My Struggle*. Is that phenomenology itself transformative? I've already granted that Knausgaard's book, as well as those of some of the other writers,

can be preternaturally absorbing, and that this state of immersion is deeply pleasurable. But pleasures vary in their other properties. What must be asked is this: What exactly is the pleasure of autofictional absorption worth, artistically? In a brilliant review of *Boyhood*, the third volume of *My Struggle*, the critic Nicholas Dames concludes on just this note: "The novel form usually aims at more than hypnosis," he says, and it's an open question whether *My Struggle*'s "hypnotic immersion … is as genuinely nourishing as it sometimes can feel." I won't try to settle the question here. But it's worth pointing out that Knausgaard's hyperreal chronicle of the everyday seems able to create such intense reader identification precisely by closing down the space for transformation; extreme verisimilitude removes the experiential friction by which the senses might be sharpened or shaped.

Ultimately, it is the burden of the critic who believes the reading experience of *My Struggle* is in fact visionary, rather than merely verisimilar, to show us how this is so. I have yet to read a persuasive account. No doubt we marvel at the immersion Knausgaard and others produce. But to marvel as such is not to find something nourishing or altering. As Dames suggests, deep immersion cannot guarantee nourishment. That requires something more: vision.

There are also the book's mimetic qualities to consider. It should be granted, Knausgaard and his autofictional cohort do accurately document many of the experiences and sentiments of relatively affluent 30- and 40-something first-worlders. The dorm-room-level rumination on authenticity in the modern world these writers frequently engage in — a topic mostly exhausted in serious intellectual circles at least 40 years ago — is also probably quite true to life, as many people's intellectual peak is reached in university, only to be followed by stagnation or decline as worldly concerns overtake them. Representations of these phenomena have a place in any time capsule of the moment; from a journalistic standpoint, this kind of mimesis has real documentary value. But from the standpoint of art?

What, then, is mimesis worth artistically, beyond the pleasure to be found in witnessing the accurate recreation of some phenomenon?

It's the same kind of pleasure we take in more mundane affairs: for instance, the pitch-perfect impression of a world leader, or an old friend. Such feats, like deep immersion, can give us much to marvel at: that's exactly what he sounds like! But if the impressionist manages only to replicate and not reveal some vital and previously hidden aspect of the subject, this does not rise much above the status of a party trick.

Considering all of this, one can't help but wonder whether reader interest in these autobiographical novels, or in the much broader class of literary fiction written in some version of that universal testimonial voice Johnson isolates, is sustained not by the books' visionary power but by the essentially journalistic pleasures of stylistic and substantive immediacy they deliver. It may be, that is, that these books have not transcended the clauses of the leisure contract.

VII.

It's worth asking why visionary power, so central to earlier generations of leading literary artists, has lost its footing in literary culture, only to be replaced by something closer to good first-person reportage. Perhaps it's because we've lost belief in the critical importance of transformation through art, and have relegated it to just one of many equally worthy rewards a book can offer. Just because effective art-contract writing has sensibility shaping power, the thought goes, that doesn't make it truer or worthier than journalistic leisure-contract fiction.

There's a populist worry about elitism and high-low distinctions hanging in the background, about deeming some cultural artifacts the deep, meaningful ones, and the others pedestrian and shallow. But questions of ultimate value seem beside the point. The importance of transformative reward in art fiction needn't be understood in terms of its giving us a more accurate picture of reality than leisure fiction, but rather in its capacity to give us more reality, so to speak, by equipping us with more ways of coming to grips with what is. It is this expanded experiential terrain that is the central reward of visionary work.

Some may argue that good leisure fiction like *The Corrections*, or to take perhaps a more favorable case, *My Struggle*, does as much as works like *Your Face Tomorrow* or *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* in expanding that terrain, extending one's experiential capacities. Myself, I can't quite see how these works could carry the same visionary voltage, given how much Franzen and Knausgaard are concerned to describe the everyday world in the usual left-leaning, bourgeois terms familiar to any university student. Here again, the burden of constructing that case must fall on the shoulders of advocates of these writers and books.

Perhaps, though, we have simply lost the taste for art fiction and the costs associated with it — have forgotten, in the words of the narrator of Ben Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, how to have "a profound experience of art." Gaddis, after all, really is Mr. Difficult. By now we are only too familiar with the broader cultural reasons nudging us in this direction: the problem of distractibility in the digital era; reality television and its glorification of the banal and demotic; the populist leveling of aesthetic and critical standards encouraged by the ease of publishing online; the seeking out of micro-communities that reinforce our points of view and taste rather than alter them; the rise of the notion that everyone, by virtue of having a pulse, must have a story worth telling and the correlative explosion of blog-memoir culture. Perhaps these shifts are making us lose not just our taste for visionary fiction, but our belief in its very possibility: that novels, or anything, might have the sorts of transformative powers I've ascribed to them. In that case, though, preserving our intellectual integrity would mean that we stop paying lip service to a notion of artistry in literature that no longer carries conviction. This would still leave us free to give ourselves over to the pleasures of leisure fiction (and journalism too), but without the bad faith.

There is another choice, of course. Rather than annul the art contract, we could try recommitting to it. That would mean expecting our best writers to push themselves to visionary heights, and expecting ourselves, as readers, to make the climb, not always easy, to meet them there. In the offing, perhaps, is that profound experience of art, for writer and reader both.

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