

WHAT WE'RE ALL LOOKING FOR:

NOTES ON OUR REALITY HUNGER

David Shields

My book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* was published in February 2010. This essay distills what I hope are some of the book's most maddening provocations.

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, rear-guard review of my work ("Shields has betrayed the novel form," et cetera) 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 works 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 don't 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

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.

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 one inch 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. For example, 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 nar-

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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's 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 DeQuincey 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

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 a few summers ago of the lonelygirl15 phenomenon resided

rative (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 to a Beheading*, Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* foreground these issues by emphasizing their narrators' flawed processes of recollection. Especially, though, compare Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, a naïvely 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 recreate 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 compelling 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 backforming 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's *My Dinner with André*, Jonathan Safran Foer's "A 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. For example, 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 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 dream-world, 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 "The 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 autobiography, 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 *Eddie*. 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 Bouillier'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*

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GRAVEYARD SHIFT

Rick Campbell

Wrapped in glass, each night
I knew that I would die. Sea air
drifted in, coated the windows
of the self-serve gas station. I sat inside
on display: The Unfortunate Worker.
Alone, I sold coke,
cigarettes, gas, but really
the sign said kill me. Who
will know? Who will care?
No lights around. No other
stores. Dark. West
Riviera Beach, I-95. Kill
me tonight. Any night.
I listened to music. Walked.
Danced, then fell asleep.
Kill me. Each car that came in
could.

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 pre-packaged 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 quasi-memoir 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 ears 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, et cetera. 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. ☘

WHAT EVERYBODY IN THE ROOM KNOWS:

NOTES ON DAVID SHIELDS'S *REALITY HUNGER*

Bob Shacochis

{ 1 }

In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, David Shields articulates a credo for a burgeoning artistic movement he identifies in American culture, writers and artists who, in Shields's words, are "breaking larger and larger chunks of 'reality' into their work." Shields sent his book to me a year and a half ago. For about a month, I took it with me everywhere, even accidentally dropping it in the bathtub.

In his letter accompanying the manuscript he wrote: "I could see you liking it a lot or hating it." I wrote back to say that by the time I had finished *Reality Hunger*, I had not felt so exquisitely frustrated or wretchedly overstimulated since falling in love with a torture queen in high school.

{ 2 }

A brief description of the poststructuralist structure of *Reality Hunger*: the overall effect is manic, ADD-ish, like a macro-stutter, Twitterish sips chased by Big Gulp commentaries, not your conventional architecture or gait or cadence, no methodical Point A leads to Point B careful and steady onwardness. There's something gypsy-like about it, roving, peripatetic, impulsive. Is this an accurate reflection of your thought process or state of mind? Perhaps. But it doesn't seem far off from capturing the frenetic, improvisational state of mind of our churning culture, and it flirts with the prophecy, in Eliot's words, that we risk becoming a people "distracted from distraction by distraction." Myself, I feel more liberated by the discipline of structure, the way Flaubert felt more liberated by a sedentary bourgeois lifestyle, which he considered the ideal environment for a writer who wanted to let his imagination run around like a renegade.

{ 3 }

My mixed feelings here should please Shields, who agrees with Fitzgerald that "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Shields in fact loves the way two visions compete

against each other, the tension and irresolution created by opposing truths, especially, and I hope not exclusively, within a single consciousness. He writes in section 374: "Great art is clear thinking about mixed feelings." I still am not thinking quite clearly about the mixed feelings I have for *Reality Hunger*, although I am clear that most of the occasional bouts of antipathy I have for it are a visceral response to Shields as a nonfiction chauvinist with a nail gun in hand, banging down the coffin lid on the novel, especially BIG novels, like the one I've been writing since 2002.

