

WHY EXPERIMENTAL FICTION THREATENS TO DESTROY PUBLISHING, JONATHAN FRANZEN, AND LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

A correction
By Ben Marcus

In the left temporal lobe of the brain, below the central sulcus of Ronaldo, but above and tucked behind both Broca's area and Heschl's gyri, sits Wernicke's area, a tufted bundle of flesh responsible for language comprehension. It gets its name from Carl Wernicke, a German neurologist who discovered in 1874 that damage to this region could cause an impairment of language comprehension. Think of Wernicke's area as the reader's muscle, without which all written language is an impossible tangle of codes, a scribbled bit of abstract art that can't be deciphered. Here is where what we read is turned into meaning, intangible strings of language animated into legible shapes. If we do not read, or do so only rarely, the reader's muscle is slack and out of practice, and the stranger, harder texts, the lyrically unique ones that work outside the realm of familiarity, just scatter into random words. The words may be familiar, but they fail to work together as architectural elements of a larger world.

In the literary world, it's not politic to suggest that the brain is even involved in reading, or that our reading faculties might actually be improved. Mentions of the brain imply effort, and effort is the last thing we are supposed to request

of a reader. Language is meant to flow predigested, like liquid down a feeding tube. Instead of the brain, it's the heart that writers are told they

must reach in order to move readers, to stir in them the deepest, most intense feelings. If we are successful, we touch or break our readers' hearts. But the heart cannot be trained to understand language, let alone literary language, which might come in complex and challenging guises, and which can at times seem put to uses so foreign that it resembles the dialect of a new tribe of people. Although this language might at first seem alien, immersion in its ways can show us unprecedented worlds of feeling and thought. Literary language is complex because it is seeking to accomplish some-

thing extraordinarily difficult: to engrave the elusive aspects of life's entanglements, to represent the intensity of consciousness, to produce the sort of stories that transfix and mesmerize. And despite claims to the contrary by B. R. Myers, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Yardley, Tom Wolfe, and Dale Peck, among other critics and writers, literary language can also make a more abstract but no less vital entertainment—subtle, unfamiliar, less wedded to preapproved modes, but exhilarating nevertheless.



*Ben Marcus is the author of the story collection *The Age of Wire and String* and the novel *Notable American Women*. He recently edited *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*.*

A writer laboring intensely to produce art from words would almost certainly hope for an active Wernicke's area, rather than an atrophied one, on the part of his reader. As a writer of sometimes abstract, so-called experimental fiction that can take a more active attention to read, I would say that my ideal reader's Wernicke's area is staffed by an army of jumpsuited code-breakers, working a barn-size space that is strung about the rafters with a mathematically intricate lattice of rope and steel, and maybe gusseted by a synthetic coil

The true elitists in the literary world are the ones who have become annoyed by literary ambition in any form

that is stronger and more sensitive than either, like guitar strings made from an unraveled spinal cord, each strand tuned to different tensions. The conduits of language that flow past it in liquid-cooled bone-hollows could trigger unique vibrations that resonate into an original symphony when my ideal reader scanned a new sentence. This would be a scheme so elaborate that every portion of language would be treated as unique, and its infinite parts would be sent through such an exhaustive decoding process that not even a carcass of a word would remain. My ideal reader would cough up a thimble of fine gray powder at the end of the reading session, and she could use this mineral-rich substance to compost her garden.

Short of this desire for a supreme reader's muscle, a writer might be forgiven for wishing to slip readers enhancements to their Wernicke's areas, doses of a potion that might turn them into fierce little reading machines, devourers of new syntax, fluent interpreters of the most lyrically complex grammar, so that the more difficult kind of sense writing might strive to make could find its appropriate Turing machine, and would be revealed to the reader with the delicacy that the writer intended. This would liberate the writer to worry less about whether or not everyone could process even the most elementary sentences, and he might then move deeper into a medium that has only begun to be tapped, certain that at least some readers would be happily bushwhacking alongside him.

But these enhancements to Wernicke's area in fact already exist, and they're called books: the fuel that allows this region of the brain to grow ever more capable. If reading is a skill, with levels of ability, and not simply something we can or cannot do, then it's a skill that can be improved by more, and more varied, reading. The more various the styles we ingest, the better equipped we are to engage and be moved by those writers who

are looking deeply into the possibility of syntax as a way to structure sense and feeling, packing experience into language, leveraging grammar as a medium for the making of art. Whether or not this intense kind of reading makes us freaks is another matter, but the muscle grows and strengthens every time we use it, leaving us ever hungrier to encounter sentences we've never seen before. And there are certain books that do require us to be readers, that ask us to have spent some time with sentences of all sorts, and presume an intense desire for new language that might render notions of "effort" in reading meaningless.

But now, in the literary world, writers are being warned off this ambitious approach, and everywhere are signs that if you happen to be interested in the possibilities of language, if you appreciate the artistic achievements of others but still dream for yourself, however foolishly, that new arrangements are possible, new styles, new concoctions of language that might set off a series of delicious mental explosions—if you believe any of this, and worse, if you try to practice it, you are an elitist. You hate your audience, you hate the literary industry, you probably even hate yourself. You stand not with the people but in a quiet dark hole, shouting to no one.

I am writing this essay from such a hole, I suppose, and it's my view that the reverse is true. The elitists are not supposedly demanding writers such as myself but rather those who caution the culture away from literary development, who insist that the narrative achievements of the past be ossified, lacquered, and rehearsed by younger generations. In this climate artistic achievement is a legacy, and writers are encouraged to behave like cover bands, embellishing the oldies, maybe, while ensuring that buried in the song is an old familiar melody to make us smile with recognition, so that we might read more from memory than by active attention.

The true elitists in the literary world are the ones who have become annoyed by literary ambition in any form, who have converted the very meaning of ambition so totally that it now registers as an act of disdain, a hostility to the poor common reader, who should never be asked to do anything that might lead to a pulled muscle. (What a relief to be told there's no need to bother with a book that might seem thorny, or abstract, or unusual.) The elitists are the ones who become angry when it is suggested to them that a book with low sales might actually deserve a prize, as happened with last year's National Book Award in fiction. So insulted that they were being asked to think quickly for themselves about the work of the finalists—which had largely gone unreviewed—critics and writers from major newspapers (Ed-

ward Wyatt, Laura Miller, Caryn James, Thomas McGuane) rushed to defend the industry from these unknown books, and readers were assured that the low sales figures for some of the titles could mean only that the books had failed our culture's single meaningful literary test. The judges were of diverse artistic styles, and their choices, instead of being seen as an excellent opportunity to discover overlooked and possibly extraordinary books, were dismissed out of hand. This was a clear announcement that the value system for literature was tweaked to favor not people who actually read a lot of books but a borderline reader, highly coveted by the literary industry, who might read only one or two books in a year and who had damn sure better be recommended a prize-winning book that will flatter his intelligence and bring him warmly into the fold of the most audience-friendly writing. The literary industry, in other words, is struggling too much financially to issue a highly visible prize to an obscure, under-reviewed book that is more lyrical than narrative, more cerebral than sentimental. The judges, like bad corporate team members, had played too much to the interests of deeply committed readers. There are only one or two chances each year to capture this borderline reader, after all, and it's too dangerous to recommend a book that might take some effort and risk puzzling the poor soul who just wants to read a good old-fashioned novel.

