

David Shields: The Danger Quotient

"What is it about this work I 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-linear, semi-grab-bag nature of their narratives; the absolute seriousness, phrased as comedy; the violent torque of their beautifully idiosyncratic voices." That's David Shields describing the literature he loves in a passage from his work-in-progress, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. The author of books as varied as *Dead Languages* and *Black Planet: Facing Race During an NBA Season*, Shields is more than willing to subvert convention or form to explore personal obsessions, to follow the beckoning of his own beautifully idiosyncratic voice. For the past three years, Shields and I have discussed via e-mail and over coffee and tea (and on car rides) our unease with writing more conventional fiction or memoir, driven by character, erected by plot. Our conversations (along with Shields's work) have helped to pave my transition into more exploratory forms of prose. I am indebted to him for his careful guidance, as mentor and friend.

-Jay Ponteri

Loggerhead Reading Series: In Ben Marcus's essay "On Time Must Die," he describes what he refers to as the anti-story tradition of literary fiction, the kind of story that is less interested in happenings that take place in a specific moment in time and more interested in ideas and mental states, the wanderings of one's mind. Lately I've been thinking a lot about writing fiction that has very little to no plot, that doesn't necessarily require me to invent (or contrive!) such happenings, that allows me, as Marcus puts it, "to work around time" or without it. I'm able to write what matters the most to me: what's inside of my head, e.g., my thoughts, neuroses, dreams, memories, interests in literature and culture.

It seems to me that you've been writing fiction and nonfiction like this for many years, since your story collection, *A Handbook for Drowning*. That is to say, they're stories and essays that do away with the messy mechanics of plot (scene-writing, cause and effect, action and reaction) in favor of meditation in the forms of

list-making, self-reflection, literary and cultural criticism, exploratory reportage. What's so unappealing to you about the kind of writing you did in, say, *Dead Languages* (a novel that made use of more conventional plotting)? And what's so appealing about writing stories like "A Brief Survey of Ideal Desire" and "The Sixties," fiction that seems more driven by ideas and self-rumination?

David Shields: I do think you've ID'd the excitements and the concerns of the form in which you and I are interested. Yes, one doesn't want contrivance, but is what is left only wanderings, neurosis?

I really want to think not.

I'm still very proud of *Dead Languages*; I think it's a good novel, and there are a disconcertingly large number of people who say, "Why don't you write a book like that again?" What is it about the plotting in a book like that—which, frankly, isn't plotted very heavily—that is unappealing to me now and what is it about self-rumination that I find so intoxicating?

For me, it has hugely to do with a quality of nervousness, of rawness, of existential excitement. When I think of the books I love, almost invariably they are books that are full of what I've come to call "reality hunger." They're impatient in their attempt to evoke consciousness. Recently I happened to pick off the shelves Bellow's *Herzog*. I found myself surprisingly excited by some of it. Some of the lines, some of the writing is really beautiful. I hadn't remembered responding to a novel in this way for a while. But pretty shortly the excitements of the work faded for me in the light of the endless narrative contrivance. The moments that are alive for me come way too few and far between. There are good meditations, but they're buried in an avalanche of formulaic narrative patterning, dutiful characterization. I want a book that is nothing but good moments, nothing but those exciting, nervous-making, existential lunges and plunges. This can of course happen occasionally in a novel, but overwhelmingly for me in such books the game isn't worth the candle, as they say; way too much gets sacrificed on the altar of plot (apologies, Mixed Metaphor God).

There are exceptions, but as I say, in general, I'm much more excited by a work that does away with this empty armature. Does that make sense? What's your sense for yourself? Why has narrative ceased to interest you as much? For me, I feel I'm playing to my strengths and avoiding my weaknesses, whereas I've always felt that you're remarkably good at evoking other people, creating story, etc. I wonder why that has gone flat for you if it has....

LRS: I'm not sure why it's gone flat for me. When I place a narrator or viewpoint character in a scene that I'm fabricating (even when writing close to my life), I begin to feel like I'm avoiding or circling around what matters the most to me, yet when I strip away plot contrivance, what I'm left with feels more real to me—memories and mind-states and worries and thoughts about literature and culture and self-reflection and dreams and self-conscious mumbblings, stuff we hide from everybody save our spouses and shrinks and sometimes we cannot even tell them. As of late I even have problems making up fictional names for my narrators; they remain nameless. Or I cannot imagine (anymore) asking myself this particular question when I'm writing: "How would such-and-such character act or behave in this certain situation?" I think Marcus's essay argues for the creation of new forms that can hold this stripped-of-contrivance story.

