

The Future of Literature

Artistic Ontology in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, Karl Ove Knausgaard's

A Death in the Family, and Ben Lerner's *10.04*

Anastasia Hurford

MA by Research

Department of English and Related Literature

University of York

December 2020

Abstract

This thesis provides a reading of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* (2013), and Ben Lerner's *10.04* (2014) which argues that each text is centrally concerned with the problematic relationship between art and life and, further, the future of literature as it responds to changing contemporary understandings of the role of writing in shaping being. I consider the portrayal of virtuality within all three texts in the form of future projection and imagined realities, and then go on to suggest that they present the cause of this virtuality as artistic ontology – a conceptualisation of being which uses the artistic form to make sense of existence – and argue that the texts evaluate these processes, that each in its own way criticises their effectiveness in fully containing the reality of existence. The failure of artistic ontology implicates the continued value of literature, and as such I suggest that McCarthy, Knausgaard, and Lerner are concerned with considering new modes of writing in the face of what they see as its insufficiency. I consider the specific ways in which the texts rethink literature and its value, highlighting their use of post-irony and affect, and then read 'Bad Collectivity' as indicative of the possibilities of a new kind of affective artistic community. By considering the utility of this community to political movements which must happen off the page, this thesis positions reading as a social experience and highlights the value of reclaiming the virtual capacity of texts in allowing us to imagine the possibilities of the future.

Contents

Abstract

Introduction: Facing Forwards 5

Chapter One: Between Two Worlds 14

Chapter Two: Lives in Art 33

Chapter Three: Spaces for Healing 56

Epilogue: The Next Life 77

Works Cited 85

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction | Facing Forwards

I want you to think about the first time that literature mattered to you. Perhaps it was the first book you couldn't put down, perhaps the first time you saw a book write your emotions better than you could ever feel them, the first time you experienced that complete immersion into the intensity of an aesthetic experience. Those moments where the overwhelming power of the book consumed you, and you understood that art contained within in it something more, something above regular existence. Perhaps, like me, you carried around a book with you everywhere, not necessarily with the intention of reading it, but merely to be close to it, to feel its power. Then, of course, as you delve further and further into literature and its study, that power begins to fade. The more you learn about how to critically engage with texts, the more you become aware of all of those insidious little things that they are doing, all that lurks beneath the surface which you weren't aware of, and suddenly literature becomes a problem to solve instead of an answer in itself. The power which you experienced within literature has been sapped by its critique—and yet you did truly experience it.

What can we say is the purpose of literature? Is it to deconstruct the systems of the literary, or to facilitate this ecstatic experience? Are these our only two options? These questions are ones with which contemporary criticism has become obsessed. In a 2013 edition of *SubStance* journal entitled "Does Literature Matter," J. Hillis Miller acknowledged what they call "human beings' insatiable desire for the literary" (20), but questioned the

reason for this desire, asking of literary pleasure: “do these pleasures matter? What makes reading them pleasurable? Is it a guilty pleasure?” (23). In her book *Uses of Literature* (2008), Rita Felski asked similar questions, discussing “why we are drawn to... texts in the first place” (1), and emphasising that, as writers, readers, and critics “we are sorely in need of more cogent justifications for what we do” (3). That the continued creation and consumption of literature needs at all defending speaks of a lack of theoretical foundations to justify its continued relevance in the contemporary world. Joshua Landy related this to a “newfound precariousness” tied to a “shift in economic conditions... as well as to certain technological developments” and, as such, the question of the function of literature today is “a necessary question, and possibly an urgent one” (Rolin, 40). However, as Landy pointed out: “we have a lot of work to do if literature is to one day matter again” (48). In the face of what Jacqueline O’Dell called “literature’s complicity in the very systems it disavows” (3) and the landscape of critique becoming “inescapably, overbearingly... negative” (Felski, 3), the solution to literature’s need to solidify its purpose remains elusive. To Felski’s opening question – “do we gain nothing at all when we read?” (3) – the answer cannot be firmly no, since the continued turning back towards the medium signals some kind of utility, and yet, as Derek Attridge pointed out, it “solves no problems and saved no souls” (4). Why, then, do we keep coming back, looking for our souls to be saved?

It is this question that possesses the writers which this thesis discusses: Tom McCarthy, Karl Ove Knausgaard, and Ben Lerner. All three have expressed a scepticism towards the value or utility of writing: McCarthy has stated that there is a “fundamental, systematic dysfunction written right into the medium’s core” (“Bomb”); Knausgaard that “when you’re writing you want the truth, but there is something in writing... that works against that aim” (“Overrated”), and yet, both continue to write. Lerner, partially quoting Marianne Moore, explains his own understanding of this predicament: “I too dislike it [writing], and have largely organised my life around it” (*Hatred*, 6). In this thesis, I argue for a reading of Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005), Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *A Death in the Family* (2013), and Ben Lerner’s *10.04*, (2014) that positions this tension as central to the texts, sees each as an

investigation into the ontological foundations of art and as attempting to work through the issues that these foundations create. From this, the novels self-reflexively mediate on modes of writing, both in their content as well as their particular styles. I posit that we should read McCarthy and Knausgaard's work as representative of two ends of a spectrum: McCarthy understands the frontier of literature as being in embracing a subjectless style, Knausgaard as his opposite, utilising a renewed focus on extreme subjectivity. McCarthy jettisons the personal from his work; Knausgaard celebrates it. Lerner's writing, I suggest, situates itself between these two extremes, delicately traversing his dual role as writer and narrator and contemplating the ways in which his subjectivity is compromised by the conditions of its creation. Each text provides a valuable perspective on the ways in which literature should function, and reading the three against each other can help us to think about the goals of literature and the purpose of art more generally, as well as the possible futures where these new ideas can be enacted.

Beyond Artistic Ontology

My approach throughout the following chapters is predicated on a specific understanding of the ontological foundations of art which will be referred to as artistic ontology. Artistic ontology suggests that the conceptualisation of both being and art is essentially identical, and, in light of a hermeneutical phenomenology which positions experience as textual, the relationships which writing and reading have to being are essential to their understanding. Taking its basis in Martin Heidegger's "being-towards-death" (*Being*, 10), artistic ontology highlights the formalisation of life through a time-narrative of life to death, wherein death represents the closure of this narrative and therefore the moment in which its meaning is completed and grasped. Paul Ricoeur elaborates upon this, highlighting a subjective desire for "synthesis between the events or incidents [of life] which are... multiple, and the story which is unified and complete" (*Quest*, 21). In this, "an event is more than an occurrence... more than something that just happens; it is what contributes to the progress of the

narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end.” Experience, then, is artistic, conceptualised within a meaning-making structure, and the artworks we consume markers for experience, objects upon which the continued structuring of our being relies. I turn back to artistic ontology in chapter two, but what this thesis is concerned with, overall, is its insufficiency in the face of a reality which is multiple and unfixed, and therefore cannot be represented by a static, singular narrative.

This thesis investigates the future of literature in the face of crisis. This is a very contemporary issue, not only this contemporary but any; it concerns what it means to write and read in the present moment – at the end of history and up against the future. This is entirely different from reading historically or understanding writing as a historical practise: as Theodore Martin argues, the present is “unlike any other kind of historical period – for the simple reason that... it is not yet historical” (227). What present experience cannot access is a “historical perspective” on itself, a codification which contains its entirety and relates each part back to a sensible whole to create meaning. In contrast to history, which we understand as having a fixed identity, the present is, Amy J. Elias states, “always in motion” (42); it resists codification, any definition becoming obsolete the moment it is conceived as the present continues and redefines itself. As a result, though we live it, we “simultaneously can and can’t know the late capitalist present” (Martin, 236). Acknowledging this, the status of literature and writing in the present becomes also unstable, since it must codify and refer to as a necessity of narrative and form. The present evades classification, cannot be historicised, and so how can literature, which Jacques Rancière claims must “convert[] every sign of life into a sign of history, and every sign of history into a poetical element” (23) function? The insecurity of the present means any writing which attempts to speak to it is doomed also to insecurity and, consequently, those writers who attempt to do so are obsessed with what they see as the inherent failure of their work.

The relationship which the present has to history is doubled with an equally unstable one concerning the future. In her edited volume *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present* (2017),

Elias speaks of an understanding of the future as “figure-fulfilment”; that “we look forward in time almost against our will, in the *wake of a* future understood to be antithetical to reason, out of control or happening outside of human agency” (41). This anticipated future is central to artistic ontology, in which life is lived and defined by an end, and so the future has already taken place in a virtual imagining of its playing out as an eschatological goal. Here, the future is “experienced not as a horizon of hope and/or progress, but as something that has already happened as an anticipated event” (42), a narrative of its completion existing already in the present. As a result, the present is collapsed into merely “an interplay of past and future,” mortgaged in favour of an anticipated future where it is imagined to be fulfilled. This mirrors the very form of the novel, in which textual events are pointed forwards towards their meaningful completion on the final page. This kind of formalisation, however, does not allow for writing to refer to present experience as a meaningful moment in itself, and, as such, contemporary writers who attempt to are doomed by the very form of their expression. How do we refer to a present moment which has been obscured by the expansion of the past and future into the entirety of experience? The real present is supplanted by a virtual future, and, as such, writing towards any truth of present experience appears impossible. Elias highlighted that the “temper and logic of the present” is inherently a “paranoia” (44), and we can see this realised in literature which attempts to write the present, characterised by an anxious insecurity of form and instability of intent and purpose.

What this thesis engages with are the specific ways in which McCarthy, Knausgaard, and Lerner traverse these issues, how they imagine this crisis of writing to either signal a death of literature, or conversely its very birth as a medium which can finally speak to life. Although this has been central to the development of the novel form since the nineteenth century, this has not stopped contemporary novelists from engaging with these questions – genuinely, as if they might be the ones to at long last find an answer – afresh. McCarthy certainly subscribes to some version of the former, Knausgaard flickers between them as his mood changes, but Lerner, having organised his life around it, sees within literature the possibility for a new kind of understanding of being. What the third chapter and the epilogue

of this thesis examine are the ways in which these three texts imagine new modes of literature and discuss what it means for texts to be forward facing; to rethink our relationship to the future and forgo a future-fulfilment form in favour of a palimpsestic present which contains within it a reference to the past and a design for the future. Acknowledging the role that art plays in shaping experience, what is at stake in overcoming this crisis is more than the fate of literature; also implicated is the continued structure of being, the very form of our existence. In carving out a literature which reimagines its relationship to the future, so too can we begin to reimagine our own future.

Universality and Identity

However, when talking about aesthetic experience or the wider experience of subjectivity in general, to speak of a universal experience lacks nuance and is fraught with problems. Understanding literature as a reflective experience places the sort of subjectivity that literature enables at the centre of discussion, and, as a result, what form this subjectivity takes in relation to the social reality of existence. The idea that literature can speak to experience, even in the abstract way that this thesis has so far described, is predicated on an at least partially universal subjectivity. I do not mean to deny this outright, since there are ways in which the very structuring of experience through systems of signs impact each person who is alive, but it would be wrong to suggest that these structures both make up the entirety of experience and are received in the exact same way by each person. To talk about the experience of subjectivity we must at the same time be speaking about the ways in which this experience is deeply gendered and racialised. Writing about literature and empathy, Namwali Serpell describes what we understand as the “default human” (“Banality”) – those who fall into the category of white, male, cis het – and the ways in which this type of subjectivity has “dominated for so long” the “part of the hero” in our literature that we fail to “offer a fuller, deeper, rounder picture of human experience.” What Serpell here articulates is that whiteness and masculinity has come to represent a foundational existence, pure and

untainted by the inherent politics of belonging to a marginalised identity. In this, the white male character is able to speak to a supposed universal experience where all others must speak only to their personal story, inherently coloured by their race or gender.

Serpell speaks of this division in order to highlight the links between “artistic empathy and political life,” and to ask questions about what purpose using art in this way serves, but we can also understand this distinction as illuminating the ways in which the literary tradition has served to actively exclude the marginalised from human experience. Since, as Kim Adrian points out in a series of letters to Knausgaard, “the tradition of the novel has since its inception... been advanced largely by men, in particular white European men,” our understanding of literature is essentially defined by terms which this particular identity has set out. As such, literature and the literary tradition belong solely to those white men who have inherited it from their white male ancestors, theirs to either revere or deconstruct. Acknowledging the role which art plays in shaping subjectivity, this implicates more than just the issue of representation on the page; we can see now that the supposed uncritical universality of literature also facilitates the jettisoning of all experience which isn’t white and male out of accepted subjectivity. As such, artistic experience, and, therefore, the self-knowledge gained through it, are defined by terms created by a tradition of whiteness and maleness and, as a result, those whose identities are not validated within the experience become alienated from their own understanding of their subjectivity.

That this thesis looks only at white male authors warrants serious consideration. I do not mean to suggest that these texts partake in an uncritical appraisal of their own status of being written by and about white men, because in fact each text does deal with these issues in their own way. We see this in the narrator of *Remainder*’s destructive ignorance of the ways in which his identity as a white man relates to his place in the world, Knausgaard’s fraught relationship to his own masculinity in *A Death in the Family*, and Ben’s perhaps overly neurotic concern over how his white maleness is perceived in *10.04*. As such, the relationship between subjectivity and identity is central to the ways in which these texts

attempt to rethink and deconstruct the literary form. However, that they can partake in this deconstruction at all is as a result of their inheritance of both a subjectivity and a literary tradition which enables their specific iteration of consciousness. As a result, what must be stressed is that this thesis meets these texts on their own terms; engages in a conversation within the parameters of literature that they come about as a result of. This is beneficial to the understanding of artistic ontology because, of course, it too arises out of this tradition. But to suggest that this represents the entirety of subjectivity without qualification would be to ignore the ways in which our identities also come to define our experience.

The structure of this thesis concerns three main chapters: the first identifies a problem, the second suggests a cause, and the third explores the ways in which McCarthy, Knausgaard, and Lerner attempt to imagine a future for literature beyond the issue. The first chapter addresses the problem of virtuality and details its centrality to all three texts being considered. Here, virtuality refers specifically to a perceived sense of subjective duality; a feeling that experience is not whole, that we are caught between reality and fantasy. Leading on from this analysis, the second chapter addresses the cause of this, and reads the texts as suggesting that an experience of virtuality is created as a result of the framework of artistic ontology. This chapter begins with a discussion of the centrality of art and artworks to the texts and the ways in which they come to be representative of a wider desire for subjective stability. Then, the chapter expands upon this discussion to consider the ways in which the novels explore the centrality of the artistic form, that is, artistic ontology, to the continued existence of the subject. The third part considers the central role of death in these processes and therefore suggests a reason for their centrality to the texts. The third chapter of this thesis highlights the ways in which these texts, acknowledging the problems of artistic ontology and the consequential failure of art, attempt to rethink or recontextualize writing through their individual styles. In this chapter I read the texts alongside two strands of contemporary thought: New Sincerity and affect theory.

The thesis then imagines an understanding of literature which relies on cognisance of both theories and suggests that, through Lerner's work specifically, we can imagine a new kind of literature which fulfils that which we still desire of it without succumbing to the dominant problems of artistic ontology. I end the thesis by attempting to extend this analysis outwards to the wider issue of what McCarthy, Knausgaard, and Lerner see as a political project as well as a literary one. This part, following on from the analysis of the prior three parts, thinks through the ways in which reconceptualising literature allows us to understand its function also in a new way. This new literature contains within it the power of possibility, the ability to imagine a future and, in doing so, recontextualize also the present, opening it up. Consequently, literature becomes forward-facing and, now unchained from the necessity of transcendence, we can begin to read towards the fulfilment of those imagined futures in the real.

Chapter 1 | *Between Two Worlds*

In an interview in 2014, Ben Lerner pronounced that his second novel *10.04* “occup[ies] that flickering edge,” that it was “neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them” (“Hall-of-mirrors”). It makes sense to understand this as referring to the ways in which the novel blends together Lerner’s own experiences and the events of his own life with invented situations and reactions, positioning itself as the “edge of fiction” (*10.04*, 237) through its stylistic merging of fact and fiction. However, Lerner’s concern with flickering edges extends further than the supposed autobiographical nature of his novel: we can track through his wider work a perceived interest in the boundaries between what is understood as real and not real. In Lerner’s essay “The Actual World,” written for *Frieze* magazine and published in 2013, he explores the ways in which different artistic media have double existences in both the “actual” and the “virtual.” Almost identical language is used in his 2016 book-length essay *The Hatred of Poetry*, where Lerner differentiates between “the actual poem” (6) and the “virtual” (8) one, highlighting this distinction as central to the experience of both writing and reading. In the face of this, Lerner’s interest in the flickering edge should be understood as containing within it more than a simple description of autofiction: we can see that it is the boundaries of reality and experience as related to the practise of literature which are of central concern to Lerner and his writing. Lerner’s *actual* and *virtual* refer to two conflicting states of being: one in which the “condition of possibility” – the ways in which a subject controls their own fate in the face of a future as yet unwritten – is accepted, and another in

which it is “defeated” (“Actual World”). Lerner did not invent this language – openly admitting to have “stole[n]” it (“Actual World”) from poet Allen Grossman (*Hatred*, 7) – but it is fair to state that those critics who are interested in the issue seem to have gravitated to this in his work: his writing said to have “short-circuit[ed] binary distinctions between the fictive and the real” (Kingston-Reese, 142) and, through this, embody the kind of virtuality which “characterize[s]... contemporary reality” (Bilmes, 5).

Focus on the virtual in contemporary literary criticism largely centres around the ways in which it renders reality, in Wojciech Kalaga’s words, as a “hybrid” (99) – the virtual seen as present in the actual and vice versa, and so therefore either state is bound up in the meaning of the other. In a study on the virtual’s capacity for pausing time, Michael Clune sees the virtual as referring to “a kind of conscious experience that we can’t yet actualize” (*Writing Against*, 35), making clear the way that the definition of the virtual is inherently bound up with the definition of the actual; their mutual hybridity rendering one inseparable from the other. Also of interest to contemporary critics is the experience of time as two conflicting states – time as a collection of moments and time as a totality of experience – and how this results in a virtual subjectivity. Theodore Martin, too, has claimed that “in the sleepless world of 24/7, the history or totality of the present becomes, if not outright illusory, at least something of a dream” (233). Lerner’s *10.04* is consumed by projected futures and imagined states of reality. This is not something that critical focus has ignored: Daniel Katz has claimed that “the virtuality at issue” in the text is “history and experience in light of the unknowable horizon implied by all futurity,” and that the definition of the present through the virtuality of an imagined future is the “single most determining factor dictating how we live every ‘present’ we are allowed to inhabit” (325). Pieter Vermeulen acknowledges something similar: *10.04* focuses on humanity’s “dependence on the future” (661) and, as a result, the “virtual becom[ing] actual” (662).

