

Fail better

What makes a good writer? Is writing an expression of self, or, as TS Eliot argued, 'an escape from personality'? Do novelists have a duty? Do readers? Why are there so few truly great novels? Zadie Smith on literature's legacy of honourable failure

Zadie Smith
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1. The tale of Clive

I want you to think of a young man called Clive. Clive is on a familiar literary mission: he wants to write the perfect novel. Clive has a lot going for him: he's intelligent and well read; he's made a study of contemporary fiction and can see clearly where his peers have gone wrong; he has read a good deal of rigorous literary theory - those elegant blueprints for novels not yet built - and is now ready to build his own unparalleled house of words. Maybe Clive even teaches novels, takes them apart and puts them back together. If writing is a craft, he has all the skills, every tool. Clive is ready. He clears out the spare room in his flat, invests in an ergonomic chair, and sits down in front of the blank possibility of the Microsoft Word program. Hovering above his desktop he sees the perfect outline of his platonic novel - all he need do is drag it from the ether into the real. He's excited. He begins.

Fast-forward three years. Somehow, despite all Clive's best efforts, the novel he has pulled into existence is not the perfect novel that floated so tantalisingly above his computer. It is, rather, a poor simulacrum, a shadow of a shadow. In the transition from the dream to the real it has shed its aura of perfection; its shape is warped, unrecognisable. Something got in the way, something almost impossible to articulate. For example, when it came to fashioning the character of the corrupt Hispanic government economist, Maria Gomez, who is so vital to Clive's central theme of corruption within American identity politics, he found he needed something more than simply "the right words" or "knowledge about economists". Maria Gomez effectively proves his point about the deflated American dream, but in other, ineffable, ways she seems not quite to convince as he'd hoped. He found it hard to get into her silk blouse, her pencil skirt - even harder to get under her skin. And then, later, trying to describe her marriage, he discovered that he wanted to write cleverly and aphoristically about "Marriage" with a capital M far more than he wanted to describe Maria's particular marriage, which, thinking of his own marriage, seemed suddenly a monumentally complex task, particularly if his own wife, Karina, was going to read it. And there are a million other little examples ... flaws that are not simply flaws of language or design, but rather flaws of ... what? Him? This thought bothers him for a moment. And then another, far darker thought comes. Is it possible that if he were only the reader, and not the writer, of this novel, he would think it a failure?

Clive doesn't wallow in such thoughts for long. His book gets an agent, his agent gets a publisher, his novel goes out into the world. It is well received. It turns out that Clive's book smells like literature and looks like literature and maybe even, intermittently, feels like literature, and after a while Clive himself has almost forgotten that strange feeling of untruth, of self-betrayal, that his novel first roused in him. He becomes not only a fan of his own novel, but its great defender. If a critic points out an overindulgence here, a purple passage there, well, then Clive explains this is simply what he intended. It was all to achieve a certain effect. In fact, Clive doesn't mind such criticism: nit-picking of this kind feels superficial compared to the bleak sense he first had that his novel was not only not good, but not true. No one is accusing him of so large a crime. The critics, when they criticise, speak of the paintwork and brickwork of the novel, a bad metaphor, a tedious denouement, and are confident he will fix these little mistakes next time round. As for Maria Gomez, everybody agrees that she is just as you'd imagine a corrupt Hispanic government economist in a pencil skirt to be. Clive is satisfied and vindicated. He begins work on a sequel.

2. The craft that defies craftsmanship

That is the end of the tale of Clive. Its purpose was to suggest that somewhere between a critic's necessary superficiality and a writer's natural dishonesty, the truth of how we judge literary success or failure is lost. It is very hard to get writers to speak frankly about their own work, particularly in a literary market where they are required to be not only writers, but also hucksters selling product. It is always easier to depersonalise the question. In preparation for this essay I emailed many writers (under the promise of anonymity) to ask how they judge their own work. One writer, of a naturally analytical and philosophical bent, replied by refining my simple question into a series of more interesting ones:

I've often thought it would be fascinating to ask living writers: "Never mind critics, what do you yourself think is wrong with your writing? How did you dream of your book before it was created? What were your best hopes? How have you let yourself down?" A map of disappointments - that would be a revelation.