I like any prose (or poetry) that hits close to the bone, full of insight and details that feel fresh and hard-earned, not researched or guessed at. I especially think of your book *Remote*, how it so deftly presents reality through a variety of modes: anecdote, reportage, meditation, prose poem (lyricism), list, dreams, etc. Or of an interesting form that sprang from your last two books (*Enough About You* and *The Body Politic*): the (auto)biographical essay about another person (Bill Murray or Howard Cosell) that really, inadvertently, tells the story of David Shields. I wonder if you can elaborate more on this idea of "reality hunger" and how that maybe guides your drafting process.

Shields: I'm right now working on a new book called *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*—which explores all of these issues ad infinitum. Hard for me to address all these topics without just

attaching 14 chapters from the book-in-progress. The issue is so close to me, so crucial, so complex and fascinating it's hard to even begin talking about it. That said, I agree with much of what you said: I couldn't imagine making up characters named Bill and Hank and Henrietta. Seems ridiculous. As Dave Eggers said a while ago, "writing fiction feels like driving down the highway wearing a clown suit."

It's interesting to me that you and I were "trained" to become fiction writers, and for a variety of cultural/artistic/personal reasons, that emptied out for us. In the book I try to go into all of these reasons. For me, a very live idea—have I said this already?—is nervousness, placing myself and the reader in a state of danger. Without that, why bother? And the frame of fiction seems to me to reduce the danger quotient considerably—not always but usually.

Reality hunger: I'm very interested in reality-based art in a variety of forms: self-reflexive documentary (e.g., Ross McElwee), anthropological autobiography (George Trow, Renata Adler), stand-up comedy and performance art that risks a lot (Rick Reynolds, who grew up in Portland, Spalding Gray, early Sandra Bernhard). All of these people were crucial influences on me about a decade ago. I'd written three books—three works of fiction—two novels and a book of linked stories—and I was working on my fourth book, *Remote*, and I couldn't get it to become a novel. I wasn't interested in that mechanism. And these works of art mentioned above were crucial catalysts to push me into this mode. For the last ten years or so—ever since *Remote*—I've been in love with art again, whereas in the late eighties and early nineties, I was trying to love traditional fiction and was bored beyond belief.

Obviously, regarding reality hunger, one wants to put "reality" in quotation marks and understand that I or other writers interested in this mode aren't somehow uniquely accessing the real. Instead, I think, and this is crucial, the emphasis is not on "character" and "plot" but theme and idea. The kind of work I'm interested in is above an investigation of something rather than pure story. In this regard, this quotation from John D'Agata seems to me crucial:

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. Maybe the works succeed, maybe they fail, but at least what they both do is clarify the problem at hand. They're both journeys. They're both pursuits of knowledge. One could say that fiction, metaphorically, is a pursuit of knowledge, but ultimately it's a form of entertainment. I think, at least, essays and poetry are more directly and more urgently about figuring something out about the world. Fiction may do that, too, but not... the fiction I've read.

LRS: My experience was that while working with this form that's so deeply established, its conventions (scene-making, plotting, sustaining dramatic tension) began to impede discovery, and it's this self-discovery (this admission of truth!) that has become such a dangerous part of my own writing. I have become interested in writing some of the stuff that goes through my head but rarely makes it out of my mouth. I'm trying to write about distractedness, what (and why and how) it's like to be trapped inside yourself, inside thoughts, daydreams, neuroses, memories, fantasies, and so forth, as the world (marriage, family, job) goes by. The writer Susan Neville once said that literature begins where our illusions end.

The prose in your last four books, all nonfiction, feels deliciously dangerous because of a confessional quality, a willingness to enter places that literature has ignored (saying the unsayable) and to reveal self at all costs while also making a connection to the culture that encourages such behavior. An example that comes to mind: in *Black Planet*, there's that wonderful passage that describes you imagining yourself as Gary Payton while making love to your wife. Male fantasy seems like a territory largely unexplored in literature (except of course erotica or pornography). That moment feels dangerous to me. There are moments similar to that in *Enough About You*. They remind me of John Cheever's journal entry in which he dreams himself on a postage stamp. Can you talk further about this "dangerous" quality?

