Leon Stone had set up two separate rooms in his otherwise cramped house to serve as writing areas: one in which to write his novels and stories, those products of his pen for which he still holds the greatest affection, despite their failure to gain him the critical acceptance he feels they deserve, or much of an audience, and one to which he repairs when he intended to work instead on his non-creative prose, literary criticism mostly, long analytical essays that no doubt demonstrate his penetrating critical insights and his mastery of literary history, and that have managed to make his a recognizable name among those who read the few magazines and quarterlies that are willing to publish such things, but that do not really give him the pleasure he derives from creating original works of fiction, even though sometimes only he really knows how original and how truly illustrative of the critical principles he champions in his essays these works are.

The fiction room is small but homily decorated—knick-knacks and what-nots—one bookcase full of his favorite fictions by other writers (for inspiration), an oak table on which can be found his current manuscripts, various writing-related objects (pencils, sharpeners, to-be-filled notebooks) and reference books (dictionary, thesaurus, the latest edition of Writer’s Market), and, placed in one corner of the room, a plush and comfortable-looking recliner, where Leon sits to compose his first drafts. There is a shaded reading lamp next to the chair, and the windows are nicely curtained in a gauzy fabric that gives the room just the muted light a writer needs to feel safely separated, at least for a while, from the more glaring and indiscriminate light shining on the uninspired affairs being conducted outside those windows.

There is no computer. It is to be found in the second room, where Leon will go to type up his completed drafts, but which otherwise he uses when it is time to write an essay. These he can generally do quickly, so the room has few adornments: other bookcases (mostly all the old literature textbooks he’d accumulated as a college student), the computer and its desk, a framed poster of the historical landmarks of Minneapolis, a city has visited several times and enjoyed very much.
It was to this room, in fact, that Leon had gone on the day that concerns us. Leon was sitting in the inexpensive but not uncomfortable office chair preparing to commence the day’s work (a critical essay in which he was busily demolishing the reputation of a current novelist whose laughably artificial prose was so distressingly overvalued) when he suddenly plunged into an existential crisis unlike any he had ever before experienced.

The fiction of Julian Meadows is notorious for the way in which it often begins by misdirecting the reader’s attention. A typical Meadows story will place us in a seemingly ordinary setting, described in the most matter-of-fact way, only to suddenly introduce what will be the story’s motivating conflict, seemingly out of nowhere. If the reader is first led to believe it is a story exploring the surface realities of its protagonist’s situation, she is abruptly forced to confront a wholly new story in which the depths of suffering human consciousness will be brought to the reader’s attention by a writer of great psychological penetration.

And Leon had indeed endured many such crises over the span of time he had spent perfecting the scribbler’s art, episodes of self-doubt and intimations of futility so intense and burdensome it was all he could do not to lie down on the floor and never get up, prolonged periods of dark despair in which existence itself seemed so senseless, so frankly bizarre and absurd, that he mostly wanted no part of it, although he never really made any effort to be done with it, beyond finding a piece of rope one day and wrapping it around his neck just to convince himself he was really serious in his disaffection, that he would really do it if the feelings didn’t let up, that there was a point beyond which his ability to accept misery and degradation would not extend, where he would not allow it to persist, although that point never quite seemed to approach, or if it did, it kept being moved off a little farther along the line of toleration and acquiescence, and eventually the worst of it would be over, although never would he be entirely free of this unwelcome knowledge that lurking behind all our restless activity there is nothing, no plan, no point, no reason, really, to pursue any such activity except for the sake of activity itself, to avoid simply coming to rest and confronting the void that endlessly expands itself all around us but that our busyness allows us to ignore, and, perhaps because of this very knowledge, each subsequent occurrence of these psychic breakdowns was just that much worse, the slough of
despond deeper, the conviction that all endeavor, all struggle, even the struggle to write, was utterly useless even greater, until now this latest seizure of immobility threatened to leave him permanently incapacitated, if only because he can now see that every time he manages to renew his sense of purpose and rededicate himself to getting on with the work that ought to be giving him satisfaction, or else why would he do it, he only wound up in an even deeper psychological pit, this time so deep he’s pretty sure he can’t get out, the feeling of being hemmed in, confined, cut off from reassuring light and revivifying air, so intense he thinks his whole body is simply going to cave in, his very being squeezed out of existence, and if this is the price to pay for continuing to function, at least part of the time, at something like a normal level of competence, then he would prefer just to stop, cease trying, lapse into a voluntary catatonic state, declare it all a worthless fraud, an opportunity only for torment and torture, undeserving of any further effort to make it make sense,

Meadows has often indicated—although surprisingly few commentators have taken note of the fact—that his most immediate influences are the great modern interrogators of human consciousness: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce. Their unstated doctrine that the proper work of the novelist is to limn the processes of the mind in all its impulsive flow, to connect the reader with another human personality through the writer’s authentic re-creation of the singular mental life that comprises such a personality, is Julian Meadows’s own literary lodestone. In all of his work its pull can be recognized in his unwillingness to sacrifice this psychological verism to the artificial demands of plot or theme or what some critics want to call fine writing.

