History, Critique, Utopia

Experimental Writing in the Context of Contemporary Anglophone Literature

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Die Dekanin
Prof. Dr. Barbara Schellewald

Actually, art is now scarcely possible unless it does experiment.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

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ABBREVIATIONS

AT	Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästhetische Theorie*. 1970. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Vol. 7. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003. Print.
ATHK	Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. 1970. Ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum, 2004. Print.
DA	Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*. 1947. Frankfurt: Fischer, 2004. Print.
EF	Adorno, Theodor W. "Der Essay als Form." *Noten zur Literatur*. 1974. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Vol. 11. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004. Print.
VA	Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästhetik (1958/59)*. *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Ed. Eberhard Ortland. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009. Print.
LND	Adorno, Theodor W. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/66*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity, 2008. Print.
ND	Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialektik*. 1966. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Vol. 6. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003. Print.
NDA	Adorno, Theodor W. *Negative Dialectics*. 1966. Trans. E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1997. Print.
PD	Adorno, Theodor W. et al. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. 1969. Trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby. London: Heinemann, 1976. Print.

TL	Adorno, Theodor W. “Titel.” *Noten zur Literatur*. 1974. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Vol. 11. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004. Print.

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INTRODUCTION
EXPERIMENTAL WRITING IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE LITERATURE

In 2002, *The New Yorker* published a controversial essay by Jonathan Franzen that started a lively and widespread debate about the current purposes of literary fiction. The essay, titled "Mr. Difficult," presents an extensively elaborated rejection of a certain tradition of contemporary literature—what Franzen considers to be a particular lineage of postmodern North American fiction, the beginnings of which he identifies with the work of William Thomas Gaddis, Jr., and whose novels serve Franzen as paradigmatic cases to discuss the deficiencies apparent in that tradition.

As the title of the essay suggests, the issues Franzen raises circulate around the notion of 'difficulty' in contemporary North American writing, and Franzen begins his discussion with a personal anecdote about his own experience of literary difficulty in connection with a letter he received upon the publication of *The Corrections*. In this letter, an enraged reader accused Franzen of being a difficult writer for using words like "diurnality" and "antipodes," and "phrases like 'electro-pointillist Santa Claus faces'" (238), in his best-selling novel. Franzen then proceeds by considering the question what precisely it is that makes the notion of difficulty such a persistent point of contention in the popular discourse about literature. He believes that we might assess this issue through what he perceives to be the two basic models of literature. The first model he terms the "Status model," according to which "the best novels are great works of art, the people who manage to write them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it's because the average reader is a philistine" (240). The second model Franzen terms the "Contract model," according to which "a novel represents a compact between writer and reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience" (240).[1]

Importantly, the two contrasting models of reading do not strictly apply to particular formal qualities of literary works. As Franzen states, these models are about "how fiction relates to its audience" (240). One might be tempted to think of a work like James Joyce's *Finnegan's*

[1] Steven Moore in his discussion of Franzen's essay notes that 'status' and 'contract' are terms that have "their origin in Marxist theory." Coined by the English lawyer and legal historian Henry James Sumner Maine, the terms denote the following: "*Status* means having a legitimate, inherited place in society, [a system] which lasted up until the bourgeois era; *Contract* sacrifices this security for mobility: the son of a blacksmith doesn't inherit his father's smithy but instead contracts his labor to one factory or another" (8; emphasis in original).

Wake as a typical Status novel. But, as Franzen notes, precisely this novel might correspond to the Contract model, granted that it manages to yield an experience of pleasure in the reader, forge a connection between reader and work and, by extension, one between reader and writer. One might readily (and reasonably) contend here that this rather makes void Franzen's distinction between Status and Contract literature, as any kind of work might then be conceived as belonging to the latter category, given the individual tastes of particular groups of readers. Yet for Franzen, this is not the case, and it is here where the notion of difficulty becomes important: Franzen argues that there is a certain kind of literary difficulty that necessarily establishes a work as a Status work and disables any conception of it according to the Contract model—with what he believes to be detrimental consequences for the current state of literature.

Franzen elaborates this claim through a consideration of William Gaddis's two famous novels *The Recognitions* and *J R*. These two notoriously difficult works grant Franzen the opportunity to work out an inner distinction of the notion of difficulty into two kinds: one kind of difficulty he attributes to *The Recognitions*, and accepts; the other kind he attributes to *J R*, and rejects. Crucially, the latter novel then comes to work as a template for the postmodern tradition of North American writing Franzen dismisses in his essay. Yet what is the crucial distinction between *The Recognitions* and *J R* in terms of their difficulty? Franzen recounts his experience of reading *The Recognitions*:

> There were quotations in Latin, Spanish, Hungarian, and six other languages to be rappelled across. Blizzards of obscure references swirled around sheer cliffs of erudition, precipitous discourses on alchemy and Flemish painting, Mithraism and early-Christian theology. The prose came in page-long paragraphs in which oxygen was at a premium, and the emotional temperature started cold and got colder. (243)

This seems to read like a description of a Status novel, in which difficulty figures as a distinction and where technical "excellence" reflects an uncompromising "artistic vision" (241). However, Franzen holds that while displaying the typical qualities of the Status work, *The Recognitions* at its core still works as Contract literature: "At the novel's hidden pinnacle, behind its clouds of subsidiary symbolism, beyond its blind canyons of Beat antinarrative, is a story about the loss of personal integrity and the difficult work of regaining it" (244). This legitimizes the difficulty of *The Recognitions*, because its formal difficulty essentially reflects an existential difficulty, and as such enables the reader to emotionally identify with the plights that the novel explores, connect to it, and be entertained by it.

This looks different in the case of *J R*. Not only does the book further the formal difficulties apparent in *The Recognitions*, it also lacks the existentialist foundation of the formal difficulties that salvage Gaddis's first novel.[2] In fact, Franzen believes that *J R* does not merely display a lack of this crucial humanist core, but actually works against it, and thereby effectively and detrimentally breaches literature's contract with the reader. Crucially, it is this gesture that renders the novel a paradigm for a whole tradition of postmodern North American fiction, which Franzen identifies with writers like Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, William H. Gass, William Burroughs, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Barry Hannah, John Hawkes, Joseph McElroy, and Stanley Elkin (246). Franzen holds that all of these writers essentially share a deep "postmodern suspicion of realism" (246), which leads them in their work to a formal subversion of the representational qualities of the novel and consequently to the abolishment of the "soul-to-soul contract between reader and writer" (258). Franzen grants that there are of course reasons for such gestures in the works of postmodern writers: "Indeed, one defense […] is that conventional fiction […] was simply inadequate to the social and technological crises that twentieth-century writers saw developing all around them" (258). Continuing to write in a conventional way would thus betray the task of fiction to come to terms with its own time and its apparent crises. Moreover, conventional modes of literature are not merely incapable of reflecting these crises, they also work at the hands of the system that is responsible for them, by producing a fictional veneer that covers up its harmful workings. Hence postmodern writers, in their attempt to "resist absorption or co-optation by an all-absorbing, all co-opting System" (258), must produce works that go against the very grain of conventional storytelling and thus against the Contract model of literature.

