

1. Fiction—or more generally, longform narrative text—has long been the handyman of society and culture, serving whatever functions are most needed at a historical moment. The Greek oral tradition, famously, functioned in part to preserve cultural histories and customs—hence its sprawling lists of names and figures, its lengthy descriptions of hospitality, in Homer. Arabic maqamas synthesized and preserved the collected wisdom of the medieval Iberian peninsula through proverbs and fables. Victorian novels provided an escapist entertainment for members of the aristocracy, while the Bible, Quran, and Mahābhārata operated as normative unifiers.
2. We no longer need literature to provide heavily plotted absorption: drug-like escapism, the loss of ego, more easily come from other mediums. Likewise, our encyclopedias, our etiquette guides, our microfiche handle our cultural historiography just fine. Television, film, non-fiction, and the Internet spent the 20th century eating away at literature's territory, forcing the discipline to transform from generalist to specialist. The best literature of the modern day does what only literature can do—allow readers to squat and inhabit other minds, other worldviews, other consciousnesses.
3. The works that have proved most compelling in this 21st century—Ben Lerner's *10:04*, Maggie Nelson's intimate *Argonauts*, Tao Lin's anhedonic *Taipei*, Chris Kraus's resurrected *I Love Dick*—are all fundamentally concerned with representing a specific psychic space and outlook, with freezing them in time and then re-presenting them as coherent structures. When we thrill at the compulsion of a unique literary voice, what we really mean is we've encountered a novel, believable, lifelike consciousness in the wild. Franzen's *Freedom* was Dickensian, yes, but the reason it gripped contemporary readers was because it allowed them to slip from one mind into another, to alternate between and compare subjectivities, to inhabit a range of social roles. It adds up to an alternative teleological explanation for the agreed-upon shift in literary practice toward sincerity and tell-all, so frequently characterized as a metamodern response to PoMo's ironic distance, itself a response to modernism's commitment.
4. If we look to more banal examples of personal voice, generalizing the contemporary principle to "interiority baring" and intimate disclosure, Emily Gould, Elena Ferrante, Karl Ove Knausgaard immediately appear—in sum, the most influential writers of the past ten years. This is a more archetypally feminine style of writing, which happens, incidentally, to align with a influx of women into the book industry unprecedented since the epistolary novel. (The evocation is clear: epistolary form is fundamentally about the social, networked self.) Knausgaard, arguably literature's biggest sex icon of masculinity, is still operating within what is fundamentally a feminine paradigm—exceedingly intimate, detailed chroniclings of what it's like to occupy a psychic space. We can add to this list self-consciousness and anxiety, except they sport clear antecedents in the Jewish humor of the Upper West Side.

5. This alterity is often (sub)culturally determined: modern consciousness is inevitably formed under the pressures of subcultural niche, media consumption, and the significations of the gendered or racial self. Reflecting this, Lin's pseudo-fictional protagonists continually drink wheatgrass smoothies, ingest adderall, and have conversations on Google Chat. Nelson and Kraus use their work to build out personal canons of the intellectuals and artworks which have profoundly influenced their lives. Gould and *Gawker* were insider trading to native New Yorkers, but a form of cultural voyeurism for everyone else.
6. Woolf and Dostoevsky may have delved into the phenomenological experience of consciousness, but not into the specificity of different psyches, of different psychosocial gestalts, like the writing of today. To [cite Brian Evensen](#), it is a mode of storytelling which allows readers to experience a consciousness specifically outside their immediate realms of possibility.
7. In this new paradigm of fiction, "authenticity," intimacy, and disclosure—or at least the appearance of all these traits—become increasingly important. What we as readers are searching for is unfettered access, not shoddy simulacra. What else was the New Sincerity movement than the promise of exactly this? Long Gmail chat threads baring the way interesting personalities communicate in private; gut-churning disclosures of taboo interiorities and fucked-up impulses. A bridge to the great dilemma of Adam Sandler's character in *Punch-Drunk Love*, still the best Paul Thomas Anderson movie: "I don't know if there is anything wrong because I don't know how other people are."
8. One caveat to bear in mind: the psyche, the identity, is not just culturally determined but [inherently social](#). We are a specific identity in relation to a specific person, not independent of others. As a result, the writing which best captures, structures, freezes, a psyche, is often that which is addressed. Fiona Duncan: *Every book is a love letter. Most things I write are to an audience of one...* Kraus: *You feel like you have a secret addressee? I do too.*
9. The shift toward psyche-baring and consciousness voyeurism makes sense in a social context, even ignoring the technological arguments about medium and ecological niche. The counterculture of the midcentury gave way to the subcultural moment of the eighties, nineties, and oughts, which has given way in turn to a moment of identity fluidity. Identity mobility is orders of magnitude higher than ever before, a byproduct of atomization and digital connectivity. Is it surprising, then, that we are so enthralled with voyeuristically peering into other ways of seeing, other ways of communicating, other ways of existing in the world? Thus the inhabiting of consciousnesses, like a trying on of clothes.

10. (And of course, there is the matter of political perspectivism: it is convenient and probably not coincidental that we are witnessing, in leftist praxis, a simultaneous emphasis on situated perspective and subjectivity as a source of truth.)
11. It's not that literature in previous moments did not allow this kind of psychic connection, this mind inhabiting—humanities enthusiasts like Harold Bloom and Steven Pinker have made similar arguments in connection to empathy expansion and the progress of human morality—but in the past, this was one literary goal among many. Historical readers also went to fiction to learn about faraway countries, to escape their daily lives, to learn from and transmit continued chains of cultural knowledge.
12. Contemporary readers get these fixes elsewhere. What the book provides that no other medium can is the experience of slipping behind another set of eyes, another mass of neurons, to see the world and the self in a different way. Some of the great TV has moved, with some success, into the interior realm—HBO's *Girls* comes to mind with its depictions of intimacy and mental illness—but the gaze of the camera will never directly and organically capture interiority. For all the shortcomings of language in communicating an interior state, it is still the best tool at our disposal. There is, then, no need to water fiction down to the extent it historically has been. The great unburdening of fiction has begun.
13. Peli Grietzer has [argued](#) that the past hundred years have seen a shift toward vibe-centric arts, where a tight, aesthetically and philosophically vibey worldview pervades the text, expressed through cultural objects and phenomena which make up the author's personal canon. Evensen makes similar claims about prioritizing affect, "intensively conveyed by utterance," in his own writing. Might he be only partly correct? Might this vibe-centrism in fact be a byproduct of a shift toward espousal of personal worldview, the result of personal gestalt as literary practice?
14. As for criticism, at a certain point in contending with autobiographical autofiction we'll have to shed the pretense that we aren't encountering a person on the page. Readings of Freud and Jung will return to fashion; readings of the *DSM* will see a debutante. Ignore Barthes: coming literary works will be more appropriately interrogated through psychological analyses than the lit-theoretic formalism of the previous century. These texts' worldviews and ideologies, their themes and meanings, will be put on blatant view (rather than buried in need of unburial; rather than parabled or symbolized), which means that the "underlying text" in any work is not something *by* the author but the author *zirself*.
15. Perhaps this leads to the end of collective ideology.