While it would probably not be surprising for readers of Meadows’s fiction to learn that he sees himself as the inheritor of a tradition of interiorized fiction a la James and Woolf, they might be interested to know further that Julian Meadows did not truly understand the nature of his literary task until he came upon the writing of the European critic Petr Yankoff. In particular, he has never forgotten this passage, from Yankoff’s book Projecting the Self: “To find a straightforward and unmediated perspective on the performing subject, to bear witness to his self-revelations in the act of enunciation itself, is crucial to the reading subject’s capacity to situate himself satisfactorily in relation to the text itself, its meanings, judgments, its mutually
reinforcing obligations. All writers are always in the process of projecting a self, a self that speaks to the receiving self simultaneously embroiled in the ongoing performance of writing-as-writer.”

Since, following on Yankoff’s keen insight, writing is always about the writer, an attempt on the writer’s part to (literally) express himself and on the reader’s to apprehend and appreciate the irreducibly human outlook thus expressed, exemplifying as it does the very possibility of manifesting such an outlook, what better way to get at the very essence of literary art than to write directly about writers struggling to write?

I knew that my problem would cease once I had written the first convincing sentence, the sentence leading me someplace I’d never been before. Luckily, on this day that sentence came rather quickly, as if, taking pity on me in my almost farcical incapacity, another writer, at that moment hovering omnipresently somewhere over my shoulder, whispered the words in my ear, commanded my hand to take the pencil firmly in its grasp and press it to the page. The act of writing itself—more precisely, the act of finding the words that give your sentences a shape you could not have pre-designed, a meaning you could not have anticipated fully, that prompt you to say what you never knew to say—remains the only reliable remedy for these attacks of despondency.

Although, as my wife would always remind me, it is this very writing that causes me such distress to begin with. Or at least it is the reception it has received that is the problem, which is to say the lack of reception, more precisely. The utter silence it has provoked would be more precise still.

Well, at least he finally admitted it. All that time he would keep saying that his work was appreciated by a few, but that this knowing few, though indeed few, were still knowing, and this is the audience a writer true to his art doesn’t just settle for but finally wants to reach. And sometimes the knowing few spread the word far enough that a writer might at least make a living at it.
The worst thing was that I listened to this. For a while, anyway. The day he announced he’d quit his job in order to devote himself full-time to nothing but writing was the day I could no longer stay and watch him consign both our lives to final failure. It was not so much that I didn’t believe he was a gifted writer—even, in some ways, a genius. It was, rather, his single-mindedness, his unwillingness to compromise, his devotion to literature as if it were a religious calling.

Readers of Julian Meadows’s work are well aware of his systematic disregard of what is conventionally known as “point of view.” Not only does he switch freely from the omniscient to the subjective form of narration, but he also as freely changes the perspective from which his stories are told from character to character. Purists find this technique disconcerting, but ultimately it, too, is a strategy designed to help achieve this writer’s larger goal of digging beneath the external details of ordinary existence, of avoiding the reduction of fiction to the recording of “information” to be conveyed to readers turning to fiction for the most superficial of reasons: to see the familiar world reflected back to them, to experience that ersatz world in all of its illusory fullness at the expense of coming to know knowing itself as recreated by the literary artist.

In effect, Meadows depicts human awareness as interdependent, the individual mind capable both of attaining a detached, objective perspective (the “view from nowhere”) and of linking up with other individual minds to produce a collective core of consciousness, a connected cluster of coordinated cognition the conveyance of which is the requisite responsibility of the writer. Meadows has dedicated himself to the task of carrying out this imperative and of avoiding the superficial satisfactions of the more obvious displays of shameless gimmickry other writers settle for.

As he prepared to enter the seminary, Leon had few qualms about the choice he had made. Although, perhaps it wasn’t entirely proper—not altogether a happy omen—that just as he had committed himself to studying for the clergy he had also concluded he no longer believed in God.
He had always had his doubts, in truth his crisis of faith had come about gradually, his final realization really only the ultimate point in a line that led from that first Sunday when the prospect of going to church seemed laborious indeed in contrast to the possibility of remaining in bed and sleeping a while longer to the evening just last week when Leon turned the last page of Outside of Life, the book that has finally and irreversibly convinced him that the construct of the omnipresent and efficacious God guiding things from “outside of life” cannot be maintained by clear-thinking people. For someone like Leon, a man who has always felt the need to believe in something other than flux and instability, something to which he could voluntarily pledge himself in both calling and conviction, this last experience threatened literally to be the end of the line.