Franzen perceives several problems in this ideology-critical gesture of postmodern fiction, the most prominent one he terms the "Fallacy of the Stupid Reader," after which "the purpose of this art is to 'upset' or 'compel' or 'challenge' or 'subvert' or 'scar' the unsuspecting reader" (260). To him, this displays the condescending view Status writers take of the reading public, which they see as oblivious creatures living in a sort of ignorant bliss in a system that

[2] An irritated Franzen describes the novel in the following way:

> *J R* is a 726-page novel consisting almost entirely of overheard voices, with nary a quotation mark, a ‚he said,' or a ‚she said,' no conventional *narration* of any kind, no ‚later that same evening,' no ‚meanwhile in New York,' not a single chapter break, not even a section break, but thousands of dashes and ellipses, another cast of dozens, and a laughably complicated plot based on Wagner's *Ring* and centered on a multimillion-dollar business empire owned and operated by an eleven-year old Long Island schoolboy named J R Vansant. (254-55)

actually represses them, which is why they have to be awakened by enlightened postmodernists. Yet this is not his main point of critique: "[T]o sign with the postmodern program, to embrace the notion of formal experimentation as a heroic act of resistance, you have to believe that the emergency that Gaddis and his fellow pioneers were responding to is still an emergency five decades later" (259). In Franzen's view, precisely this is no longer the case. Not in the sense, though, that there is no longer any social crisis to be registered, but rather that literature is no longer the adequate form by which to engage with it. Apropos Gaddis's *J R*, Franzen notes: "J R [the novel's protagonist] is an avatar of Bart Simpson, but Bart is incomparably better suited to our cultural environment than J R is. The genre for an effective and entertaining Systems satire is the half-hour weekly television cartoon, not the literary novel" (262-63). In straightforward terms, Franzen believes that postmodern literature has become obsolete because the project it pursues is today better realized in a different medium and format.

Crucially, postmodern literature is not merely an obsolete form of writing, but also one that subverts the very kind of work that Franzen believes to be the most relevant literature today: Contract literature. Contract literature, as we have seen, forges a deep connection between aesthetic (formal) difficulty and the existential difficulty of life—a connection that the postmodern Status work severs. Yet it is this connection which literature, according to Franzen's view, is essentially about: "A story […] where the difficulty is the difficulty of life itself, is what the novel is for" (269). Moreover, in setting up this connection, the Contract work also forges a deep connection between reader, work, and writer, thereby upholding a literary community that Franzen believes to be under threat in today's culture.[3] In sum, then, the pursuits of postmodern literature for Franzen essentially display an elitist form of aesthetic ideology critique—a critique that is doubly futile, as it is today better realized in other cultural phenomena, and as it subverts the very humanist notion of literature which represents the true (if not only remaining) purpose of literature in contemporary culture.

One can appreciate Franzen's effort to engage with pertinent issues that concern literature today: the relation between literature and new media, the relation between literature and society, and, given these relations, the current purpose of writing fiction. However, his notion of postmodern literature—a term which subsumes a whole list of quite different authors,

[3] In this respect, Franzen notes that "[e]very writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness" (240). That this community is threatened in today's culture is a claim that he argues in more detail in "Why Bother?," an earlier essay that can be seen as a pre-text for the argument in "Mr. Difficult."

as we have seen—seems rather narrow and polemical. As such, it was only a matter of time until a critical response to "Mr. Difficult" appeared. It first arrived in the form of an essay by the author and critic Ben Marcus, titled "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It," and published in *Harper's* magazine in 2005. Marcus's response to Franzen's essay is particularly interesting because he does not defend experimental fiction—what Franzen calls postmodern literature—in the terms that Franzen proposes: for Marcus, such a literature is not merely about an aesthetic form of ideology critique, but rather about something else entirely—something which, importantly, does not involve any claims to literary Status.

First of all, however, Marcus dismisses Franzen's own defense of Contract literature. The obvious but necessary point that Marcus makes is that Contract literature is the last kind of literature that would need a defense, as it essentially suggests a form of writing that is (and has been for a long time) very popular in contemporary culture, that is, a form of writing along the lines of "[John] Updike's narrative realism" (51). This writing does not need a plea, especially not from a "major, prize-winning novelist" like Franzen (51). To Marcus, such a gesture is especially problematic as it is articulated in the form of an "attack [on] a diminishing and ever more powerless avant-garde and its readership" (51). As such, Franzen's argument rather turns into a inversive rhetoric that aims at securing and solidifying his own status as a popular writer in contemporary culture. Of course, Franzen genuinely seems to have other reasons for defending this kind of literature. To him, literature as such is threatened in contemporary culture: technological changes and the reign of new media threaten the practice of literature and a particular form of a literary cultural community (Franzen 69-70). This is why he defends so-called Contract literature, as this is the kind of literature that in his opinion might best salvage the realm ousted by today's prevalent modes of cultural consumption. With Marcus, however, one might suggest a somewhat different understanding of this defense: Franzen does not primarily defend contract literature for existential reasons—because it eminently enables an experience endangered in contemporary culture; but rather for commercial ones—because it secures a profit for the literary market, as it suggests an accessible form of literature that essentially adheres to established conventions of writing. This is also the reason why Franzen in Marcus's view condemns less conventional forms of fiction, because such forms do not correspond to the assumed demands of the market: "There are only one or two chances each year to capture this borderline reader, after all, and it's too dangerous to recommend a book that might take some effort and risk puzzling the poor old soul who just wants to read a good old-

fashioned novel" (Marcus 40). Franzen's seemingly moral pursuits therefore reveal themselves as market-driven thinking.

One might hesitate here to make Franzen a mere advocate of conventional, readily accessible, and easily marketable fiction. After all, he endorses works like Gaddis's *The Recognitions* or Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*—two demanding novels that certainly do not correspond to any of these attributes. Franzen, then, does not actually promote, in a strong sense, one particular form or genre of writing.[4] The question he asks is rather whether a particular form of writing pertains to a certain deep structure of literature that concerns the connection between reader and writer and the kind of literary community it sets up. This opens up a whole spectrum of possible literary forms.[5] In this sense, what Marcus calls narrative realism is not the sole exponent of Franzen's humanist notion of literature, but rather the prime and most popular example inside that spectrum. Yet Franzen does of course reject certain forms of literature, namely those he perceives to be working against his deep structure of literature—a feat that he attributes to postmodern fiction. This, I think, reveals the true problems of Franzen's logic: it works as a simple binary understanding of all possible forms of literature as either being for or against this deep structure. But what if the kind of fiction Franzen condemns is not about the subversion of any literary contract, but actually about something else entirely? This is what Marcus suggests, which why his essay is a particularly interesting one to consider.

Marcus's notion of experimental writing can be approached best through his reflections on a particular region of the brain's cortex at the beginning of his essay:

> Think of Wernicke's area as the reader's muscle, without which all written language is an impossible tangle of codes, a scribbled bit of abstract art that can't be deciphered. Here is where

[4] In his own view and in terms of his own fiction, Franzen might rather be seen as an advocate of a kind of literature that manages to straddle the line between the accessible and the demanding. As he puts it in a recent interview with Christopher Connery:

> My ambition is to explore the outer limits of that subgroup [that is, the large group of readers with a casual interest in literature] without losing the core [that is, the small group of readers with a strong interest in literature]. The core tends to have a taste for the harder stuff. These are the people I feel the deepest kinship with, but I have an optimistic Midwestern side that doesn't want to exclude anyone who might have even a passing interest in trying to read a good book. For me, part of the stress of being a writer is living in fear of losing one side or the other of that dichotomy. Of becoming, on the one hand, too obvious or commercial for the core group, or, on the other hand, too difficult or dark for the openminded but essentially untrained fiction reader. To invent things that are both true and fun is my ambition. ("Interview" 34)

[5] In this respect, see Franzen's favorable introduction to Donald Antrim's recently republished postmodern classic *The Hundred Brothers*.