10.04 is, then, overtly and undeniably concerned with the experience of virtuality, but I posit that it is also relevant to Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family*, though critical focus has not so far brought this to the fore. McCarthy's repetitive psychosis and Knausgaard's self-destructive sincerity are the main focuses of their critical reception, and, while these two states of being are inherently related to virtuality and a tension between the real and the unreal, the language of virtuality has not been employed by critics. This chapter will argue that this is an oversight: that the language of virtuality is an elucidating lexicon to use when discussing these texts. Analysing both *Remainder* and *A Death in the Family* as examples of texts that evaluate and realise issues of virtuality, moreover, elicits an interpretation which more holistically deals with the texts' central concerns. So, when critics speak of *Remainder*'s "double movement of production and reproduction" (Franklin, 160) or Knausgaard's sincere effort to "rescue moments from the march of time" (Wood, 2012) what they are doing, though not explicitly, is discussing the ways in which the texts engage with the virtual.

In this chapter, I will address three different aspects of virtuality – duality and projection; imagined realities; and the social – in order to investigate the ways that *10.04*, *Remainder*, and *A Death in the Family* explore and realise the complicated processes and states of being that the virtual subject experiences. In this case, duality and projection refers to the processes through which the subject feels or becomes removed from their sense of reality: complications surrounding self-definition and reliance upon the phenomenological projection into the future. Imagined realities are moments which question the fidelity of reality through imaginative scenarios, and, through this, the status of the subject who engages with them also. In the third part regarding the social, I explore the ways in which, through social interaction, or simply through the perceived adjacency of other people in the framework of society, the subject's relationship to reality is destabilised. This includes the ways in which characters believing that they are viewed, as well as the general state of 'being one who can be viewed' impacts or heightens the sense of dualistic virtuality that they feel.

Duality and Projection

McCarthy's *Remainder* centres around the nameless narrator's quest to recreate initially banal and eventually violent events in order to experience them over again but 'better'; to feel them naturally without the unknowingly applied conceptualisation which he feels was present during the first experience. This central concept arises as a result of an experience that the narrator has in which, prompted by a particular crack on a bathroom wall, he 'remembers' a place he has never been to. He claims that, in this place, all of his "movements had been fluent and unforced," that nothing was "second-hand," but that it had been "natural... real; I'd been real — *been* without first understanding how to try to be" (60). This of course implies that, in the narrator's everyday life, this is not the case; that usually he does feel second-hand. He elaborates upon this when discussing the film *Mean Streets*, stating that, in contrast to the characters in the film, he'd "always been inauthentic" (23). That, where Robert De Niro would walk down the street, smoking a cigarette, and do it naturally and without comment, the narrator would be thinking "*here I am, walking down the street, smoking a cigarette, like someone in a film. See?*" (23) He looks back on his life in a way that film characters cannot: with an awareness of his own status as a living being. More than this, in knowing it, he cannot unknow it, no matter how much he may want to, cannot close the distance between experience and its understanding.

It is perhaps helpful to think of the narrator's grief as articulating and embodying the experience of *Dasein*, Heidegger's being which "understands itself in its Being" (*Being*, 10). Heidegger positions *Dasein* as a fundamental state of humankind's existence: humans cannot forget that they exist: that they will die; that they have lived; that they are this moment living. McCarthy's "be...without first understanding to be" is almost identical to Heidegger's "understand itself in its being," but what Heidegger presents in a manner of explication, McCarthy's narrator understands as the fatal condition of his existence. The narrator feels a strong desire to strip himself of his status as *Dasein*, to enter into that

experience which takes place before cognition. Of course, a Heideggerian understanding would believe this to be impossible, but the narrator certainly feels like he experiences it in the moment of his fantasy. The imagined recollection of his perfect apartment building is described as coming with “all the force of an epiphany, a revelation” (60) – a momentous, life affirming experience. However, what must also be understood is how the very power of this moment unintentionally complicates further the narrator’s existence. Understanding fully that there is a different way of being, one in which life does not look back upon itself, and knowing that we do not and perhaps cannot experience it, means that everyday experience becomes desaturated, unfulfilling, and less real. We can see that this moment in *Remainder*, one of unfettered positivity, sets into motion all of the catastrophic events of the novel, leaving at least two people dead, multiple more fugitives, and the narrator on course for his own self-induced airplane crash. This positivity is doubled with a sinister power of destruction, a destruction which, using the language of Clunes’ virtuality, “pits the survival of the subject against the operation of habit” (*Vanish*, 245). The perceived stability of the narrator’s memory contains within it, unbeknownst to him, its opposite.

Since the novel begins with “something falling from the sky” (5), hospitalizing the narrator to the extent that he has to learn to walk again, *Remainder* is commonly read as a trauma narrative.¹ Through this reading, the fractured persona that the narrator develops is a result of the compulsion to re-enact trauma, to return to the psychological places of comfort that the subject had access to before the schismatic moment of their trauma. Jim Byatt has claimed that, as a result of trauma, the narrator’s life takes the form of “subjectivity becom[ing] substantially divorced from the objective world in which the incident takes place” (246). Similarly, Wojciech Drag suggests that the novel functions as a “metaphor for the traumatised subject’s self-destructive immersion in the cycle of repetition” (388),

¹ See Jim Byatt, “Being Dead? Trauma and the Liminal Narrative in J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* and Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*.” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol 48, no. 3: 2012, pp 245-59. Wojciech Drag, “Compulsion to Re-enact: Trauma and Nostalgia in Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*.” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2: 2015, pp 377-392. Seb Franklin, “Repetition; Reticulum; *Remainder*.” *Novel*, vol. 50, no.2: 2017, pp. 157-175.

implying that the central concern of *Remainder's* narrative is the psychological experience of trauma. While it would be foolish to deny the ways in which the narrator's accident, despite happening before the novel starts, looms over every other event of the narrative, interpreting the novel purely as a result of specific trauma and not as an exploration of subjectivity in general – of modes of living that are applicable to those who have not suffered from an explicitly traumatic event – misrepresents key concerns within the novel. It is significant that both *A Death in the Family* and *10.04* are concerned with similar practices, though neither are ostensibly read as exclusively trauma narratives by critical consensus. All three texts explore the perception and experience of a double existence, wherein life is both lived and understood as lived, and so it seems prudent to read the three texts as essentially similar and warranting complementary analysis. *Remainder*, then, should be read not only as a study of trauma, but also as an example of the kind of subject-critical literature that also encompasses both Lerner and Knausgaard's work.

Read in this way, the similarities between the manner in which the narrators of all three texts talk of experience are not surprising. In *A Death in the Family*, the narrator, who has the dual role of being both Knausgaard and some sort of fictitious amalgamation of his public and private selves, describes the world as “superstructure” (197). Elaborating, he states that experience is contained within “humanity's horizons of comprehension” (197) and is, therefore, a “fiction” (198), separate from the real conditions of existence. He expresses a desire to leave this world, one where “everything is understood” (197) and enter into one which reflects reality, echoing McCarthy's need for a moment before understanding. Both texts express a desire to escape the world of comprehension into a supposedly ‘purer’ state of being: one which, instead of being understood within this artificial superstructure, would simply exist without need for comprehension. Similarly, in *10.04*, Lerner's narrator – again ostensibly himself – expresses a desire for a “world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit” and claims that the “experience of presence depended entirely upon its obliteration” (47). That, to access what he calls presence and I have

described so far as the moment before understanding, experience cannot be organised into a structure or order. Instead, each moment must exist and then not exist; not become part of history, nor part of memory, but enter into nothingness, annihilation. All three texts, then, are concerned with the experience of a doubled existence – the moment and its understanding – and this tension causes the very definition of selfhood to be compromised. Ben in *10.04* describes this doubling as “discovering that you are not identical with yourself” (109), a moment of friction, anxiety, but suggests that, at the same time, within this lies a “glimmer, however refracted, of that world to come, where everything is the same but a little different” (109). This other world is the moment of presence, and Lerner claims that we as humans must “divide [ourselves] into two people... cut across worlds” (78); that we are inherently doubled in our experience of being and its understanding.

The inherent duality of existence plays out also in the form of a projection of subjectivity across time. Here, a cognisance of the future means that, in Leonid Bilmes’ words, the present moment is “made to wear the burden of its future memory” (5). Subjectivity is cast forward in anticipation of an imagined future, and as such must exist both in this future and the present moment of experience at the same time. *Remainder* visualises this in the form of the stock market, into which the narrator invests a portion of his millions in compensation – into the “speculation” (41) which the market revolves around. After learning how stocks work, how “the collective imagination of all the investors keeps projecting futures, keeping the shares buoyant,” the narrator asks “what if everyone stops imagining futures for all of them at the same time?” to which the stockbroker replies that, if this happened, the market would crash (42). The stock market is fundamentally based on a virtual currency: the currency of the future, which by definition can never exist. In this sense, it is defined by a state of absence, the value of the future in its being never realised. The stock market, then, serves as a metaphor for the sort of projection which is a necessary part of subjective experience: a forward projection into a future which can never arrive. Of course, the result of this kind of projection is once again a doubling; a subjectivity partially located in

the present and partially in the anticipation of the future. When Pamela Erens describes Knausgaard as “struggl[ing] to be at one with his own life” (206), and Vermeulen calls Lerner’s project an attempt to make “life inseparable from itself” (662), they highlight the same core concern: to join experience fully in the moment of being. In this “radiant” (*Death*, 256) moment, the projected future is replaced with its potential, and “what normally fe[els] like the only possible world bec[omes] one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs” (10.04, 19).

Where the narrators of *10.04* and *A Death in the Family* take solace in the moments in which they can feel reality seeping back into their lives, the narrator of *Remainder*, though searching for the same thing, takes solace in the complete virtualisation of his life. We see this in the obsession he has with his coffee shop loyalty card. He is “excited” by the prospect of filling up his card, not for the free coffee that ten stamps awards him, but because he likes the idea of “clocking the counter, going right round through zero, starting again” (47). The narrator relishes in the projected future that the card facilitates –its meaning always ahead, therefore always in the process of becoming available to him: just in front, to be realised at a later stage. The promise of fulfilment. As the narrator’s mania grows, so do the lengths that he goes to in order to access the card’s projected future. He returns to the coffee shop and buys three drinks just so he can fill his card up and get another one, and then, at the end of the novel, buys enough cappuccinos to completely fill his empty card: “I’ll pay for the nine [coffees]... but it’s just the tenth I want. You can keep the nine, or throw them out, or do whatever you want” (270). It becomes obvious that he is only interested in the imagined future that the card provides him, the rewards system it represents; drinking the nine coffees is of no relevance or comfort to him. In this sense, he gains solace from the complete virtuality that this practise enables, manages to escape from his dual existence in reality and virtuality by fully allowing himself to enter the latter. Though it has not given him the presence he claimed to want as a terminal goal, he feels content to be fully something, no matter which state that is. When the narrator speaks of a desire to get to “the other side of

something” (216), which side, real of virtual, is no longer particularly relevant. All he desires is fulfilment, wholeness, and he will take that wherever he can get it.

Imagined Realities

The decision that McCarthy’s narrator makes, however, is one which is necessarily unsustainable. By virtue of taking part in the world, there are moments in which acknowledgement of the very reality of existence cannot be avoided. These moments, in which the imagined state of things either degrades or is schismatically exploded, are significant since they force the subject to consider both the structure of their reality and their own involvement in shaping it. We might understand love and desire as representative of this kind of imagined reality: Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) positions desire as “hypnosis” (11) and “hallucinat[ion]” (87). He suggests that we “hallucinate what [we] desire” (87), that it is not a person that is loved, but an imagined state of being, a perceived “presence which is shared” (40). In this, Barthes states that “*I love you* becomes *you love me*” (187) – love is not giving a part of yourself but receiving an imagined state of existence. In this, “the lover’s fatal entity is precisely: *I am the one who waits*” (40), defined by the absence of the loved one and therefore representing a state in which the real is supplanted with a “craving to be engulfed” (10) by the virtual beloved.

Both Ben in *10.04* and Knausgaard in *A Death in the Family* experience this specific kind of captivating romantic virtuality. Ben becomes infatuated with a woman he later learns does not exist, and states that, when in love with her, he had “an overwhelming sense of the world’s possibility and plenitude” (*10.04*, 37), describes being without her as feeling a “present absence” (38). Here, Ben invokes the other “inwardly to keep [him] on the brink of... mundane complacency,” in Barthes’ phrasing (17): he experiences absence as an “active practice” (*10:04*, 16), manipulates it into meaning something. In an almost identical way, a young Knausgaard becomes obsessed with a girl called Hanne and spends all of his time

thinking about her, claiming that “hope lay in the next time [he] would see her” (*Death*, 145). Hanne both controls his present moment and also defines his future, engulfing Knausgaard in an idea of her existence. However, neither men see their desire come to fruition, their ideas of love and reality shattered. Ben learns that the woman he desires, whom he thought was his friend’s daughter, is in fact not: that his friend has no children. He feels the “world rearrange itself around [him]” (10.04, 38) as his reality disintegrates, the status of his emotional response now also fraught. Similarly, Knausgaard, after one instance in which Hanne is attentive to a male classmate in the way that he thought particular to himself, begins to realise that Hanne does not care romantically about him. He asks himself: “what actually was this world I was living in? What actually were these dreams I believed in?” (147). Understanding love as, in John Armstrong’s words, the “intense experience” (3) of “the sense that one is in touch with the source of all value” (3) allows us to understand the significance of the moment in which love is lost: the very meaning of the world is ripped from the grasp of the lover in a schismatic moment of anguish.

What is being expressed in both of these anecdotes is the torment of a virtual existence: both men come to realise that the strong emotions they experienced, strong enough to control the entirety of their lives, were based on a misunderstanding, a lie of their own making. The intense passion for life that they had both felt when expressing their love was mere imagination, related to nothing real. Lerner’s “present absence,” then, becomes instead an absent presence — the overwhelming feeling of there being nothing there to feel. The character of their emotional response becomes unstable: certainly, they felt something, but since these feelings relate to nothing real, what status do they occupy? In Michael Clune’s words, this realisation causes “experience [to] collapse in from the outside” (“Vanish”, 244) and therefore fundamentally complicates their continued subjectivity. Though the narrator of *Remainder* doesn’t experience this particular kind of imagined reality, he is impacted in other moments by the same kind of damaging virtuality. The narrator visits a garage and experiences what he believes to be windscreen wiper fluid, after

being poured in his car, “vaporiz[ing]. Evaporat[ing]” (153) and in this moment feels the same sort of intense joy that Knausgaard and Lerner do towards their desired: states that “it felt wonderful,” like a “miracle” to him (153). Then, moments later, his hallucination is broken when he begins to drive away and the liquid he thought had disappeared floods into his seat through his dashboard, the ‘miracle’ merely a malfunction. The narrator then experiences a moment of great sadness “not in the normal sense, but on a grander scale... a disaster, a catastrophe. Yes, it was very sad” (155-6). His experience is almost identical to that of Ben and Knausgaard’s lost love; he too experiences a loss of the source of all value and the reality of his experience is called into question. In each breakdown of imagination, the fundamental structure of reality becomes unstable and, by extension, also the continued subjective existence.

The failure of this fantasy means that the subject is unable to define their relation to both the imagined state that they had experienced and the new reality into which they find themselves pushed against their will, and, as a result, their subjectivity threatens to collapse in on itself. In *10.04*, Ben’s friend Noor tells him a story in which someone calls their brother to finally tell him everything he’d always wanted to, but, when he is finished, realises that the phone had cut off; that their brother had heard nothing. Noor claims that he “couldn’t repeat what he’d said... he’d had this intense experience... a major event in his life, but it never really happened” (107). That “it happened, but it didn’t happen. It’s not nothing, but it never occurred.” The wording here – “not nothing” – is significant, since it mirrors the negative power of abjection in Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1980):

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. *Not me. Not that. But not nothing*, either. A something which I do not recognise as a thing, a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing

insignificant. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (2)

Kristeva here specifically refers to the power of repulsive observations such as seeing a corpse or our own intestines, things which are “improper/unclean” (2), in creating the sensation of the abject within us. She explains that the sight of something which is both *me* and *not me*, which exists somewhere between the status of subject and object causes our understanding of both of those categories to collapse and therefore horror to emerge. However, she then goes on to explain that is not simply “lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). Understanding this, it would not be unfair to categorise the imagined realities that these novels describe as belonging to the wide category of the abject. The moment in which the reality of experience is cast into doubt is one which disrupts the structure of subjectivity, and as a result those who experience it are thrown out of the imagined order of existence and into an unknowable state in which reality becomes foreign in a moment of existential horror.

This horror is more obviously addressed in the story of Noor’s own imagined reality. She tells Ben that, all her life, she had believed herself to be Arab-American, her father of Lebanese heritage, but after his death her mother reveals that her father was someone else, a white man; that the man she called father had no biological relation to her whatsoever. Once she had heard the news, she says that she felt her hands begin to pale: “I had always thought of my skin as dark because my father’s skin was dark... and as I sat there looking at my hands, without feeling anything, it was like I could see my skin whitening a little... I started seeing my own body differently” (104). What Noor loses here is not only a level of reality, but also an element of the way in which she fundamentally defines herself. She had described how central being an Arab-American was to her identity, as it “connected” (99) her to her Lebanese family. The way that Noor centrally defines herself here is snatched away, and as a result she feels jettisoned from her own body; abjected into a foreign state of reality. Her

body becomes a symbol of her own dual existence: occupying the monstrous status of being both laughably familiar and jarringly distant.

Knausgaard experiences a similarly horrifying turn towards reality when confronting the death of his father. On hearing the news of his passing, Knausgaard's first reaction is to have none. He can't comprehend the fact of his death, since, as he states at the start of the novel, the ways in which we think about death as a society represent a "collective act of repression" (5). He claims that it is kept hidden from us because "death might be beyond... life, but it is not beyond the world" (202). Here once more it is helpful to think in terms of abjection: Knausgaard articulates the perfect repulsion we have towards death, the act of acknowledging its reality causing the boundaries of subjectivity to breakdown. Perhaps it is because of this concealment that Knausgaard has the strange experience, when he returns to the house where his father died, of convincing himself that his father will walk back through the door at any moment. He hears "down below, the front door slam" (279) when no one was expected and immediately worries "was it dad? Was he returning? I was as frightened as I had ever been... it was dad, I knew it" (279). Of course, it wasn't, and in the moment of relief after his uncle walks through the door instead, Knausgaard describes a magpie flying towards him: "it flapped its wings a couple of times and the sound, somehow leather-like, was unreal" (281). Of course, this experience was not at all unreal: what was unreal was that which he imagined as real –his father rising from the grave– and it is this world, the world he has found himself thrown into in spite of his illusion, that is real. The sound of the magpie is real and his father an illusion, but here the order is flipped – he can no longer differentiate between the two, no longer knows how to define them.