Good old-fashioned novels are what *The Atlantic Monthly's* B. R. Myers likes, and that is just about all. He is among the more dour of the ambition-scorning literary critics, affronted by the very notion that he must care, even a little bit, about contemporary writing as an art form in order to discuss it. Writing about contemporary fiction while wearing a gas mask, Myers says not only that the emperor has no clothes but that there is no emperor. ("Give me a time-tested masterpiece or what critics patronizingly call a fun read—*Sister Carrie* or just plain *Carrie*.") He'd very much prefer not to read anything new, to believe that nothing more is possible in literary art after Hemingway. He is so thorough in his arguments against any kind of incremental shift away from established narrative practice, so complete in his condemnation of even some well-established contemporary writing (Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Annie Proulx, and Cormac McCarthy all get buried) that one might conclude he simply doesn't believe writing to be an art form. It's more of a lost art, like plastering, and the best practitioners are dead and gone. Myers seems to have no belief that literature might have a future, that change is possible, that something new and genuinely artistic might happen. It is as though a man has run onto a baseball field mid-game, de-

claring that baseball no longer exists even as the game orbits beautifully around him.

It's never easy to debate a flat-earthier like Myers, but that alone is not the reason I cannot win this argument. The other reason is that the writers championed by the likes of Myers are called realists, and I'm not. This will always look like an argument between the realists and the experimentalists—with the realists tackling life and all its complexities and the experimentalists dry-humping whatever glory hole they can find. I am told that I'm an elitist precisely because I don't practice realism, which is by far the reigning style of contemporary literature, the incumbent mode, however loudly its adherents might claim underdog status. No matter my interest in reality, in the way it feels to be alive, and the way language can be shaped into contours that surround and illuminate that feeling: because I don't write the conventional narrative language, and because I haven't often foregrounded the consciousness of characters in my fiction, and livestocked those characters in a recognizable setting, I will never be considered a realist.



Of the many kinds of literary-fiction writers, it's the group called the realists who have, by far, both the most desirable and the least accurate name. One might easily think that they have the right of first refusal to the true doings of the world, a pair of proprietary goggles with special reality-tuned lenses. Other kinds of writers either are not interested in reality (experimentalists, postmodernists, antirealists!) or must wait in line to graze the scraps of less matterful life left behind, the details deemed unworthy of literary report by their more world-concerned peers.

The notion that reality can be represented only through a certain kind of narrative attention is a desperate argument by realists themselves,

who seem to have decided that any movement away from their well-tested approach toward representing the lives and minds of people would be a compromise. Because the deep engineering of realism (a brilliant feat, I agree) has already been accomplished, we must either sign up to practice it or work in exile under slighting names and increased marginalization. Never mind that *it has already been accomplished*, and that ambition, or even sheer curiosity, would ask us to forge something new. We are expected instead to lay our needle into the well-worn groove, and out will magically come the refined literary product.

The fallacy that literary realists have some privileged relationship to reality has allowed the whole movement to soften and become false, which is also what artistic movements naturally do, no matter how significant. The exceptions are terrific writers who have pounded on the emotional possibilities of their mode, refusing to subscribe to worn-out techniques and storytelling



methods so familiar we could pretty much sing along to them. These are writers who are keen to interrogate the assumptions of realism and bend the habitual gestures around new shapes: Joy Williams, Deborah Eisenberg, Kate Braverman, James Purdy, and Richard Yates are such writers, and I could list many more.¹ At its best, realism is a mode I relish for its ordered, pictorial approach to consciousness, its vivid choreography of settings and selves. At its worst, it's uninspired,

¹ David Gates, Marilynne Robinson, William Trevor, David Means, Denis Johnson, Nicholson Baker, Mary Caponegro, Susan Choi, Barbara Gowdy, Barry Hannah, Stephen Dixon, to name just a few North American writers.

dull, and oppressively devoted to its modern forebears Cheever and Updike, and it wears such a heavy tire mark on the exhausted assumptions of psychology that reading it is akin to constantly crawling from a trench of received ideas.

Anyone who has not been invited into the realist camp is slurred as being merely experimental, whether or not his or her language is a gambit for producing reality on the page. Calling a writer experimental is now the equivalent of saying his work does not matter, is not readable, and is aggressively masturbatory. But why is it an experiment to attempt something artistic? A painter striving for originality is not called experimental. Whether or not originality is a large or small myth, an outsized form of folly or a quaint indulgence, a visual artist is expected at least to gun for it. Without risk you have paintings hanging in the lobby of a Holiday Inn. But a writer with ambition now is called “postmodern” or “experimental,” and not without condescension. Traverses away from the inscribed literary style—even when they amount to freefalls down the mountainside—are either looked at snidely or entirely ignored, unless the work is traditional at heart but with enough surface flourishes and stylistic tics to allow a false show of originality, so that critics can dispense phrases like “radically innovative” and “a bold new voice,” when the only thing new is the writer’s DNA.

If literary titles were about artistic merit and not the rules of convention, about achievement and not safety, the term “realism” would be an honorary one, conferred only on writing that actually builds unsentimentalized reality on the page, 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 realists, most notably those who seem to equate writing with operating a massive karaoke machine. In such a scheme, Gary Lutz, George Saunders, and Aimee Bender would be considered realists right alongside William Trevor, Alistair MacLeod, and Alice Munro. It would be a title you’d have to work for, and not just one you inherited because you favored a certain compositional style.

If B. R. Myers is the literary refusenik who cannot make room for writing to inch away from traditional techniques, Jonathan Franzen, a far more authoritative voice, is the movement’s famous, and more troubling, avatar. At once more flailing and more cautious than Myers, Franzen has mostly restricted his rebukes to dead writers such as William Gaddis and James Joyce, but he has been perfectly clear how opposed he is to the model of language art they represented. He has come down so frequently against litera-

ture as an art form, against the entire concept of artistic ambition, that he has by now become the movement's most reliable, and certainly its most fluent, spokesperson.