> what we read is turned into meaning, intangible strings of language animated into legible shapes. (39)

More formally, Wernicke's area, which takes its name from the German neurologist Carl Wernicke who first described it in 1874, is the part of the human brain that is "involved in the comprehension of both spoken and written language" (Colman). In Marcus's appropriation of the term, the practice of reading as such is an exercise for maintaining the functioning of our linguistic capabilities, and the reading of literary writing consequently an "enhancement" (Marcus 39) of these capabilities, that is, if literary writing presents us with linguistic arrangements that we are not used to or have even never seen before. And this, of course, is precisely what happens when we experience experimental fiction. Hence a work like Gaddis's *J R* must not be perceived as a formally strained and strenuous subversion of literary conventions for the sake of criticizing the dubiousness of the ideologies that underlie and govern them. Rather, the unconventional pursuits of such a novel can be seen as an aesthetic attempt to discover new linguistic compositions and strengthen our abilities of engaging with words—of interpreting, understanding, and expressing them. Experimental fiction, then, is not an exemplary case of Status writing that excludes readers by denying them the pleasures of conventions, but an exemplary case of offering the reader a new and progressive literary experience.

Importantly, as such, experimental fiction is more than just an intricate language game—a cipher of codes or complex exercise in cognition that promotes our linguistic capabilities. For Marcus believes that it has as much interest in reality as Franzen's Contract writing, "in the way it feels to be alive, and the way language can be shaped into contours that surround and illuminate that feeling" (41).[6] In this sense, experimental fiction for Marcus is "lyrical" fiction—a fiction (Marcus quotes from the *Oxford English Dictionary* here) that is "an artist's expression of emotion in an imaginative and beautiful way" (46). The potentially oblique forms of experimental fiction, then, rather than being anti-realist and thus against the Contract mode of literature, in fact remain closely connected to reality, as a concrete manifestation of a subject's artistic response to it. As Marcus puts it: "Although [the] language [of experimental fiction] might first seem alien, immersion in its ways can show us unprecedented worlds of feeling and thought" (39), as the "possibilities of language" are

[6] This point echoes Alain Robbe-Grillet's claims about the *nouveau roman* and its interest in reality in his book *For a New Novel*. Robbe-Grillet's aesthetics will be considered in some more detail in chapter 3 of this thesis.

"employed to show a reader what it's like to be alive, to be a thinking, feeling person in a very complex world" (51). Experimental writing, then, not only contributes to the furthering of our linguistic capabilities, but also to the very purpose of literature that Franzen promotes in his essay: the aesthetic disclosure of existential issues.

While this seems to be an almost conciliatory gesture on Marcus's part, some critics reviewing the debate between Franzen and Marcus (a one-sided one at that, as Franzen did not respond in turn to Marcus's essay) did not see it as such, but rather as quite the opposite. Notably, the author and critic Jess Row holds this view. In a text titled "Marcus vs. Franzen," Row claims that the debate brought into life by Franzen and Marcus "returns us to the pure spirit of modernism and the rhetoric of cultural crisis, of vanguards and reactionaries" that works to "repolarize American literary culture" ("Marcus vs. Franzen"). Row thinks that this is especially problematic because the distinctions suggested in the debate—between realism and experimental writing, conventional and progressive forms of fiction—do no longer apply in our contemporary culture climate. He holds that "the modernist credo—To Make It New—is [today] part of every contemporary novelist's DNA, as is a certain degree of ambivalence about the gravitational pull of narrative toward certain well-established forms" ("Marcus vs. Franzen"). Conventionalism and experimentalism are no longer mutually exclusive tendencies, but are fused in current literary works. All contemporary writers have absorbed the lessons of modernism, hence even a writer essentially working in the realist tradition will produce a work that displays both an awareness of the contingencies of its own conventions as well as stylistic and compositional aspects that go beyond them. Row hence believes that reintroducing an oppositional understanding of the relation between convention and experiment will not only establish obsolete boundaries between artistic forms, but also in a more substantial way fail to adequately conceptualize the character of contemporary literature.

Robert L. McLaughlin's arrives at a similar point in his essay "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." It is useful to consider this text here, as McLaughlin delivers an extensive and intricate explanation for the fact that contemporary forms of writing manage to integrate formerly opposed tendencies in literature. In McLaughlin's view, the reasons for this current state of fiction are to be found in the relation of contemporary literature to the phase that immediately preceded it—postmodernism—and the major phases that have informed postmodern literary discourse—modernism and realism.

In McLaughlin's view, literary postmodernism presents a radicalization of the program of modernism. Modernist artists were centrally concerned with questions of perception, that is,

how reality is or might be perceived. Consequently, they tried to find new ways to render perception in art (56). For McLaughlin, this itself presented a literary-historical transition, as modernism moved away from the realist tradition, its apparent belief in a given objective reality, and the assumption that it can be represented through established artistic conventions. Art in modernism was no longer about the representation of an objective reality, but about a rendering of the subjective act of the perception of it. Literary postmodernism then radicalized the modernist program in that it even more emphatically and explicitly foregrounded literature's tenuous relation to reality and its claims to a representation thereof. While modernism put into doubt the belief that reality can be objectively represented in art and focused instead on the subjective perception of it, postmodernism in turn even put into doubt the modernist belief that subjective perception could be rendered in art in any way. Its claim was thus more fatal: Neither in an objective nor a subjective way can reality be formally realized in art. Form, in fact, does not respond to reality at all, but rather presides over it—language does not mirror the world, but shapes it, us, and our perception of it and ourselves. Postmodern literature hence directed its attention to form itself, and to the question how it modifies the reality it assumedly represents. In McLaughlin's words, "the process of representation, not the object represented, would be the subject matter of postmodernism" (56). This has led the reception of postmodernism to identify the following as its governing tropes: self-referentiality, metafiction, irony, and pastiche.

McLaughlin believes that this linguistically relative view of reality still determines the basic artistic attitude of contemporary writers, yet he also notes a crucial difference between current literary works and those of the postmodern era: Today's works, which McLaughlin terms "post-postmodern," are still conscious of literature's tenuous relation to the world, yet they also display a return to certain realist conventions that were radically subverted in postmodernism. They are no longer merely interested in "self-conscious wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions," but also again in "representing the world we all more or less share" (65-66).[7] McLaughlin notes two major reasons for this. Firstly, the "era of conglomerization" has lead to the market dominance of large publishing houses that are no longer willing to take any risks in terms of the books they publish, but rather just want to sell

[7] McLaughlin's point in these reflections is that in fact postmodernism was—at least in the form of its early American variant—never anti-realist (and thus anti-humanist) in the first place. He elaborates this through a discussion of John Barth's two seminal postmodern essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment" (54-59).

them as "units" (54-55). Secondly, McLaughlin holds that the noted tropes of postmodernism have for long been co-opted by the culture industry and thus emptied of their potentially subversive impact, as can be seen in the case of self-referentiality in fiction: "Self-referentiality by itself collaborates with the culture of consumer technology to create a society of style without substance, of language without meaning, of cynicism without belief, of virtual communities without human connection, of rebellion without change" (66).[8] These are the reasons that in McLaughlin's view have led contemporary writers to again embrace literary conventions, in particular those of literary realism, in their work: as a response to the demands of today's market and the "dead end of postmodernism" (55).