Knausgaard highlights this complicated duality further when he speaks of his grandfather's sudden hospitalization. He says that "it was the first time it had struck me that everything had been as it always was right up until that moment. He had been suffering massive internal bleeding over a long period" (284). We are made aware that the reality that

Knausgaard believed he existed in had been perfectly stable whilst, unrealised by everyone, the physical state of his grandfather had been deteriorating. This moment represents a moment of emancipation from the false reality which they had been experiencing, but it is not positive, it is one of intense horror. Here, Knausgaard uses the internal bleeding of his grandfather to represent the dangers of continuing to believe in a virtual world — if only they'd have known.

The Social and the Other

That subjective experience functions around these tensions has implications for the ways in which the subject engages with the other, and we can understand these interactions as resultingly playing a role in the experience of virtuality. We see in all three texts that engaging with a social world creates tension and anxiety for the narrators: in *10.04* this is realised in the form of Ben's hyper-anxious self-reflection, in *A Death in the Family* through Knausgaard's neurotic over-consideration of all interactions, and in *Remainder* through the narrator's complete rejection of social interaction in favour of isolation and objectification. Mark Seltzer understands the experience of being social as "oscillat[ing] between the act and its reflection," that each interaction "consists of itself plus its staging" (173). This is something which Ben in *10.04* feels intensely, overtly concerned not only with what he's doing but how it is received by others. After an interaction with a group of builders working on his house, he "tr[ies] to imagine how they imagined me" (172), and, when working at a food coop, hurries to "distinguish [him]self from the zealots who, whilst probably holding investments in Monsanto... look down with a mixture of pity and rage at those who'd shop at a Union Market or Key Food" (96). After any interaction with a world outside of his mind, Ben must spend time examining his actions, picturing how other people perceived them and cementing within his mind his own "manifold inadequacy" (147) as a functioning human. Knausgaard also experiences this kind of anxiety: he states that he couldn't ask his friend to open his beer for him because that would be "too homo" (*Death*, 114) and worries about the

brand of cigarettes he had brought to a party: “Pall Mall mild, not exactly the coolest cigarette around and, standing here with the all-white cigarette in my hand... I regretted not having bought Prince” (114). Social interaction, then, is inherently performative: a performativity which necessitates that the subject play the dual role of themselves and those who view them. This duality, in Seltzer’s words, “takes the form of a doubling of reality” (166), and as such pushes the subject into a virtual space in which who they are and how they are perceived are inherently caught up in one another.

Remainder’s narrator has very little patience for other people, but, when he does interact with them, he experiences a similar sort of confused sense of reality. At one point in the novel, the narrator sees a group of homeless people across the street. He watches them for a moment, before stating that “these people, finally, were genuine... they weren’t interlopers... they really did possess the street, the moment they were in” (50), implying that unlike himself, these people were able to be fully real, fully present. He then partakes in an imagined reality where he takes a member of the group out to dinner and asks him questions about his supposed presence. However, the homeless man is argumentative and doesn’t understand. The narrator then says that “the waiter took the tablecloth away. She took the table away too. There wasn’t any table. The truth is, I’ve been making all this up... he existed, alright... but I didn’t go across to him... I didn’t want to. I didn’t have a thing to learn from him” (54). That this interaction was a fantasy has no bearing on its significance to the narrator or the wider narrative of the novel: we can understand this moment as representing the narrator’s desire, in the wake of bodily trauma, to be fully real. When in conversation with the homeless man, who he sees as frustratingly genuine, the narrator is not only attempting to understand his experience of presence, but also trying to sequester some for himself. By engaging with this man, the narrator aligns himself with his presence, interacting with him in order to enter himself into the narrative of complete experience. Within the fantasy, the homeless person becomes “my homeless person” (53), his supposed reality cast into the domain of the narrator, now belonging to him as much as to the homeless man.

Here, the narrator uses interaction with the other to solidify his own reality, to partake in their fullness.

By contrast, where *Remainder's* narrator actively seeks out this interaction, Ben in *10.04* appears instead to desire to be completed unseen. He expresses anxiety whenever he is spotted by other people, unwilling to engage in the social script he feels necessary. After being seen by a neighbour, Ben states that he “felt a pressure to turn around and signal some kind of greeting... I stood there awkwardly for a moment and then he raised his arm and I raised mine... feeling ridiculous” (167). This moment represents more than simply Ben’s embarrassment; it speaks more widely to a fear regarding being perceived, and what this perception means for Ben’s selfhood. We can understand this perception by an other as solidifying the existence of the subject: alone, I can question, even deny, my full ontological status, but once I am viewed by someone who is not me I become passive to their hailing. Understanding this, using George Berkeley’s words, “*esse*” really is “*percipi*” (24), since it is within the moment of perception that the reality of existence is solidified. Of course, this very fact implicates the structure of experience since it means that the subject is reliant on an other, on that which is fundamentally not them, to define their selfhood, to be fully real. This mediation of subjectivity splits it up into two distinct centres, and therefore inherently complicates the structure of experience, enabling a virtuality which results in the sort of fear which Ben in this moment of perception is forced to experience.

This is something which Knausgaard in *A Death in the Family* is centrally concerned with, ruminating over the tension this kind of virtuality creates. When seeing his image represented in a photograph, he claims that “it was confusing and annoying that this internal space should be exhibited for external approval” (291), that the photograph contained “something intimate and hidden,” but that, at the same time, he could “never quite associate [the pictures] with [himself]” (291). The photograph’s dual status as being both intimate and foreign captures the tension which Knausgaard feels as a result of his complicated virtual

status: the photograph's ability to solidify his existence, to denote his reality, cannot fully represent him, since his subjectivity is defined by a feeling of duality, a dearth of concreteness which the photograph cannot capture. In the moment of perception then, the underlying structures of Knausgaard's selfhood begin to disintegrate, and as a result his virtual status is acknowledged in a fraught moment of self-realisation. Still, Knausgaard seems to understand that perception by others is an inescapable part of subjectivity. He claims that when he was younger, it "often it felt to me as if I were false, or deceitful since I never played with an open deck, I was always calculating and evaluating" (*Death*, 240), but that, now, "this didn't bother me anymore, it had become my life" (240). Here, Knausgaard articulates the ways in which the persona he performs, that other people see, and what he considers to be his authentic self are so intertwined that neither has more claim to reality than the other: they exist together in a complicated virtual relationship. That, as Knausgaard has elsewhere claimed, "you can never reach an authentic "I," an authentic self. I think it's impossible to free yourself from the social being you are" ("Looks Back"). Acknowledging this, the necessity of the subject's virtuality becomes apparent: Knausgaard resigns himself to the inherent properties of his existence, characterised by an insecurity of definition.

Endings

It is important to note that none of the texts considered in this thesis are static, that each in its own way provides a narrative journey which sees the characters attempt to leave their uncomfortable virtual state. McCarthy's narrator in *Remainder* achieves this by fully surrendering to his feeling of virtuality: rejecting reality in favour of his own passive fantasy. By the end of the novel, the narrator has taken part in a failed bank robbery which resulted in two people dead, but does not seem to care, focussed instead on boarding a plane so he can "go into the air" (269). Once they take off, however, the authorities order him to turn back. The narrator initially agrees, and they turn the plane around, but then changes his mind and makes the pilot turn again. After being asked once again by the authorities to

return, the plane makes a third turn. The narrator finds joy in this, stating that he “didn’t want to stop” experiencing the feeling of “weightlessness” that it creates (274). He then forces the pilot to keep “turning back, then turning out” (275), cycling back on himself. What is appealing about this process, he states, is “the sensation of being held just above something” (274): by remaining between the place of departure and the place of arrival the narrator does not have to enter into either, does not have to touch the real world and can instead simply fly, weightless, between them. Fully consumed by his virtuality, the narrator rejects reality in favour of “suspension” (274) – because at least, in allowing this, he can enter fully into the unreality of the state, no longer forced into duality. To call *Remainder* a “narrative of recovery”, then, as Jim Byatt does (248), seems almost cruel: the narrator may believe that he has achieved some positive goal, but the results of his choices will surely catch up with him as the fuel tank begins to empty.

Knausgaard and Lerner’s narrators, by the end of their novels, on the other hand, reconsider their relationship with their own virtuality, and, though they are not fully relieved of it, the acceptance of this status comes with at least small comfort. For Knausgaard, this comes with the reconciliation of life and death into one state of human existence. An understanding of death which positions it as fundamentally separate from life, that “the moment life departs the body, it belongs to death” (*Death*, 3) causes experience to divide into two, one half in the moment of life, one in anticipation of death. However, Knausgaard sees the acknowledgment of the very physicality of death, that it is “no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind” (393), as a moment in which the otherness of death is reconciled into the entirety of experience. Here, our “lifeless state” represents “merely one form among many” (393) which constitute existence and, as such, resolution of the two states into one allows a stability of subjectivity, able to now be solidly defined. Joanna Semeiks’ suggestion, then, that Knausgaard’s “entire book has worked to show that human beings are not just another life form” (236), that death represents a “final Other” (234) could not be further from the truth. Life and death are not, in Stephen Fisk’s words,

“distinct domains” (83), but are essentially part of the same process of existence, and cognisance of this relationship allows the parts of subjectivity which were cast outward into these domains to be once again joined together in an understanding of the fullness of experience.

Lerner suggests a similar approach, encouraging an understanding of temporality which joins experience together in the present moment. In this, time is experienced as “the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, corresponding” (10.04, 239). The projection of subjectivity into a future conceptualised as part of a timeline stretching out behind and in front of us necessarily splits experience into parts, but, in Lerner’s configuration, each of these parts exist simultaneously, in a palimpsestic whole which is an appreciation of each part. When Ben claims he imagined each woman he sees to be “pregnant, then I imagined all of us were dead, flowing over London bridge” (238), he is articulating the experience of this full present – the pregnancies evoking a legacy, a future which is gestating this very moment, the dead evoking a history, past lives, now over, still present, part of experience. The imagined future now enters into the present moment, and brings with it the power to reconcile duality, to gift Ben a fullness of being. It is because of this that he can “look through [his] reflection” (240) instead of at it. Unlike Knausgaard’s photograph, Ben’s image is no longer received with horror; he can look straight through his reflection to the other side. Lerner and Knausgaard refuse to keep turning their planes back around, and instead look directly at the corpse, walk over the bridge: face the world directly and become one with themselves.

Chapter 2 | *Lives in Art*

Since its first release in Norway in 2009, the genre of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series has been a contentious and central part of both its publicity and criticism. Pamela Erens' claim that *My Struggle* is a "novel... born to give voice to the everyday" (203) is fundamentally denied by Bruce Bauer, who states that "it is not a novel, it lacks even the remotest whiff of contrivance" (592). It is "not formless" (Erens, 204), but it is also "plotted somewhat accidentally" (Wood, "Recall"); it is a "piece of gossip" (Deresiewicz, "Masterpiece") but also "revelatory" (Franklin, "Undid"). This confusion is not unexpected: Knausgaard himself does not seem to desire to define his work as any particular thing or in any particular way. He has referred to the texts as a "memoir" ("Without Dignity") and has claimed that their entire purpose was to "depict reality as it is" ("Looks Back"), but has also called them "novel[s]" and argued that "novels tend to obscure the world instead of showing it" ("Exchange"). His is a series, then, that is asked to perform in multifarious and sometimes contradictory ways for different readers, and for the author himself – who, in typical Knausgaardian style, has also denied his authorship: "I am too self-critical to be a writer" ("Exchange"), and "it is only those who do not know how to write who can write; only those who cannot write a novel who can write a novel" ("Out to Where").

Knausgaard's personal response as well as the aggregate response of critics asks potent questions about the ways in which we expect texts to perform. Is the purpose of the

work of art to record, to represent, to transfigure, to translate? Of course, it is not just in relation to Knausgaard's work that the purpose of art is questioned: contemporary understanding of the utility and function of art expects much of both artworks and the concept of art in general. It is asked to both, as Theodore Martin claims, "codify our historical moment" (230) and, in Rachael Greenwald Smith's formulation, "affirm the fundamental existence and importance of individual subjective experience in general" (187), as well as "shap[e the] destiny" (Samba, 243) of those who create and consume it. Laura Colombino has stated that in the face of the "postmillennial" period, which is characterised by "cultural relativism... the ethical and political challenges of globalisation... [and] the age of post-theory," there is a need for literature to "reaffirm its value" and "find solid speculative foundations" (172). In this sense, it must respond to the changing historical moment, counteracting Martin's claim that it shapes it. Depending on who you ask, critics believe we are either experiencing the death, or the rebirth, of the novel; the beginning or demise of a cultural period; the start or the end of history, and the tone of contemporary criticism makes it clear that the need to define the current historical moment is bound up in the need to define the purpose of literature.

The introduction to this thesis outlined the stakes involved in both creating and defining art: that the artistic form is central to the defining and structuring of experience, and as a result art objects come to stand as external markers for existence which facilitate the experience of the subject. Understanding this, the desired function of texts implicates also the structuring of experience. Nicholas Gaskill's explication of the major conflicts in literary criticism suggests two distinct approaches to interpretation, one concerned with "drawing out (*abstract*)," associated with the Historicist movement, and the other with "growing together (*concrete*)," which is the domain of the New Critics (510). These two camps understand texts separately as being a "statement about experience" and "experience itself" (513), and as such firmly position literature, and by extension its study, as related to a

phenomenological project. Of course, this is what Ricoeur suggested in his *Existence and Hermeneutics*, claiming that:

Hermeneutics can be defined no longer as an inquiry into the psychological intentions which are hidden beneath the text, but rather are the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed by the text. What is to be interpreted in the text is the proposed world which I could inhabit, and in which I could project my ownmost² possibilities. (112)

What Ricoeur posits here is an understanding of the processes of interpretation which is only nominally about the interpreted text itself. Instead, the act of interpretation is a drawing out of ontological possibility, of the reality which the text holds within it which we desire to sequester into our non-textual existence. In this, the “purpose of all understanding is to conquer a remoteness” (101), in which the subject can “glimpse” (105) a more fulfilling version of their being which Ricoeur refers to as “something like an *archaeology of the subject*” (105). Here, textual analysis is reciprocal: texts draw as much out of us as we do out of them.

Knausgaard is not unaware of the reality of this relationship. He has stated that “to write a book and have it published is to risk exposing some parts of yourself” (“Out to Where”) and bemoans that writing makes him “visible to others to see” (“Exchange”), highlighting the reality contained in the texts. This is something which critics regularly read as central to Knausgaard’s *A Death in the Family*: Ruth Franklin has stated it is only through “empt[ying] his life out on the page that Knausgaard finds himself,” and Erens that the text simply reveals “the sort of person Karl Ove Knausgaard has been” (205). The text then, contains some sort of representation of reality, a revelation of an intimate, inner truth. While neither Ben Lerner’s *10.04* and Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* are overtly read as revealing a

² ‘Ownmost’ here used in the Heideggerian sense, meaning that which belongs “primordially and essentially to *Dasein*’s being” (*Being*, 295). Its use by Ricoeur here ties his hermeneutics to the phenomenological experience of *Dasein*.

central or hidden reality of their writers – although the semi-autobiographical nature of *10.04* is not ignored – I posit that all three texts should be read as centrally concerned with the relationship between art and being. Where both Knausgaard and Lerner’s texts position themselves as explicitly and overtly concerned with both art and life, McCarthy’s *Remainder* is seldom read as being centrally about this relationship. I argue that such a reading elucidates an interpretation of the text that reads the narrator’s response to trauma as representative of the wider experience of subjectivity and its relation to the artistic form as a means of self-knowledge.

In this chapter, I will bring to bear the questions which this introduction has suggested on the ways in which *A Death in the Family*, *Remainder*, and *10.04* explore the power and promise of art; the ways that both the object and the concept itself control the lives of the characters. Firstly, I will address the ways in which the texts consider the power of the art object and suggests reasons for their centrality to the character’s lives. I will then go on to extend this to a wider explication of the processes of artistic ontology. This part addresses the role of narrative and collectivity in allowing the subject to contain and orient their lives, as well as the ways in which an artificially artistic form is supplanted onto the subject’s experience of life. The final part will look towards death and consider its centrality to the narrative making techniques that the characters in the novels employ, before ending the chapter by addressing the ways in which texts evaluate the failure of artistic ontology and address the emancipatory potential of conceptualizing existence in new ways.

The Power of the Artwork

Whether it be the explicitly curatorial *10.04*, or the semi-fictional recounting of Knausgaard’s writing process in *A Death in the Family*, or even the narrator of *Remainder*’s obsession with constructing and staging imagined experiences, all three of these texts are concerned with the process of creating: how experience is arranged into structure and form, and how something becomes what we would call art. The relationship to art in each of these three

texts begins simply with affinity – they all contain a multitude of references to art and culture: McCarthy’s Robert DeNiro; Knausgaard’s *Space Oddity* (1969); and Lerner’s *Back to the Future* (1985), Jules Bastien-Lepage *Joan of Arc*, Donald Judd’s boxes, and Christian Marclay’s *The Clock*. This is not an unusual feature of novels, and certainly not contemporary novels, which often position themselves as part of a wider artistic community – in Lerner’s words, the novel is a “fundamentally curatorial form... a genre that assimilates and arranges and dramatizes encounters with other genres” (“Actual”). Still, this affinity raises questions about the perceived power of art: what is the benefit of positioning your text as part of a wider community of creations and creators?

Perhaps more than both *A Death in the Family* and *Remainder*, Lerner’s novel surrounds itself with the culture of art and expresses a reverence and admiration for the perceived power of art to move. When viewing a piece of art created by his girlfriend Alena, Ben describes it as “so powerfully located in the present tense that it was difficult to face” (10.04, 27) and has a similar experience when viewing Donald Judd’s boxes, commenting on the “disorienting power of the Judds” (180). Ben is moved by the perceived power of these artworks, bent to their whim, and in doing so presents an image of art to the reader as being something with the power to affect, not merely a passive object but as containing some sort of power or greatness which Ben finds difficult to bear. In a similar way, Knausgaard in *A Death in the Family* speaks of Olav H. Hauge’s poetry as being “so much greater than us, it belongs to infinity” (302) – that the poem has a power which he almost cannot comprehend, it exists above and beyond his own experience. Like Ben, Knausgaard has a conflicting physical response to artworks, claiming that, though he finds himself drawn to them, they can “sometimes be difficult to endure” (185). Both of these experiences are a strange mix of positive and negative emotions: there is an awe and appreciation present in the description, but it is doubled with a frightening appreciation of power and meaning within the objects, something which both men find difficult to interact with.

