Four Sour and Stringent Proposals for the Novel; or, The Unambitious Contemporary Novel

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Long before writing fiction began to absorb my time, to the point that I ended up arranging my teaching and my career so I could accommodate longer hours in coffee shops, I was an art historian. Back in graduate school, before I had any notion that the challenges and pleasures of fiction might someday loom so large that they could actually displace my career, I was struck by a book on the subject of linear perspective written by a French art historian, Hubert Damisch. Instead of thanking people who had helped him, or talking about the art he loved, he opened with the line, "This book was born of impatience."[1]

Even though I have set aside much of my professional career in order to make time for writing and studying novels, my motivation, like Damisch's, is often negative. I'm occasionally energized and inspired by authors I love, but mainly my imagination works differently. When I'm reading, I find it helpful to think about what I would have done if I were the author. After I've finished a novel, I often spend a day trying to understand why I wouldn't have written the book I just read. I make notes, which tend to turn the novels I've read into case studies. They have themes, like "What is genuine weirdness?," "How do you know when to stop reading an author?," and "When the author clearly knows things the narrator doesn't."[2] These short essays have worked as warning signs for me, like KEEP OFF THE GRASS or NO SWIMMING: DANGEROUS CURRENTS. They reminded me where I didn't

1 Damisch, *Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (MIT Press, 1994), xiii.

2 The reading diary is mainly posted on Goodreads (tinyurl.com/elkinsreviews).

A novel can be like the most interesting person at a party, the one who sits at the bar looking glamorous and ignoring everyone.

want my own fictions to go. There were certainly some authors I loved, but that only made them more dangerous in my eyes. I'd learned from art history how treacherous it can be for an artist to emulate another artist. As any artist knows, when you're working you don't want to stop to theorize, and for years, it was enough to keep the writing diary. It showed me with increasing clarity what I did not like, what I wanted to avoid. Now that my own novel is finally finished, I've been able to look back at the hundreds of short essays I wrote and gather recurrent themes.[3] The result is this list of four things I think contemporary novels can try to do.

This sort of essay, in which a writer proposes a manifesto of sorts, or tries to sum up the entire unruly and diverse scene of contemporary fiction, is itself a recurring trait of the literary world. Some years ago, Tim Parks started a productive controversy by claiming that some novelists—he named Haruki Murakami, among others—wrote an intentionally simple form of their language so they their novels could be quickly translated into English and compete on international markets. He called the result "the dull new global novel."[4] A few years earlier, Zadie Smith had proposed "Two Paths for the Novel," complaining that "a new breed of lyrical Realism" had held sway, and needed to be avoided in favor of another sense of the self: more discontinuous, and less available to confessions and epiphanies.[5] More recently the novelist David Shields wrote *Reality Hunger*, a manifesto for collage realism that undercut itself by including a number of contradictory claims—half of them written by other people.[6] A quality shared by these and other manifestos and declarations is dissatisfaction, impatience, with the current state of affairs. This essay is no different in that regard, although my contribution comes from a little farther outside the literary

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3 My novel is divided into three freestanding volumes. One (actually it's volume 3) will appear as *Weak in Comparison to Dreams* (Unnamed Press, LA) in November 2023.

4 Parks, "The Dull New Global Novel," *New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2010.

5 Smith, "Two Paths for the Novel," *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2008; and see David Haglund, "The Long Shadow of 'Two Paths for the Novel'," *The New Yorker*, February 7, 2015. The idea of casting doubt on the conventional novel's capacity to capture discontinuities of consciousness is really only a call for a return to modern and postmodern strategies of discontinuity, which have been practiced since Woolf, Stein, and Joyce, and which are pursued by many contemporary novelists, from Eimear McBride and Mike McCormack to Ali Smith and Lucy Ellmann. Marcie Frank, in "The Novel in Two Parts," *The Rambling*, May 17, 2019, suggests that the two strains have come together.

6 Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, Knopf, 2010.

community: I have a longer historical range in mind here, and I am less engaged by current interests in ethnic and other representations. It matters, too, that I am socially distant from the world of literary social media, which tends to both propose and dispose the terms of its arguments. What I have to say here is, I suppose necessarily, sometimes distant from current conversations about the novel.