Hence we arrive at the paradigmatic form of contemporary literature: an essentially realist kind of fiction that is nevertheless conscious of its own conventions and also displays aspects that go beyond them. McLaughlin, then, argues in a comprehensive way Row's claim that innovative and self-critical aspects are today part of every literary work—even of works that essentially adhere to established conventions. The real interest here, however, is how Row and McLaughlin each seem to evaluate this current state of literature. Row seems to welcome it, as he suggests that we have arrived in a state of a historical sublation of formerly opposing tendencies in a reconciled form that balances culturally polarizing forces and thereby enables a non-exclusive view of literature. McLaughlin, in turn, seems to be somewhat more divided on the matter. Granting that a critical view of artistic conventions has entered the collective consciousness of contemporary writers, he perceives the relation of contemporary works to such conventions in a more complicated way: the return to (realist) conventions displays not only a critical response to the predominant and by now popularized and thus voided procedures of postmodernism, but also a fulfillment of the demands of the publishing industry. This suggests a less harmonious view of the relation between conventionalism and experimentalism in contemporary literature: rather than as a mere reconciliation, it here also appears as a form of compromise. This touches on the crucial issue in this discussion. For if we grant that conventionalism and experimentalism are fused in contemporary works of literature, we still have to ask the question in what way precisely this works: Is this a harmonious fusion that bears witness to a cultural situation in which former boundaries have been overcome, as Row suggests? Or is a more conflicted one, at once critical of the commodified devices of

[8] This is a view which McLaughlin adopts from David Foster Wallace's influential essay on modernist literature, titled "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction."

postmodernism and concessive to the market, as McLaughlin holds? Or might it even be that experimentalism is thus essentially consumed by conventionalism, or at least made compliant to its pursuits?

This third view is advocated as well by some contemporary critics, notably by Zadie Smith in her widely discussed essay "Two Paths for the Novel," in which she considers the contemporary state of the novel and its possible futures. Like McLaughlin, who elaborates its historical development, Smith perceives self-conscious realism to be one of the paradigmatic forms of our current literature. The basic claim that grounds Smith's argument about contemporary literature is that we today live in a culture of "inauthenticity," one which especially affects "the Anglo-American liberal middle class," and the literary form which was conditioned by this "community": the realist novel ("Two Paths"). Consequently, contemporary realist novels formally reflect the spiritual crisis of the middle class in questioning their own assumptions of authenticity: "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, and the essential fullness and continuity of the self" are questioned in contemporary realist novels ("Two Paths"). Today's works concede that these premises can no longer be taken for granted, and they display aspects that reveal this.[9] As such, Smith thinks this would be a laudable gesture of the contemporary realist novel. However, she holds that this literary form does not really persist in this inauthentic state, but rather employs the self-critical awareness of its own premises as a means to reestablish them: "By stating its fears," Smith holds, the contemporary novel "intends to neutralize them" ("Two Paths").[10] In the form of the contemporary realist novel, the fusion of conventionalism and experimentalism therefore becomes a much more dubious enterprise. Rather than prolifically using self-consciousness to expose the fundamental inauthenticity of its own conventions, it employs it to achieve exactly the opposite: to solidify its status.

In his book *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* Gabriel Josipovici goes yet a step further than Smith. In his view, contemporary literature does not merely spend experimental means on a conventional purpose, but rather wholly abandons any experimental gestures. Instead of a conservative self-conscious realism, what we get today in the most popular forms of literature is just realism proper. What Josipovici finds most disconcerting about this current

[9] Smith discusses this phenomenon at the example of Joseph O'Neill's commercially successful and critically acclaimed novel *Netherland*.

[10] For a similar view of the contemporary novel, see Benjamin Kunkel's essay "Novel" in *n+1*.

tendency in fiction is that its advocates seem to perceive it as a logical contemporary consequence of a modernist legacy: in their view, what necessarily follows from modernism is realism.

Josipovici explains this peculiar phenomenon in the following way: The basic situation of modern art, and hence of art today, is that is has lost its "ability [to] effortlessly […] articulate the world" (182).[11] The loss of a shared cultural order in modern society meant the loss of a necessary formal correspondence between the work of art and its object, that is, whatever the work of art attempts to present in its form. As the relationship between work of art and object becomes contingent, it is the task of modern artists to engage with this "arbitrariness" in their works (182). Josipovici holds that art reached the peak of the formal realization of this precondition in modernism—a tradition that he calls that "of those who have no tradition" (185), of those who work in the consciousness that their art "impos[es] a shape on [the world] and giv[e] it a meaning which it doesn't have" (72).

In Josipovici's view, contemporary writers have completely misunderstood this modernist legacy, as they have concluded that to be true to the modernist spirit today means to produce "an unflinching realism which resolutely refuses the consolations of poetry and Romanticism" (171).[12] The logic of this, and its fallacy, can best be observed in the use of the "telling detail"—that is, the seemingly arbitrary aspect of a described object—in current literary writing (171). Contemporary realists believe that the telling detail connects narratives to brute reality and thereby appropriately reflects the modern disenchantment of art and the essentially arbitrary relation between art and the world (171-72). In this, they fatally confuse reality with the Barthesian "reality effect" (Barthes, "Reality" 234), as they fail to acknowledge that what they achieve by the telling detail is not the presentation of the merely given as such, but rather just a highly mediated but thoroughly naturalized effect of the predominant conventions of literary realism.[13] Josipovici thinks this confusion is fatal because the fundamental lesson of

[11] Josipovici bases his assessment of the historical preconditions of modern art on the writings of the art historian T.J. Clark, whose notion of modern art is itself based on Hegel's end of art thesis (182).

[12] Most extensively, Josipovici bases his critique of contemporary realism and its misapprehension of modernist premises on a reading of the English novelist Adam Thirlwell's quasi-treatise *Miss Herbert* (32-33, 171-74).

[13] This is how Roland Barthes explains the "reality effect":

> Semiotically, the 'concrete detail' is constituted by the direct collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a form of the signified, i.e. narrative structure itself. (Realistic literature is narrative, of course, but that is because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, confined to 'details', and

modernism is that an aesthetic engagement with reality means to extensively inquire "what it is and how an art which of necessity renounces all contact to the transcendent can relate to it, and if it cannot, what possible reason it can have for existing" (173). This means that art cannot adhere to established conventions, and certainly not the conventions of realism, as they not only are the most firmly established conventions of literary writing, but also suggest that reality can be represented in art in a straightforward way. As such, realism suggests a relation between art and reality that precisely covers up the preconditions which modernism was at pains to establish—namely, that this relation in modernity has become fundamentally contingent.

Josipovici holds that these are still the fundamental preconditions that govern art today, hence contemporary literature, rather than embrace realism, must renounce its conventions, and return to the modernist project in a real sense. This means that contemporary writers must strive for a truly experimental form of literature that is "unwilling to settle for that fixed distance from the language they are using and the story they are telling" (166-67) that is at the heart of literary realism. Modernism means precisely that such a mode of writing is no longer possible, and, importantly, that there is no single other mode which could replace it. Rather, each artist must reject given conventions and traditions and experimentally endeavor to formally engage the preconditions of artistic contingency in her or his own way, and ever anew.[14] This is the only artistic attitude that might do justice to the contingent relation of art and reality, the main exponent of which for Josipovici is not the telling detail of the realist convention, but that which cannot be named—"that which will fit into no system, no story, that which resolutely refuses to be turned into art" (113). The effort to convey this unnamable thing, Josipovici holds, is the "effort […] at the heart of the Modernist enterprise" (113), and should consequently be that of contemporary art as well.

This assessment of the relation between conventionalism and experimentalism in contemporary literature is hence one that not only perceives it as potentially problematic, as

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> because the most realistic narrative imaginable develops along unrealistic lines.) This is what we might call the referential illusion. ("Reality" 234)

In Barthes's view, this has the following consequence: "[T]he very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the signifier of realism; the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity" ("Reality" 234).

[14] This also suggests a particular meaning of Pound's modernist credo "To Make It New": It emblematizes the necessarily incessant search for forms by which the artist might achieve a (however remote and aesthetically estranged) contact with real. To make it new, in this sense, means to always try anew. Only this will be a proper aesthetic response to the contingent state of modern art.