Map of disappointments - Nabokov would call that a good title for a bad novel. It strikes me as a suitable guide to the land where writers live, a country I imagine as mostly beach, with hopeful writers standing on the shoreline while their perfect novels pile up, over on the opposite coast, out of reach. Thrusting out of the shoreline are hundreds of piers, or "disappointed bridges", as

Joyce called them. Most writers, most of the time, get wet. Why they get wet is of little interest to critics or readers, who can only judge the soggy novel in front of them. But for the people who write novels, what it takes to walk the pier and get to the other side is, to say the least, a matter of some importance. To writers, writing well is not simply a matter of skill, but a question of character. What does it take, after all, to write well? What personal qualities does it require? What personal resources does a bad writer lack? In most areas of human endeavour we are not shy of making these connections between personality and capacity. Why do we never talk about these things when we talk about books?

It's my experience that when a writer meets other writers and the conversation turns to the fault lines of their various prose styles, then you hear a slightly different language than the critic's language. Writers do not say, "My research wasn't sufficiently thorough" or "I thought Casablanca was in Tunisia" or "I seem to reify the idea of femininity" - at least, they don't consider problems like these to be central. They are concerned with the ways in which what they have written reveals or betrays their best or worst selves. Writers feel, for example, that what appear to be bad aesthetic choices very often have an ethical dimension. Writers know that between the platonic ideal of the novel and the actual novel there is always the pesky self - vain, deluded, myopic, cowardly, compromised. That's why writing is the craft that defies craftsmanship: craftsmanship alone will not make a novel great. This is hard for young writers, like Clive, to grasp at first. A skilled cabinet-maker will make good cabinets, and a skilled cobbler will mend your shoes, but skilled writers very rarely write good books and almost never write great ones. There is a rogue element somewhere - for convenience's sake we'll call it the self, although, in less metaphysically challenged times, the "soul" would have done just as well. In our public literary conversations we are squeamish about the connection between selves and novels. We are repelled by the idea that writing fiction might be, among other things, a question of character. We like to think of fiction as the playground of language, independent of its originator. That's why, in the public imagination, the confession "I did not tell the truth" signifies failure when James Frey says it, and means nothing at all if John Updike says it. I think that fiction writers know different. Though we rarely say it publicly, we know that our fictions are not as disconnected from our selves as you like to imagine and we like to pretend. It is this intimate side of literary failure that is so interesting; the ways in which writers fail on their own terms: private, difficult to express, easy to ridicule, completely unsuited for either the regulatory atmosphere of reviews or the objective interrogation of seminars, and yet, despite all this, true.

3. What writers know

First things first: writers do not have perfect or even superior knowledge about the quality or otherwise of their own work - God knows, most writers are quite deluded about the nature of their own talent. But writers do have a different kind of knowledge than either professors or critics. Occasionally it's worth listening to. The insight of the practitioner is, for better or worse, unique. It's what you find in the criticism of Virginia Woolf, of Iris Murdoch, of Roland Barthes. What unites those very different critics is the confidence with which they made the connection between personality and prose. To be clear: theirs was neither strictly biographical criticism nor prescriptively moral criticism, and nothing they wrote was reducible to the childish formulations "only good men write good books" or "one must know a man's life to understand his work". But neither did they think of a writer's personality as an irrelevance. They understood style precisely as an expression of personality, in its widest sense. A writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner. When you understand style in these terms, you don't think of it as merely a matter of fanciful syntax, or as the flamboyant icing atop a plain literary cake, nor as the uncontrollable result of some mysterious velocity coiled within language itself. Rather, you see style as a personal necessity, as the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness. Style is a writer's way of telling the truth. Literary success or failure, by this measure, depends not only on the refinement of words on a page, but in the refinement of a consciousness, what Aristotle called the education of the emotions.

4. Tradition versus the individual talent

But before we go any further along that track we find TS Eliot, that most distinguished of critic-practitioners, standing in our way. In his famous essay of 1919, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Eliot decimated the very idea of individual consciousness, of personality, in writing. There was hardly any such thing, he claimed, and what there was, was not interesting. For Eliot the most individual and successful aspects of a writer's work were precisely those places where his literary ancestors asserted their immortality most vigorously. The poet and his personality were irrelevant, the poetry was everything; and the poetry could only be understood through the glass of literary history. That essay is written in so high church a style, with such imperious authority, that even if all your affective experience as a writer is to the contrary, you are intimidated into believing it. "Poetry," says Eliot, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." "The progress of an artist," says Eliot, "is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." These credos seem so impersonal themselves, so disinterested, that it is easy to forget that young critic-practitioners make the beds they wish to lie in, and it was in Eliot's interest - given the complexity and scandals of his private life and his distaste for intrusion - ruthlessly to separate the personal from the poetry. He was so concerned with privacy that it influences his terminology: everywhere in that essay there is the assumption that personality amounts to simply the biographical facts of one's life - but that is a narrow vision. Personality is much more than autobiographical detail, it's our way of processing the world, our way of being, and it cannot be artificially removed from our activities; it is our way of being active.