Franzen is a talented novelist whose aspirations have been very public—he declared himself, in a *New York Times Magazine* interview, to be more ambitious than any other writer he knows—and he is shrewd enough to nod to the idea of language art. But while he's nodding, his hands have worked up a tight stranglehold on writers outside of the mainstream, and it is hard to say if his shakedown of these writers is because he truly loathes their work or because he covets the kind of art-historical accolade they can draw.

If you had already read *The Corrections*, Franzen's third novel, his remark about unrivaled ambition was puzzling. Engrossing, operatic, and ably choreographed, the book was nevertheless a retreat for Franzen into the comforts of a narrative style that was already embraced by the culture. His ambition clearly was to belong to the establishment rather than stand out from it, to join a well-defined team rather than strike out on his own. To feel more comfortable with this capitulation, he needed, I think, to decimate the alternative, to medicate his regret over the road not taken. Artistic ambition—at least as he conceived of it in his first two novels—didn't suit him, and neither was he comfortable with literary obscurity. To look at the situation more darkly, because the formal ambition of his first two novels had failed to win him fame, he resolved to renounce formal ambition itself, to spurn the idea that writing might change into something newer and more vital. And despite some grumbling here and there from dissenters, his attacks on those who have not similarly restrained their art, in interviews and a handful of essays in *The New Yorker* and, notably, in this magazine, have gone largely unremarked.

Before Jonathan Franzen went kicking and screaming into the mainstream, and before he argued that narrative realism, scrubbed of difficulty, was the primary viable mode—not to mention ultimate achievement—for literary art, since supposedly it deeply honored that most treasured resource, the reading public, without whom writers would be nothing—those same readers whose favor Franzen would be courting and spurning in equal flailing measure (I love you, I hate you, I need you, you're stupid), creating a performance that was sometimes more compelling than his own fiction—he received at his doorstep, from a strange man, a suspicious package.

Or so he writes in a "Shouts & Murmurs" item from *The New Yorker* entitled "FC2," a light-

hearted bit of what-if paranoia, published in 1996, when terrorist fantasies still had some buoyancy, and when Franzen's enmity toward obscure writing was just a seedling. In the piece, Franzen receives a package from "FC2" that he believes might contain an explosive device, worries over how to respond, then lapses into a reverie about books and his former belief in their potency. When I read it at the time, I looked for the possibility of humor, even though Franzen had more frequently played the stern moralist or, in his 1996 *Harp-er's Magazine* essay, "Perchance to Dream," the hand-wringing artist confronting extinction, neither part allowing for very much comedy.

Franzen has been clear how opposed he is to the model of language art represented by William Gaddis and James Joyce

In the real world, FC2 stands for Fiction Collective 2, a sequel imprint to the Fiction Collective, which was founded in 1974 in order to "make serious novels and story collections available" and to "keep them in print permanently." The 2 was added to the publisher's name after a change in funding, location, and leadership, but the mission remained the same, and by the time of Franzen's humor piece, FC2 had published writers such as Mark Leyner, Curtis White, Marianne Hauser, and Samuel Delany, among dozens of others, paying increasing attention to new writers. They had no doubt been sending out advance copies of their books for blurbs to writers of Franzen's stature for many years, and one imagines that Franzen would have regularly been receiving such requests by the gunnysack. In the real world, a publisher like FC2 might hope that a writer like Franzen would choose to endorse a book of theirs and help it find interested readers.

But that's the real world. In Franzen's world a small press that publishes experimental fiction is a convenient villain as audience-safe as a Muslim terrorist in a movie; it can be gutted of its facts and pumped back to life with a glistening, self-serving fantasy, no harm done.

"FC2?" he asks himself. "A numbing, evil ether—the aura of a tightly coiled violence—soaked into my hands as I examined the package more carefully." Wasn't "FC" the name sometimes used by the Unabomber? he wondered. He thought the package might be a bomb, delivered by the Unabomber's successor. And he figured he was ripe for targeting. After all, he had participated in a collaborative novel recently published by *The Village Voice*, and his narrator was "a former Miss Ohio with a penchant for explo-

sive devices and Jiffy-Pak mailers." It doesn't take long for Franzen to whip up his fear, stiffening it with a passive-aggressive mixture of opportune naiveté and self-regard. His "controversial" work has finally brought violence to his door, and his elation seems nearly to moisten the page.

"I considered calling the police. I considered putting on my leather mittens and my swimmers' goggles and attempting to nudge the package open from a distance, perhaps employing the metal extension wands of my Electrolux. Instead, I went upstairs and called my agent."

Franzen declares to his agent that he wasn't expecting any books—something like saying you aren't expecting take-out menus under your door if you live in New York—then thinks harder and determines that indeed he was. The logic of this change of mind is omitted, and we are offered, in its place, something equivalent to the word "Aha!" Franzen decides that because he was expecting a book after all, there was, in the end, nothing to worry about, and he can go ahead and open the package. I dare not reveal what he finds inside.

Aside from the dramatic expediency of a sudden reversal, which dismantles the premise of the piece (and breaks the all-important contract between writer and reader for which he would later become a booster), there is now the matter of

Franzen's approach is a kind of innocent, aw-shucks barn burning, limned with a sudden, repealing sentimentality

bolting from the story, which Franzen does by leaping across another logical chasm and fondly referring back to those days "when a book had seemed to me potentially explosive."

But before he arrives at his closing nostalgia—in which his devotion to writing can seem to be articulated only after merrily trodding on a small press—he floats a motto that could very well apply to his next novel, *The Corrections*:

The risk now seemed acceptably low, and it strengthens a person's sense of competence and rationality to resign himself to a risk like that.

Franzen has managed to stir up a fantasy that he would be a target for terrorists, use a small press in service of the contrivance, and then drum up nostalgia for ye olde tyme when books mattered more, even while ignoring the very book he holds in his hands. Where I'm from, this is called getting kissed and slapped. In isolation, "FC2" is a harmless bit of writing with a rigged premise, but in retrospect the piece can be read as a warm-up for a series of sucker punches against

an unlikely, powerless target: the high-powered, stuffed-with-cash, culturally tremendous world of marginal, nonnarrative writing that secretly controls the world—a target that will, over the next nine years, take so many body blows from Franzen, the future heavyweight pundit, culture straddler, and angry realist, that one can very nearly hear it wheezing its last, dismal, low-sales-figure breath. Franzen's approach is a kind of innocent, aw-shucks barn burning, limned with a sudden, repealing sentimentality, that he would only refine over the next few years. Never mind that, back in the real world, FC2 would come under attack the following year from Representative Peter Hoekstra (R., Mich.) for publishing an anthology that contained a depiction of sex between women, or that Hoekstra was pressuring NEA Chair Jane Alexander to defund FC2 because of four titles he deemed offensive. Never mind that, during the subsequent hearings, writers as distinguished as Mark Strand, William Gass, and Toni Morrison would publicly declare their support for FC2. The important thing is that Franzen finds in their obscurity the shiny butt of a joke and cheerfully spans it.