But to swerve from his original decision to dedicate his talents to the elucidation of God’s purpose in the world He had created would serve only to expose his own weakness. He could still use his office to help people deal with their own doubts and disappointments, couldn’t he? Even if he himself could not settle for make-believe, a willing suspension of credulity in order to live in self-invoked illusion, he could persuade others that such illusion was preferable to an existence of unceasing despondency that terminated at last in hopelessness. This was not the work he had envisioned when he first set his sights on the ministry, but why should he not regard it as useful work, even so? He would trust in time to validate this conclusion.

Another move Julian Meadows likes to make is to fracture the chronology of his fiction, forcing the reader to constantly readjust herself to alterations of time and setting. But these manipulations of sequence, however disruptive of the reader’s expectations of an exclusively linear development of plot in works of fiction, finally only expand our conception of what “plot” can be, help bring into fiction a more capacious ability to encompass “life” in all of its vanishing points of time and cumulative transfers of place. Along with the fluidity in point of view we encounter in Meadows’s work, this fluidity of event (the former frequently in tandem with the latter) signals Julian Meadows’s unswerving commitment to perfecting the novel as not merely a transitory literary form but as indeed a veritable Book of Life.

During the time Leon was grappling most fiercely with his unassuageable feelings of self-contempt, he began to take daily walks through the thick and verdant woods behind the
seminary, itself situated on a rolling, lushly green piece of ground on the outskirts of town, a modest Midwestern city that brandished its middle American values like a Roman legionnaire his shield, defending against the depredations of those marauding outsiders threatening to overthrow them.

But Leon could not be protected from his own ungovernable impulses, seeking from within to overrun his moral defenses and lead him into sin and degradation. Thus through an act of will he took these daily excursions into nature’s bower, the fertile forest, the place where, if he was to find it at all he would find the evidence of God’s presence, if not encounter Him directly and beseech Him to relieve him of his temptations. At the very least he was able to arrest his frantically swirling thoughts and repose instead in the comforting balm he found in this calming copse, this glorious grove.

He would take the worn-down, serpentine path provided by those previous sojourners in this peaceful park, perhaps themselves perambulating its parcels for the same purpose as Leon now pursued, and wend his way past the oaks, the maples, the firs, the sycamores, sometimes veering off the path and into the shadows shed by these stately, sinuous towers of flourishing foliage and revel further in the profusion of plant life waiting within their protective penumbras.

These flowers and ferns, these saplings and shrubs, seem to soothe his troubled spirit like a magic wand waved over him by a beneficent forest sprite, like a soporific elixir administered through some rustic sorcery incarnate in this beguiling tract of woodland. And occasionally small animals could be espied, creatures whose behavior he would study with great wonder, like a spaceman suddenly plunged into an alien world and confronted with life forms so unfamiliar in their apparent purpose he can only stare open-mouthed in his perplexity, watching them as they, seemingly heedless of his interest in them, go on about their business like self-directed beings who instinctively understand their place in the universe and do not waste even one moment of their precious time in life brooding about the ultimate point of it all, dwelling on the fact that, as far as anyone could tell, all activity undertaken by the living was poor recompense for the utter extinction one had to endure when dead.
When all is said and done, however, Julian Meadows should be judged primarily as a stylist of great descriptive, almost poetic, power and amplitude. All of the other techniques surveyed here, in fact, can be said to be designed to draw the reader’s attention to Meadows’s own writing as writing, to make the reader contemplate the prose in prose fiction, ultimately to focus the reader’s interest as a reader on the properties of his own precise, but intensely evocative style. This style is especially notable for its immersion in nature imagery, delivered in pungently worded, perfectly cadenced sentences that evoke the natural world both limpidly and with heightened figurative force.

True devotees of literary style cannot fail to appreciate in particular Meadows’s masterful command of metaphor and simile, his inexhaustible ability to make us see the world anew through original and intricately conceived figures almost metaphysical in their signifying scope, frequently tied together sequentially to create an ongoing meld of meaning that at times perhaps threatens to overwhelm the passive reader unprepared for a kind of fiction that operates so purely to refine language itself into a burnished gem of reflected life.