{ 4 }

In section 419, Shields writes: "The composition of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance." At 540 pages, I'm about two thirds of the way through my novel. I am, it seems, a creator of doorstops. My first novel clocked in at more than 800 manuscript pages. Honestly, I could not tell you what it was about in a few minutes. It was never evident to me what it was about until I read the jacket copy. I know this sounds disingenuous, or just plain lazy, but it's really a joke I tell on myself about being a prisoner in the windowless cell of my intuition and instinct—in short, my subconsciousness, and in my everyday life, my subconsciousness can't even be trusted to answer the phone. To the best of my self-knowledge, my consciousness and subconsciousness are not a great team. According to Shields, "A better course of procedure is to pretend that these books already exist and then offer a resumé, a commentary." Being exhausted and impoverished from my labor, I find this idea immensely appealing, as long as I still get paid.

{ 5 }

About Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, Shields says: "I couldn't read that book if my life depended on it. It might be a good novel or it might be a bad novel, but something has happened to my imagination which can no longer yield to the earnest embrace of novelistic form." I need to ask, whose problem is this, Shields's or the novel's? If I don't enjoy Broadway musicals, does that mean there's something intrinsically wrong with the genre? Of course, that's not the point. The point embodies a question: does a genre have the capacity to contribute anything original and provocative and stimulating to a culture? That's a fair question, isn't it? But my counterpoint would be this: can't we also measure a genre's value by what it helps sustain in a culture? Or, when a genre simply preserves, rather than innovates, is it time for it to get out of the way?

{ 6 }

Section 561: "If literary terms were about artistic merit and not the rules of convenience, about achievement and not safety, the term 'realism' would be an honorary one, conferred on work that actually builds unsentimental reality on the page, that matches the complexity of life with an equally rich arrangement in language. It would be assigned no matter the stylistic or linguistic method, no matter the form. This, alas, would exclude many writers who believe themselves to be realistic, most notably those who seem to equate writing with operating a massive Karaoke machine."

You know, I mostly agree with the position here, and since Shields admires writers who aren't afraid to embarrass themselves blurting out shit no one else will say, I want to say that there are times, as a reader, that I take great comfort in sentimental reality. If you're not cynical or ironic, it seems you are, by default, simply sentimental. Maybe you even think life is a beautiful gift that merits your gratitude. That tendency, too, I think is part of being real. I can't quite see how it makes me, or life, less complex. My emotions don't have to be intelligent. They just have to be emotions, messages from my metabolism. To suggest that emotions can be high-minded is a high-minded fallacy, although they can certainly be immature. It's the universality of emotions that fuels a writer's rocket ship. Or submarine.

{ 7 }

Why does anybody write? Because they have a fundamental problem with silence. Because they can't shut up, really, their blessed noise a type of antidote to their ready-made graves. Because every society finds immeasurable value in expression and, more to the point, shaped expression, especially at the grassroots level of storytelling, and up the ladder of culture

I NEED TO ASK, WHOSE PROBLEM IS THIS, SHIELDS'S OR THE NOVEL'S?

and civilization to collective/tribal, national, global myth-making. And as Jim Harrison tells us, there are no old myths, only new people. Perhaps the primary role of the writer is to update the myths and traditions of our humanity for the newcomers. Finding original ways to do this is welcome but not of the greatest importance. The process begins most intimately with this bedtime request: Daddy, tell me a story. Not Daddy, tell me your thoughts. Mostly, Mommy and Daddy tell you what they think without having to ask, until you ask bigger, better, more probing questions—Daddy, what do you think about Mommy's adultery? But in the larger sense of continuity and community, we ask for stories. We crave stories. We live and die stories. To ask the question *What happens next?* is to proclaim *I am alive, I want to be alive, let me stay alive long enough to know how everything turns out.* When you stop asking *What happens next?* you're dead.

As for plot or drama—the logic of a story—once we all agree that real life abounds with narrative, it's not a bad idea to admit that crisis reveals the foundation, the core precepts, of a character (or, for that matter, a family or a nation) better than anything else. Much better, at least, than a person sitting comfortably in Starbucks daydreaming about important things—reality, doubt, art, et cetera. Which is not to say that reflection and meditation are in any way worthless or trivial.