A note before I start: these points are peppered with quotations from the literary critic Steve Mitchelmore, whose site, "This Place of Writing," is a source for unrepentantly radical criteria for writing. Thanks to a correspondence from around 2016 to around 2018, which ended in the only possible way, with his silence to my last rejoinder, my own novel changed fundamentally.[7]

1. Novels aren't about real life. One of the commonplaces of criticism is that novels can be the best places to learn about the world, because they offer imaginative access, empathy, and a sense of lived experience. This is true in anti-realist positions such as conceptual writing and realist projects like Shields's. Novels are said to open our eyes to other identities, show us the world from the perspectives of people we've never known. From novels we learn what it's like to walk out of Sudan to save yourself, to live in a conflicted Hindu-Muslim community, to be queer in a conservative Laotian family in Minnesota, or to be a woman of color and suffer from the daily thoughtless prejudices of white Americans.

I don't want to dispute any of that. The world needs more imaginative empathy, and novels are one of the best ways to get it, along with film and travel. Enlarging the world is something novels do, but I don't think it's what they are best at. Here is the strongest, simplest way to think differently about this topic. It's a line from the Australian novelist Gerald Murnane: "I cannot recall having believed, even as a child, that the purpose of reading fiction was to learn about the place commonly called the real world."[8]

An amazing thought. Think of Rembrandt: he had exceptional skill at rendering dusky interiors, furs, ruffles, and jewelry, light falling obliquely across skin. But he had another skill, which is the reason he's in museums: the capacity to represent inwardness, what German critics call *Innerlichkeit.* The people in his paintings are

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7 Mitchelmore, "This Space of Writing" (this-space.blogspot.com, 2000-present), which is also excerpted in a book (tinyurl.com/mitchelmorebook). The quotations here are with his permission; they're mainly from our correspondence.

8 He says this in many ways in many texts, over and over like a mantra, and he worries about it. In "Landscape with Freckled Woman," he first says "I was privileged to see what no one else could see: all that I had to do as a writer was to describe the far-reaching vistas and the intricate topography continually before my eyes… I need not be curious about what were called real people…" and on the next page he lists the sorts of things writers concerned with "real people" might describe, but then he wonders whether he has used his sense of writing "to console myself for failing to see what others saw quite clearly." "Landscape with Freckled Woman," *Landscape with Landscape* (Sydney University Press, 1985), 2-3.

pensive, they're working out some problem, remembering something from their past. Some scholars doubt that, and wonder whether Rembrandt put on a show of profundity for his clients. In this context it doesn't matter. What counts is that Rembrandt's skill at making us think about thoughtfulness is more important than his ability to paint naturalistic portraits.

Or think of Murnane's idea this way. It's easy to teach a dog to fetch or sit, but tricks are only one of its behaviors. A dog is a complex social animal, capable of what we call loyalty but might as well call love. Valuing novels for the social information they contribute, as many literary prizes do, is like judging dogs for fetching. It's true that "novelists can provide insights about society that pundits and experts miss," as the critic Adam Kirsch said of Michel Houellebecq, and when those insights include social violence, then reading novelists can be "more urgent than ever."[9] But if Houellebecq has done interesting things with the novel, providing insights about European society is not one of them.

American fiction in particular is often thought to be about bringing "news from a distinct corner of American" life, as Dwight Garner once said of Tommy Orange. From fall 2018 to fall 2019, I read the fiction installment in *The New Yorker* each month for twelve months. All but one of the selections taught readers about some corner of American life they may not have known: conservative Korean immigrants to California, Turkish families, Armenian immigrants, an East Asian couple dating by Skype. Literary prizes and best-seller lists show that novels are often places people go to learn about people they don't know: Orhan Pamuk illuminates Turkish urban and rural society, Smith tells us about social configurations in the U.K., Jonathan Franzen reports on the North American middle class. As Parks has said, magic realism gave many North Americans and Europeans their ideas about South America, even though it represented that continent in a peculiarly textureless fashion, without allowing readers to see differences between Colombia, say, and Peru.

Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* was generally reviewed as a story about a privileged New Yorker, and critics praised it as a narrative of depression that can be applied to many social contexts. But in a 2021 *Bookforum* survey Moshfegh wrote, "I wish that future novelists would reject the pressure to write for the betterment of society. Art is not media… We need novels that live in an amoral universe, past the political agenda described on social media. We have imaginations for a reason."[10] That was a nicely contrarian opinion in the context of the *Bookforum* survey, which was titled

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9 Kirsch's subject was Houellebecq's misogyny and its connection to incels. *New York Times Book Review*, July 5, 2018, p. 17.