If not the best novelist of his generation, then certainly the most anxious—eager for fame, but hostile to the people who confer it—Jonathan Franzen has excelled most conspicuously at worrying about literature's potential for mass entertainment. It's a fair worry to have, if vain, but he's been a strange and angry contender for the role, and the results have been spectacular, depressing, and confusing all at once. In reviews, essays, and lately even a short story, he has taken wild swings at some unlikely culprits in literature's decreasing dominance. In the process he has also managed to gaslight writing's alien artisans, those poorly named experimental writers with no sales, little review coverage, a small readership, and the collective cultural pull of an ant.

Citing *Ulysses* as the ultimate scare text, he claims, in an online conversation with *New Yorker* editor Ben Greenman, that its frequent placement on top-ten lists of the best books of the twentieth century "sends this message to the common reader: Literature is horribly hard to read. And this message to the aspiring writer: Extreme difficulty is the way to earn respect. This is fucked up. It's particularly fucked up when the printed word is fighting other media for its very life."

Even while popular writing has quietly glided into the realm of the culturally elite, doling out its severe judgment of fiction that has not sold well, and we have entered a time when book sales and artistic merit can be neatly equated without much of a fuss, Franzen has argued that complex writing, as practiced by writers such as

James Joyce and Samuel Beckett and their descendants, is being forced upon readers by powerful cultural institutions (this is me scanning the horizon for even the slightest evidence of this) and that this less approachable literature, or at least its esteemed reputation, is doing serious damage to the commercial prospects of the literary industry.

Most recently, this anxious ideology has contaminated his fiction. A skeletal story in *The New Yorker* of May 23, 2005, depicts a husband-and-wife writing team whose relationship dissolves over their artistic differences. She stays in Hollywood, where her success and fame seem limitless, entirely comfortable with her vocation. And he, a husk of a character desiccated by Franzen's obvious scorn for him, retreats to New York and the austerities of marginal fiction writing, where his unhappiness is telegraphed so heavily that it seems gouged into the page. It's a cautionary tale for writers, and could very well be a public-service announcement: to leave the mainstream, to write experimental fiction, is to be a miserable narcissist, obsessed with the pleasures you left behind.

As a champion of industry, policing not just writers but audiences as well, Franzen is a prickly advocate at best, seemingly unable to judge an author's work without resorting to the concept of "fame." In his long review on Alice Munro in the November 14, 2004, *New York Times Book Review*, rather than discuss her book, *Runaway*, he sandbags the entire piece by trying first to account for what he sees as her lack of supporters. "Outside of Canada," he writes, "...she has never had a large readership." Before he gets to the book and its merits, he wants to take "some guesses at why her excellence so dismayingly exceeds her fame."

Never mind that Alice Munro was one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in 2005, or that she was awarded the Medal of Honor for Literature by the National Arts Club, or that *Runaway* itself was a bestseller in the United States, or that her books regularly hit bestseller lists and have appeared in at least thirteen languages. Aside from the fact that Munro could only be better known to readers if she were Jonathan Franzen—or maybe because of it—Franzen provides a sassy list of possible excuses, each of them having little to do with Munro's work. She's Canadian, she doesn't write educational fiction, she fails to brood in her author photos, and "She doesn't give her books grand titles like 'Canadian Pastoral,' 'Canadian Psycho,' 'Purple Canada,' 'In Canada' or 'The Plot Against Canada.'"

Franzen's reasons have nothing to do with Munro and everything to do with the limits of literary fame. The straw-man premise allows Franzen to declare that literary fame, even at its most realized, does not equal other kinds of cul-

tural stardom, a complaint that echoes back to his essay "Perchance to Dream," in which he fretted over the power of television and the Internet and worried that all the rave reviews his work had received did not deliver to him the fame he had expected. We were meant to imagine a greater kind of celebrity for writers, one that corresponded more to movie stars. Why



he's using Munro, a seventy-four-year-old from Wingham, Ontario, as a finger-puppet for this renewed complaint is unclear. In "Perchance to Dream," he was able to pontificate without red-tagging unsuspecting writers into alliance with him. The only example he used was himself.

It must have surprised Munro to find that she was far too underappreciated, and that it was at least partially because she wrote about people:

As long as you're reading Munro, you're failing to multitask by absorbing civics lessons or historical data. Her subject is people. People people people. If you read fiction about some enriching subject like Renaissance art or an important chapter in our nation's history, you can be assured of feeling productive.

Here some more kissing and slapping occurs. In apparently trying to court a new audience for Alice Munro, Franzen offends the one she already has, and then insults an imagined readership that is supposedly obsessed more with feeling productive about their entertainment than with its actual quality. Nor is it clear when the audiences for mass entertainment became interested in multitasking, unless he's referring to us sucking down large tubs of soda while we watch movies.

Although Franzen may be right to show distress over a culture that values the true story over the imagined one, or a culture that promotes the productive entertainment paradigm (which would explain the crushing dominance of *Highlights* magazine), he seems far too ready to believe in the endurance of momentary cul-

tural comets, like Bill Clinton's memoir, which gets its own pelting, and which is now throbbing ever more quietly in the past, cited by precisely no one as a fine work for the ages.

Another of Franzen's reasons for Munro's lack of fame is that her "work is all about storytelling pleasure. The problem here being that many buyers of serious fiction seem rather ardently to prefer lyrical, tremblingly earnest, faux-literary stuff." Although I love the whiplash of circular reasoning, it would not take gunpoint for me to admit that buyers of serious fiction who do not prefer serious fiction are not exactly buyers of serious fiction. And why has "lyricism" become the enemy of this serious fiction, an antithesis to storytelling pleasure, if it only means "an artist's expression of emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way," at least according to my dictionary? This is an inconvenient contradiction, and it takes a swipe at actual buyers of serious fiction, most of whom do, in fact, buy books by Alice Munro and do not need to be accused of buying "faux-literary stuff." The ambassador would do well to turn his weapon away from the natives.