{ 8 }

Section 563: "Urgency attaches itself now more to the tale taken directly from life than one fashioned by the imagination out of life." Urgency seems anathema to the panorama of literature and art and to the luxurious act of reading itself, even if there is a divine urgency in

any writer at any time, seized by the passion of creation, to get the words out, the ideas down, and, certainly, an urgency to share with another what you have just discovered, such as a great book. This urgency I have as a reader, but, as a writer, at least since my undergraduate days, I have lost any intimate, natural familiarity with it, unless I take drugs to make me speed up—and if you find this pathetic, you're not alone:

so do I. On the other hand, both Shields and I agree that with a real-life first-person narrator, a display of the flawed self—sprinkled with genuine self-effacement and self-mockery—is endearing, or at least it's intended to be, unless you're a cynic and compelled to identify vulnerability as a clever trick of the trade, and the trade, Shields and I both agree—although we arrive at our agreement invested in different commodities and speaking different vernaculars—whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, is masquerade. I find nothing wrong with this notion of masquerade, which we can deconstruct into lying, invention, and artifice.

{ 9 }

Sometimes the world only fits together through contradictions.

{ 10 }

Section 292: "Conventional fiction teaches the reader that life is a coherent, fathomable whole that concludes in neatly wrapped-up revelation. Life, though—standing on a street corner, channel surfing, trying to navigate the web or a declining relationship, hearing that a close friend died last night—flies at us in bright splinters." Yes, life does fly at us sometimes in bright splinters, and other times it just sits on us like a hippopotamus, but you're playing a zero-sum game here between life and fiction, and I can only reemphasize what I feel is the greater truth: life and art are not the same, and conventional fiction doesn't teach us that life is coherent and fathomable but instead allows us to indulge in the illusion that life is a coherent, fathomable whole. Why is this important? As the writer I mentioned before said, life is otherwise unbearable. My friend Murray



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Gell-Mann, who won a Nobel Prize in physics for discovering quarks, believes all life in the universe is a matter of coincidence rather than design, trillions and trillions of bright splinters colliding endlessly over the eons until here we are, the accident of us. If that's true, and Murray's only guessing, I still prefer the illusion that it is not.

{ 11 }

The exquisite paradox of fiction is that it provides us with a venue where we can be seduced by what's true while at the same time remaining indifferent to what's real.

{ 12 }

Section 571: "There is more to be pondered in the grain and texture of life than traditional fiction allows. The work of essayists is vital precisely because it permits and encourages self-knowledge in a way that is less indirect than fiction, more open and speculative." I generally agree with this sentiment, but the problem described here is a problem with sensibility and voice, not form. The tradition of realism is more at issue here than the tradition of fiction. Plus, who says self-knowledge is the goal of fiction? Losing yourself is the point, having your brain sucked out and replaced with some other consciousness. Fiction, like much good art, says, *Wait a minute, enough about you.*

{ 13 }

I'm certain that no one would ever mistake my novels for barely disguised essays, but I'm also certain those novels have tried, through dramatization, to figure something out about the world. In my first novel, I was obsessed with where and how and why things—things!—found their genesis, so I was constantly restarting the narrative as part of the thematic strategy of the book. Begin here, I would say, and one hundred pages later I would say, No, begin here, pushing backward into the endless chain of an event's precedents, trying to track down the full sequencing of cause and effect—the effect being known, the cause or causes more elusive. This is, of course, an impossible and sometimes ridiculous task, excavating your way back in Michener-esque fashion to the big bang. In my second novel, I'm obsessed with endings. For instance, once you have a clear idea of where hate began, where does hate end,

and how does it end? With forgiveness? I used to think so, but now I'm not so sure. Look at the movie *The Reader*, for instance. It is not about forgiveness but empathy, which does not exist except through the imagination, which is also the only way love exists. I probably could figure these things out just as well in a poem or an essay, though perhaps the result wouldn't be so ... entertaining.