10 *Bookforum*, June/July/August 2021; tinyurl.com/moshfeghbookforum.

A complex novel is one that keeps you wondering, keeps you working to understand what the author thinks they're doing, and does not ever answer your questions.

"What forms of art, activism, and literature can speak authentically today?" but it is still a long way from Murnane. It's one thing to cast doubt on the use of novels to argue ethical positions. It's another to refuse the temptation to report on the world.

As much as I'm interested in learning about the world by reading novels, I'm more intrigued by what novels can do other than reporting. Murnane's an extreme case, but he is fundamentally correct: novels do many irreplaceable things, but the most important, the capacity that isn't shared by any other medium, is the ability to weave imagination with logic, memory with reasoning, producing a sort of complexity I'll try to define in the last heading. It's a pity to keep asking such a complex medium to perform simple tricks, or to behave like a newspaper or a diary. I agree with Mitchelmore when he says fiction is most challenging when it's doing something other than "engaging readers with... information." If you're a writer, and you want to tell people about your life, your culture, or your identity, by all means do, but keep in mind that novels have a different capacity.

2. A novel should not be "careful, cautious and professional" as Mitchelmore also says. In the wake of McSweeney's and the collection *MFA vs NYC*, there is a fair consensus about what "professional" literary fiction is.[11] The "MFA style" is capacious: it can accommodate the full range of new subjects and settings, but it's typically well crafted, with unimprovable word choices, polished turns of phrase, carelessly skillful descriptions, well-managed elisions and ellipses, knowingly tweaked narrative lines, and sharp, pared-down dialogue. It does whatever it does with full assurance, protected by a hard veneer of competence. Workshop stories are "nice, cautious, [and] boring," as David Foster Wallace put it back in 1988. They're "as tough to find technical fault with as they are to remember after putting them down."[12] Erik Hoel notes the minimalist quality of much current fiction:

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11 *MFA vs NYC*: Two Cultures of American Fiction, edited by Chad Harbach (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

12 Wallace, "The Fictional Future," reprinted in *MFA vs NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction*, edited by Chad Harbach, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014; and see Andrew Martin, "'MFA vs NYC': Both, Probably," *The New Yorker*, March 28, 2014.

> Workshop-trained writers are often, not always, but often, intrinsically defensive. This single fact explains almost all defining features of contemporary literature. What you're looking at on the shelf are not so much books as battlements. Consider the minimalism of many current novels, their brevity—all to shrink the attack surface. Oh, the prose is always well-polished, with the occasional pleasing turn of phrase, but never distinctive, never flowery nor reaching.[13]

This minimalism is very different from the one I teach in art history. Those artists—Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin—produced large, unexpected, often awkward and intrusive objects. Hoel is right that the anonymized surfaces and generic content of the new prose minimalism, as well as the masks of autofiction, can be understood as defenses: in autofiction, the author isn't accountable, because they can't ever quite be found.

The "professional" style isn't a matter of who has an MFA and who doesn't; that notion was nicely disproven in a study by Richard Jean So and Andrew Piper.[14] But it can be clearly felt in a reading of literary journals, especially those associated with universities. During the last ten years I've read, and often subscribed, to 153 different journals that publish fiction. That list is probably about half the number of English-language literary journals that aren't exclusively poetry. It's a daunting ocean of writing. Here's just the letter P, from my spreadsheet: *Pank, Paperbag, Paris Review, Penn Review, Place, Ploughshares, Poets and Writers, Popula, Porter House Review, Prairie Fire, Psychopomp, A Public Place, The Puritan.* Pretty much an impossible reading assignment, especially because the spreadsheet needs constant revision as small journals come and go.[15] My ten years of reading didn't give me a sense of uniformity. Some journals focus on regional literature, others nourish older styles and voices or are nostalgic or sentimental, and a few are determinedly experimental. But there is a style that comes through the haze of voices. It's writing that's smooth, assured, untroubled by awkwardness, with a minimum of technical faults, off-kilter phrases, or unaccountable lapses in tone. In short: it's workshopped, professionalized.

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13 Hoel, "How the MFA Swallowed Literature," 2021, tinyurl.com/erikhoel. Hoel adds: "Even the use of first-person, so ubiquitous now, is defensive, for it protects you from getting the inner life of someone unlike yourself wrong."