McLaughlin does, but as a relation that is fundamentally incompatible. Jess Row's initial claim that the conventional and experimental might go hand in hand in contemporary art in Josipovici's view becomes a contradiction in terms, as the experimental can never materially inhere in a practice which is essentially based in established conventions. Rather, Josipovici believes that what we need today are emphatic forms of experimental fiction that counteract the predominant conventions of realism that potentially refute them—works in the vein of modernists like Stéphane Mallarmé, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Claude Simon, or Alain Robbe-Grillet. It is telling that Smith suggests a similar response to this apparently compromised state of current fiction. Like Josipovici, she believes that realism (even of a self-conscious kind) is necessarily incompatible with today's state of culture. As this culture has essentially become inauthentic, only experimental works that do not rely (however self-reflexively) on any premises and conventions that suggest an authentic relation between art and reality might achieve to aesthetically convey our current cultural situation.[15]

Ralph M. Berry, one of today's most prolific theorists of experimental writing as well as an experimental author in his own right, arrives at a similar conclusion in his various texts on the subject. Proceeding from an assessment of the historical preconditions of art that is close to that of Josipovici and Smith, Berry holds (following Immanuel Kant) that we are part of a modern historical continuum in which our "judgments" about art "can no longer […] look to a common human sensibility for their stabilization and ground" ("Experimental Writing" 200). Concretely, we can no longer agree upon today what art should or can do, in what form, and at whose service—even what art's reason for being is. In a seemingly cryptic way, Berry suggests that art must respond to this situation by being present: As art can no longer rely on established notions of art and artistic conventions, that is, on the past achievements of art to guide us into the future, it must focus on the present. The present has to be brought into art in an emphatic sense. This will ultimately also assert art's reason for being: by bringing the present into art, art is itself brought into the present, and thereby materially asserts its own being. Art's reason for being is to be merely there.

Yet how can art achieve such a peculiar kind of presence? One might here think again of Josipovici's contemporary realists, who believe that the telling detail is able to forge a close connection with the present. Like Josipovici (and Smith in somewhat different terms), Berry

[15] The work that in Smith's view prominently constitutes such a contemporary form of experimentalism is Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. This novel (and Smith's discussion of it) will be considered in more detail in chapter 3 of the thesis.

rejects such an approach. But his argument goes beyond the historicist point that realism is a mode of writing that implies a relation between art and reality that is no longer tenable. Berry's claim is more general: As realism implies a referential and representational use of words, this means that realist works will in a fundamental sense always be at a certain remove from the present, as the words of such works will always refer beyond themselves, to something that is not materially there in the work itself, but lies outside of it, and is thereby absent. Yet art has to bring the present, and thereby itself, into presence. This is achieved by an opposite gesture: the meaning of words must no representationally refer beyond their materiality, but must be brought into materiality itself. Only in this does art become truly present. For Berry, this is what happens in experimental writing. In experimental works, "meaning materializes, not just in the world of fiction, but before our very eyes, in the book we're holding, and this incarnation occurs at a proximity unequaled by representations, regardless how vivid" ("Language Problem"). This is the "presentness" ("Question" 318) of experimental writing—what determines its purpose for contemporary literature.

Berry notes different ways by which literature can achieve this experimental state. There is, for example, the tautological temporality of Gertrud Stein's sentences, like "a thing made by being made" ("Avant-Garde"), which brings something into existence that is already there, thereby making the present present, through making it; or what Stanley Cavell called the "hidden literality" of Samuel Beckett's works, as they display a use of "words in such a way that nothing about their context of use if implied" ("Experimental Writing" 211), making what is there on the page all that there is, all that is present; or what is conveyed by Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which is about an encyclopedia that infringes on reality, an object hence that seemingly affirms literature's referential reign over the world, but one that ultimately cannot contain the story that presents it, thereby making the story itself prominently present: "The more convincingly Borges represents reality as constructed, the more problematically his own words stand out. Their total negation makes their materiality obtrusive" ("Did the Novel Die" 25). All of these gestures yield what Berry calls the "irrepressible materiality" of experimental writing, their "presentness" ("Did the Novel Die" 25), which not only adequately reacts to the given historical preconditions of art, but also manages to assert the reason for art to continue to exist in them.

In a direct response to Jonathan Franzen's "Mr. Difficult," Berry holds that this is in fact what makes experimental writing difficult: not, as Franzen believes, "the [elitist] difficulty of an institutionally privileged vocabulary or professional jargon" ("Did the Novel Die" 26),

but the much more democratic difficulty that arises from what Donald Barthelme called "'the mysterious shift that takes place as soon as one says that art is not about something but *is* something'" (quoted in "Question" 318). In other words, this means that the difficulty of experimental writing is not realized through esoteric symbolism and allegory, or a refined literary allusiveness, as Franzen would have it (this would make the work referential), but rather through the absence thereof: it is the "lack of literariness" which makes experimental writing "incomprehensible"—the fact that experimental writing merely is ("Did the Novel Die" 25).

Yet this is not all there is to experimental writing. Its fundamental gesture also has philosophical and political consequences. Philosophically, the peculiar presentness of experimental writing means that that to interpret an experimental work is to interpret it without any "preconception" ("Experimental Writing" 201). This however does not mean that the experience of the work will be an experience of some "inaccessible meaning," which would point out the limits of interpretation (and knowledge in general), but, because of "meaning's near total implication in the work's facticity" ("Experimental Writing" 214), it will be an experience of the preconditions of interpretation: reading an experimental work will give us the opportunity to reflect on the process of interpretation itself, and how it is determined. As the presentness of the experimental work implicates the reading subject in a specific way, it also affects the writing subject. Berry notes that the writer of the experimental work does not produce it in terms of a preformed system, but in terms of a system that is only brought about in the process of writing the work, and which thereby is "continuously present in every fragment" of it ("Experimental Writing" 209). This ultimately also means that the distinction between the writing and the reading subject, between "creating and discovering," "breaks down" ("Experimental Writing" 205): In the event of the experimental work, what happens for both the writer and the reader is the present.

The peculiar presentness of experimental writing also relates its political import: By eschewing literary modes that would make it referential, by merely existing by and through itself, by persisting in its materiality, the experimental work attains an objective autonomy. Berry holds that this is its politics: "Wherever writing, the media, marketplace, and mainstream have become inseparable, asserting the autonomy of words is a revolutionary act" ("On Freeing Words"). This seems to suggest a subversive notion of experimental writing in the vein of the one that Franzen put forward. Yet while Franzen believes this to be the only distinction of experimental writing, and one which necessarily destines it to failure, Berry holds that "its resistance to co-optation, although essential, [is] still quite secondary" ("Did the Novel Die"

26). The central aim of experimental writing is not to expose the ideological trap doors of given realist conventions. Rather, by "refusing the bad-faith compromises of tropes, canons of taste, and mass marketing, [it] establish[es] solidarity with all those whom literature's institutions had failed to acknowledge, making [the] work's alienness a sign of hope" ("War" 4).

Not resistance, but hope—or resistance only through hope—is what distinguishes the politics of experimental writing: its peculiar presentness reveals to us an alternative to the present cultural confinements of literature. As such, the fundamental gesture of experimental writing becomes a gesture of freedom—a freedom from constraints imposed on literature by the market and the dominant institutions. In producing its own preconditions[16], experimental writing shows that "freedom conditions telling itself" ("Did the Novel Die" 27); in resisting its reduction to prior preconditions, experimental writing in a fundamental sense displays a "freedom from necessity" ("Avant-Garde"). This, then, is the necessity of experimental writing, its vital contemporary purpose.