Franzen's argument is starting to reveal itself. Alice Munro lacks fame because she is a fiction writer, because "she refuses to render vital dramatic moments in convenient discursive summary. Also, her rhetorical restraint and her excellent ear for dialogue and her almost pathological empathy for her characters have the costly effect of obscuring her authorial ego for many pages at a stretch."

Translation: if she did not write fiction, and if she showcased her ego, she'd be more famous. This is about as substantive as saying, "If you weren't tall, you'd be short."

With Franzen so busy staring longingly out from literary pastures at other forms of thriving media—movies, television, and the Internet—

he proves an undesirable champion and a pundit deeply antagonistic to writing. One senses him trying to lure his favorite writers away from language, plying them with the promises of other media, where no doubt they could achieve greater fame.

I think he's perfectly right. If only writers could give up their interest in language, then they might truly be able to compete for those enormous money-spending audiences. If they are interested in language and what it can do, then they must settle for a certain level of renown, and that only if they are extremely lucky. For my part, I wish that Franzen and any other writer with a similar ambition would go ahead and surrender the language part of their work, and make their entertainment without it. Then writing could be practiced by writers: people who are still thrilled by the possibilities of language and not so concerned that more people play paint ball than read.

In his September 30, 2002, *New Yorker* essay "Mr. Difficult," Franzen indicted William Gaddis as unreadable, needlessly obtuse, and frequently indifferent to his reading audience, of which Franzen, strangely, numbered himself an ideal member: "Hello! I'm the reader you want! . . . If you can't even show me a good time, who else do you think is going to read you?"

"Mr. Difficult" offers opposing models for "how fiction relates to its audience," Contract and Status, the Jekyll and Hyde of artistic approaches. To the elite minds of Status, "the best novels are great works of art, the people who manage to write them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it's because the average reader is a philistine." The Contract crowd hold a dim view of the Status people: "According to the Contract model, difficulty is a sign of trouble. . . . [I]t may convict an author of placing his selfish artistic imperatives or his personal vanity ahead of the audience's legitimate desire to be entertained—of being, in other words, an asshole." Additionally,

Contract stipulates that if a product is disagreeable to you the fault must be the product's. If you crack a tooth on a hard word in a novel, you sue the author. If your professor puts Dreiser on your reading list, you write a harsh student evaluation. If the local symphony plays too much twentieth-century music, you cancel your subscription. You're the consumer; you rule.

Franzen first subscribes to both models, but then joins the Contract crowd, who love their audiences. The Status crowd, scorning their audiences, are particularly fucked up, because they risk losing even more readers for a dying industry. "In my bones," he writes, "I'm a Contract

kind of person. I grew up in a friendly, egalitarian suburb reading books for pleasure and ignoring any writer who didn't take my entertainment seriously enough."

Although he calls Gaddis "an old literary hero of mine," he savages the old master, then takes the man's bones from his body, builds a grinning skeleton, and kicks it to hell. Franzen paints Gaddis as the dark prince of Status, writing obtusely just because he can, and secretly hating his own work:

... I suspect Gaddis himself would rather have watched "The Simpsons." I suspect that if anyone else had written his later novels ... he would not have wanted to read them, and that if he had read them he would not have liked them. ... To serve the reader a fruitcake that you wouldn't eat yourself. ... This is the ultimate breach of Contract.

This elaborate framework, built up to show that Gaddis has failed to entertain Franzen, is given a bit of a shiver by the fact that he neglected to consult a wide array of established readability tests, and thus failed to mention that Gaddis's supposedly impenetrable writing could have been easily understood by sixth-graders. That's the mark Gaddis's work *A Frolic of His Own* earns on a test called the Fog Index, which issues a school grade for a score.

This is relevant not only because Franzen excoriates Gaddis as a standard-bearer for all writers who don't actively court their audiences but because several 1,000-word samples from Franzen's own novel *The Corrections* blow up the scales at a brainy 12.4 on the Fog Index.² In other words, the sixth-grader who can understand Gaddis must become, at the very least, six years smarter in order to understand Franzen's novel. And although she cannot yet decipher a Franzen essay damning Gaddis for his impenetrability (Fog Index 20.7), she can understand writing by Mr. Difficult himself, an inversion that Gaddis might have appreciated. Presumably, reading all of that Gaddis

² Other readability tests confirm the Fog Index point spread, citing Gaddis as far easier to read than Franzen. The SMOG-Grading system, the Lix Formula, the Kincaid Formula, the Automated Readability Index (ARI), the Coleman-Liau Formula, and the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, which is readily employable in the Tools section of Microsoft Word, all back up the slaughter. None of this would be particularly compelling if it wasn't also supported by the king of readability tests, the Lexile Framework for Reading, which bills itself as a "scientific approach to reading and text measurement" (not to be confused with literary criticism). It uses a mathematical formula and a colossal database to help educators match students to texts, and it throws around phrases like "targeted reading experience," "syntactic complexity," and "forecasted comprehension rate." Using benchmark titles like *Danny and the Dinosaur* and *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the Lexile scale covers readers from first grade to graduate school.

After registering on the site, and dumping my texts

might help her prepare for reading about how she should not be able to read him.

If Franzen is being roundly trounced in the readability tests, then how should we interpret his accusations against Gaddis? Who is the real Mr. Difficult? Maybe there's nothing to conclude but this: The tests are funny; they mean nothing. Everyone knows that Franzen writes bestsellers and Gaddis writes the Torah, that Franzen loves his characters while Gaddis paints ice on plastic men, that Franzen weaves a soft and cozy yarn while Gaddis stitches with bramble and thorns.

I'm not stubborn enough to conclude that because Gaddis typically uses shorter sentences, smaller words, and a more familiar vocabulary than Franzen that he is therefore more readable. It would be a bit of sophistry to follow that line of reasoning much further, though I would suggest that Franzen uses his own dubious criteria to

One senses Franzen trying to lure his favorite writers away from language, promising them greater fame in other media

make his case against Status writing. His readability test involves the following assessment from "Mr. Difficult": "Think of the novel as a lover: Let's stay home tonight and have a great time. Just because you're touched where you want to be touched, it doesn't mean you're cheap. ..." Except every now and then a lady likes to be taken out for dinner.