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Sections 574 and 581: "The kinds of novels I like are ones which bear no traces of being novels." "Once upon a time there will be readers who won't care what imaginative writing is called and will read it for its passion, its force of intellect, and for its formal originality." Hasn't this always been the case? It's the idea of formal originality that troubles me. Originality must prove itself within a context of coherence—temporal, spatial, logical zones that make sense. You can't keep breaking and rearranging form into so many pieces or contortions before it becomes formlessness, brokenness that is not art but wild spent energy. Collage has its limits, limits set by the discipline of a cohesive aesthetic. Juxtapositions, Shields agrees, need to be manipulated through artifice, through selection, through editing. One can't reasonably expect serendipity out of every thrown-together moment on the page or the stage or the canvas. Originality still comes in a finite package. Shields proclaims often that he is bored by fiction. What I'm mostly bored by is newness—I harbor a decidedly un-American distaste or indifference or skepticism for the patriotic cult of growth and progress. I find the past much more instructive in helping me grasp the present and newness an addiction that quickly overwhelms memory and legacy. Newness qua newness is a disease. The pathological need for relentless novelty.

{ 15 }

Section 575: "Only the suspect artist starts from the art; the true artist draws his material elsewhere: from himself. There's only one thing worse than boredom—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 even believe in it. The genre, having squandered its substance, no longer has an object. The character is dying out; the

plot too. It's no accident that the only novels deserving of interest today are precisely those novels in which, once the universe is disbanded, nothing happens—*Tristram Shandy*, *Notes from the Underground*, all of Thomas Bernhard, Camus's *The Fall*, Duras's *The Lover*, Barry Hannah's *Boomerang*." A universe disbanded and static? I confess I'm at a loss when I try to comprehend the appeal of entropy, the antithesis of bright splinters flying.

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Many thoughtful writers and critics like Shields assume there's a cultural disconnect between literature and the public, between books and the way we live. Is that true, do you think? Is it true that fiction is dying, that as a traditional form it has no significance anymore to the way we try to engage with experience? But everyone in this room, and outside this room, knows a vital fact about human nature—you need someone to tell your stories to. The definition of being alone in life starts and ends here: no one to listen, no one to hear, no one to receive. Doesn't it? The definition of being alone, or maybe even of being insane, is being stuck with only yourself as the audience for your stories ... which is a categorically different state of affairs than being stuck with yourself as the audience for your own thoughts and feelings (if you even know them). And the inevitable conclusion of this understanding leads to the acknowledgment, once again, that writing, no matter the intensity and depth of its solitude, is an act motivated by community, the sharing of experience, a gift to cast out the dread and confusion of our aloneness, or worse, our emptiness.

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The part of me that writes fiction is pretty much unrecognizable to me, and it's always interesting to find out from a reader what they found out about me from reading my work. I'm playing a multitude of roles, separate from myself, and yet undeniably of myself. Here's a great way to distinguish between Shields and me, between nonfiction and fiction, and between me as a nonfiction writer and me as a fiction writer. Section 455: "Johnny Carson, asked to describe the difference between himself and Robert Redford, said, 'I'm playing me.'"

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Perhaps it's time to talk harmoniously about how what makes us distinct as writers is also, paradoxically, a space, a bridge where we share common ground in the masquerade. The blurring of genre, like the blurring of gender, seems natural and inevitable and makes sense, given the fact that some writers, like some people, are born to mix things up, inhabit more than one thing, identity, self simultaneously. Neither genre nor gender is cut-and-dried. Nor is reality, I might add, but, of course, reality isn't a genre, it's an elaborate menu. As embryonic writers, we don't know what it is we're writing—whatever it's called is not important. Little by little, we study and learn genre and form, just as we study and learn craft, and then we're sent on our creative way to figure out what works best for us as writers, where we want to plant our flags and make a stand.