14 So and Piper. "How Has the MFA Changed the Contemporary Novel?," *The Atlantic*, March 6, 2016, online.

15 There are online services such as semrush.com that show the number of visitors on different websites, and that can be helpful to distinguish very small magazines from mid-range ones. During one month, *The Paris Review* had over 750,000 visitors, *Ploughshares* had 90,000, and *Prairie Fires* less than 3,000. The services I've tried have thresholds beneath which numbers aren't collected.

In part I'm describing the kind of form-filling that Shields polemicized against in *Reality Hunger*, but it is also the professionalism of several generations of writers who have come out of MFA programs and been shaped by residencies, workshops, and conferences. It's a difficult tide to swim against. Anti-professionalism, well-judged lapses, deliberate awkwardness, odd and quirky plotlines, and surrealist fantasies are not enough to escape the prison house of workshopping. In my own field of academic writing, there's a similar interest in rule-breaking and innovation, and a similar despondency about the mills of higher education and their increasing fidelity to just a few universities. There isn't an easy answer, and it's been said that academic uniformity is the air our age has chosen to breathe. But it's always possible to keep an eye on your imaginary reader for signs of unease. If they can read what you write without being upset or seriously confused, or if they keep nodding their head and smiling, then what you write might be more careful and cautious than you think.

3. A novel need not provide good companionship.

For many millions of readers, novels are company, solace, escape, entertainment. You might be afraid to have a life like a character in a novel, but you can understand enough of what they experience to feel things along with them. Even bad characters become companions. A novel can keep you company like nobody's business.

Sometimes, though, novels can do something stranger. They can ignore you. It's like the difference between a public lecture where the speaker is attentive to the audience, eliciting laughs, making eye contact, and a lecture where the speaker is wrapped up in what they're saying, and you just have to follow along. Each kind has its strengths. It's always good to be in the company of a speaker who wants to involve you, but there are also times when the speaker has to concentrate on what they have to say. And it's seldom a pleasure to listen to someone who panders too much, who's desperate for your attention and approval. (I'm thinking of some over-produced TED talks.)

Most novelists think of their readers a lot. You can feel their eyes on you as you read. If you squirm or fidget, they ratchet up the drama, put in some sex, or lure you with a new mystery. But a novel can be something other than an opportunity for "engaging readers with company." That's another of Mitchelmore's maxims. A novel can be like the most interesting person at a party, the one who sits at the bar looking glamorous and ignoring everyone.

I hadn't realized how continuously authors seek my attention, how desperately they want me to keep reading, until I discovered some writers who don't think that way. Joyce is like that in *Finnegans Wake*. Was he thinking of an actual human reader at all when he wrote that book? It's not clear. He pictured ideal readers, who would basically dedicate their lives to reading (and he got them, in the

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form of academics), but there's nothing in the book to indicate he spent time imagining or accommodating any plausible, real-life readers. When you read *Finnegans Wake* you're teased with puzzles and amused by jokes, but the person telling them isn't looking at you. His eyes are somewhere out on the horizon.

This sense of being ignored by the author is one of the reasons I like Arno Schmidt, a postwar German novelist who's as famous in German-speaking countries as Joyce. For the last year I've moderated an online group reading Schmidt's monstrous novel *Bottom's Dream*. Every Saturday we work through another five or ten pages, dense with references to hundreds of forgotten European writers, poets, and critics. Most of the time the author doesn't help us at all: he quotes a line and names the author, and it's up to us to find the source and read enough of it to understand why he's mentioned it. His characters have no discernible inner lives, so there's nothing to empathize with. There isn't much of a plot, and only intermittent descriptions of the surroundings. Schmidt once said he wrote for four hundred people, but our group has wondered if there have even been more than a few dozen. Still, I love the feeling that Schmidt never felt he had to add a detail or a bit of dialogue to keep my attention. You can go for a hundred pages in *Bottom's Dream* without encountering a hint that the author cares about you, wants your attention, or notices when you're bored. Schmidt just wrote what he wanted, without even looking up to see if anyone might be there.

There are many novels like this. It's sink or swim with Musil, Bernhard, Stein, Perec, Beckett, Gaddis, or, for that matter, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. After reading Schmidt or Joyce, a writer like Karl-Ove Knausgaard comes across as compulsively, pathetically addicted to my attention. I can feel how much he wants me to keep reading, and what he'll do to ensure that I don't close the book. Most authors fill their novels with helpful cues, tempting hints, friendly reminders, entrancing set pieces, accumulating tension. But if you're a writer, consider this alternative. You can say to yourself: I won't be a dependable source of pleasure, I'm not a guide, I'm not there to reassure the reader. I'm here to write what I want, what I feel needs to be said, and it will only be a distraction to continuously try to picture what my reader might want.