Shields: I'm glad you find some of the work in my last few books risky.

Funny that you mention that moment in *Black Planet*. I can't count the number of times someone has come up to me and said how strange they found that moment or how many times reviewers mentioned it, usually critically. Clearly, it punches people's buttons in a way they find discomfiting, which, surely, surely, must be the point of art.

Oscar Wilde: "The books that the world calls immoral are those books that show the world its own shame."—pretty much my mantra.

And yet, of course, I'm not interested in my own consciousness per se, my own thoughts per se. I'm interested, I hope, in what Yeats calls "mirror turn lamp"—self-investigation that goes so deep that it turns primitive, mythic, "universal," and thus one's own self-investigation becomes investigation of some larger cultural/human tendency, trait, characteristic.

I like, too, what you say about impeding discovery and the way in which journal/diary work can have the effect of freeing one up to enter into more risky, dangerous terrain. Why? Because in such works—Cioran, Cheever, Pessoa, Nietzsche, Leonard Michaels's *Shuffle*, David Markson, et al.—the momentum of narrative is absent. The heavy-breathing plot line is vacated and in its place there must be something else to replace that momentum and that becomes, perforce, cultural dread, psychic revelation. What could be more exciting?

LRS: It seems that since *Remote* (published 10 years ago!), you've been turning mirror to lamp, investigating the nature of self, our desires, our cultural influences and inclinations, our need to be known by others. In a way, *Remote* feels way ahead of its time, like it will (and should) continue to find new readers who are interested in this particular subversion of form in which plot, like an erected scaffolding, is torn down, and what stands in place is the thing itself.

I know we've both been interested in short prose forms (the prose poem, the short-short story). I am especially drawn to two pieces from *Remote* that stand so beautifully on their own: "Why we live at the movies" (along with the old snapshot of a child, presumably you, dressed in cowboy costume) and the section that follows, titled, "Desire," a short meditation on your desire for women who wear glasses. The former operates through image and metaphor while the latter is driven more by a sort of lyrical self-reflection. For me, short prose forms are so exciting because they seem to suit this search for self while at the same time placing the writer in the position of actually shaping and/or inventing the form itself. (*Letters to Wendy's* by Joe Wenderoth comes to mind too). Can you talk about your sense of short prose forms and this desire for self-investigation? Why is the prose poem so conducive to self-reflection?

Shields: Peter Johnson, who's a prose-poet and editor, talks well about the way in which the prose-poem form is by its very definition a genre-blurrer. Divided self: divided work. In the search for self, or some semblance of self, it's good to have an open-ended form that can go absolutely anywhere—into reflection, into fancy, into reportage, into stand-up comedy, into any possible form that will deepen the investigation, which is all I care about. Ninety-nine percent of novels, certainly all traditional novels, are not committed to investigation; they're only minimally, marginally about investigation; the investigation comes almost as exception, as icing.

I was thinking about this recently in regards to my daughter's soccer game. The coach's daughter struck me as unusually beautiful, though not in an exactly traditional way. She's only around 12 or 13, but it occurred to me—maybe a little perversely—what an interesting book it would be to be the father of this girl and just constantly meditate on what it would be like to be that beautiful, how the world comes to a person like that, how that beauty affects the world; I would love to write that book. Whereas the more conventional approach would be you'd create a novel in which there's a father, a girl, and all sorts of other characters, and only slightly does the book get at beauty. Maybe such a book would even be called *On Beauty*, but it would yield way too many of its reins to narrative development—to

what D'Agata calls entertainment—and that's simply not serious writing, whereas, say, *Letters to Wendy's* yields *nada* to narrative and instead is on every page, in every sentence, exploring the nexus of American appetite, desire, voluptuousness, vanity, etc.—the book might look inchoate, but it couldn't be more focused.

I'm not hugely interested in short forms except as building blocks, I must admit, of larger forms—*that* I'm hugely interested in. Prose poem per se, short form per se, I definitely love, but I especially love what happens when the mini-pieces are building a Watts Tower.

A final thought regarding shortness—I love how it cuts to the chase, eliminates all dross. The very brevity says, "Get rid of contrivance, character development, scene setting, tedious dialogue,"—give me, as in Robert Hass's *Human Wishes*, the core concerns, the guts of the thing that thrills and pushes the writer to cut to bone. ❖