Leon put down his pencil, pleased at the progress he had made on this day. The overrated current novelist was getting his comeuppance, indeed. Such a mishmash of incoherent rambling and backtracking! It’s hard to believe such writing wasn’t laughed into the garbage bin, much less published and sold in real bookstores. Leon is constantly taken aback by the gullibility of most readers these days. Rarely does he begin reading a newly published novel that he is subsequently able to finish, so transparent are the desperate devices its author is likely to resort to in order to trick the unwary reader into simply turning the page.

Soon enough he will again start going to the other room, the fiction room, and begin working again on his own latest fiction, the writing of which he has temporarily interrupted to compose the current critical essay, a short story, as it happens, a story he likes to think provocatively combines the intelligence and intellectual rigor of his criticism with the probing lyricism he believes his fiction has always exhibited. Since few people have bothered to take note of this quality in his fiction—or little else about it, for that matter—perhaps the new approach will draw the attention of those who think of him only as a reviewer of other people’s books. If they think of him at all.
Julian Meadows, shortly after bringing his protagonist to his moment of self-recognition, realized himself that he could no longer continue to use this persona he had created to give expression to his own frustration at being underappreciated. Julian Meadows is a well-known and amply rewarded writer of fiction who is otherwise as content with his lot as man could be—he’s never had a depressive moment in his life—and does not consider his work particularly complex and certainly has never considered it something like a substitute for the religion he long ago abandoned but still fells a need to approximate.

Lately Julian Meadows has taken to writing essays spelling out his ideas about literature, about the role of prose fiction (as an entertainment, but entertainment that lifted people’s spirits, did not pander to their baser instincts for crude sensationalism) and of the writer in American society (not just as an entertainer, but as a teller of tales that allow readers a respite from the random occurrences of ordinary life through his mastery of the organizing powers of narrative). But not many had seemed to take notice of them, and those few who had mostly dismissed them as the jejune jottings—a phrase actually used by a self-styled “critic” in one of the (luckily little read) literary quarterlies—of a middlebrow novelist trying to burnish his otherwise dubious intellectual credentials.

Thus Leon Stone, his methodical working habits, his experience of writing as a kind of agony, his flights of experimental fancy. But it can’t go on.

Although it will go on. As it happens, “Leon Stone” has taken on a life of his own, unknown even to Julian Meadows, who, one must finally acknowledge, did indeed bring this character into existence in the first place, if only in the most rudimentary and not especially skillful fashion. Moreover, we are forced to admit further that the Leon Stone in question has in turn created a character named “Julian Meadows,” a popular novelist who wishes his theories about the writing of fiction not just to be taken seriously, but to be accepted as the definitive statement about the art and craft of fiction. During those moments when Julian Meadows’s attention wanders, when he is thinking about something other than the need to keep Leon Stone on his forced march across the page and on to who knows where—perhaps about how at that very moment some aspiring novelist toiling away as a book reviewer or journalist or “scholar” might be looking away from his own writing desk or computer screen to imagine the mere
novelist (most of whom had gotten published in the first place because they knew which backs to scratch) who could marshal the resources of English prose in the breathtaking way he was in the process of demonstrating in his own work-in-process, even if it was a piece of critical analysis or literary journalism and not “fiction”—Leon Stone has snuck in between the lines—or perhaps behind them, furtively enough that Meadows wouldn’t notice, or would think it just the faint afterimage of his own projected obsessions—to provide a mocking counterpoint to Julian Meadows’s uncertain flourishes of the pen. You might believe that such an occurrence is literally impossible, that it is no more than a fancy, a conceit concocted to express some larger idea the writer doesn’t want to say flat out, but I can testify by my own personal experience that it can happen. I myself have invoked a fictional character into figurative existence only to find him recalcitrant and uncooperative, taunting me to reassert control and get on with the task at hand. Once such a creature disappeared altogether, only to turn up later as the author of a magazine article in which he asserted his own right to “expose” my “incompetence” as a writer of “fiction,” his very “appearance” in this respected publication being the very best “evidence” available that I had no talent for the “imaginary” whatsoever. Suffice it to say it left me feeling like I was myself a fictional creation, in a story of the kind for which I otherwise have the least possible regard. In fact, while I am conscious of sitting here at this table, pressing these words into a notebook as I were indeed their “author,” the agent by which they cohere into something resembling sense and the authority of last resort, I am unable to recall with certainty precisely what task I had set for myself before taking a seat here: Was I in the process of explicating the subject at hand (the subject shared by both Leon Stone and Julian Meadows, that is, the need to assert one’s prerogatives, one’s justly-acquired deserts), or am I myself the subject being explicaded, yet another character wandering around in the limbo between the wish and its fulfillment?