Franzen decides that because he can't enjoy Gaddis then no one can, and his conclusions all revolve around a bizarre belief that he is somehow the ideal reader for complex, difficult writing, when clearly he is not. (I imagine myself visiting Ethiopian restaurants and thundering: "I am a

into the formula, I found that Gaddis had creamed Franzen again. According to the Lexile scale, Gaddis's prose from *A Frolic of His Own* (just slightly more readable than the *Harry Potter* series) is on a difficulty par with a children's title called *The View from Saturday*, by E. L. Konigsburg. Franzen's readability peer on the Lexile scale is Clois E. Kicklighter. According to Amazon, Kicklighter's *Modern Masonry* "provides a thorough grounding in safe methods of laying brick, block, and stone, as well as a broad understanding of materials and their properties. Includes over 75 procedures for laying brick, block, and stone."

Although I would be more inclined to read *Modern Masonry* than *The View from Saturday*, I'm sure that I represent the minority. I can understand that *Modern Masonry* would require a more specialized audience, familiar with certain jargon, less committed to the primacy of story, and willing to indulge sidebars and reference arcana, momentum-snuffing historical forays, discursive writing, passive phrases, and long procedural passages entirely lacking in suspense. Hooray!

lover of the world's foods! I am a deeply serious eater! If you can't even make food that I would like, then who do you expect will eat this?") Franzen seems to have decided that if someone as smart as he is cannot enjoy the books, then all those who say they can must be lying. Or are so effectively intimidated by the forbidding books that they feel they have to claim to like them. Or are otherwise invested in the notion that difficult writing must be important. The problem here goes beyond mere outsized self-regard on the part of Franzen. He also has decided that his subjective

If Franzen finds Gaddis boring, fine. I want to follow Gaddis wherever he goes, precisely because I've never been there before

experience must form a basic template for the reality of others. This is an unfortunate trait in a novelist: it is a failure of empathy, an inability to believe in varieties of artistic interest, and a refusal to accommodate beliefs other than his own. I recognize the personality type, and I did not vote for it.

If official tests tell us very little about literary readability, the more subjective grading system Franzen administers to Gaddis is equally suspect, and in the end only demonstrates Franzen's hostility toward the kind of literature that doesn't give him what he already knows he wants. But these broad refusals pit him against some extraordinary writing, such as this passage from Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic*:

She sat studying the blood fleck on her thumb until cries from the street brought her to the windows, boys (for some reason always all of them, boys) shambling up the hill below her on gusts of bold obscenities turning her back for the hall, the stairs, down getting breath at an alcove window. On the corner opposite, the old man from the house above bent sweeping leaves into a dustpan, straightened up carrying the thing level before him like an offering, each movement, each shuffled step reckoned anxiously toward an open garbage can where he emptied it with ceremonial concern, balanced the broom upright like a crosier getting his footing, wiping a dry forehead, perching his glasses square and lifting his bald gaze on high to branches yellow-blown with benisons yet to fall. She fled for the kitchen.

It's a book consumed by dialogue, so the rare descriptive interludes are rhetorically surprising, and Gaddis stirs the moment until it swirls around us. His manic attention finds resonance in every detail. The boys' language comes in gusts, while in the same sentence Liz gets her breath at the win-

dow. There's high speed in the passage—witness the directional prepositions, up, below, down, opposite, toward—and Gaddis choreographs with great directorial authority. He spins the compass and takes everything in, and he can just as easily attach religious imagery to leaf raking as he can build our sense of Liz's anxiety without hearing her thoughts. In another writer's hands, this partial scene would just be filler to get Liz to pick up the phone (which she does next), but for Gaddis it is an opportunity to build feeling and atmosphere.

While it might indeed be pleasurable to get what we knew we wanted—that is, after all, why we wait in line to sit on Santa's lap—it is arguably sublime when a text creates in us desires we did not know we had, and then enlarges those desires without seeming desperate to please us. In fact, it's prose that actually doesn't worry about us, and I don't find that ungracious, because novel writing is not diplomacy. It's a hunger for something unknown, the belief that the world and its doings have yet to be fully explored. If Gaddis can be exhausting, it's because he's relentless, and it takes energy to run alongside him. If Franzen finds him boring, fine. I want nothing more than to follow Gaddis wherever he goes, precisely because I've never been there before.

What's not being measured by the readability tests, or by Franzen—what cannot be measured—is the logic and continuity between sentences, the overall coherence of the text—variables that are obviously far more subjective. A random collection of unlinked elementary sentences would yield an accommodating readability score while defying any known forms of actual readability. This is illustrated by the low Fog Index score (9.3) of passages from one of the more notoriously inaccessible texts, Gertrude Stein's sublimely nonsensical *Tender Buttons*:

A cushion has that cover. Supposing you do not like to change, supposing it is very clean that there is no change in appearance, supposing that there is regularity and a costume is that any the worse than an oyster and an exchange. Come to season that is there any extreme use in feather and cotton. Is there not much more joy in a table and more chairs and very likely roundness and a place to put them.

The language is simple, and the syntax is familiar, though it's shorn of recognizable content and reads like an encoded WWII dispatch. Sentences shift purpose in midstream, and parts of speech get hammered until they wobble, exposing the deep strangeness of language. The transitions, if you could call them that—"moats" might be better—are unhinged, with associative leaps and logical pirouettes that are, depending on where you sit in Franzen's

Status/Contract polarity, either exhilarating or boring, rapturous or pretentious.

It would take a certain kind of ninth-grader to enjoy writing so free of coherence, so much more interested in forging complex bursts of meaning that are expressionistic rather than figurative, enigmatic rather than earthly, evasive rather than embracing. This ninth-grader must enjoy language wedded less to story and more to poetic possibilities. What interests me about this kind of writing is its desire to discover meaning where we might not think to find it, as if it's burning entirely new synaptical pathways, and this is a very different pleasure than the kind I might get from narrative realism. It's a poetic aim that believes in the possibilities of language to create ghostly frames of sense, or to prove to me that rational sense might be equally unstable, and I can get a literally visceral thrill when I read it, because I happen to actually enjoy language.

Although Stein's individual sentences do not require excessive deciphering, the connections she attempts between them are far more challenging, mysterious, and wide-ranging than the transitions Franzen uses in his narrative realist mode, which generally builds linearly on what has gone before, subscribes to cinematic verisimilitude, and, when it's not narrating, slaps mortar onto an already stable fictional world. I find a terrific amount of complexity to be possible in Franzen's approach, and it frequently comes in the form of characterization. Characters are built to be intense webs of plausible contradiction, and their often conflicting desires, which can be emotionally self-destructive, war within them to produce dramatic tension. When it's done well, this can be immensely satisfying to read. But the notion that this is the premier paradigm for art made with language is like suggesting that painting should have ceased after Impressionism.