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I went to college to study journalism, worked as an in-the-trenches journalist, despaired of my fate as an in-the-trenches journalist, went back to school to study creative writing, wrote and then began publishing short stories, was offered a contract by a venerable New York publisher for a story collection (with the caveat that I subsequently provide them with a novel—a promise that terrified me because I had no intention of writing novels), started taking phone calls—after the collection was published—from editors at glossy national general-interest magazines asking if I would be interested in doing nonfiction for them—Yes!—spent ten years writing the novel I didn't want to write and also running around the world with *carte blanche* from the major magazines (because I needed the cash flow and hungered for adventure), accepted a job as the food columnist for *GQ* magazine (because I was living in a tent and broke), quit the columnist job to cover the invasion of Haiti for *Harper's Magazine*, stupidly accepted a proposal from my publisher to write a nonfiction book about the invasion, finished the book in debt (as if I had paid Viking/Penguin for the honor of writing the book), went to Russia and the Himalayas and Kosovo and the Caribbean for journalism gigs, got seriously depressed for a shitload of very good depressing reasons, got off the road, and, in 2002, decided all I wanted to do with the

rest of my life was write novels. Not because I was terribly ambitious, but because the part of me that was a fiction writer, more or less dormant since the mid-nineties, had ascended once again, and, to my surprise, my imagination, the scope of the storytelling I envisioned, no longer seemed suited to the short form. The point is, I never fell deeply in love with one form or another, never felt myself a hostage of form or genre, until I found myself, at this advanced stage, surrendering to the novel (and the decision was utilitarian not evaluative). Instead I sluttishly bed-hopped from one to another as this form or that genre seemed better suited to what was going on in my life at any particular time. Whether that virtuosity makes me a greater artist or a lesser artist I could not say. It never occurred to me that one form or serious genre might be better equipped for getting at reality or realness than another. Each form has its own purpose, its own aesthetic, its own audience. Each is a representational slice of the pie of life on earth. If you want reality, eat the whole pie, although I think to do this you have to die.

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When I'm interviewed, this question always comes up: "So, Bob, what do you like better, writing fiction or nonfiction?" It's like being asked for a favorite love-making position—why do I have to choose? I customarily answer with an admittedly glib riddle: when I get tired of telling lies I like to tell the truth; when I get tired of telling the truth I like to tell lies. When the interviewer asks which is which, I have to shrug and say I don't know, it depends upon the angle of observation. Why this and not that, since both genres have provided equally welcome homes to my writer's voice and sensibilities? Forever I will be torn between the two, fiction and nonfiction, novels and essays (public and personal), marriage and promiscuity, living an imaginary life internally and bearing witness to the firehose-in-your-face blast of the external, between invention and reportage, between the profound truths that spin out of elegant lies and the profoundly damaging lies that are the inevitable spawn of inauthentic truths. For some writers, both this and that, you might agree, are spellbinding. Here's Shields again: "The poles of fiction and nonfiction are constantly bouncing their force

fields back and forth between each other. What I want is the real world, with all its hard edges, but the real world fully imagined and fully written, not merely reported." I couldn't agree more, as long as we both agree as well that as writers we are trying to express what's ultimately ineffable, except to maniacs or saints: reality, that most controversial and diverse aspect of human existence. What is the taste of sugar? Sweet. What is sweet? What does an orgasm feel like? Fabulous. What is the feeling of fabulous? You can throw bundles of language at these questions and still not arrive at reality.

{ 21 }

I wrote *The Immaculate Invasion*, my chronicle of the occupation of Haiti by U.S. troops during the nineties, in the first person, so readers might have the opportunity to better judge what I had to say by their understanding of who they thought I was. In a review on the front page of the Washington Post Book World, I was told by the reviewer to, quote, Get the hell out of the story, Bob. It's not about you. End quote. Well, I know the story's not about me, but it does matter who's doing the seeing and the telling. It matters a lot whether it's me or Dick Cheney telling the story, whether we both employ first-person narrators or submerge ourselves in a more so-called objective point of view. And my question is both existential and moral: exactly how do I remove myself from the story, pal? Pretending I'm not in the room doesn't change the fact that I'm in the room.