It is with this statement that I want to conclude my introductory overview of the discussion surrounding experimental writing in the context of contemporary Anglophone literature.[17] As it shows, questions concerning experimental writing have been widely addressed in the last decade, and the participating writers and critics have offered many different and contradictory views on the subject, concerning the basic quality and purpose of experimental writing, and its particular status in contemporary culture: Jonathan Franzen sees it as an obsolete form of elitist aesthetic ideology critique that subverts the conventions and traditions that literature in his view should focus on today. Ben Marcus rejects Franzen's reductive account and holds that experimental writing, rather than an anti-literature, is a linguistically and cognitively progressive kind of fiction, one that at the same time works as an idiosyncratic lyrical form, that is, an aesthetic expression of a particular perception of reality. Jess Row, proceeding from the dispute between Marcus and Franzen, more basically questions the distinctions both Franzen and Marcus apparently make between conventionalism and

[16] Berry has a nice formulation for this that closely links this gesture to the scientific meaning of the experimental: "To conduct an experiment […] is to provoke the origin into life" ("Experimental Writing" 204). Experiments in this sense are attempts to verify assumptions about a given object or event. As such, they bring about, in their failure or success, their own preconditions.

[17] There are numerous further texts that participate in the contemporary discussion about experimental writing, which however for pragmatic reasons did not make it into this overview. Let me just mention what I consider to be some of the most interesting ones among them: Kathleen Fitzpatrick's *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television*, Jeremy Green's *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millenium*, Davis Schneiderman's "Notes from the Middleground," and David Shield's *Reality Hunger*.

experimentalism, noting that such distinctions do no longer apply to a contemporary literature that manages to integrate both in its forms, which exposes their debate as a retrograde one that reestablishes aesthetic boundaries we long ago have overcome. Robert L. McLaughlin confirms this, but is more divided in his evaluation of such a development, as he notes that the current integration of conventionalism and experimentalism does not just display a necessary generic progress from an earlier stage in literary history, but also more precariously a concession to the demands of today's publishing industry. Zadie Smith continues in this rather critical vein, claiming that while contemporary conventional literature, in the form of the realist novel, might display experimental aspects, these aspects, rather than giving expression to the essential inauthenticity of contemporary culture, are ultimately contributive to covering it up and consolidating thus the untimely premises of authenticity in which the tradition of literary realism is based. Gabriel Josipovici, then, is even less optimistic than Smith, noting that the predominant form of fiction that we find today does not constitute a problematic integration of the conventional and experimental, but rather the complete abolishment of any experimental trace in a newly reinforced conventional realist literature. More detrimentally still, this development is based on a fundamental misapprehension of our modernist legacy, as the current realists assume that their way of writing is the adequate response to the fundamental contingency of art in modernity, while in fact the only proper answer to such preconditions would be an experimentalism that proceeds in the radical unconventional way of modernist works. Ralph M. Berry supports Josipovici's point insofar as he claims that only experimental writing is the emphatic aesthetic expression of the given historical preconditions of art, that is, of a culture which no longer has shared assumptions about its purpose. To give expression to these preconditions, Berry holds that art must become present. Realist literature can never achieve this, as it works in a past tradition and more fundamentally is based in a language that is always at a remove from the present, which only the peculiar presentness of experimental writing can capture. Berry also reintroduces the political purpose of experimental writing to the discussion that Franzen originally used to dismiss it, holding that indeed, experimental writing, in its particular promotion of aesthetic freedom, does have a political function, which however is not its sole purpose, but rather an effect of its presentness that also has philosophical implications for an account of the reading and writing subject.

Thus we arrive at a very much contradictory set of contemporary views on the subject of experimental writing, which seems to raise more questions than it answers: Is the purpose of experimental writing mainly political? Or philosophical? Or aesthetic? Or cognitive? Can the

experimental and the conventional be reconciled? Or are they mutually exclusive ways of writing? Has experimental writing become a historically obsolete form of literature? Or is it in fact the only proper expression of the historical preconditions that govern today's cultural activity?

The following thesis, then, displays my attempt to come to terms with these questions about experimental writing in contemporary literature, and to propose, as a contribution to this discussion, my own assessment of the nature and purpose of experimental writing, and its particular status in our culture. What I claim, in view of the issues raised by the different writers presented in the overview, is that experimental writing is indeed a particularly emphatic formal expression of the historical preconditions that determine our artistic productions today, and that it responds to these preconditions in a critical and utopian way: experimental writing challenges its own historical preconditions, but also points beyond them to a different state of being. As such, the purpose of experimental writing is not political, or philosophical, or aesthetic, or cognitive, but rather presents an entwinement of these spheres. This seems to suggest that experimental writing is a rather rarified and exclusive literary form. But it is precisely the opposite that I want to argue in the following discussion, namely, that experimental writing is an inclusive kind of literature: Although the eschewal of literary traditions and conventions is certainly one of its basic distinctions, it nevertheless must not be seen as a writing that outright works against them. Rather, experimental writing remains tied to more conventional and traditional forms of fiction.[18] Its historical status betrays this: As a kind of writing that emphatically expresses the general preconditions that govern contemporary culture, it necessarily remains close to all forms of contemporary literature, conventional and not, as they are essentially grounded in these same preconditions.

This brings me to another important matter concerning the notion of experimental writing offered in this thesis: As experimental writing is here made out to be an emphatic expression of the historical preconditions that govern all contemporary forms of literature, this suggests that it is a particularly fundamental form of literature. This is a crucial point not just for understanding the relation between conventionalism and experimentalism, and the inclusive nature of experimental writing, but also for resolving a potential terminological issue apparent

[18] Brian Evenson seems to make a similar point in his essay "Taking Things for Granted," in which he holds that the conventional and the experimental are not mutually exclusive forms of writing, but cohere in the way of an anamorphosis: A given literary text does always and necessarily display both, it merely depends how one might perceptually give shape to the relation.

in the contemporary discussion presented in this introduction. As the overview of current approaches to the subject shows, the different writers and critics seem to proceed with quite different terms for what is here called experimental writing: Only Marcus and Berry extensively use the term 'experimental' in their discussion; Josipovici identifies the kind of writing in question predominantly as "modernist" (which is also implied in Berry's texts), Franzen as "postmodern," and McLaughlin, in turn, as "post-postmodern"; Smith does not propose one specific term to denote the subject, but "avant-garde" is the one that turns up most times in her essay (this is a term that Marcus also uses as a synonym for 'experimental' in his essay). This seems to posit an impossible terminological tangle, and consequently prompt the question why one should opt for the single term 'experimental writing' in this context. Does this not rather precariously conflate terms that should be kept separate? Not necessarily. First of all, I think that 'experimental writing' is the least charged one offered by the various critics in the discussion—it is formally and historically less specific than the terms 'modernist,' 'avant-garde,' 'postmodern,' and 'post-postmodern.' Yet crucially, at the same time, it also names something that is potentially apparent in all of these forms of writing. This directly bears on the historical character of 'experimental writing' as elaborated above: As the emphatic expression of the fundamental modern preconditions of literature and art, 'experimental writing' reveals the preconditions in which all of these forms are related. What this implies is that there is a historical continuum between these various stages of literary history, which is precisely one of the assumptions from which this thesis proceeds: the stages from 'modernism' to 'post-postmodernism' do not develop in the form of radical breaks, but as breaks that are still related in the same modern preconditions, the emphatic expression of which might generally be termed 'experimental writing.' This consequently suggests experimental writing not as a specific genre of literature (though it certainly affects generic distinctions, as will be shown in the subsequent chapters of the thesis) with a set of clearly denotable formal and historically limitable characteristics, except for the crucial one that all the other terms arguably share, namely an eschewal, in more or less prominent ways, of literary conventions and traditions.[19] This is, after all, what is generally meant by the term in its dictionary sense: As noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'experimental' means something "tentative," pursued by "trial," that is, a procedure