Eliot may have been ruthlessly impersonal in his writing in the superficial sense (if by that we mean he did not reveal personal details, such as the tricky fact that he had committed his wife to an asylum), but never was a man's work more inflected with his character, with his beliefs about the nature of the world. As for that element of his work that he puts forward as a model of his impersonality - a devotion to tradition - such devotion is the very definition of personality in writing. The choices a writer makes within a tradition - preferring Milton to Moliere, caring for Barth over Barthelme - constitute some of the most personal information we can have about him.

There is no doubt that Eliot's essay, with its promise to "halt at the frontiers of metaphysics or mysticism", is a brilliant demarcation of what is properly within the remit of, as he puts it, "the responsible person interested in poetry". It lays out an entirely reasonable boundary between what we can and cannot say about a piece of writing without embarrassing ourselves. Eliot was honest about wanting both writing and criticism to approach the condition of a science; he famously compared a writer to a piece of finely filiated platinum introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. This analogy has proved a useful aspiration for critics. It has allowed them to believe in the writer as catalyst, entering into a tradition, performing an act of meaningful recombination, and yet leaving no trace of himself, or at least none the critic need worry himself with. Eliot's analogy freed critics to do the independent, radically creative, non- biographical criticism of which they had long dreamt, and to which they have every right. For writers, however, Eliot's analogy just won't do. Fiction writing is not an objective science and writers have selves as well as traditions to understand and assimilate. It is certainly very important, as Eliot argues, that writers should foster an understanding of the cultures and the books of the past, but they also unavoidably exist within the garden of the self and this, too, requires nurture and development. The self is not like platinum - it leaves traces all over the place. Just because Eliot didn't want to talk about it, doesn't mean it isn't there.

5. Writing as self-betrayal

Back to my simple point, which is that writers are in possession of "selfhood", and that the development or otherwise of self has some part to play in literary success or failure. This shameful fact needn't trouble the professor or the critic, but it is naturally of no little significance to writers themselves. Here is the poet Adam Zagajewski, speaking of The Self, in a poem of the same title:

It is small and no more visible than a cricket
in August. It likes to dress up, to masquerade,
as all dwarves do. It lodges between
granite blocks, between serviceable
truths. It even fits under
a bandage, under adhesive. Neither custom officers
nor their beautiful dogs will find it. Between
hymns, between alliances, it hides itself.

To me, writing is always the attempted revelation of this elusive, multifaceted self, and yet its total revelation - as Zagajewski suggests - is a chimerical impossibility. It is impossible to convey all of the truth of all our experience. Actually, it's impossible to even know what that would mean, although we stubbornly continue to have an idea of it, just as Plato had an idea of the forms. When we write, similarly, we have the idea of a total revelation of truth, but cannot realise it. And so, instead, each writer asks himself which serviceable truths he can live with, which alliances are strong enough to hold. The answers to those questions separate experimentalists from so-called "realists", comics from tragedians, even poets from novelists. In what form, asks the writer, can I most truthfully describe the world as it is experienced by this particular self? And it is from that starting point that each writer goes on to make their individual compromise with the self, which is always a compromise with truth as far as the self can know it. That is why the most common feeling, upon re-reading one's own work, is Prufrock's: "That is not it at all ... that is not what I meant, at all ..." Writing feels like self-betrayal, like failure.

6. Writing as inauthenticity

Here is another novelist, in another email, answering the question: "How would you define literary failure?"

I was once asked by a high-school student in an audience in Chennai: "Why, sir, are you so eager to please?" That's how I tend to define failure - work done for what Heidegger called "Das Mann", the indeterminate "They" who hang over your shoulder, warping your sense of judgment; what he (not me) would call your authenticity.

That novelist, like me, I suppose like all of us who came of age under postmodernity, is naturally sceptical of the concept of authenticity, especially what is called "cultural authenticity" - after all, how can any of us be more or less authentic than we are? We were taught that authenticity was meaningless. How, then, to deal with the fact that when we account for our failings, as writers, the feeling that is strongest is a betrayal of one's deepest, authentic self?