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Camus: "There are kinds of sincerity so confused that they are worse than lies." I would add objectivity to this insight: there are kinds of objectivity so confused they are worse than lies.

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The emergence of Shields's most cherished form, the lyrical essay, sounds a lot like the emergence of multi-racialness, multi-culturalness, and wherever we look at contemporary society we find this aggressive blurring of genres and traditions and categories, this cross-breeding of identity and possibility that leads to a neutralization of form—or perhaps a better way to say this is a democritization of form—and it must be obvious to you by now that the reason two genres like fiction and

nonfiction have a proclivity to blur together is because truth and lies, facts and fancy, black and white, share the same inclination: to seep through each other's boundaries.

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A few weeks ago, I received an email from a friend who is writing a memoir about the decades she lived in Kathmandu. She wanted to send me a better version of a manuscript she'd previously sent me, and she said that in this new version she had "tried to be nicer about Tim" (her second husband). I wrote back to say that even before reading the revised version I thought being nicer about Tim would simply be being nicer about Tim—it would not alter my impression of his words and deeds, which, I'm afraid, make him, in my impression of him, the type of person I cannot abide, even for a moment, no matter whatever positive traits he possesses. What you have shown me of him through your writing, I said, I'm afraid cannot be redeemed.

She wrote back to say: "Yes, yes, I know, but isn't that kind of a moral dilemma? My writing him in that way makes him unredeemable, though of course it is as seen through my eyes in that time, and maybe it's really somebody who in that moment is freaking out and not coping because the whole thing is just too big and they just don't have what it takes to handle it. ... Words are so indelible. I guess that's the advantage of disguising stuff in a novel. I actually don't want to make Tim solidly into this utter jerk. Even though he may have been one, it is not necessarily who he is now, or will be in the future."

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How, then, to determine the Truth about this guy Tim? Impossible, mostly, but one thing is certain: if you just let Tim act and speak, any reader can interpret and judge those actions and utterances for herself, without the spin of a writer's commentary or analysis. That fact alone plays to the advantage of traditional narrative prose and realism, although, to be perfectly honest here, I struggle mightily in my nonfiction workshops to wean students from the compulsion to show, don't tell. They are wary of telling, I suspect, because then the burden of Truth is stripped from characters and action and lands squarely on the shoulders of the

teller, the first-person narrator, which means it's incumbent upon the writer to figure out who she is, why she might have married someone with such a fucked-up cosmology in the first place. Sooner or later, the facts about Tim begin to inform the truth about the narrator. My friend was astute enough to get this without me having to point it out. She wrote to say that she was already intuiting that the next part of the story, her relationship with Tim and his

was a sexist pig. "Who are you and where did you get this notion?" I asked her. She said that she had heard me read, and now she could see clearly who I was. I admitted the male character in the scene I'd read had big problems relating to women, but the character wasn't me. "Hah!" she said. "You wrote the character, and how could you successfully write a sexist character if you weren't a sexist yourself?" A friend of mine, a retired special agent with the FBI who

which means the reverse image. As a nonfiction writer, I shape myself to the task at hand, which means, inescapably, that the whole of me is put forth by one or two of my many parts. In either case, much like with truth and reality, there seems to exist an obstacle to the pure communication of a pure self, an innate conundrum centered at the heart of identity and credibility ... both manufactured traits. A deft liar, as you know, can be extremely credible. Okay, then, says Shields, forget about it, feel free to do what existence itself does, which is mix it all up, as artfully as possible. Embrace Stephen Colbert's notion of *truthiness*—just don't run for office or become a mainstream journalist. Let the genres do what they ontologically do anyway, which is bleed into one another, and why not? Invent in nonfiction (but judiciously), report in fiction (but artfully). Since there's going to be a problem regardless ... what's the problem? Or to quote Colette's friend and fellow author, Jean Cocteau: *I am a lie that always speaks the truth.*