[19] This is precisely the characteristic that Paul Stephens in his historical survey of experimental writing determines as the lowest common denominator of the various understandings of the subject apparent in contemporary discourses: "If the literal-minded professor and the bohemian artist can agree on anything, it is that experiment challenges ‚fixed laws'—which I take to be unexamined social and artistic conventions" (165).

that is not based in already ascertained parameters, which in a literary context would be formal traditions and conventions. Consequently, these are eschewed in an experimental work. Another meaning of the term also implies this: the 'experimental' is that which is "discovered by experience" in an "empirical" or "practical" way (OED). In a literary context, this means that the event of experimental writing cannot be based in already established conventions and traditions, as its outcome is only yielded in the immediate process of experiencing it—in its production and reception, which are both ways of discovery.[20] (Of course, experimental procedures may then, in the passage of time, become themselves established literary conventions and set up a tradition, which in turn will lead to new experimental procedures.) As such, then, experimental writing is not a specific literary genre, but more fundamentally a kind of literary gesture that is implicated in the modernist, the avant-garde, the postmodern, or the post-postmodern, yet cannot be reduced to either of these terms, but rather subsumes them, implying the more fundamental modern preconditions that potentially determine these more specific historical forms of literature.[21] Importantly, this does not make experimental writing the only true form of modern literature, but rather a kind of writing that most emphatically reveals its preconditions, and which as a gesture rather than a genre then might become apparent in many different forms of contemporary writing of a more or less conventional kind.

This anticipates the various points about experimental writing I am going to elaborate in the following chapters of the thesis. Theoretically, I will pursue this on the basis of Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetics, which I believe to be particularly informative for the issues raised about experimental writing in current discussions of the subject. Why Adorno? Firstly and generally, Adorno's aesthetics arguably presents the last comprehensive modernist aesthetics of the twentieth century. This means that it is an aesthetics that promotes modernist premises about art, yet at a point in history where these premises have become tenuous in view of emerging paradigms that contested them. In other words, Adorno's aesthetics is, in my reading at least, a transitional aesthetics, developed at the threshold from modernism to postmodernism.

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[20] This further clarifies Berry's claim that the distinction between "creating and discovering breaks down" in experimental writing ("Experimental Writing" 205), as creation itself becomes an experiential act of discovery. I will return to the relation between experimental writing and experience in the conclusion to this thesis.

[21] This is akin to what Berry suggests when he argues that the experimentalism of "modernism was not a response to historically circumscribed conflicts and crises but, on the contrary, arose from necessities internal to literature itself" ("Question"), and that "experimentation" reveals "art's universal structures" ("Experimental Writing" 201). Here, I would not go as far as Berry in claiming that experimental writing discloses the universals of art, but somewhat more specifically its modern Western historical preconditions.

The conception of his major work on the philosophy of art betrays this: Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* was written between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, that is, precisely in the time that is often considered to be the transitional phase in literature from modernism to postmodernism.[22] Hence Adorno's aesthetics temporally moves between the paradigms that govern the contemporary discussion of experimental writing, as virtually all of the presented views base their arguments on modernist (notably Josipovici and Berry) and postmodern (notably Franzen, McLaughlin, and Smith) assumptions about art. As such, Adorno's aesthetics will certainly be informative for this discussion. Secondly and more specifically, a number of the issues raised in Adorno's aesthetics directly relate to those apparent in the contemporary discussion about experimental writing: the role of artistic traditions and conventions in contemporary culture, in particular those of realism (which in the contemporary discussion figures as a the common shorthand for traditional or conventional literary art); the potential co-optation and commodification of art in contemporary culture (addressed by Franzen and Berry); and, related to this, the autonomy of art, and its potential freedom (addressed by Berry and Marcus). Thirdly and most importantly, Adorno awards an important status to experimental art in the context of these issues, and elaborates in a philosophically substantial way the nature of experimental art and why it attains this particular status. Because of this, I believe Adorno's aesthetics to be informative for establishing a comprehensive notion of experimental writing—one that moreover manages to clarify some of the contradictions apparent in the contemporary discussion of the subject.

In the first chapter of the thesis, titled "Experimental Writing and Theodor W. Adorno's Aesthetics," I will hence elaborate my own notion of experimental writing in terms of Adorno's aesthetics. In accordance with my claims about experimental writing as outlined above, this notion will suggest the following: Experimental writing is the basic gesture of *modern* literature as such, and is characterized by *three basic qualities* (which are title-giving for this thesis): (1) Experimental writing is a formally emphatic, contemporary reflection of the modern historical preconditions of art. This is the *historical quality* of experimental writing. (2) Experimental writing is not only a reflection of its historical preconditions, but also presents a critical assessment in aesthetic form of these preconditions. This is the *critical quality* of experimental writing. (3) Besides reflecting and critically assessing its historical preconditions, experimental writing also points beyond these preconditions towards a changed state of culture and society.

[22] The *Aesthetic Theory* was eventually published in unfinished form in 1970, one year after Adorno's death.

This is the *utopian quality* of experimental writing. The development of the three basic qualities of experimental writing in terms of Adorno's aesthetics will also reveal the crucial point that experimental writing is not an exclusive, elitist form of literature, but rather an inclusive one. Granted, it might seem rather odd to establish such an egalitarian claim on the basis of Adorno's aesthetics. After all, the established reception of Adorno often makes him the main authority of a refined, elitist, and culturally pessimist aesthetics of distinction. And indeed, as noted, Adorno's aesthetics does promote an emphatic notion of modernist art, which might seem to potentially consolidate such a view. Yet herein lies precisely the indication of an inclusive notion of experimental writing: In my reading, Adorno's promoted notion of an autonomous modernist art turns out to be an emphatic notion of modern art as such—not the only kind of art to be promoted, but rather the one which is formally most revelatory about the preconditions that determine the various given forms of contemporary art, to which it consequently remains closely related.[23] In this sense, another basic aim of this chapter is to reclaim Adorno's aesthetics for a progressive yet decidedly democratic understanding of contemporary art and culture. Importantly, this endeavor is supported by the recent publication of Adorno's lecture *Ästhetik (1958/59)*. This hitherto unavailable text reveals new aspects of Adorno's thought that in my opinion necessitates a contemporary revaluation of some of the persistent claims that have been made by critics in regard of his philosophy of art. Consequently, this chapter makes extensive use of the lectures in the discussion of experimental writing and Adorno's aesthetics.[24]

The subsequent three chapters, then, consider contemporary literary texts in view of the notion of experimental writing as established in the second chapter of the thesis. In accordance with the central claim of the thesis about the inclusivity of experimental writing, these chapters are not just about emphatic literary works of formal experimentation, but also explore the potential connection between such works and seemingly more conventional ones. Thus the sequence of the three literary chapters will look as follows:

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[23] The fact that there is a conspicuous slippage of terms in Adorno's aesthetics betrays this: Interchangeably, Adorno calls his promoted art form "advanced" (AT 148), "progressive" (AT 160), "new" (AT 30), "experimental" (AT 43)—or simply "modern art" (AT 42).

[24] In accordance with this basic aim of establishing an alternative understanding of Adorno's aesthetics, the discussion in the next chapter will for the conceptualization of his notion of modern art focus on terms that are somewhat different from the ones that have hitherto governed the reception of Adorno's aesthetics: While terms such as aesthetic negativity, autonomy, or estrangement do figure in the discussion, they do not take center stage, but instead make way for a set of terms that are yet less negatively charged.

The second chapter of the thesis discusses *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*. In my view, Davis's stories present an exemplary case of a formally conspicuous kind of experimental writing according to the notion developed in the first chapter. The aim of this chapter, then, is to show how this rather complex philosophical notion of experimental writing and its three basic qualities are concretely manifest in a literary work of art.