That sounds very grand: maybe it's better to start at the simplest denomination of literary betrayal, the critic's favourite, the cliché. What is a cliché except language passed down by Das Mann, used and shop-soiled by so many before you, and in no way the correct jumble of language for the intimate part of your vision you meant to express? With a cliché you have pandered to a shared understanding, you have taken a short-cut, you have re-presented what was pleasing and familiar rather than risked what was true and strange. It is an aesthetic and an ethical failure: to put it very simply, you have not told the truth. When writers admit to failures they like to admit to the smallest ones - for example, in each of my novels somebody "rummages in their purse" for something because I was too lazy and thoughtless and unawake to separate "purse" from its old, persistent friend "rummage". To rummage through a purse is to sleepwalk through a sentence - a small enough betrayal of self, but a betrayal all the same. To speak personally, the very reason I write is so that I might not sleepwalk through my entire life. But it is easy to admit that a sentence makes you wince; less easy to confront the fact that for many writers there will be paragraphs, whole characters, whole books through which one sleepwalks and for which "inauthentic" is truly the correct term.

7. Do writers have duties?

All this talk of authenticity, of betrayal, presupposes a duty - an obligation that the writers and readers of literature are under. It is deeply unfashionable to conceive of such a thing as a literary duty; what that might be, how we might fail to fulfil it. Duty is not a very literary term. These days, when we do speak of literary duties, we mean it from the reader's perspective, as a consumer of literature. We are really speaking of consumer rights. By this measure the duty of writers is to please readers and to be eager to do so, and this duty has various subsets: the duty to be clear; to be interesting and intelligent but never wilfully obscure; to write with the average reader in mind; to be in good taste. Above all, the modern writer has a duty to entertain. Writers who stray from these obligations risk tiny readerships and critical ridicule. Novels that submit to a shared vision of entertainment, with characters that speak the recognisable dialogue of the sitcom, with plots that take us down familiar roads and back home again, will always be welcomed. This is not a good time, in literature, to be a curio. Readers seem to wish to be "represented", as they are at the ballot box, and to do this, fiction needs to be general, not particular. In the contemporary fiction market a writer must entertain and be recognisable - anything less is seen as a failure and a rejection of readers.

Personally, I have no objection to books that entertain and please, that are clear and interesting and intelligent, that are in good taste and are not wilfully obscure - but neither do these qualities seem to me in any way essential to the central experience of fiction, and if they should be missing, this in no way rules out the possibility that the novel I am reading will yet fulfil the only literary duty I care about. For writers have only one duty, as I see it: the duty to express accurately their way of being in the world. If that sounds woolly and imprecise, I apologise. Writing is not a science, and I am speaking to you in the only terms I have to describe what it is I persistently aim for (yet fail to achieve) when I sit in front of my computer.

When I write I am trying to express my way of being in the world. This is primarily a process of elimination: once you have removed all the dead language, the second-hand dogma, the truths that are not your own but other people's, the mottos, the slogans, the out-and-out lies of your nation, the myths of your historical moment - once you have removed all that warps experience into a shape you do not recognise and do not believe in - what you are left with is something approximating the truth of your own conception. That is what I am looking for when I read a novel; one person's truth as far as it can be rendered through language. This single duty, properly pursued, produces complicated, various results. It's certainly not a call to arms for the autobiographer, although some writers will always mistake the readerly desire for personal truth as their cue to write a treatise or a speech or a thinly disguised memoir in which they themselves are the hero. Fictional truth is a question of perspective, not autobiography. It is what you can't help tell if you write well; it is the watermark of self that runs through everything you do. It is language as the revelation of a consciousness.

8. We refuse to be each other

A great novel is the intimation of a metaphysical event you can never know, no matter how long you live, no matter how many people you love: the experience of the world through a consciousness other than your own. And I don't care if that consciousness chooses to spend its time in drawing rooms or in internet networks; I don't care if it uses a corner of a Dorito as its hero, or the charming eldest daughter of a bourgeois family; I don't care if it refuses to use the letter e or crosses five continents and two thousand pages. What unites great novels is the individual manner in which they articulate experience and force us to be attentive, waking us from the sleepwalk of our lives. And the great joy of fiction is the variety of this process: Austen's prose will make you attentive in a different way and to different things than Wharton's; the dream Philip Roth wishes to wake us from still counts as sleep if Pynchon is the dream-catcher.