As much as I enjoy Stein's more slippery work, I understand why *Tender Buttons* is not popular, but that doesn't discredit it artistically, nor does it make me believe that Stein wrote to create a cloud of difficulty that would intimidate readers into thinking her work was important. *Tender Buttons* is a children's book with loosened hardware, logic put through the fun-house, and it's entertaining to me. And Stein's kind of writing is available for everyone to ignore, which they frequently do—it is being forced down precisely no one's throat, and has, at this moment, almost no cultural influence or power whatsoever, nor is it a landmark for younger writers.

Franzen works so far from his Status premise that he forgets just how suspect it is to claim that writers such as Gaddis, or Stein, or Beckett, or their more contemporary counterparts—David Markson, Joe Wenderoth, Gary Lutz, or Jena

Osman—are being held up as literary models for younger writers. This kind of work is not appearing in *The New Yorker*. It is not being published by mainstream presses. When published, by a small press, it is mostly not being reviewed by the *New York Times*, let alone any number of other newspapers or review outlets.

The power that Franzen wields, on the other hand, writing in *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times* against these weapons-grade experimentalists, even while he might complain that literary power barely approximates the kind that other forms of celebrity might offer, is huge by comparison. If any writer is being held up as an ideal model, it is Franzen himself. He shouldn't give his opponent muscles it does not have, only to knock it back down to the canvas.

In their online dialogue, Franzen and *New Yorker* editor Ben Greenman exchanged ideas about literary difficulty, and Franzen revealed his approach to writing:

If somebody is thinking of investing fifteen or twenty hours in reading a book of mine—fifteen or twenty hours that could be spent at the movies, or



online, or in an extreme-sports environment—the last thing I want to do is punish them with needless difficulty.

I would like to meet the reader who is weighing those options and choosing the non-difficult novel. Paint ball would win this contest every time, if just for the perfect sound the weapon makes. But leaving aside the perils of competing against extreme-sports environments, further clarifying Franzen's claim to unrivaled ambition, because I think he is the first writer ever to

announce a rivalry with extreme sports, he is clearly in direct competition for customers, I mean readers.

What's not being said in his response is that language itself is the difficulty, not just certain kinds of language. Language is a poor medium for the kind of mass entertainment that Franzen seems interested in. There are a few exceptions every year, most recently the Harry Potter books, but even the easiest book on the Lexile scale, *Play Ball*, *Amelia Bedelia*, which we might all agree to be readable, is far outsold by the Baby Einstein television series. If he is advocating ease, how easy is he willing to be? Isn't the logical end to this obsession that he will have to give up language entirely?

Franzen seems to see only one kind of difficulty: needless. He wants literary language to function as modestly as spoken language. Poetry, the great unmentionable, must now run and hide. It is hard to imagine what he would say about any number of poets not tied to obedient or recognizable structures of sense and form: Emily Dickinson, George Oppen, William Blake, John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, Michael Palmer, Wallace Stevens, C. D. Wright. He worries so much that a reader will have to think and work that he wants this kind of demanding writing discredited, and he refuses to think that other readers are not bothered, don't see it as work, and get an immense charge from the different ways artists are able to use language. He seems desperately frustrated by writers who don't actively court their audiences, who do not strive for his specific kind of clarity, and who take a little too much pleasure in language. It's a little bit like Britney Spears complaining that the Silver Jews aren't more melodic, or the Rockettes, despite their sold-out shows, whining about the cold abstractions of Pina Bausch.

Obsessing over difficult writers as the culprit in this cultural war seems beside the point, but they provide such an easy target that Franzen can't help himself.

Greenman: People love to rank the top novelists, but what about the most difficult? Is Gaddis the best example of an author whose degree of difficul-

ty forcibly ejects readers from his works? Who else comes close? Hawkes?

Franzen: Hawkes at least wrote shorter books.

Aside from the fact that this conversation sounds like two gentlemen who sure do love their literature, I am intrigued by this forcible ejection from a book—I imagine it makes a sound very much like the firing of a paint-ball gun—and I've never been able to resist getting cast aloft after a bout of arduous reading. Neighbors of mine are reading Alexander Kluge. I wonder if some evening I might see them hurtling through the air over my back yard.

Franzen/Greenman might have better played the anthropologists of impenetrability, but using John Hawkes as their king of difficulty shows just how inadequately they've rehearsed. Because Hawkes once heatedly stated that he "began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and

theme," he has been seen as the nonesuch of difficulty and experimentalism, not just a writer lighting a fire in an interview. But Greenman and Franzen should have read his books before signing on to this misunderstanding, because works like *Travesty*, *The Blood Oranges*, and *The Cannibal*, not to mention some of his later titles, are orbitally conventional in their dramatic execution, and all feature rich, traditionally conceived characters, not to mention talking horses.

If the Greenman-Franzen Grand Jury wants to cite a truly difficult text, which crashed every readability

test I subjected it to, they should mention an Austrian novel whose title will sound strangely familiar. Thomas Bernhard's *Correction* scores the highest Lexile I've ever seen, more than twice as high as Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and it should possibly only be read inside a steel cage after it's been sprayed with Roundup. According to the Fog Index, you'd have to finish 355 years of school before you could understand it. I don't even have a Ph.D., but I find this book to be extraordinary, menacing, brutally controlled, and one of the most memorable novels I've ever read. Exhausting? Hell yes. I hope I never recover. When Franzen is given a genuine opening to account for the possibility that some readers might enjoy this kind of difficult writing, he can assign to us only a kind of eager, self-loathing masochism:



The obvious difference between reading a novel and looking at a painting or listening to a symphony is that reading requires sustained, active effort. Maybe it's more useful to compare a difficult book with a difficult person. Some of us are attracted to people who seem demanding, or reticent, or prickly, on first meeting; we're attracted to the challenge of breaking down resistance; we have the feeling that a person who's so well defended has something valuable to defend.

Or maybe some of us happen to think and feel in language, and have been led into intense sensations because of its original deployment on the page. Some of us have felt dizzy elation when language has pushed at its limits. Some of us feel relief when we read this kind of writing, because it proves there is always more to think and feel, always another mind to engage and enter, always intensities we did not know existed. Some of us are attracted to writing that refuses the artistic assumptions of others. The result may be strange, foreign, remote, complex, difficult, but if a mind made it with rigor and care, with sensitivity, then it can be exquisite.

If you think of a novel as a contract between the reader and the writer, an agreement to entertain and be entertained, difficulty doesn't make much sense. But, as soon as you have "important literature," books with some sort of cultural status, the notion of difficulty sets in.