This power can be understood as a result of the art object's hierarchical power as a thing. In his essay *The Thing*, Heidegger states that the essential quality of a thing is its "presencing" (171), a phrase that describes the complex process through which something is recognised. Before it is recognised as a thing, the object merely takes up space. Presencing is a gathering together of meaning into that physical space as a single point of reference and comes about through an understanding of the contextual placement of that object as part of a larger system of experience. In this, the thing contains within it more than simple materiality; it contains an abstract power which is born through the oversaturation of knowledge and potential in the thing's physical form, which extends beyond the object's borders outwards into experience. This "thingly gather[ing]" (172) occurs in contrast to the subjective experience: unlike the thing, which is granted and retains its full contextual meaning in the present moment, the subject is not so easily contained. Their existence is not defined by a gathering together but by a projection of meaning forward into a potential future. We are each moment incomplete, but the thing need not wait to be realised: it is realised fully in the moment of recognition, and this recognition transfigures the physical space that the object takes up into something with abstract potential, moving it from the lone plane of materiality and bringing it into conversation with history, meaning, possibility.

In light of this, the art object is really the art *thing* since it by definition must have a fully contained and realisable meaning within it upon viewing.³ Art has the privileged position of having form, that is, what Nicholas Gaskill refers to as the experience of "everything-together" (506). The artwork's form makes the "whole available for apprehension" (512), since each part of it "works in reference to the whole" (514). By this definition, the properties of the thing and of art are essentially the same, and the process of gathering is an inherently artistic mode. The artwork, Heidegger claims, like the thing, has to power the "manifest something other than... itself" (*Origin*, 81) – it contains within it a

³ In Bill Brown's essay *Thing Theory*, he states that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy," and, as such, what the thing "really names is less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4).

centralizing force which brings together disparate parts of aesthetic experience into a singular point of reference. It is the very thingyness of art which renders it desirable: the dependence on a future which possesses our lives robs the present of its meaning. By contrast, the artwork is fully realised in each moment, gathers meaning towards itself in the moment of viewing, and in this fullness contains a power which we lack. By being close to these works of art, by aligning or revolving our lives around them, we hope that perhaps some of that meaning, awesome and oppressive, will dissolve also into us.

All three of the texts characterise art as gathering meaning into itself. This occurs most explicitly in *10.04* when Ben goes to view *The Clock*, an installation piece by Christian Marclay featuring a montage of clips from television and film arranged so as to function as a real clock – “each scene indicates the time with a shot of a timepiece or its mention; time in and outside of the film is synchronised” (52). The very form of this artwork is explicitly based around gathering, bringing together disparate elements from different films and unifying them together towards a common goal, a common narrative. Ben is aware of this, stating that “the actors in each scene, no matter how incongruous, struck me as united in anticipation of that threshold” of midnight (52), that each individual part of the work is “integrated into an overarching narrative” (53) in service of the whole. *The Clock* lays bare what is the internal process of all artworks: its content derived from organization as well as its form. The piece is about, as Ben understands, the “collective, unconscious sense of the rhythms of the day,” and in observing this, Ben experiences “a supragenre [which] made visible our collective” (53) – that the piece, through its choice of specific clips at certain times, for example showing people leaving work between five and six, alerts the viewer to the collectivity of their own experience, of the ways in which they “expect” (53) things to happen at certain times. The gathering of art, then, is perceived to be able to implicate the world outside in its collectivity – through experiencing *The Clock*, the viewer is brought into conversation with the imagined collective state of the world.

Lerner expands upon this when Ben speaks of his response to Ronald Reagan's 1986 speech about the Challenger disaster. He claims that it demonstrated to him how "the transpersonality of prosody constituted a community" (113), that the poetry of Reagan's speech brought together all those who listened to it into a connected space, a collectivity which moves beyond each individual listener and indicates what Theodore Martin refers to as the "broader experience of a shared present" (230). The speech "pulled [Ben] into the future," using "poetic language to integrate a terrible event and its image back into a framework of meaning" (112), a meaning that the event alone did not possess. It is only by the artistic gathering together of the collective experience of the event that it becomes meaningful, through its relationship to the whole. Ben also notes that Reagan "plageris[ed]" (115) a poem by John Gillespie Magee, which in turn closely resembles the work of Cuthbert Hicks, who Magee claims the poem was inspired by, and in this chain of ideas he finds another meaning. Reagan's final product, Ben claims, "moves through bodies and time," and each part is gathered together into a "collective song" – the voices of each writer integrated into a singular point of meaning (115). Here, as Gayle Rogers argues, the work of art is positioned as part of a "field of relations" (227), and, through this, Reagan's speech contains much more than just the words on the page. It contains also the history and promise of human experience.

The power of this gathering is what draws the narrator of *Remainder* to the character that Robert de Niro plays in *Mean Streets*, who, through his artistic existence, represents for the narrator a kind of desirable presence. When he goes to see *Mean Streets*, the narrator observes that De Niro's character is "perfect" (22), that, when he did anything, "he seemed to execute the action perfectly, to live it, to merge with it until he was it and it was him and there was nothing in between" (22). The narrator recognises de Niro as being fully in control of his actions, and in control of the space that he inhabits; his existence fully integrated into the world. In this, the narrator understands de Niro as having the presence that thingly art contains: the ability to be fully realised in the moment of viewing, at one with his own purpose. By contrast, the narrator understands himself as "artificial" and "plastic" (22), he

cannot be recognised as complete in the moment, exists as a virtual suggestion of personhood, as opposed to de Niro's bold statement of it. The irony is profound: fiction is more real than reality.

The presencing power of artwork is also responded to in *10.04* and *A Death in the Family*. In *10.04*, Ben's understanding of Alena's photography as being "located so powerfully in the present tense" (27) can be read as attesting to this: the picture's meaning coalesces in the moment of viewing, having no need to project into the future to retain that meaning. Knausgaard's experience is almost identical. He describes the "freedom" (*Death*, 185) he feels when engaging with art objects, stating that "what they possessed, the very core of their being, was inexhaustibility, and what that wrought in me was a kind of desire. A desire to be inside of that inexhaustibility" (186). This inexhaustibility is the presence of the artwork, its constant present tense which can never decay or fade away, and this stasis separates art from subjective experience, which time builds up and then destroys. Pamela Erens' claim, then, that Knausgaard shows that "the major task of fiction is to make us experience the world more fully" (240), is one which highlights what Knausgaard understands as the artwork's presence, an experience of being which is greater and reaches farther than the frame of its canvas. Knausgaard, in this moment, voices what the other texts leave as implicit – that the pull of art comes from a desire to be within it, to enter into that endless present and become the centre of meaning; to be the point of reference, about which everything else gathers.

In light of this desire, it is worth considering the ways that art is perceived to be able to transfigure the individual; in which the subject can be caught up in or implicated by the gathering and presencing power of the artwork. Knausgaard describes feeling this to be possible in his juvenile desire to be the sort of person who could become a musician. This is not to be confused with wanting to be a musician himself, since he claims that playing music is "beyond him" (*Death*, 88). Instead, he desires the sort of personhood which being a musician, having "the gift" (89), implies. He states that he wanted "so much to be someone. I

wanted so much to be special” (89); that, if he were a musical person, his existence would be transfigured – that his capacity to create art would validate his existence, join his experience with the presence of art. Similarly, Knausgaard claims that he “learned nothing, understood nothing” (295), from his reading at university, but that was not what was important to him. Instead, he “was after enrichment, and what enriched me while reading Adorno, for example, lay not in what I read but the perception of myself while I was reading. I was someone who read Adorno!” (295) It is not the content of the texts which are desirable but simply the idea of their meaning. Knausgaard wants to position himself as adjacent to these artworks, and in doing so allow his existence to be defined by them, and their meaning to seep also into him. Ben in *10.04* also feels this desire, stating that when he dies, he “want[s] to have ‘papers,’ want[s] to leave... those traces, that it would authenticate me” (71), illustrating what Daniel Katz calls his belief in the “the writer’s self immortalization through art” (325). Ben believes in the power of art to realise his personhood, that the recognition of his life through artistic traces would validate his existence.

Artistic Ontology

There is, then, a perceived difference between the realm in which art resides and the world in which we live. As the narrator in *Remainder* muses, art is “abstract” and, in this abstraction, “not real” (166) – it does not have the power to state that “something has happened here” (166), to touch the world directly. Ben in *10.04* understands this perspective also, stating that, when he views *The Clock*, he kept looking towards his phone to check the time, even though the perceived purpose of the piece is to accurately reflect time, and so he was “looking away from a clock to a clock” (53). He is momentarily embarrassed, before realising that this practise “revealed” something to him: that he “watched time in *The Clock*, but wasn’t in it,” that the minutes that passed in the artwork and the minutes that passed in his life were “minutes from different worlds” (54). Art then, even when as overtly referring to it as in *The Clock*, does not and cannot penetrate life; it is necessarily detached.

Still, though the characters in these novels may believe that art and life are separate, the texts themselves speak to a different reality. Ben in *10.04*, although perhaps not to his knowledge, experiences his life within the syntax of art. On multiple occasions, without explicit comment, he integrates literary quotes into his prose: he states that “the earth was beautiful beyond all change” (37) quoting William Bronk’s *Midsummer* (1955), tells a young man struggling under the influence of ketamine that “I am with you...and I know how it is” (189), quoting Walt Whitman’s *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (1856), and at the very end of the novels implores “reader, we walked on” (234), referencing Charlotte Brontë’s famous line from *Jane Eyre* (1847). These lines are integrated into the prose with no special caveat – there is no acknowledgement of their plagiarised status, they simply become part of the narrative and part of his life in the same way as his own thoughts and actions do. Ben’s life is lived through an artistic lens, his own experience brought into conversation with the realm of art. Further, Ben describes events in his life using artistic language, claiming that he had experienced “the sexiest kiss in independent film” (209), calling social existence a “collective song” (114), and suggesting that in the sky he “saw the clouds as craquelure” (32). His experience is understood through this artistic metric, and, in doing this, the perceived power of art is supplanted onto his life. It is only through this artistic mode than Ben can categorise his life, can recognise it as something definable, and, in this, give it form and meaning.

Knausgaard and McCarthy, like Lerner, also use the syntax of art to help their narrators understand life. Knausgaard refers to himself as always “playing roles” (*Death*, 296); *Remainder*’s narrator describes a tarmac road as being “like an old grand master” (180), his memory returning after his accident “in instalments, like a soap opera” (71). But why, if all the characters attest either a belief that life and art do not touch, are their lives lived so firmly in the shadow of it? It is here that an understanding of artistic ontology can elucidate the complicated nature of the character’s existences: we should understand their being as conceptualized through an artistic mode, an artificial form which necessarily grants an artificial meaning. This is not a conscious decision: it is clear in all three texts that the reliance on artistic ontology is either completely unknown, as in the case of *Remainder*, or

realised with a tragic resignation to its power, as in *10.04* and *A Death in the Family*. We see this kind of living within each text in the narrativization of life, individual moments brought together into a larger life-story which shapes and grants meaning, their experience extended outwards to reference the history and potential of all experience. In *Remainder* the narrator describes feeling a sadness “not in the normal sense but on a grander scale, the scale that really big events are measured in, like centuries of history or the death of stars: very, very sad” (155), moving his emotions from a personal sphere into the collective human sphere of time and then even further into the cosmic sphere, his sadness on par with the centuries’ long death of stars. Similarly, Knausgaard describes his adolescent obsession with a girl in his class as “one of the *grands amours*,” (*Death*, 136) raising it above “trivial crushes” (136) and into a place where that crush can mean more through its adjacency to all other crushes, past and future. Transcending his own experience, the *grand amour* moves into a collective one, gaining meaning by positioning itself as part of a narrative wider than Knausgaard’s personal life. In *10.04*, Ben frequently experiences “the world... rearranging itself” (32) around him, making him the centre and therefore the point around which everything else gravitates. This positions Ben as part of the wider narrative of the world: his own experience rendered meaningful by relation to and reliance upon the experience of each person in the world, its power and abstract potential.

10.04 expands upon and makes explicit this narrative-creating power when Ben details the ways in which he understands the spatial integrity of the city as representative of a collective experience. Ben talks of the reaction that “built space” (108) draws out of him, stating that it provided the “intuition of community” (108), that, when observing the city, he experienced his “personality dissolving into a personhood so abstract that every atom belonging to me as good as belonged to Noor” (109), his co-worker. In this sense, Ben’s individuality, by understanding himself as part of the city, is surrendered up to the collective. Even the physical space he takes up, his body, his atoms become part of something bigger than himself; allow themselves to be drawn together with everyone else’s into a collective body, “convert[ing]” (3) the space itself as well as each individual who interacts with it. Ben

claims that the city contains the “material signature of a collective person that didn’t yet exist, a still-uninhabited second person plural to whom all the arts, even in their most intimate registers, are addressed” (108). This ‘second person plural’ can only be the point of meaning, the point from which all purpose grows outward: Ben acknowledges that art relies on this point, that its formal requirements are in aid of reaching it, and, at the same time, links this artistic mode to his human experience, implicating himself and the city in the process of artistic ontology. As Ben’s senses and the city “vibrat[e] at one frequency” (29), he feels himself to be joined with the point of meaning, fully realised in its aura. We should not understand Lerner as, per Vermeulen’s suggestion, “implicat[ing] the reader” (627) in this second person plural, but as acknowledging that which is beyond the reader, that imagined “ideal reader” (Atwood, 157) to which the writer writes.

Knausgaard also searches for this point of meaning, reading his life as if it were a piece of art, interpreting it in search of some subtextual narrative or purpose. When talking about his father’s face, Knausgaard admits that “I had always tried to interpret the expression on his face... I had never been able to look at it without trying to read it at the same time” (*Death*, 204). This is reminiscent of the way that Knausgaard describes Giotto’s art, claiming that their faces “reveal” (362) something, that they hide an inner truth or power. His father’s face, then, becomes identical to these paintings, read as if there is some disguised or latent meaning to be revealed in the crevices of his skin. Using almost identical language, McCarthy’s narrator describes the people who he had paid to perform a bank heist as looking like “sculptures” (261) and then states that “something else was being revealed too, something that had been there all along, present but hidden, now emerging, everywhere” (261). As Knausgaard did, the narrator sees in the moment the potential for interpretation, for meaning to rise out of the actions of his bank robbers and grant him access to that world of art and presence. In both cases, life becomes a text, a canvas, onto which artistic language, texture, and form is supplanted in order to be studied.

Of course, *Remainder's* central narrative overtly addresses this artistic rendering of life. The narrator's desire to recreate incidents that he either imagines or experiences should be read as an exaggerated but explicit staging of the processes of artistic ontology. In the moment where he first experiences his imagined apartment block, the narrator states that, in this building, his "movements had been fluent and unforced. Not awkward, acquired, second-hand, but natural," that he had "merged with them, run through them and let them run through me until there'd been no space between us" (60). Here he describes the feeling of full presence, oneness with being. The narrator then decides to recreate this moment, bringing together different people and props together to enact his vision in reality. Whilst this compulsion is widely read as a trauma induced practice to "make possible a quasi-mechanical looping of experience around an unrecoverable event" (Franklin, 157), and "a manifestation of restorative nostalgia" (Drag, 381), discussion of its obvious relation to artistic form has not yet been brought to the forefront. Reading the narrator's compulsion as an attempt to contain his life within an artificial structure in order to give it meaning allows us to think about this central narrative not only through the lens of trauma, but also as part of the novel's wider concerns regarding the relationship between art and life.

His is an explicitly artistic endeavour, though the narrator himself would not want to admit it. He hires actors, buys a space which he turns into a stage, writes scripts which the actors must follow, gives them direction, takes part in the performance: as Wojciech Drag claims, he "assumes the role of director, screenwriter, stage manager – and most importantly the audience" (386). This endeavour, and each subsequent one he creates, is an explicit rendering of life through artistic means, bringing together disparate elements into a whole which is fundamentally coded with the spirit of an artwork – it has purpose, destination, and reference. It has presence, and by partaking in the fantasy, by positioning himself inside of his creations, the narrator attempts to presence himself, to transcend time, in which each moment is empty and will decay, and enter into the endless present of art. We see this desire manifest itself in the form of the narrator's obsession with replaying elements of the

production, claiming that, when within the structure, “the moment I was in seemed to expand and become a pool – a still, clear pool that swallowed everything up in its calm contentedness” (*Remainder*, 132). Through his artistic rendering of experience, the narrator is able to escape from the flow of time.

While the desire for transcendence manifests itself here through the narrator’s desire to remain outside of time, it is more potently expressed in all three texts through the relation of experience to the divine or cosmic – that of existence extended towards infinity or brought into conversation with a creator in order to supplant the meaning of both of these things onto the subject themselves. In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner refers to this desire to align our lives with the heavens as the “transcendent impulse” (7), and we see this invocation in moments such as in *10.04* when Ben muses “how easily worlds are crossed” (22) or when Knausgaard describes himself as being “as handsome as a god” (*Death*, 158): both are a call to transcendence, to power. The positioning of these characters lives as part of or related to the cosmic power of divinity grants them, by mere association, some of that power, meaning on a grand scale. To *Remainder*’s narrative, the religious is perhaps more essential: the novel begins with the very first line recalling “something falling from the sky” (5) and ends with the narrator “among the clouds” (275), both invoking the heavens. After a particular incident in which the narrator believes that the windscreen wiper fluid from his car has disappeared, he describes it as a “miracle” (153), that he had watched matter be “transubstantiated” (153) and even goes as far as to describe the young mechanic who had dealt with his car as “like a Christian martyr being flagellated, crucified, scrawled over with stigmata” (153). Here, the language of religion ties this event, strange but nonetheless real, into a framework of meaning and purpose. The narrator’s own life becomes part of the wider narrative, history, and potential of religion, moved from mundanity and virtuality into a place of pure presence: heaven.

Knausgaard experiences a similar religious experience. At the start of *A Death in the Family*, he describes a childhood incident wherein, during a news report regarding a sunken ship, he believes that he sees “the outline of a face” (7) in the water. Here, Knausgaard takes part in the process of artistic gathering: the ebbing of the waves, the colours reflected passively onto the water, are brought together into an image; make themselves available for interpretation to Knausgaard, who supplants the physicality of the ocean with an abstract textuality. That he sees a face is important: Knausgaard very literally sees his own humanity reflected in the water, realised in the water, and it is through this realisation that his humanity is recognised and placed as part of the wider narrative of nature and meaning. Shaken by the experience, he goes to tell his father, who, half-mockingly, asks: “was it Jesus you saw?” (8) immediately connoting this experience with a religious one. Though Knausgaard denies that the face was Jesus in this particular moment, later, when an adult Knausgaard begins writing his novel, he sees in the wooden grain of his flooring the “image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns” (170). This time, there is no doubt what face he sees: where the face earlier was merely an image, now “it really was Christ” (171). He finds the divine inside of his own life, assimilates his own experience into its transcendence, and through this gives it meaning. Knausgaard has said that, personally, he has “just substituted literature and art for religion” (“Exchange”) – that both of these are narratives, are ways to become presenced: he understands the power of both of these things as ontological devices. So, when he sees Jesus’ face, he really does see him. Knausgaard’s story is positioned in conversation with Christ’s, and it is through this that he can transcend the mundanity of each moment into the eternity of the sky.