I think interesting contemporary novels should mainly fail to

give dependable pleasure. They shouldn't console, guide, or reassure. The reader should be on their own, repeatedly, even continuously. There's an often-quoted passage in Kafka that puts this question of companionship very well. In fact, it says it so powerfully that I suspect some people who quote it can only hope to live up to it:

> I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief.[16]

Not every novel needs to hack its readers to pieces or exile them into the wilderness. But perhaps we could use more of that, and less of the nurturing, healing, hugging, and handshaking of contemporary fiction.

4. A novel is complex. This is the most complex problem. Complexity itself is tarnished by its association with privileged, over-educated white male writers, from Joyce and Proust to David Foster Wallace. And it's ideologically ruined by its association with the Frankfurt School of modernist criticism, according to which serious, ambitious modern art has to be complex. I have a different, and simpler idea of complexity, which I find helpful in thinking about why I'm attracted to complex novels. The sort of complexity that interests me comes naturally when a book is long enough. That's because as Montaigne knew, despite our best intentions, thought wanders off wherever it wants, and so do moods and feelings. Any novel that gives itself the space to wander will eventually go off-topic. *War and Peace* has twenty-four philosophical essays in it. *The Man without Qualities* begins as essays, gets lost, and stays lost. Complexity isn't easy to define. I've tried a couple of times, and I think it helps to distinguish real complexity from simple complexity. A high-rise building is complex in an uninteresting way (it may have special elevators, a rooftop water tank, or a tuned mass damper). Those might be of interest to engineers, but they are repeated in many buildings, and most people don't care much about them. I'd like to call things like jets, atomic clocks, particle accelerators, and high-rise buildings "intricate," and reserve "complex" for things that don't follow patterns or formulas,

16 As quoted in tinyurl.com/kafkaquote.

things that are unique, or only partly known, or unclassifiable. That's why I don't count murder mysteries as complex: they often have intricate plots, but in the end everything's tied up. A complex murder mystery, in this sense, would be Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Voyeur*, because nothing's resolved (and nothing may have taken place). A complex novel will undermine a reader's expectations as it goes. Is this a murder mystery at all? Maybe it's a memoir, or an autofiction, or a romance… or possibly nothing that's identifiable. Complexity isn't easy to define in positive terms, but it has a specifiable effect on the reader: it's puzzling. A complex novel is one that keeps you wondering, keeps you working to understand what the author thinks they're doing, and does not ever answer your questions. When you finish a genuinely complex novel, all the guesses you had while you were reading will be wrong, and the novel will only be like itself, and not like any other novel.

I hope these four proposals can suggest ways to write novels that are less conventional and more challenging. I wrote them mainly for myself, to help articulate some ideas that drive my novel, *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*. I was determined to do each of the things on this list: not report about the world, not be careful or cautious, fail to be a reliable companion, and create real complexity. I wanted to avoid intricacy and open the door to difficulty. I had ideas and themes—lots of them, since I'm the sort of writer who uses cards, spreadsheets, graphs, summaries, and outlines—but the novel wasn't guided by them. Instead it was steered past a succession of achievable goals that I wanted to avoid. I knew I didn't want the pleasure of the book to come from its intricacy, from its appeal to the reader, or from the unusual subjects I describe. I didn't want to contribute a memoir, an entertainment, an intellectual puzzle, a political fiction, a historical fiction, a speculative fiction, an allegory, a satire, a comedy, a tragedy, a romance, an autofiction or a metafiction.

All this may sound negative and not very realistic, but it's the way I have always thought about art: if you read enough, you're likely to start seeing formulas everywhere, and then comes the question: what isn't a formula?

There is a book's worth more to write on this subject, but manifestos are personal. You have to make your own. You might reject a couple of these points, and add others of your own. What I'd like to communicate here is that most novels written these days are too easy. Too professionalized, too much concerned with reporting the "real world," too simple in their structure, too familiar and friendly and entertaining and consoling, too hypnotized by fame, reviews, and imagined readers. Those are what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle called category mistakes.

We don't love dogs because they fetch. A