I SLUTTISHLY BED-HOPPED FROM ONE TO ANOTHER AS THIS FORM OR THAT GENRE SEEMED BETTER SUITED TO WHAT WAS GOING ON IN MY LIFE AT ANY PARTICULAR TIME.

male darkness about sex and money and power, was going to be the hardest part to probe, since it steered directly toward what she called her own fucked-up cosmology. I've seen that darkness, she said, and, of course, the most disturbing part of all is how a woman gets drawn into that darkness. What is it in a woman's psyche, she now had to ask herself, that allows that to happen?

Making yourself vulnerable—risking criticism or ostracism, playing with the fire of exposure—seems a virtue, but how vulnerable will you actually allow yourself to be, and what happens if, in terms of creating art, the best literature you could possibly create is also an expression of everything wrong and hideous and ugly about you? Do you want to throw yourself on that pyre? You can't be naive or cynical about these issues, can you?

Anyway, to get closer to the reality of the relationship between these two people, we need to hear from as many witnesses as we can, beginning with Tim. But memoir, by its very nature, never reaches this threshold of reality—instead it settles for verisimilitude, which makes it easy for me to agree with Shields that, by its own terms, we can call a memoir fiction. The boundaries established to separate fact from fiction are merely boundaries established to create the illusion of a separation between fact and fiction.

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Come on, now—what is the truth? As writers, we're stalked by this question even off the page. The last time I read from one of my novels at Bennington, a female student accosted me later that evening and told me I

provides the prototype for another character in this novel, was amazed, after reading the first half of the manuscript, that I had the balls to write so nakedly about my marriage. When my wife read the same pages, she told me she found them deeply disturbing, but she was relieved and grateful that the portrayal wasn't based on us. Another friend of mine, Jane, at a dinner a few years ago, told me she had just finished reading my nonfiction book *Domesticity: A Gastronomic Interpretation of Food and Love*; although she enjoyed it, she wanted me to know that, based on what she'd learned from reading the book, she could never live with an asshole like me. I'd frequently heard this assumption—that I was an asshole—from many people who had read *Domesticity*. "Wait a minute, Jane," I said. "I wrote the book. If I'd wanted to make myself look like the perfect companion, I could have done that, too." Instead, I made myself a perfect foil to my wife, because the book was more entertaining that way. It was my choice, after all, to thrust forward a self that most suited the particular narrative I had shaped to make what I hoped was a good book. I really needed Bob the Asshole to step forward here and take a bullet for me.

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In fiction, how do we know what's autobiography or not, and why is it so important to know? Even when we pretend successfully to be someone else, our imagination can be evicted from the process, and we stand accused of simply trying to disguise our "real" self. How different is this dynamic from the one we encounter with nonfiction? Not very different at all. In fact, it's the mirror image,

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This essay is on the verge, or perhaps has already passed the verge, of being unmanageable, because, like velcro or spiderwebs, everything sticks to it. For instance, obituaries—I wish I had the time to talk about obituaries right now. Or *The Wire*.

This conversation I've struck up with Shields has neither beginning nor end. The way Shields formatted *Reality Hunger*, using the alphabet and numbering, and the way I've mimicked that formatting in this presentation, is like a joke Shields runs with—even as he references classical models for the technique—a parody on the ideas of structure and form and order. Despite the facade of control, life gushes in, "one damn thing after another, unpatterned, unplotted," spraying everywhere through the interstices in *Reality Hunger*, erudite and off-the-cuff, passionately reasoned and foot-in-the-mouth, rambunctious banter on a blind date with calculated polemics, and everything is relevant, pertinent, apropos, and, likewise, in dispute, in contention, in play. Postmodernism gone hyper, with a voracious appetite for the world. And what, for writers, could be a more fertile, a more felicitous state of affairs than that? ☘