Towards Death

The relevance of narratives to the ontology of the subject cannot be discussed without speaking of the centrality of death to these narratives. Artistic ontology acknowledges the pull towards both an abstract self-death of the individual and a narrative focussed journey towards spiritual death: both are essential to the framing and understanding of existence.

The desire for this first kind of death, self-death, is understood as a response to the existential anguish that the individual is subjected to through their acknowledgement of their freedom of self-determination. The immanent and pressing weight of being the one who bears the responsibility to determine your own life causes the subject anguish and anxiety, and so to be released from this commitment is desirable. It is partially as a response to this that narrative ontology is subconsciously adopted, since, through the narrative, the subject is able to relinquish the responsibility of controlling their own life. The function of the narrative is to create destination, to position each individual moment as related to and in quest of this end, and, through this, the trajectory of life is predetermined – we cannot deviate from the path set out for us. Therefore, by conceptualizing their life as a narrative, the subject removes from themselves the responsibility of having to control and affect their own destiny.

This desire is something that the narrator of *Remainder* feels intensely. When engaging in his staged realities, which are themselves physical representations of the process of narrative ontology, the narrator feels that his “actions were passive. We weren’t doing them: they were being done” (193), and he allows this to happen, moving without protest into a space where “there was no noise anywhere, no noise at all – just the massed silence of whole scores of people waiting, like me, infinitely patient” (194). Containing his existence in a narrative means that the narrator does not have to actively direct his life, can simply wait for the promised destination to be reached, not *by* him, but *for* him. The narrator, who very rarely speaks in terms of desire and want, purposefully admits that he “liked being discussed [by others]: not because it made me seem interesting or important, but because it made me passive” (196), making explicit his desire to be removed from the weight of having to affect the world. It is in fact only when he is robbed of this ability that the narrator “feel[s]... at ease” (212). As the narrator’s breakdown progresses, his own passivity increases to the point where he feels that he “became irrelevant, suspended, each moment widening out into a huge warm, yellow pool I could just lie in, passive, without end” (196). Although these instances

could be read as merely “the traumatised subject’s self-destructive” nature (Drag, 388), it seems they also indicate a wider desire to be removed from the weight of having to determine his own life.

This quest for passivity is a fundamentally artistic endeavour. The artistic form, as Emmanuel Levinas states in his essay *Reality and its Shadow* (1948), “shuts beings up in a fate despite their freedom” (124), and, through this “liberates the artist from his duties as a man” (118). In this, art enables passivity; allows the artist, understood here as referring not only to those who specifically create, but all who engage in artistic ontology, to “concoct a vision of themselves as witnesses” (“E Pluribus,” 151). In this, they are freed from the responsibility of affecting the world, of taking part in its process, and can simply observe from the side-lines. Knausgaard, in interviews regarding his own writing, has highlighted this artistic passivity, claiming that his desire to write is related to his “desire to do something in which I completely disappear” (“Exchange”), that the “destructive” nature of writing is why it is “very much an escape from everything” (“Overrated”). Through writing, Knausgaard is rendered “self-annulled” (Wood, 2012), brought out of his life in which he is the master of his own fate and into an imagined realm, one where the beginning necessarily references the end.

This desire for self-death is doubled with an understanding of death which positions it as integral in giving life form, containing and suspending it within greater meaning. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the essential being-towards-the-end of humankind means that death represents the moment in which the wholeness of experience is granted, and therefore also its meaning. This is overtly understood by the narrator of *Remainder*, who is conscious of the power of death in granting presence and meaning. He calls a dead man “the symbol of perfection” (177), stating that, in death, he had “merged with the space around him” (177) and that the place where his body fell had become “sacred ground, blessed ground” (178). Death signifies the closing, the completion of the narrative and therefore the

one who dies becomes completely filled with presence, with the meaning that this death has promised them, released from the inescapable tension which they experienced when alive. The death of this man allows him to enter into the grand narrative of every life that had been lived, and will be lived; every death that has been enacted and will be enacted, as well as the abstract idea of life and death; of the cosmic life, the cosmic death. The narrator, speaking again of the dead man, claims that “anyone who occupied [the death space] in the way that he’d occupied it would become blessed too” (178) – emphasising the ways in which adjacency to meaning can implicate also the one who stands adjacent. As Jim Byatt claims, this understanding of death “remove[s] the dying from the scene of their own death to an alternate realm” (246), allows death to mean more than its physical reality. The narrator claims that he had to re-enact this death “for myself, certainly, but for the world in general as well” (178), extending his personal experience towards the collective, in which his play-death would mean something for each person now alive; each person soon dead.

McCarthy’s narrator’s collective death is reminiscent of what Knausgaard claims that he “wanted death to evoke” (*Death*, 382) – a “solemnity” (382) which he puts in contrast with the “trivial” (382). Death here represents something grand, in which the one who dies is elevated from mundane, ordinary life into a realm of meaning and importance. Indeed, Knausgaard understands death as something which contains life, stating that death is “interwoven” in a way that differs from “the objective, concrete reality that surrounded [him]” (341), that it represents a conceptual process through which the “beyond,” that which is “unfathomable” (201) at the limits of our experience, is closed off, creating an understandable whole. Our world is “enclosed around itself, around us” (201) through this conceptualised death-meaning, and in this ironic way, it is only through death that we may understand life. When Knausgaard claims that he “saw life... thought about death” (174), he articulates the ways in which life is lived in the shadow of death; that its understanding relies on placing its entire power within death, allowing it to mean something only through this relationship. This artificial form is inherently artistic, and so, when James Wood states that

writing “lays bare, examines, dramatizes... that death journey” (“Recall”), he is articulating an understanding of the artistic rendering of death as destination which controls both art, as metaphor, and life, as ontology.

Though *10.04* does not deal as closely or as explicitly with death as McCarthy or Knausgaard’s novels do, Ben’s heart condition should be read as an explication of these death-anticipatory processes. He describes his condition as “an entirely asymptomatic and potentially aneurysmal dilation of my aortic root that required close monitoring and probable surgical intervention,” which he claims may be the result of a genetic disorder called “Marfan disorder” (4). This disorder is real, but its close linguistic relation to the Texan city of Marfa, a well-known artistic community where Ben later goes to view Donald’s Judd’s boxes, links it with art and artistic experience. As a result of this disorder, Ben’s heart is at risk of giving out at any moment – his aorta dilating to the point where he would suffer an immediate stroke – and so represents a very real and imminent threat on his life. In this sense, Ben anticipates his death as artistic ontology dictates, but it becomes more than the imagined potential for the future, becomes immediate in his life. This kind of death anticipation is different from the simple being-towards-the-end which I have previously described, since the unknowable timeline of Ben’s illness means he cannot fully project his death into an imagined future: it is, and could be, happening at any moment. Death then, instead of pushed into the far future as an end, becomes the thing which defines each next moment. Ben has no way to plan his life since, a moment later, it could be over.

A Death in the Family, too, recontextualises death, defining the difference between the two understandings as “one... associated with concealment and gravity, earth and darkness, the other with openness and airiness, ether and light” (6). Here he posits death as representative of two separate ideas – physicality and spirituality. The former is “repressed” (5), through practises such as hiding the body of the dead; the latter, the “open” death, displaces it, raises it above us into a spiritual, meaningful space. The truth of death, he

suggests, is pushed aside in favour of a death which functions as a conceptual marker for being – the death of artistic ontology. Knausgaard positions the sight of the dead body as the breakdown of this spiritual death. The physicality of death disrupts the former narrative and it therefore breaks down, revealing the failure hidden behind the veneer; now exposed and beginning to decay.

Failure and Emancipation

The knowledge of this ‘true’ death represents a single point at which artistic ontology fails, but it is not the only one. As described in the previous chapter, we can understand the perceived virtual existence of the subject as a failure of this kind of conceptualization: projection towards an imagined future is required in order to feel presence, but this projection is precisely what draws the subject out of the present moment, causing an experience of duality. The very practise which was developed to combat virtuality unknowingly enables it.

We also see artistic ontology break down in moments where the artificially supplanted meaning of life degrades; completeness crumbling and revealing multiplicity. This is illustrated in *10.04* through the breaking down of the Challenger space shuttle in mid-air soon after taking flight, killing everyone on board. Ben speaks of how, when watching the disaster take place, everyone “expected the shuttle to disappear successfully into space and instead saw it engulfed in a giant fireball, saw the branching plumes of smoke as its components fell back to earth” (111). In this moment, the complete object of the shuttle disintegrates into multiple parts, no longer an object in itself; now merely a collection of “components” which “branch” further and further away from each other. The shuttle becomes representative of the breakdown of meaning which the failure of artistic ontology initiates. When the shuttle falls back to earth, then, we see it fall in reality further and further away from the point of meaning.

A similar kind of language is used when the narrator of *Remainder* experiences an equally jarring breakdown of meaning. When he goes to get his car fixed, he believes that he sees the wiper fluid “transubstantiated” into “un-matter” (153), and as a result he “looks up at the sky: it was blue and endless” (153). Here, the narrator experiences the feeling of meaningfulness, becoming “elated,” and, as Lerner does, using relation to the sky to represent this meaning. However, also like Lerner, the narrator sees the moment where this structure of meaning breaks down. When he turns on the engine, “a torrent of blue liquid burst[s] out of the dashboard, and cascade[s] down” (154). As the Challenger craft did, the narrator sees the liquid he believed to have transcended come “crashing back down to earth, turning the scene of a triumphant launch into the scene of a disaster” (156). The language McCarthy uses here could, in fact, have very easily been used to describe the exploding of Lerner’s space shuttle: both incidents represent the tragic moment in which meaning, which had up until that moment been thought of as stable, erodes. This erosion also causes the stability of the subject’s ontology to erode, their own being implicated in this failure.

In these particular examples, the moment in which meaning breaks down is one of anguish and it is certainly the case that, for the entirety of the novel, the narrator of *Remainder* does everything in his power to avoid these moments. However, both Lerner and Knausgaard seek these moments out, understand them not as moments where the subject is implicated in the *failure* of artistic ontology, but where they are *emancipated* from it. Towards the end of *A Death in the Family*, Knausgaard describes the difference between what he calls “a child’s reality and an adult’s”: when that which as a child had importance – brand trademarks, a particular view of the sea – were all “no longer laden with meaning” (323). He claims that, through understanding this, “the world was the same, yet it wasn’t” (323), using language almost identical to Lerner in *10.04*: “everything will be as it is now, just a little different” (19). Both of these quotes describe the feeling of becoming emancipated from narrative ontology – the world is the same, of course, but it is also completely different, of course. Lerner elaborates on this through his use of the storms which bookend the novel.

When these storms are coming, reality as the characters know it is interrupted: they cannot be sure that, tomorrow, the world that they experience will continue. The storm threatens to destroy infrastructure, to disrupt social existence, to prevent regular business from happening. In this, tomorrow does not really exist, and so, therefore any artistic narrative of projection into the future is disrupted. Therefore, the meaning that has been pushed forward towards this imagined end has nowhere to go; must coalesce in the present, granting each moment a meaning which it has been deprived of. Ben describes the storm drawing near: “what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs” (19). The narrative is disrupted, and so the subject is thrust towards “the threshold of electrification” (234), their lives infused with a new kind of power due to emancipation from artistic ontology.

As a response to their newfound knowledge of their own freedom, the narrators of these two novels turn away from the art which they had for so long thought of as central to their lives. Knausgaard “burn[s] all the diaries and notes I had written” (*Death*, 312), Ben disregards his book about fraudulence, replacing it with “one I’d written in its place for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction” (*10.04*, 237), both attempting to give up on the reliance they have on art for presence, moving forward out of the negative processes of artistic ontology. Through this, they allow the meaning that they had placed outside of themselves, in their novels, their films, their paintings, to come flooding back to its source, filling themselves up finally with power and possibility. Their experience becomes “too alien to integrate into a narrative” (236), as the reality of their worlds is accepted, and the book, which Knausgaard accepts that he had written “for dad” (*Death*, 386) – who is the same person as Lerner’s ‘you,’ as McCarthy’s dead man – gets placed inside a suitcase, “covered with clothes... zipped... up” as Knausgaard “le[aves] the room” (387). They have moved past the need to imagine an existence for themselves inside of their books; deciding, instead of writing about it, to live it.

Chapter 3 | Spaces for Healing

In an interview with *Vulture* regarding his third novel *Satin Island* (2015), Tom McCarthy was asked the probing question: “So, what is it that you’re trying to say in your novels?” (“TED”) McCarthy’s reply revealed no intimidation, though, and without qualification, he answered: “It seems that something needs to be done.” This reply is tantalisingly vague, but we can begin to draw out its meaning by considering McCarthy’s literary project as a whole, which, as he explained in a separate interview, is interested in the “impossibility of writing within the contemporary moment,” in an age where “everything is already written” (“Existential”). Acknowledging this, we can understand McCarthy as concerned with the continued existence of writing in the face of what he sees as its futility and, as such, his imploring “something needs to be done” can be contextualised as part of a wider desire to re-establish a purpose or utility for literature in order to cement it a future. McCarthy specifically linked these concerns with a phenomenological project, stating that “the question of being human is ultimately a literary question,” and designating humans as “writing machines,” highlighting “the way that identity is formed around certain narratives, metaphors, symbolic operations.” Here, McCarthy extends his literary project outwards to consider not only writing, but also the relationship that writing has to the ways in which we as humans come to understand ourselves.

What McCarthy suggest, then, when he speaks of something needing to be done, is a complete change in, or if not something so bold, a reconfiguration of literature and its critique – a desire to form a kind of literature which successfully responds to the concerns of both contemporary existence and the political ends of the arts in general. McCarthy is not alone in his desires: contemporary cultural and literary criticism is overtly concerned with modes of definition and the politics of reading and writing, acknowledging the perceived necessity of redefining literature for a new era. John Doyle has specified a need felt by contemporary writers to “create something more meaningful and fulfilling” (262) and Adam Kelly suggests that a new kind of understanding is needed in order to “enable literary fiction to engage [with] trends in an urgent, complex, and dialectical manner” (“Sincerity,” 198). The stakes, then, are high: contemporary criticism sees both writing and its critique as centrally significant in designing a future for literature and, more broadly, carving out a politically conscious place for art.

As my previous chapter explored, the role art plays in shaping subjectivity necessitates its centrality to questions of phenomenology and, though contemporary critics might not use the specific language of the analysis which I have undertaken, this is not a fact which they ignore. Recent literary criticism acknowledges what Kelly refers to as “a generation of novelists” concerned with challenging “older forms of expressive subjectivity” (“Reply,” 5). Rachel Greenwald-Smith suggests a pressing interest in “critiquing the notion that reading stands outside of history, and that it gives us a kind of universal emotional experience that makes us better people” (“Unknowable,” 26). This implies a wider concern with modes of writing and reading, and the ways in which literary tradition has prioritized certain narratives of politics and ontology. The so-called post-postmodern period, as the name would suggest, responds to the perceived end of postmodernism in the mid-90s.⁴ Post-

⁴ Clarke, Ralph. “Metaffective Fiction: Structuring Feeling in Post-postmodern American Literature.” *Textual Practise*, vol. 33, no. 2: 2019. Pp 263-279.

Doyle, John. “The changing face of post-postmodernism: irony, sincerity, and populism” in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 59, iss. 3: 2018. Pp 259-279.

postmodernism re-evaluates the priorities and conclusions of the postmodernist movement, which, though artistic ontology is not solely associated with that period, suggests a preoccupation with the same issues which this thesis has identified in previous chapters – the power of narratives in shaping understanding of ourselves and our world, and, consequently, the synthetic nature of subjectivity. Postmodernist thinking, through its use of irony, self-reference, and acknowledgement of meta-narratives, uncovers many of these truths, but its solutions now appear outdated. What was then revolutionary is now established, what was subversive now gentrified, and as a result contemporary criticism seeks new ways to not only address but alleviate and perhaps solve the problems that artistic ontology creates.

McCarthy's *Remainder* has been positioned by critics as questioning the value of literature in the face of a contemporary which looks to redefine its utility. Christina Lupton recognises McCarthy's interest in evaluating the "limits of the encounter with the printed page as a media encounter" (Lupton, 516), and Jason Baskin notes his "experimental, often abstract aesthetic that is marked by continual attempts at conceptualization gone awry" ("Vanguard"). McCarthy, then, is firmly cemented as a "standard bearer of the avant-garde novel," and *Remainder* as consciously considering the value of its own form. It would not be wrong to categorise both Knausgaard and Lerner's writing in a similar way: Knausgaard has expressed an interest in the "difference between ideology and reality, politics and literature," and the severe need for art in the present moment to "see the world" ("Exchange"), and Lerner has been described as "notably opposed to theories of writing as the expression or revelation of a singular coherent interiority" (Rogers, 219). Lerner has also claimed that he is "not interested in novels that make you forget they're novels"; he is "interested in the way that the construction of a book or work can be dramatized by that book or work of art" ("Time"), positioning his writing as clearly investigating the role of literature and art in the contemporary age, and specifically as a response to the totalizing narrative of artistic ontology.

Echoing McCarthy's need for something to be done, Knausgaard has stated that he "feel[s] like something is broken, and I'm trying to heal it" (Glancy, 2015), and, using the language of recovery, Lerner has professed interest in "see[ing] what spaces for healing exist" ("Brooklyn"). As such, we can consider all three writers as working towards the same goal: the frontier of literature, oriented towards recovery, which promises to occasion a psychic healing process. In the following pages, this chapter will examine the ways in which McCarthy's *Remainder*, Lerner's *10.04*, and Knausgaard's *A Death in the Family* examine and embody the problematics of reading and writing with the knowledge of its failings, the knowledge of artistic ontology, and suggest new ways of engaging with literature, subjectivity, and the wider problem of codifying collective existence. I will end the chapter by suggesting an understanding of Lerner's "bad collectivity" (*10.04*, 239) which exemplifies the new kind of reading and writing which this project has been written towards in the hopes that, if not now, it could be written sometime in the future.