—Jonathan Franzen, in conversation with Ben Greenman

After writing two ponderous and tonally stilted novels, puffed with an old leaky bellows into language coffins called "characters," Franzen found his métier with an expansive, carefully structured family drama that was, to his obvious chagrin, fairly enjoyable. The first two books were not difficult so much as tedious, and they were hell to get through, so I didn't. But I've heard far worse said about my own work, and I never mistook my resistance to Franzen's first two books for a universal trait. I never thought that his obscurantist's approach to novels was part of a larger problem, or that it was being forced on me, or that it was bad for the literary industry. Nor did I believe that heavily researched novels, fortified with arcane information, were intrinsically flawed.

In *The Corrections*, Franzen discovered a far more entertaining way to tell stories. He cast off the obfuscations and informational soddenness of his first two books—which suffer from a desperate belief in obscure research, accompanied by a peg-legged approach to simple narrative scenes—and arrived at a storytelling facility that perfectly matches the material that interests him. The result is readable and engaging. He has very much earned his large audience. But what he hasn't

earned so well, in my view, is the right to pass off a fear-based argument as solid reasoning, to step on an entire form of reading and writing that, it's true, may have no commercial clout but might matter very much to people who believe that Updike's narrative realism is not the final, or only, achievement of literature, meant to be adhered to by all writers who come after him.

I have not come to this essay to vent an anger toward a writer who is more successful, both critically and commercially, than I am, but rather to offer another perspective on why a writer might be more interested in the possibilities of language than in the immediate pleasures of a mass audience, more curious about how syntax might

I am intrigued by this forcible ejection from a book—I imagine it makes a sound very much like the firing of a paint-ball gun

be employed to show a reader what it's like to be alive, to be a thinking, feeling person in a very complex world, less interested in mastering someone else's market-tested narrative technique. Since one of literature's leading spokespeople—I'm the reader you want!—is in fact not the reader I would ever want, it seemed important to hear from the kind of reader that Franzen seems to be claiming does not, or should not, actually exist. I am not advocating the complex or difficult approach as the superior one, or claiming that it is better than seeking to commune with the largest possible audience, but when a major, prize-winning novelist seeks frequent occasions to attack a diminishing and ever more powerless avant-garde and its readership, a response is in order.

Franzen's notion that a writer leaves behind the conventions of narrative fiction only to seek a shortcut to Status seems to me merely his own reason for straying from tradition with his first two books and, again, not a universal trait. His self-protective argument would have us believe, though, that these cynical motives are universal, that because the literary industry is financially imperiled, "fighting other media for its very life," to do anything but provide realist narrative is actually to do harm. But it strikes me as even more harmful to the industry to put up limits to the art form, to blame one kind of writing for the failure of another kind.

I have the sense that I might now be referred to as the opportunistic writer who tried to take down Franzen, the reigning lit king. I'm guilty of resentment, jealousy, and a pinched, embittered vision. But Franzen the writer and Franzen the

pundit are two different characters entirely. I will read with interest the fiction he produces. What I won't do is ignore the anti-artistic statements he makes in the guise of his reviews and essays, the hostility he heaps upon writers whose models differ from his own.

As a reader, I won't agree with his attribution of a cynical, Status-clutching motive to writers who actually care for language and its possibilities. Although those writers may be, in Franzen's view, failing with language, and although the whole venture may be doomed, it is their right to try and fail, as their failure might help readers discover new ways of thinking and feeling. Beckett issued a perfect motto for this belief: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."

Franzen wants to protect himself from disagreement by playing a lifeless devil's advocate, imagining the opposition calling him stupid. But instead I just would like him to stop declaring himself the ideal reader for writing he so clearly loathes, to retire from his role as a self-hating spokesperson for a tradition that wants as little to do with him as he with it. As a reader, I am not on Franzen's Status side, a side whose retorts he has flaccidly invented. I have never said that anyone who does not want to read difficult writing is a moron. I think there are pleasures and challenges to be had in both approaches, and I see no reason to get out the flamethrower. But Franzen is not just criticizing a writer when he dismisses Gaddis; he's criticizing an audience, telling them that there's no way they could possibly like what they like because there's simply no entertainment in it.

... the work of reading Gaddis makes me wonder if our brains might even be hard-wired for conventional storytelling, structurally eager to form pictures from sentences as featureless as "She stood up."

Why can't Franzen just say that his own brain is so wired? If he's speaking about our brains, then how does he account for the human ability to read and enjoy poetry, which his Status fiction can much more closely resemble? Why is he so anxious to blot out alternatives to conventional storytelling, or to grope for a regressive, biological justification?

I find it ironic that Franzen gives the name "Status" to those writers most interested in upending the status quo, or that a "Contract" for him means only something you sign and honor, and

not also what a muscle does when a body is tensed and afraid. But "difficulty," that's the difficult word. It is calling for refurbishment.

What I find difficult, when I read, is to encounter other people's artistic achievements passed off as one's own. I find it difficult to discover literary tradition so warmly embraced and coddled, as if artists existed merely to have flagrant intercourse with the past, guaranteed to draw a crowd but also certain to cover that crowd in an old, heavy breeding. I find it difficult when a narrative veers toward soap opera, when characters are explained by their childhoods, when setting is used as spackle to hold together chicken-wire characters who couldn't even stand up to an artificial wind, when depictions of landscape are intermissions while the author catches his breath and gets another scene ready. I find writing difficult that too readily subscribes to the artistic ideas of other writers, that willingly accepts language as a tool

that must be seen and not heard, that believes in happy endings, easy revelations, and bittersweet moments of self-understanding. I find writing difficult that could have been written by anyone. That's difficult to me, horribly so. Mr. Difficult? It's not Gaddis. Mr. Difficult is the writer willing to sell short the aims of literature, to serve as its fuming, unwanted ambassador, to apologize for its excesses or near misses, its blind alleys, to insult the reading public with film-ready versions of reality and experience and inner sensations, scenes flying jauntily by under the banner of realism,

which lately grants it full critical immunity. Mr. Difficult attacks a harmless, blameless enemy that is working with language, as a painter might with color, as a composer might with sound, as a dancer might with movement, to make something come to life inside our heads: experience, thought, action, feeling. It's difficult when narratives are punched out from the same old factory templates. Now, that's bad for literature, and maybe that's why literature is fighting for its very life, because compromise is mistook for ambition, and joining up is preferred to standing out. Maybe literature is fighting for its very life because its powerful pundits have declared a halt to all artistic progress, declaring it pretentious, alienating, bad for business.

This isn't a manifesto. It's a response to an attack from the highest point of status culture. The contract I signed? Not to stand by when a populist pundit puts up his dull wall and says what literature can and cannot be. ■