A great piece of fiction can demand that you acknowledge the reality of its wildest proposition, no matter how alien it may be to you. It can also force you to concede the radical otherness lurking within things that appear most familiar. This is why the talented reader understands George Saunders to be as much a realist as Tolstoy, Henry James as much an experimentalist as George Perec. Great styles represent the interface of "world" and "I", and the very notion of such an interface being different in kind and quality from your own is where the power of fiction resides. Writers fail us when that interface is tailored to our needs, when it panders to the generalities of its day, when it offers us a world it knows we will accept having already seen it on the television. Bad writing does nothing, changes nothing, educates no emotions, rewires no inner circuitry - we close its covers with the same metaphysical confidence in the universality of our own interface as we did when we opened it. But great writing - great writing forces you to submit to its vision. You spend the morning reading Chekhov and in the afternoon, walking through your neighbourhood, the world has turned Chekhovian; the waitress in the cafe offers a non-sequitur, a dog dances in the street.

9. The dream of a perfect novel drives writers crazy

There is a dream that haunts writers: the dream of the perfect novel. It is a dream that causes only chaos and misery. The dream of this perfect novel is really the dream of a perfect revelation of the self. In America, where the self is so neatly wedded to the social, their dream of the perfect novel is called "The Great American Novel" and requires the revelation of the soul of a nation, not just of a man ... Still I think the principle is the same: on both sides of the Atlantic we dream of a novel that tells the truth of experience perfectly. Such a revelation is impossible - it will always be a partial vision, and even a partial vision is incredibly hard to achieve. The reason it is so hard to think of more than a handful of great novels is because the duty I've been talking about - the duty to convey accurately the truth of one's own conception - is a duty of the most demanding kind. If, every 30 years, people complain that there were only a few first-rate novels published, that's because there were only a few. Genius in fiction has always been and always will be extremely rare. Fact is, to tell the truth of your own conception - given the nature of our mediated world, given the shared and ambivalent nature of language, given the elusive, deceitful, deluded nature of the self - truly takes a genius, truly demands of its creator a breed of aesthetic and ethical integrity that makes one's eyes water just thinking about it.

But there's no reason to cry. If it's true that first-rate novels are rare, it's also true that what we call the literary canon is really the history of the second-rate, the legacy of honourable failures. Any writer should be proud to join that list just as any reader should count themselves lucky to read them. The literature we love amounts to the fractured shards of an attempt, not the monument of fulfilment. The art is in the attempt, and this matter of understanding-that-which-is-outside-of-ourselves using only what we have inside ourselves amounts to some of the hardest intellectual and emotional work you'll ever do. It is a writer's duty. It is also a reader's duty. Did I mention that yet?

10. Note to readers: a novel is a two-way street

A novel is a two-way street, in which the labour required on either side is, in the end, equal. Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing - I really believe that. As for those people who align reading with the essentially passive experience of watching television, they only wish to debase reading and readers. The more accurate analogy is that of the amateur musician placing her sheet music on the stand and preparing to play. She must use her own, hard-won, skills to play this piece of music. The greater the skill, the greater the gift she gives the composer and the composer gives her.

This is a conception of "reading" we rarely hear now. And yet, when you practise reading, when you spend time with a book, the old moral of effort and reward is undeniable. Reading is a skill and an art and readers should take pride in their abilities and have no shame in cultivating them if for no other reason than the fact that writers need you. To respond to the ideal writer takes an ideal reader, the type of reader who is open enough to allow into their own mind a picture of human consciousness so radically different from their own as to be almost offensive to reason. The ideal reader steps up to the plate of the writer's style so that together writer and reader might hit the ball out of the park.

What I'm saying is, a reader must have talent. Quite a lot of talent, actually, because even the most talented reader will find much of the land of literature tricky terrain. For how many of us feel the world to be as Kafka felt it, too impossibly foreshortened to ride from one village to the next? Or can imagine a world without nouns, as Borges did? How many are willing to be as emotionally generous as Dickens, or to take religious faith as seriously as did Graham Greene? Who among us have Zora Neale Hurston's capacity for joy or Douglas Coupland's strong stomach for the future? Who has the delicacy to tease out Flaubert's faintest nuance, or the patience and the will to follow David Foster Wallace down his intricate recursive spirals of thought? The skills that it takes to write it are required to read it. Readers fail writers just as often as writers fail readers. Readers fail when they allow themselves to believe the old mantra that fiction is the thing you relate to and writers the amenable people you seek out when you want to have your own version of the world confirmed and reinforced. That is certainly one of the many things fiction can do, but it's a conjurer's trick within a far deeper magic. To become better readers and writers we have to ask of each other a little bit more.

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