Old Fashioned Irony and New Sincerity

In the first scene of Lerner's *10.04*, the narrator's literary agent asks him about what kind of novel he wants to write. What Ben actually replies we are not told, instead conveying what he "should have said": "a minor tremor in my hand; I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid" (4). This novel, we come to learn, is the novel we are reading, a novel "on the very edge of fiction" (237). Ben's project, then, is the same as Lerner's – the book that Ben wants to write is the book that Lerner has in fact written, a book which usurps Ben's initial plan to write a "novel about literary fraudulence" and instead becomes "an actual present, alive with multiple futures" (194). This blurring of reality and fiction is central to the formation of *10.04* and allows the text to comment on its own meaning, on the intent of its own writer, thereby orientating the text around the politics of its very existence, infusing it with a commentary on its own creation.

To take Ben's desire at its most basic level, wanting to move "from irony to sincerity" (4), of course implies irony's problematic status and the desirability of sincerity as an alternative. In this, *10.04* sees itself aligned with post-ironic writing, of which David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Plurum: Television and US Fiction" is widely considered a foundational text.⁵ In the essay, Wallace highlights how the components of postmodernism, which once stood as the tools of rebellion against an established order, had been appropriated by that very power system and sold back to the public in plastic packaging; diluted to become palatable, and therefore stripped of their revolutionary power. Irony had become "enfeebling" due to its "institutionalization," and as a result, in order to challenge narratives of power, new artistic techniques or modes of reading must be cultivated (181). Wallace suggests what this could look like, stating that "the new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile" (193), and will "have the childish gall to actually endorse single entendre values... treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions... with reverence and conviction... eschew self-consciousness and fatigue" (192-3). In short, "the next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels" (192), who are dedicated to that which postmodernism had rejected: earnestness, the meaning of one's words, and sincerity.

Through this, Wallace champions a kind of literature which emphasises, in Doyle's words, the "value [of] empathy and interpersonal connection" (260), and thus attempts to reinstate a "post-ironic belief in fiction" (259). Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters* (2016) expands upon Wallace's work, highlighting the "deadly necessity of transcending solipsistic relativism" (201) which had been the dominant trend of the late 20th century, and pointing out a need for contemporary writers to "invent new ways of negotiating the problem of inner and outer states" (208). Post-ironic literature is concerned with modes of representation, returning the experience of subjectivity to the forefront of literature, as opposed to the detached meta-narratives of postmodernism, reclaiming the meaning of one's words and

⁵ See Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Harvard UP, 2016.

therefore “underwrit[ing] the possibility of genuine human connection” (199). Though neither Wallace nor Konstantinou speak explicitly about the processes involved in artistic ontology, such attention provides tools for assuaging the negative practices it entails. Through prioritizing and highlighting specific, personal experience and response, literature could, in theory, pull storytelling back from its reliance on transcendence, and instead of producing grand narratives, simply reflect the realities of subjective experience, in all of its idiosyncrasy.

This kind of writing is something widely associated with Knausgaard and his *My Struggle* series, with critics celebrating his “radical honesty” (Franklin, 2018), and praising the ways in which he prioritizes all of that “urgent, messy human stuff” (Erens, 207) which makes up existence. Of course, the very form of the series implies something true or honest: the novels concern the trajectory of Knausgaard’s life, from his childhood through to his dissolving marriage, and to the point at which the novels you are reading began to be written. Told in what reviewer Ruth Franklin calls an ostensibly “unedited” fashion, with an “authentic randomness” (“Undid”), the novels carry with them the veneer of reality, and Knausgaard’s claim that “one of the dangers of writing like this, blindly, is that things... become visible for others to see” (“Exchange”) denotes the truth of his writing: it really does contain something of his life in it. Paired with the real-life drama of many of Knausgaard’s family members publicly denouncing the book as invasive and attempting to sue to keep it out of the public sphere, *My Struggle* positions itself as autofiction which contains very little fiction. Instead, it is widely understood as achieving a verity which few novels have: of transcending the bounds of its pages and therefore being simply “life itself” (Bauer, 592).

To use Franklin’s phrasing, Knausgaard’s *A Death in the Family* “wallows in idiosyncrasy” (“Undid”), pairing discussion of formulating events in his life such as the death of his father or the birth of his children with the banality of a trip to the corner shop; the tedium of lying in bed, waiting for sleep to come. When describing the course of his childhood, Knausgaard spends nearly ten pages detailing an adolescent endeavour to sneak

alcohol past his parents, going into detail about the boy with whom he attempts it: “Jan Vidar, who lived in Solsletta, about four kilometres down the hill from us, and that autumn had started to train as a patissier at the technical college” (50). Jan Vidar is not a major character in the novel, and so such extreme detail is, to the narrative, non-essential and, even if it wasn’t, the minutiae of the description – not only specifying that Jan Vidar lived down the hill from him, but recounting the exact number of kilometres – does not seem to derive from any necessity of storytelling. More than this, the entire particular anecdote bears very little on the wider trajectory of Knausgaard’s narrative, and yet he devotes such time and detail to it, writing of the manner in which the boys made their plans, enacted them, failed, tried again, failed, and finally succeeded. This level of detail, and the time devoted to recounting particular, seemingly unrelated stories, then, cannot be intended to advance any plot or narrative, but instead simply exists to show, in Erens’ words, merely “what kind of person [he] has been” (205).

As such, each event does not, as artistic ontology dictates, point towards the end of the narrative, containing a meaning deferred until the final page, culminated in the final line of the novel, the final word. Instead, each moment must stand alone as sufficient and valuable, disrupting traditional narrative rules and instead wallowing in their very meaninglessness, allowing significance to come not from the fact that this moment may one day mean something to someone, but from the very reality of events which have no purpose – the “unbearable banality” of life, which Knausgaard believes to be “radiant” (*Death*, 356). However, caution must be exercised when approaching the text in this way: when does the glorification of the mundane slip into the territory of writing towards another narrative, supplanting writing towards transcendence with writing turned towards the self? *My Struggle* has been deridingly likened to a “giant selfie” (Deresiewicz, “Masterpiece”), a description implicated in the socio-political circumstances of both the novel and Knausgaard’s perceived narcissism. Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts have criticised this kind of writing for promoting a “sincerity that cancels critique” (25), and specifically that, “by stealth” (23), it reinstates a “white and male prescription” of that

sincerity by “rehabilitat[ing] the liberal humanist subject, [which] necessarily operates by the same racialised and gendered logic” (23). Jackson and Nicolson-Roberts highlight the perhaps malicious intent behind a renewed interest in personal experience: a desire for a return of power structures which enabled the comfort and fulfilment of a singular racial and gendered class at the expense of the rest of world whose experiences are cast out of literature by their very particularity.

Understanding this criticism is of importance to this project, since all three of the texts I consider in this thesis were written by that racial and gendered class. Still, as I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, it would be a disservice to suggest that Knausgaard, or Lerner, or McCarthy, present an uncritical illustration of their narrators’ sincere subjectivity, and, though Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts’ criticisms were in fact levelled against Kelly’s construction of New Sincerity, he provide useful insight into how we can read sincerity *with* critique. In his 2010 essay “The New Sincerity,” Kelly addresses the “complex ways” (198) in which sincerity is handled in this kind of writing, which he associates with the work of such writers as Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, and David Eggers. He differentiates between *authenticity*, which he associates with the typically modernist idea of writer as “aloof genius, as persona rather than person” (199), and *sincerity* which by definition, he states, “can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation” (201). Here, sincerity is related to that which complicates its existence, and, as a result, concerns a “performativity against a perceived cultural over-emphasis on the authenticity of the expressive, intentional subject” (“Reply”, 9).

Sincerity, as Kelly understands it, is more complicated than the kind of uncritical subjectivity that Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts highlight. Kelly instead suggests an understanding of the literary subject as something complex, inextricably linked to the reality out of which it was born and all of the contradictory properties that entails. In *10.04*, a particularly potent example of this is when Ben goes to donate his sperm. After being shown

into the room where he will deposit it, Ben takes note of the pornography available to him, and notes to his surprise that it is “indexed racially” (88). He becomes “embarrassed” and it is only after a “few seconds of panicky deliberation” over whether or not he should watch the videos, and furthermore which video he should choose, that Ben finally decides to simply press play and watch the video which was already in the player – something called “Asian Adventures” (88). Ben then feels the need to explain to the reader that “that’s not my thing” and then rationalizes that “*not* choosing seemed less objectional somehow than having to express positive preference among the available categories” (88). Here, Ben’s self-conscious anxiety about the way his partaking in this action reflects upon him is one implicitly related to his position in the world and society as a whole; his maleness, his whiteness. In this, the sincere appraisal of his surroundings is not invested in constructing a singular, uncritical persona, but is instead concerned with examining the ways in which Ben’s subjectivity intersects with a wider political system of meaning and significance. Ben’s anxiety stands as a marker for a subjectivity that is fragile and unstable; exists not above or beyond his material conditions, but as a product of them, to evolve and be shaped as those conditions evolve and take shape.

As a result of its entanglement with socio-political conditions, Ben’s subjectivity is difficult to integrate into a wider narrative of which he is the centre, since a first-person narrative is inherently singular. Understanding the individual in fact as inherently multiple, and part of a system of multiplicity, prevents any residual significance-making desires from usurping the novel. Further, Ben’s personal anxiety is extended to the level of society through the novel’s structure: the plot takes place between two potentially catastrophic natural disasters which throw everything that happens in between into insecurity. Ben explicitly comments on the precarious nature of contemporary existence: “I did not say that our society could not, in its present form, go on, or that I believe that the storms were in part man-made, or that poison was coming at us from a million points, or that the FBI fucks with citizens’ phones, although all of that was to my mind plainly true” (220). Here, by aligning the contingency and precariousness of his own subjectivity with the precariousness of society

as a whole, Ben implicates not only himself, but the entire system and each person within it in the unstable creative processes which enable their existence. Hari Kunzru's statement, that *10.04* is a "book about self-consciousness" (2014), thus captures the essential nature of Lerner's work: alongside the ostensible plot and the frequent art criticism and essay runs the major thread of the novel; the anxiety and difficulty of the continued existence of the narrator's subjectivity as a product of a society which is itself unstable and wavering.

All three authors texts are characterised by what Kelly calls an "aesthetically generative undecidability" ("Sincerity," 204). Both Lerner and Knausgaard overtly engage in this kind of writing; invoke uncertain language and modes in which both the textual reality and the reality outside of the text are rendered complicated. We see this in *A Death in the Family* when Knausgaard, in response to an aunt claiming that she lives near him, "you know", writes: no, "I didn't know. Before tonight I didn't even know she existed. I should have said that, but I didn't" (163), or when Lerner in *10.04* relates what his friends said, "although not in these words" (99). In *Remainder*, McCarthy's narrator uses almost identical language when he speaks of his lawyer telling him that his "memory had gone and only slowly returned – in instalments, like a soap opera, although he hadn't used that metaphor" (71). Here, the structure of these statements – in which that which isn't true is primary, and only qualified after it has been uttered – complicates the reality that the narrator supposedly represents: in the 'real' world of the novels, the narrator didn't say what they meant, and in the recounting of the events of that 'real' world, the narrator didn't convey what really happened. As such, both systems are thrown into question, and the narrator's literary persona and their 'real' existence become unsettled and complicated.

This uncertainty is paired with a further kind which destabilizes the reality of the text through the acknowledgement of a reality which the narrator does not have access to. In *10.04*, Lerner uses qualifiers to render events uncertain: his Marfan syndrome specialist Dr Walsh "might respond," (73) someone "might have seen me sitting there," (109). Through this, the simple sincerity of the text is cast into conversation with a complex understanding

of the reality which that sincerity supposedly renders plain and apparent – the supposed concrete world of the text is suddenly cast into insecurity, therefore denying a transcendent narrative and keeping the novel insurmountably suspended between the internal world of the text and the world in which that text was written. Knausgaard suggests that this kind of undecidability is in fact an inherent feature of writing, stating that “when you’re writing you want the truth, but there is something in writing, the complexity of it, that works against the aim” (“Overrated”). He recognizes the impulse for writing to speak to reality, but also acknowledges the problematic nature of that desire, never allowing it to control the work in its entirety: as Knausgaard states of *My Struggle*: “these are very much novels, and life is very different”.

Affect and Physicality

Of course, when talking about post-ironic or sincere novels, McCarthy’s writing in general, and *Remainder* especially, does not fit into the discussion particularly well. McCarthy’s writing could never be considered sincere or earnest in the way I have previously described – he has stated a distaste for “self-expression,” (“White Review”) and is interested in dispelling the myth of a writer’s task being to “express some kind of authentic self that exists outside” of writing, instead understanding it as being to “tune in and sample” (“Live Theory”). Rather than working in opposition to Lerner’s or Knausgaard’s projects, McCarthy’s solution to the problem that all three texts raise is substantially different to the formers’. Where, though complicated, they write from a perspective of subjective experience, McCarthy denounces the traditional subject narrative, writing instead towards a different kind of literature which explodes the central tenants of the traditional novel. *Remainder* has been described as illustrating a “subjectless dysphoric affect that exceeds significations” (Columbino, 173) and the “distillation of cognition to technology, language and mediation” (Lupton, 507) – prioritizing a kind of experience which is not one of individualism or subjectivity, and

instead proceeds from a conceptualization of being derived in opposition to traditional modes of relation and understanding.

Remainder's narrator's detached narrative style differs greatly from the earnestness of Knausgaard or Lerner's, defined by the narrator's disjointed appraisal of the state of the world through a hyper-fixated lens. It is not the case that the narrator doesn't feel, he does – he becomes sad, elated, angry, disappointed – but the very structure of *Remainder's* ostensible plot denies that these emotions be tied back to any sort of centrally empathetic subjectivity. The novel begins with the narrator suffering an accident which removes him of his memory and therefore also his personality, his status as a subject: he is rendered “a blank: a white slate: a black hole” (5). Referring to himself as a ‘white slate’ allows the narrator no history, denying him any knowledge of the past, and the following phrase, ‘black hole,’ denies a future: nothing can be drawn onto his slate, it will only be sucked inwards towards oblivion. Without a history or a future, the narrator cannot hold any concrete sense of self. In this, we should not understand the narrative of *Remainder* beginning with the narrator having to ‘start again’ – construct a new idea of his subjectivity – but instead as rendering him unable to ever reach the state of subject again. He has become forever “neutral” (10) and therefore has none of the humanistic power that the traditional novel relies upon. McCarthy has, in fact, been described by Justus Nieland as “suspicious of the residual humanism” (570) present in the novel; as Pieter Vermeulen suggests, McCarthy “attempt[s] to move beyond sentiment and psychology” (550), and therefore “overcome the novelistic tradition” (550).

Remainder surely denies a traditionally humanistic reading due to the complexity of the narrator's personhood. Though the novel is written in first person, the consciousness which the reader encounters in the prose does not reveal itself as related to any traditional notions of subjectivity. The narrator has his own reasoning for his thoughts and actions, but we are neither made aware of them, nor do they fit in with what we would typically call logical subjective processes. We see this when the narrator, in his constructed apartment

block, partakes in a staging of an interaction with an old lady carrying a bin bag. He makes her repeat her part multiple times because she had made him feel “weightless” (129), but on another repeat claims “this time it didn’t work,” that “it’s broken the... you know: it won’t be right” (132). The narrator doesn’t articulate the logic behind the failure of the scene, cannot convey the reasoning for his conclusions, merely that it isn’t right. He then becomes incomprehensibly distraught when told the scene will take an hour to reset – “an hour?... that’s too... I need it to...’ My voice petered out. I was quite upset. I wanted to slip back into its right now: the pool, the lightness and the gliding” (132). He explains the situation no more, denying the reader access to the rationale of his thoughts and emotions, instead presenting them as merely a fragmented account of his experience, unrelated to any centrally coherent subjecthood. In this, as Vermeulen suggests, *Remainder* denies the “strong mode of empathic emotion and subjectivity which we tend to associate with the novel” (550), and, as a result, the reader is unable to engage with the book so as to feel what Joe Rollins has called “tangible affective pay-out” which is expected of the “contract between author and reader” (290). *Remainder*, then, engages with a complex kind of subjectivity which separates it distinctly from traditional modes of novelistic empathy and humanism.

We can associate *Remainder*’s style with what Ralph Clarke calls “metaffective fiction” – fiction that “self-consciously calls attention to the ways in which emotion and affect are represented in order to interrogate the relationship between them” (266).⁶ Affect describes “an energetics that does not necessarily emerge at the level of signification” (Rice, 201), in contrast to emotions which are the cognition of that material condition. This conceptualization, even in the act of naming which to us appears almost as pre-conscious as the feeling itself, removes being from the moment of experience and enters it into a narrative: a system of signification with which the material condition of being affected is incompatible. As Greenwald-Smith argues, affect studies’ desire to “prioritize those

⁶ The difference between emotion and affect, Clarke argues, is that where affect is the “very preconscious capability of bodies to affect and be affected in the first place,” emotion is “a feeling that becomes consciously recognised or named by a subject” (264).

unclassifiable aspects of consciousness and experience” comes about as a result of “seeing within them the key to all epistemological and phenomenological enquiries” (“Unknowable,” 11). We see a desire for cognition of affect in *Remainder* through the narrator’s intense desire to “merge with [each action] until... there was nothing in between” (22), to become one with the material condition of his affectedness, not beholden to its understanding in emotion. He dreams of being “linked... together: physically” (137) with other people, with the world around him – a connection with the very physical condition of affectedness.

A Death in the Family is also preoccupied with physicality. Knausgaard struggles with the tension he feels between the world inside his head – the world as “superstructure” which is “weightless and abstract” – and the material reality of the world that he experiences, which is defined by sensation and affect (197). For Knausgaard, his lived experience is static, enclosed: “a world of images where expression itself is everything, which of course means that there is no longer any dynamism between the outer and the inner, just a division” (200). By contrast, the physical world possesses a fluidity, a mutability which he envies. Knausgaard describes at one point being aware of the air around him:

Enveloping me, pressing against my skin and wafting into my mouth. Of it enveloping the trees in front of me, the houses, the cars, the mountainsides, of it streaming somewhere as the temperature fell, these constant avalanches in the sky which we could not see, drifting over us like enormous breakers, always in flux, descending lowly, swirling fast, in and out of all these lungs, meeting all these walls and edges, always invisible, always present. (312)

This description is particularly potent, since it could in fact have been written not about air but affect – its fluctuating, dynamic presence, which resides nowhere and in no-one but which is shared among everything, connecting them in its journey through each person’s interaction with it. Here, Knausgaard links cognition of the presence of the physical world with an emancipatory affectedness which removes experience from its “congealed” (313), static cage and releases it once again into reality. As Theresa Brennan points out, the

physiological nature of experience is often denigrated to a secondary position due to lingering dualistic tendencies, denying the reality of the “transmission [of affect, which] is... responsible for bodily changes”: it really “alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject” (1). Cognition of the physicality of existence, then, is cognition of the material condition of affect, and through this moment Knausgaard expresses his desire to forego the superstructure of the world, and instead enter into an affective reality.

A Death in the Family's preoccupation with death also concerns the physical affectedness of existence. The novel starts with a recounting of the physical reality of death, detailing how “the blood will begin to run towards the body’s lowest point... the limbs stiffen and the intestines drain” (3). However, almost immediately, Knausgaard qualifies this description by suggesting that we as a society do not think about death in this physical way, and that instead we associate it with abstract concepts of either “concealment and gravity, earth and darkness [or] openness and airiness, ether and light” (6). In this sense, death is conceptualized in the same way Knausgaard appreciates his lived experience as an adult – contained, separate, and, in this, stagnant. But, by claiming that the physical reality of the state of death is “beyond life, but it is not beyond the world” (202), Knausgaard highlights the difference between the lived experience of structures of signification and the material state of those things being signified. This death, then, becomes representative of not only one state, but the entire contained world – the life that must be lived before death. This is a world of signification, containment, and so its opposite, “the world” itself, would represent the reality which is pre-signified, pre-contained: the affective world, inaccessible to us except in “sudden states of clear-sightedness” (198) when the affective materiality of the world overcomes the structures of conceptualization which keep it at bay.

The death which *A Death in the Family's* title refers to is Knausgaard’s father, who dies about halfway through the novel. Knausgaard struggles to process this: upset that he does not “feel more than I did” (219), he repeats the phrase “he was dead” (218) or simply the word “dead” (218) as if trying to convince himself of its reality, attempting to inaugurate it

into his superstructure of experience through attaching the fact to the system of language, installing it in systems of identification. He is still unable to fully grasp the reality of the situation, even when going to see his father's body laid out in the morgue, claiming that "even though I saw all this, I still didn't see it, for all the detail disappeared into something other and something greater" (373). Death, Knausgaard states, was "interwoven in a completely different way to the objective, concrete reality that surrounded me" (341), and in this sense exists as a direct opposite to the kind of affective understanding of the world, which necessitates cognition of these objective, concrete realities. This detached death is the death which artistic ontology necessitates, and so it is only when Knausgaard steps away from his books – burns "all the diaries and notes I had written" (314) – and in doing so renounces artistic ontology that he is able to accept the affective reality of his father's death. On a second viewing of the body, the "aura" (373) Knausgaard had last time perceived is gone, replaced instead with the stark truth that "there was no longer any difference between what had once been my father and the table he was lying on" (395). Here, the personhood which Knausgaard had up until this moment associated with his father disappears, and his body becomes irreducibly physical. As a result, Knausgaard can at last grasp the very material reality of death, now detached from its narrative of meaning.

It is important to note that this understanding of death does not implicate merely itself in its conclusions: the discoveries Knausgaard makes about death become representative of not only this single part of experience but of experience in general. As he realises his father is not separate from the physical world, so is Knausgaard's own existence implicated: what separates him from his father? Both are irreducibly physical, non-sovereign, and so his own subjectivity becomes fraught with the knowledge of his affective status. It is relevant that the novel ends on this revelation, on the final words: "death, which I have always regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor" (393). This revelatory moment does not receive a denouement, in which it is consolidated or integrated. This is because in this moment of affect, all systems

of signification break down; language cannot contain it, cannot comment on it. As Lerner has argued of Knausgaard's work, "*My Struggle* is a portrait of an artist who turns his back on art, a *Künstlerroman* that is also a suicide note" ("Cornflake"); a resignation; writing into oblivion.

Good and Bad Collectivity

Lerner, by contrast, refuses to reject the artistic form at the end of *10.04*, instead rethinking it to be capable of creating the sort of affective community that Knausgaard and McCarthy have expressed a desire for. Greenwald-Smith has highlighted the "affective qualities of literary form" ("Unknowable," 17) – claiming that "literature can put us in a temporary space of feeling *something* which we cannot yet describe in personal terms" (19). Understanding this, literature could provide a way of negotiating "individualistic conception[s] of the modern subject" (18), of examining the ways in which narratives of meaning are constructed around our material experience of affectedness. In a similar vein, Clarke suggests that we "might see this invitation to 'work through' the text not as an emotional investment opportunity... but as a call to engage in an *affective labour of reading* or a form of *meta-affective reading*" (268, sic). *10.04* believes in the power of literature to enact this kind of experience – consider again Ben's anecdote about Ronald Regan's 1986 speech regarding the Challenger disaster (in which he notes how Regan's speech, written by Peggy Noonan, quotes a poem by John Gillespie Magee, which was in fact "stole[n]" (114) from poet Cuthbert Hicks). Ben claims that he "find[s] this less scandalous than beautiful: a kind of palimpsestic plagiarism that moves through bodies and time, a collective song with no single origin, or whose origin has been erased" (114). This exemplifies what the novel believes is the power of literature, of art: neither Regan, Noonan, Magee or Hicks owns or controls the poetry, and as such their subjective experiences are erased from its significance, which instead stems from the very subjectless collectivity that their referencing enables. The poem has no single writer,

and instead comes about as a result of an affective community, removing any individual from the centre of a narrative or meaning, casting it out into the world instead.

The power of art to create, in Ben's words, "real possibility: prosody and grammar as the stuff out of which we build a social world, a way of organising meaning and time that belongs to nobody in particular but which courses through us all" (116) is of interest to this project due to the ways it implicates artistic ontology. Can art be, as this thesis has questioned, an enabler of negative psychic practices, the imaginary beacon around which our destructive narrative making desires coalesce, and, at the same time, a method of freeing oneself from those very practices? The answer to this question may lie in the final pages of *10.04*, when Ben, walking around the streets of New York, relates keeping his distance from a "discarded box spring near the curb, as it may contain bedbugs" (239), but then claims that "tonight even parasitic insects will appear to me as a bad form of collectivity that can stand as a figure of its possibility, circulating blood from host to host" (239-40). The 'bad collectivity' of the bedbugs, which involves taking something from each participant involved in the collective, draining them of what they need to survive, can be understood as representative of the kind of collectivity that artistic ontology enables; a collectivity in which the subject appropriates the meaning of the other to themselves, positioning themselves at the centre of the narrative at the expense of those whose meaning they have taken, who appear merely as nameless characters in the subject's epic journey. Both the negative psychic consequences that this thesis has addressed, as well as the political dubiousness that this self-centred ontology creates, are implicated in this kind of collectivity – as if a bed bug.

However, as Lerner points out, this "bad collectivity" stands as a "figure of its possibility" (239) – by definition implies a good collectivity in opposition. Good collectivity can be understood as a kind of affective community – the opposite of this parasitic artistic ontology. In this collectivity, meaning is not appropriated from the other to the subject, as from host to bedbug, but instead both categories are collapsed and the significance which could have been held by either becomes fluid between them, circulating among individuals

and implicating each of them in its community, not allowing any to become its sole owner or distributor. In *10:04*, where bad collectivity suggests that *I am the centre of a narrative*, that the “world rearrange[s] itself around me” (108), good collectivity suggests that *I am part of a narrative*, one in which I am implicated, but does not begin or end with me. So, as Ben, in Lerner’s words, “empt[ies] himself out, pass[es] on that microphone, tell[s] so-and so’s story” (“Time”), his subjecthood is stripped of its historical power and instead becomes a kind of conduit for an affective community – a “transpersonal subject capable of figuring collective life” (“Memory”).

Lerner, like Greenwald-Smith, explicitly ties this phenomenological project to a literary one through his discussion of Walt Whitman, who he claims, through his poetry, is “less a historical person than a kind of placeholder for a democratic personhood” (*Hatred*, 27), an “open space or textual commons where American readers of the future can forge and renew their sense of possibility and connectedness” (28). In this, Whitman’s poetry and his poetic persona extend beyond his own life, his own subjectivity, and, through this, a community is born, one in which his poetry is owned not by single sovereign subject, but instead fluidly inscribes itself upon the psyche of each member of the community, forming a culture of affect around those who partake in it. In *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner claims that “the Whitmanic program has never been realized, and I don’t think it can be” (28), but, in the last passage of *10.04*, Ben claims that “everything... I hear tonight will sound like Whitman, the similitudes of the past, and those of the future, corresponding” (239). Furthermore, the final words of the novel were in fact once Whitman’s: “I know it’s hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is” (240) but, though Lerner uses the virgule to explicitly reference their poetic status, it would be wrong to suggest that these words still belong to him. Integrating the quotation into the prose as such does not remove Whitman’s authorship, explicitly references it, but acknowledges that the words no longer ‘belong’ to him in any sense. They don’t belong to Ben either, though: he merely represents one point of the affective community, the palimpsestic plagiarism he earlier spoke of now enacted not only on the page but in life. Through this final line, the poetic project which Ben set out to

achieve at the start of the novel is completed: he has written himself into the “would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid,” rejecting artistic ontology and fully embracing his own place in the wider affective community.

This positive artistic community is not enacted in either *A Death in the Family* or *Remainder*. As previously stated, Knausgaard is unable to write after escaping the “world [that] is enclosed around itself” (201) – the insular ‘bad collectivity’ which prevents him from engaging actively in a society defined by community. As a result, Ruth Franklin has claimed that Knausgaard is “a writer professing failure at both art and life” (2018). Caught up in what Rose McLaren has called his “self-destructive” (2014) subjectivity, Knausgaard could write, *did* write, six long novels. However, with the knowledge of this system’s failings, and with an appraisal of the reality he at last has access to, Knausgaard cannot write any longer, does not, as Lerner does, see his art as enabling an affective community, but instead as pulling him away from it, “outside” (240) of life. He decides he must, as Sara Ahmed claims is characteristic of affectedness, “turn [his body] towards things” (31), towards the reality of other bodies, and away from himself and his literary pursuits. That Knausgaard wrote five more volumes of *My Struggle* after *A Death in the Family* could perhaps diminish the conclusion of this first novel, but, in Lerner’s words, within this failure lies “real possibility” (10.04, 116). Though Knausgaard may not have been able to turn his back on literature altogether, within this failure lies the foundations for future victories, future conclusions.

McCarthy’s narrator also gets caught up in their own self-destruction, and as a result cannot enact a positive collectivity. He has no desire to alleviate his false reality, doesn’t “want to understand” (196) other people or the condition of his life, and, to counter his anguishing status as one who must affect, instead of moving towards a positive affectedness, decides that he desires instead to be affectless, remove himself from the status of human all together. He likes being “passive” (196), and desires to merge with objects, to “drift into them” (201) in order to finally feel “at ease” (212). This desire is, of course, what eventually leads to his supposed death, and, as such, his misguided attempts to counter radical

individualism are presented in the novel as negative desires which not only do not solve the issue, but in fact must ultimately lead to the destruction of the one who partakes in them. In this, McCarthy's narrator never gets to experience what Knausgaard does: a "glimpse" of "another world from the one you were in a moment earlier" – a glimmer of the real outside of signification (198). He is instead, through his own misguided attempts to counter them, condemned to be caught up infinitely in the negative practices that artistic ontology necessitates.

Of course, that *Remainder's* narrator makes no positive conclusions does not imply that the novel itself wasn't written towards one, or that McCarthy does not believe one is possible. Christina Lupton has described McCarthy as "embracing the death of the novel" through *Remainder*, that he is concerned with illustrating the breakdown of artistic ontology, and, through this, rejecting the medium as a "souvenir of a now defunct subjectivity" (551). Still, whilst it is true that McCarthy is sceptical of traditional novelistic understandings, it seems to me that we should not be so quick to dismiss his faith in literature: as McCarthy himself has claimed, "literature is very much about misdirection; it's not about what's being said, it's about what not being said" (Live Theory). *Remainder's* dismissal of artistic ontology is a rejection of merely one kind of art and ontology, but, just as Ben claims in *10.04*, even bad collectivity can "stand as a figure for its possibility" (239). In showing the breakdown of the narrator's attempts to overcome his virtuality, in the same way as *A Death in the Family*, *Remainder's* narrative points towards the very possibility of succeeding: lays bare the stakes involved in conceptualizing literature and being in new ways, and, though the narrator himself doesn't achieve a positive end, suggests where his failure happens, success could; in the next book, in the next life.

Epilogue | The Next Life

While musing on his relationship to art in *A Death in the Family*, Knausgaard describes in detail his experience of reading literature:

In this heavy, intricate, detailed, precise language whose aim was to elevate thought ever higher, and where every full stop was set like a mountaineer's cleat, there was something else, this particular approach to the mood of reality, the shadow of these sentences, which could evoke in me a vague desire to use the language... on something real, on something living. Not on an argument, but on a lynx, for example, or on a blackbird, or a cement mixer. (295)

What Knausgaard articulates in this passage is of central concern to his *My Struggle* series, a concern which he expressed in more concrete terms as an interest in the "difference between ideology and reality, politics and literature," in an interview with James Wood ("Exchange"). The relationship which he highlights here, which concerns the connection between words which speak to life and the life that those words speak to, also relates to and is part of a wider desire: for art, and here specifically literature, to be able to affect the world outside of its pages. A desire for that which is contained in literature to pass through the artistic boundary and become also part of experienced reality, touching and changing it. Knausgaard is not

alone in this concern: Lerner has expressed an interest in “how fictions can have real effects” (“Flat Circle”) and, with regards to this, how we can come to understand “the possibility of the reorganisation of experience through fiction.” McCarthy possesses a more pessimistic view, acknowledging that although, to writers, the real appears “so necessary,” it is in fact “something that would involve the violent rupture of the form and the procedure [of literature] itself” (“Machines”). Though perhaps different in colour, what all of these insights indicate is an urgent need for what Felski sums up as “more cogent and compelling justification[s] for what we [artists] do” (3) – a way in which to validate the political dimension of literature and art in general in order to legitimize its continued creation and cement its relevance in the contemporary world.

When considering the texts discussed in this thesis, this question becomes more than abstract: all three are decidedly political. Both Ben and Knausgaard’s relationships to their own fragile white masculinity are central to their respective narratives and, though the narrator of *Remainder* may not care to or in fact be able to articulate it himself, the novel itself is overtly concerned with the state of contemporary society under a mode of capitalism which is increasingly abstracted from reality. However, Zadie Smith’s claim that contemporary writers “seem to be attempting to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to do” (xx) raises questions about the value of such overtly political writing. What utility does the political content of these texts have to a movement which must happen in what Smith calls *off the page*? How much, if at all, can a text actually touch the material reality of the conditions which it refers to and represents? Of course, under what this thesis has called artistic ontology, such a question is answered simply with one word: no. Whilst art is conceptualised into a transcendent narrative, it must necessarily be separate from the real, which is immanent and without structure or meaning. This is something which McCarthy is deeply cognisant of, stating that, since what the real consists of is “materiality: a sticky, messy, and above all base materiality that overflows all boundaries defining... everything’s... identity,” it “thus threatens ontology itself” (“Machines”), which relies on those boundaries to organize, create meaning. Art, then

– understood in these novels, and in this thesis, as an ontological device – cannot engage with the world any more than simply referring to its notion, and any attempt to do so is simply turning back on itself: either speaking to a simulated real, or falling into a “black hole”; what McCarthy calls “the point at which the writing’s entire project crumples and implodes.”

As I argued in the third chapter of this thesis, however, we can reconceptualise the form and purpose of literature in order to alleviate the problems of artistic ontology. To understand this desire, that texts affect the world, it is necessary to turn our gaze away from solely the writing of texts and towards the reading of them. When talking about the ways in which texts can affect the real world, the ways in which readers, who must exist in this world, interact with those texts cannot be ignored, and are in fact central to understanding how contemporary literature attempts to engage with questions of politics and ideology. In the paradigm of New Sincerity, Kelly suggests that “the author and the reader really do exist, which is to say they are not merely implied” (206). That “the text’s existence depends not only on a writer, but also on a reader at a particular place and time,” and that, in this sense, literature is fundamentally an “outward facing plea” (206) – written towards the end of real communication with an *other* who is not merely an idea.

What is expressed here is a belief in the reality of texts: that they exist as part of the world and form a conduit between the real personas of the writer and the reader. Kelly emphasises the utility of texts as a communicatory device, forming a connection between two separate points in the real world and allowing them to intersect. Understanding texts in this way denies them any intrinsic power: here, in Felski’s words “texts... are unable to act directly on the world... only via the intercession of those who read them” (18). The political capacity of texts, then, is in carrying information from one to another; the book itself mere paper – wood and ink which contains no intrinsic character. It is the relationships and ideas which are formed through texts which give them power, stripping the work itself of any active role in its own purpose. Whilst it is true that, as this thesis has shown, in order for art

to speak to life it cannot be granted any transcendence, this understanding of texts as essentially politically neutral, unable to hold anything within them and merely a transitory stop between real actors, is not wholly satisfactory. Texts are not empty jars waiting to be filled; they do have within them a character and a content, and furthermore the words which are used to form these texts have a meaning and a power, and so it would be untrue to suggest that texts have no actual potential for affecting the world. Instead, I posit that recontextualising the relationship that texts have to the world as objects helps us to retain their reality whilst also acknowledging their content.

This new conceptualisation is understood best through illustration by *10.04*. At the start of the novel, under the threat of a life-suspending storm – the power of which he states renders “meaning... everywhere up for grabs” (19) – Ben starts to interact with the world in a new way. When he picks up a jar of instant coffee from the shelf, instead of it being to him simply a jar of coffee, as it would have on any other day, he claims that he:

held it like the marvel that it was: the seed inside the purple fruits of coffee plants had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellin and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Pearl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. (19)

In this moment of revelation, Ben comes to perceive the history of the instant coffee as intrinsic to the product itself, sees it as more than the physical materials which constitute its mass and shape, and instead understands it as part of a network of intersecting relationships and work. This history, which had been obfuscated in order to commodify the coffee, is integrated back into the immanent truth of the object, and, because of this, Ben claims that “it was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it.” The coffee gains power from the network of meaning and history of which it is a part, and, in doing so, becomes what Ben calls a “commons” – a space in which “that organization of time

and space and fuel and labour” is visible and available to Ben as the one who picks it up and interacts with it.

This moment, in which the physicality of the coffee is integrated with its social relationships, represents a different way of interacting with objects, and this thesis posits that it should also be extended to interacting with texts. Lerner’s coffee complicates Felski’s statement that, “while books are not subjects, they are not just objects, not simply random things stranded among countless other things” (32) since, understanding objects in the way that he describes, it would be completely wrong to call them ‘random thing[s] stranded among countless other things’ – they have specific and particular histories and meanings, and constitute specific social experiences. They are therefore not random at all, but part of a network which accounts for their existence. Furthermore, as Felski goes on to describe what separates literature from these ‘things,’ we can see distinct similarity: “bristling with meaning, layered with resonance, they come before us as multi-layered symbols of beliefs and values, they stand for something larger than themselves” (32). Such language could have been applied to Ben’s coffee, which is indicative of a wider network of social relationships and history, and therefore objects must be understood to have the sort of textual properties which Felski describes, granting them the ideological power to indicate community. Respectively, texts must also be understood as having similar properties to objects: here this refers to their ability to partake in the reality of the world, to contain within them the same network of collective experience and interconnected history. The activity of reading, then, constitutes a social activity – interacting with not any sort of transcendent meaning or metaphysical artistic substance, but instead with a very real collection of systems which relate not only to the text’s history but also with everyone who has ever read it, everyone who ever will; with the tradition of writing, the history of the world which has led to this singular moment of reading.

This network of history and relations is, however, only one part of the power and content of texts, and it is at this point which they differ decidedly from Lerner’s coffee.

Though they are both equally social objects, what separates texts is their ability to speak to the virtual: to imagine possible worlds. In the first chapter of this thesis, I discussed the ways in which McCarthy, Lerner, and Knausgaard understand the perceived virtuality of life as negative, causing anguish and preventing subjects from experiencing their full being: here I reclaim it. Artistic ontology requires art to bear the weight of reality, but once this is overcome, the virtuality of art poses no threat to continued existence, since life can be fully real itself. As such, the virtual capacities of art can instead be reimagined as having emancipatory, political power. In his essay “The Actual World,” Lerner points out that “writing is particularly suited to figuring out what we can desire or fear but can’t (now) make” (“Actual”), that the virtuality of texts allow them to become a sort of testing ground for the future, within which we can imagine things so radically removed from our experience. Here, texts become a space in which the present and all of its possibilities meet, where versions of reality can be tasted, experimented upon, tried out in order to imagine their implementation in the real world. In this sense, literature becomes what McCarthy refers to as a “process of producing space” (“White Review”), a way of projecting outwards to an imagined future, wherein its possibilities are examined and tested. Michael Clune suggests just this: that the virtual exists as “fragments of the real world... brought inside and scrutinised for any hint, any insight. Like an airplane designer examining a bird’s wing, the artist studies life to overcome its limits” (20). Here, texts have a decidedly political purpose: spaces in which to imagine the future; to create it.

This political dimension can be understood in terms of McCarthy’s fully virtual *Remainder*, which is an entirely fictitious creation, investigating the possibilities of the real through imagining potential configurations. Or in terms of Knausgaard’s *A Death in the Family*, which virtually recreates Knausgaard’s past in order to reimagine the way in which they constitute his present existence. Lerner’s *10.04* situates itself between these two extremes, combining the real and the virtual to create a commons of futurity. It is worth mentioning, here, Katie Paterson’s Future Library project, which engages with the same

questions in a very direct way. The project concerns the planting of 1000 trees in Norway in preparation to be made into books in 100 years. These books will be written over the course of the century by writers selected for their interest in “imagination and time” and then locked away, unread by anyone but their creators until the project is complete in 2114. Knausgaard is one of the participants, along with others including Han Kang, Ocean Vuong, and Margaret Atwood. Knausgaard has said of the project that he “like[s] the slowness of the forest growing, that everything is connected” (“2114”). What the Future Library consists of is the sort of virtual commons which *10.04* was written towards; each writer’s individual work surrendered to the collective of the library, creating a literary community which belongs to no single person: as Knausgaard explains, its power lies “not in the tree, but in the forest. Not in the book, but in literature” (“Trees”). More than this, what this project concerns is a casting of literature forward into the space of a future as yet unwritten, one which we cannot even be sure will ever be – as Ocean Vuong states of future readers: “my main concern is, will they be there?” (“Die”). The Future Library visualises literature as involved in a future-making project: imagining a future in the present, casting their writing forward into its virtual possibility, and, as such, playing a role in shaping its iteration in reality.

Still, having set out this almost fantastical emancipatory account of literature, I want to end with some caveats. When, like Lerner, you have largely organised your life around literature, it is very easy to convince yourself of its power: how could it not contain something special, worth commenting on, when I see within it something which has dictated the course of my life? The account which Lerner specifically, but Knausgaard and McCarthy too in their own ways provide is especially convincing when you want to believe it, so desperately need to cement a relevance for literature in the face of a present which may signal its failure. I do not mean to deny their account, to undo the work which this thesis has undergone, since it is convincingly hopeful. Still, it is worth asking: can these virtual textual futures ever become real? Is it enough to merely imagine a future? What projects like the Future Library point towards is a future fulfilment, but what is to become of the present? A political project which happens off the page concerns material reality, not merely its

projection and, as such, to rest this project after ensuring literature a future seems misguided: there is more here at stake. In the face of this, do we as writers and readers not have a duty to work towards a realisation of these futures? Literature allows us to rethink the world, imagine the future as fundamentally different, but it cannot enact these futures, this work off the page; that, as Lerner, Knausgaard, and McCarthy argue, is down to us. The work which literature undertakes is in the abstract recontextualization of the present, the virtual playing out of the subsequent possibilities of the future, but it cannot stretch further. It is not enough to want literature to change the world, we cannot wait around for words and pages to take action; we must take it ourselves.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.

Adrian, Kim. "Dear Knausgaard." *Public Books*, August 19, 2020.
<https://www.publicbooks.org/dear-knausgaard/> Accessed 10/11/20.

Armstrong, John. *Conditions of Love: The Philosophy of Intimacy*. Penguin Books, 2003.

Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. Taylor and Francis Group, 2004.

Atwood, Margaret. "Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing." Cambridge UP: 2002.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1978.

Baskin, Jason. "Death's Vanguard: A review of Tom McCarthy, Simon Critchley, et al., *The Mattering of Matter: Documents from the Archive of the International Necronautical Society*." *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 24, no. 2: 2014. *Project Music*, doi: 10.1353/pmc.2014.0008.

Bauer, Bruce. "Life Itself." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 67, no. 4: 2014. Pp 587-597.

Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding*. Ed. David R. Wilkins. Trinity College Dublin. 2002.

Bilmes, Leonid. "'an actual present alive with multiple futures': narrative, memory and time in Ben Lerner's *10.04*." *Textual Practise*, vol. 35, iss. 7: 2018. Pp 1021-1102.

Brennan, Theresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Columbia UP, 2004.

Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no.1: 2001. Pp 1-22.

Byatt, Jim. "Being Dead? Trauma and the Liminal Narrative in J. G. Ballard's *Crash* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3: 2012. Pp 245-59.

Clarke, Ralph. "Metaffective Fiction: Structuring Feeling in Post-postmodern American Literature." *Textual Practise*, vol. 33, no. 2: 2019. Pp 263-279.

Clune, Michael. "Make it Vanish" in *Postwar/Postmodern and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden. University of Iowa Press: 2016. Pp 241-250.

Clune, Michael. *Writing Against Time*. Stanford UP, 2013.

Colombino, Lauren. Review of "Pieter Vermeulen, Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form." *Altre Modernità*, vol. 18: 2017. Pp 172-175.

Deresiewicz, William. "Why has 'My Struggle' Been Anointed a Literary Masterpiece?" *The Nation*. May 13, 2014. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/why-has-my-struggle-been-anointed-literary-masterpiece/> Accessed on 27/04/2020.

Doyle, John. "The changing face of post-postmodernism: irony, sincerity, and populism." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 59, iss. 3: 2018. Pp 259-270.

Drag, Wojciech. "Compulsion to Re-enact: Trauma and Nostalgia in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2: 2015. Pp 377-392.

Elias, Amy J. "Past/Future." *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*. Eds. Joel Burgess, Amy J. Elias. NYU Press: 2016. Pp 35-50.

Erens, Pamela. "Knausgaard's Triumph." *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 91, no. 4: 2015. <https://www.vqronline.org/fiction-criticism/2015/10/knausgaards-triumph> Accessed on 07/02/2020.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Oxford, 2008.

Fisk, Stephen. "My Struggle." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 32, no. 2: 2012. Pp 82-83.

Franklin, Seb. "Repetition: Reticulum: *Remainder*." *Novel*, vol. 50, no.2: 2017. Pp 157-175.

Franklin, Ruth. "How Writing 'My Struggle' Undid Knausgaard." *The Atlantic*, 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/11/knausgaard-devours-himself/570847/> Accessed 30/03/2020.

Future Library. "Information." <https://www.futurelibrary.no/#/information> Accessed 8/12/20.

Gaskill, Nicholas. "The Close and the Concrete: Aesthetic Formalism in Context." *New Literary History*, vol. 57, iss. 4: 2016. Pp 505-524.

Glancy, Josh. "Karl Ove Knausgaard: a traitor to his family." *The Australian*, November 6, 2015. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/world/the-times/karl-ove-knausgaard-a-traitor-to-his-family/news-story/8588890843c7d69a30101aadc4e4d4a1> Accessed on 09/07/2020.

Greenwald-Smith, Rachael. "Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics." *Postwar/Postmodern and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden. University of Iowa Press: 2016. Pp 181-196.

Greenwald-Smith, Rachel. "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 57, iss. 3/4: 2011. Pp 423-VI.

Greenwald-Smith, Rachel. Interview. "Why Study Unknowable Intensities? Interview with Rachel Greenwald-Smith" by Nicholas Manning. *Revue française d'études américaines*, vol. 151, iss. 2: 2017. Pp 140-150.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Staumbaugh. State University of New York Press, 1996.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. W. B. Barton, Jr. and Vera Deutsch. Henry Regnery Company Publishing, 1967. Pp 163-184.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*. Ed Clive Cazeaux. Routledge: 2000. Pp, 79-122.

Jackson, Edward, and Nicholson-Roberts, Joel. "White Guys: Questioning Infinite Jest's New Sincerity." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, vol. 5, no. 1: 2017. Pp 1-28.

Kalaga, Wojciech. "The Trouble with the Virtual." *Symploke*, vol. 11, no. 1: 2003. Pp 96-103.

Katz, Daniel. "I did not walk here all the way from prose': Ben Lerner's Virtual Poetics." *Textual Practice*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2017: pp 315:337.

Kelly, Adam. "The New Sincerity." *Postwar/Postmodern and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden. University of Iowa Press: 2016. Pp 197-208.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, vol. 5, iss. 2: 2017. Pp 1-32.

Kingston-Reese, Alexandra. "Suspension." *Contemporary Novelists and the Aesthetics of Twenty-First Century American Life*. University of Iowa Press: 2019. Pp 136-166.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia UP, 1982.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. *A Death in the Family*. Trans. Don Bartlett. Vintage, 2013.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. Interview. "Writing 'My Struggle': An Exchange" by James Wood. *The Paris Review*. Issue 211: 2014.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/miscellaneous/6345/writing-my-struggle-an-exchange-james-wood-karl-ove-knausgaard> Accessed on 27/04/2020.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. Interview. "Karl Ove Knausgaard Looks Back on 'My Struggle'" by Joshua Rothman. *The New Yorker*. November 11, 2018.

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/karl-ove-knausgaard-the-duty-of-literature-is-to-fight-fiction#> Accessed on 19/11/2019.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. Interview. "Completely Without Dignity: An Interview with Karl Ove Knausgaard" by Jesse Baron. *The Paris Review*. December 26, 2013.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/12/26/completely-without-dignity-an-interview-with-karl-ove-knausgaard/> Accessed on 16/05/20.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. "Out to where storytelling does not reach." *Eurozine*. April 3, 2013.

<https://www.eurozine.com/out-to-where-storytelling-does-not-reach/#> Accessed on 04/05/20.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. Interview. "Karl Ove Knausgaard: Contemporary fiction is overrated" by Andrew Anthony. *The Guardian*, February 11, 2018.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/11/karl-ove-knausgaard-interview-spring-my-struggle> Accessed 26/05/20.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. Interview. "Karl Ove Knausgaard's latest work to remain unseen until 2114" by Alison Flood. *The Guardian*, October 20, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/20/karl-ove-knausgaard-latest-work-to-remain-unseen-until-2114-future-library> Accessed 08/12/20.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. "Trees, Books, Time." Trans. Martin Aiken. *Future Library Booklet 2020*, 2020. <https://www.futurelibrary.no/#/news-and-media> Accessed on 8/12/20.

Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Harvard UP, 2016.

Kunzru, Hari. "Impossible Mirrors." *The New York Times*, September 5, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/books/review/1004-by-ben-lerner.html> Accessed on 05/06/2020.

Landy, Joshua. "Conditional Goods and Self-fulfilling Prophecies: How Literature (as a Whole) Could Matter Again." *SubStance*, vol. 42, iss. 2: 2013. Pp 47-60.

Lerner, Ben. *10.04*. Granta Publications, 2014.

Lerner, Ben. "The Actual World." *Frieze*, June 16, 2013. <https://frieze.com/article/actual-world> Accessed on 30/03/2020.

Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry*. Fitzcarraldo, 2016.

Lerner, Ben. Interview. "Ben Lerner: 'People say, "Oh, here's another Brooklyn novel by a guy with glasses"' by Emily Watt. *The Guardian*. January 3, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/ben-lerner-1004-novel-books-interview>

Accessed on 30/03/2020.

Lerner, Ben. Interview. "Ben Lerner on 10:04, His Second Hall-of-Mirrors Semi-Memoir" by Boris Kachka. *New York Magazine*. August 25, 2014.

<https://www.vulture.com/2014/08/ben-lerner-interview-1004.html> Accessed on

30/03/2020.

Lerner, Ben. Interview. "an interview with BEN LERNER" by Gayle Rogers. *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 54, no.2: 2013. Pp 219-38.

Lerner, Ben. Interview. "Time is a Flat Circle: Ben Lerner Interviewed" by Karl Smith. *The Quietus*, February 8, 2015. <https://thequietus.com/articles/17190-ben-lerner-interview-1004-leaving-atocha-station-poetry-time-knausgaard> Accessed on 09/07/2020.

Lerner, Ben. Interview. "I have no memory of intending to write a novel: Ted Hodgkinson interviews Ben Lerner" by Tod Hodgkinson. *Granta*, July 9, 2012.

<https://granta.com/interview-ben-lerner/> Accessed on 09/07/2020.

Lerner, Ben. "Each Cornflake." *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, iss. 10: 2014.

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>. Accessed

10/08/2020.

Levinas, Emmanuel. "Reality and its Shadow." *The Continental Aesthetic Reader*. Ed Clive Cazeaux. Routledge: 2000. Pp 139-151.

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton UP, 2015.

Lupton, Christina. "The Novel as the Future Anterior of the Book: Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and Ali Smith's *The Accidental*." *Novel*, vol. 49, iss. 3: 2016. Pp 504-518.

Martin, Theodore. "The Currency of the Contemporary." *Postwar/Postmodern and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden. University of Iowa Press: 2016. Pp 227-241.

McCarthy, Tom. *Remainder*. Alma Books LTD, 2007.

McCarthy, Tom. Interview. "Tom McCarthy goes to TED" by Boris Kachka. *Vulture*, February 12, 2015. <https://www.vulture.com/2015/02/tom-mccarthy-goes-to-ted.html> Accessed on 17/06/2020.

McCarthy, Tom. Interview. "Live Theory: An Interview with Tom McCarthy" by Craig Hubert. *Public Books*. February 8, 2017. <https://www.publicbooks.org/live-theory-an-interview-with-tom-mccarthy/> Accessed on 17/06/2020.

McCarthy, Tom. Interview. "Interview with Tom McCarthy" by Fred Fernandez Armesto. *The White Review*, February 2011. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-tom-mccarthy-2/> Accessed on 17/06/2020.

McCarthy, Tom. Interview. "Tom McCarthy Writing the Existential Crisis" by 52 Insights. *52-Insights*, 21 July, 2016. <https://www.52-insights.com/tom-mccarthy-writing-the-existential-crisis-author/> Accessed 06/07/2020.

McCarthy, Tom. Interview. "Tom McCarthy by Frederic Tuten" by Frederic Tuten. *Bomb Magazine*, 18 March, 2015. <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tom-mccarthy/> Accessed 05/12/2020.

McCarthy, Tom. "Writing Machines." *The London Review of Books*, vol. 36, iss. 24. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n24/tom-mccarthy/writing-machines> Accessed 21/09/2020.

McLaren, Rose. "Art Does Not Know A Beyond: On Karl Ove Knausgaard." *The White Review*, 2014. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/art-does-not-know-a-beyond-on-karl-ove-knausgaard/> Accessed 14/07/20.

Nieland, Justus. "Dirty Media: Tom McCarthy and the Afterlife of Modernism." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 58, iss. 3: 2012. Pp 569-599.

Millar, J. Hillis. "Literature Matters Today." *SubStance*, vol. 42, iss. 2: 2013. Pp 12-32.

O'Dell, Jaqueline. "One More Time with Feeling: Repetition, Contingency, and Sincerity in Ben Lerner's *10.04*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 60, iss. 4: 2019. Pp 446-461.

Rancière, Jacques. "The Politics of Literature" *SubStance*, vol. 33, no. 1, iss. 103: 2004. Pp 10-24.

Rice, Jenny Edbauer. "The New "New": Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 94, no. 2: 2008. Pp 200-212.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Life in Quest of Narrative." *On Paul Ricoeur*, Ed. David Wood. Routledge, 2002. Pp 22-33.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Existence and Hermeneutics." *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Eds. Charles E. Reagan, David Stewart. Beacon Press, 1978. Pp 97-108.

Rolin, Oliver, "The Subtle Genius of the Novel" *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Vol. 28, iss. 2: 2008. Pp 40-51.

Samba, Emelda Ngfur. "Dramatic Art at the Frontier of Ontology: Reconsidering Aesthetics." *Matatu*, issue 44: 2013. Pp 243-255.

Seltzer, Martin. *The Official World*. Duke UP: 2016.

Semeiks, Jonna G. "My Struggle: Book One." *Confrontation*, vol. 112: 2012. Pp 223-236.

Serpell, Namwali. "The Banality of Empathy." *The New York Review of Books*, March 2, 2019. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/03/02/the-banality-of-empathy/> Accessed 14/11/2020.

Smith, Zadie. Introduction to *The Burned Children of America*. Eds. Marco Cassini and Martina Testa. Hamish Hamilton, 2003. Pp xi-xxii.

Vermeulen, Pieter. "How Should a Person Be (Transpersonal)? Ben Lerner, Roberto Esposito, and the Biopolitics of the Future." *Political Theory*, vol. 45, no. 5: 2017. pp 659-681.

Vermeulen, Pieter. "The Critique of Trauma and the Afterlife of the Novel in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 58, iss. 3: 2012. Pp 549-568.

Vuong, Ocean. Interview. "You'll have to die to get these texts': Ocean Vuong's next manuscript to be unveiled in 2114" by Sian Cain. *The Guardian*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/19/ocean-vuong-2114-book-future-library-norway> Accessed on 18/03/2020.

Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Plurum: Television and US Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, iss. 2: 1993. Pp. 151-194.

Wood, James. "Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*" *The New Yorker*. August 6, 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall> Accessed on 18/03/2020.