The third chapter considers experimental writing in terms of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. In the context of the general sequence of the literary chapters, McCarthy's novel represents a transitional text: In its reception, *Remainder* is often conceived as an experimental literary text (notably and influentially by Zadie Smith, whose "Two Paths of the Novel" will be considered in more detail in this chapter). The aim however of my discussion of the novel is to reveal that the novel, despite its undeniable closeness to experimental literary pursuits, formally remains a rather conventional work. The peculiar entwinement of experimentalism and conventionalism in the form of *Remainder* allows then for a practical elaboration of the claim that there potentially is a strong relation between experimental writing and formally more or less conventional works of literature. More specifically, the discussion of *Remainder* will also suggest that the *novel* is a genre particularly suitable to pursue the aims of experimental writing. This point relates directly the contemporary discussion about experimental writing presented above, as several of the writers and critics (most prominently Franzen and Smith, but also Row and McLaughlin) make their arguments explicitly in regard of the novel form. The assumption that the novel is a particularly suitable genre for experimental pursuits will be considered more closely in chapter four.

The fourth chapter, then, discusses Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*. In comparison to *Remainder* and *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, this novel represents the most conventional work considered in the thesis, or more precisely the one that is related to a notion of experimental writing in the least explicit way. As such, it is an excellent work to further elaborate the basic claim of this thesis that experimental writing is in a fundamental sense connected to more conventional works of literature. As an exemplary novel in a generic sense, *The Fortress of Solitude* also lends itself well for a more extensive elaboration of the experimentalism of the novel form—a claim that will moreover be theoretically developed in the introductory section of chapter four. It is important to add here that Lethem's novel does not just serve as a mere literary substantiation of the inclusivity of experimental writing, but also, as a more conventional work, enables in its discussion a translation of the occasionally

rather cryptic philosophical aspects of experimental writing (according to Adorno's aesthetics) into a more tangible and specific literary-critical and culture-political register.[25]

The conclusion of the thesis, titled "Experimental Writing and Aesthetic Experience," recapitulates the major claims and findings of the thesis, and introduces an issue that might be addressed in more detail in further research on the subject of experimental writing: the relation between experimental writing and aesthetic experience. In my view, a comprehensive understanding of the broader cultural and social meaning of experimental writing benefits from a proper consideration of the particular kind of aesthetic experience such a writing grants. Concluding my discussion of experimental writing in the context of contemporary Anglophone literature, I briefly outline this point with reference to a couple of pertinent texts on the matter.

[25] In view of this, I want to add here that all three texts are of course not merely assigned to an illustrative or strategic function in the context of the general argument of this thesis. Rather, each literary chapter aims at a comprehensive disclosure of the given work in question.

CHAPTER ONE
THEODOR W. ADORNO'S AESTHETICS AND EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

Introduction

The following chapter will consider Adorno's assessment of the preconditions of modern art and how modern art, in his view, responds to these preconditions. As noted in the general introduction, experimental writing is in this thesis made out to be an emphatic literary expression of the kind of modern art that Adorno supports in his aesthetics. Consequently, Adorno's complex and extensive discussion of modern art will be informative for understanding the nature and purpose of experimentalism in contemporary literature. For the sake of clarity and practicability, I have decided to subsume Adorno's heavily ramified notion of modern art in terms of three qualities that in my view encapsulate its fundamental characteristics, and hence those of experimental writing: the modern work of art essentially has a historical quality, a critical quality, and a utopian one. Importantly, these three qualities all pertain to the same basic process, yet reveal it in a different way. Accordingly, the following chapter is made up of three interlinked sections: The first section addresses the historical quality of the modern work of art, the second section addresses the critical quality of the modern work of art, and the third section addresses the utopian quality of the modern work of art. A subsequent fourth section summarizes the outcomes of the discussion and recapitulates what it implies about the particular nature of experimental writing and its current purpose.

The Historical Quality of Modern Art

The historical quality of the modern work of art arises from Adorno's discussion of the relation between modern art and history. I begin with the discussion of the historical quality of the modern work of art not only because it concerns the most accessible aspect of Adorno's reflections on art, but also because it most explicitly links up with the contemporary discussion about literature and experimental writing presented in the preceding part: literally all of the writers discussed in this part are in one way or another centrally concerned with the historical developments of the last century and literature's changing status as part of these developments—they all address the specific cultural situation we find ourselves in today, and consider how literature might respond to this situation.

For all their differences in assessing the modern situation of art, one basic view that many contemporary authors and critics share and base their claims regarding the purpose of literature and experimental writing on is the following: they assume that we experience, today, a cultural situation in which there are no longer any established literary traditions that might represent any shared beliefs, values, or customs. Let me briefly recapitulate the three most prominent positions that reflect such a view: Zadie Smith notes that "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self" ("Two Paths"), are all assumptions that today can no longer be taken for granted when discussing the novel. For Gabriel Josipovici, the situation of modern art—a situation we are, according to Josipovici, still confronted with today—is that it has lost its "ability [to] effortlessly […] articulate the world" (Josipovici 182). The loss of a shared cultural order in modern society means that the work of art no longer has an established formal way to give expression to a culturally agreed upon object, as such an object, and a corresponding form to express it, no longer exist. Art in modern times becomes a contingent pursuit. Similarly, Ralph M. Berry claims that the modern continuum of which we are part is one in which our "judgments" about art "can no longer […] look to a common human sensibility for their stabilization and ground" ("Experimental Writing" 200). Like Josipovici, Berry holds that what follows from this is art's loss of an authorized, agreed-upon mode of engaging with its object and the world at large; the loss of an established cultural function of art; and the loss, even, of the conviction that art must persist. Proceeding from these assessments of our cultural situations, all three authors assert that an experimental writing is the adequate expression of and response to such a situation: For Smith, any literature that assumes a conventional mode of expression and affirms literature's capability to capture our world in a straightforward way (here Smith primarily addresses the predominant realist conventions in today's literature) is not the proper form to express what she sees as the basic "inauthenticity" ("Two Paths") of our modern situation. Rather, a formally inquisitive writing of the experimental kind is the more adequate response to this situation. Likewise, Josipovici argues that given the contingent state of art in our time, to engage with this state means to eschew conventions (of the realist kind) that assume a firmly established connection between the literary work and the world it apparently represents (182). Rather, the literary work must relate its contingency as an expression of its "hunger for that 'relentless contact'" (166) with the world that we can no

longer take for granted.[26] And for Berry, only an experimental writing is the adequate response to our current cultural situation. As we can no longer rely on the literary past to show us the way into the future, we are left with an expression of the present in literature. This is what experimental writing does: While realist modes might be seen to represent their present historical context by their referential power, they are actually removed from their present, as their words do always refer to traditions of the past but more fundamentally beyond themselves and their materiality, to something that is not literally there in the work itself, but outside of it, thereby absent, while the experimental gesture of art must is precisely the opposite: Not by semanticizing the materiality of words, but by bringing meaning into materiality itself, art does bring the present, and thereby itself, into presence.

Adorno's assessment of the modern situation of art in his aesthetics is quite similar to the one put forward by Smith, Josipovici, and Berry. Yet whereas these three authors merely gesture towards the reasons for this contemporary state of literature, Adorno's discussion provides a complex and extensively elaborated argument that is not merely revealing about the modern preconditions of art but that even more importantly helps us to consolidate the view that art's eschewal of conventions—the basic characteristic of both Adorno's notion of modern art and the contemporary critics' notion of experimental writing—happens by way of a historical necessity. This is the historical quality of the modern work of art, and consequently that of experimental writing: its particular formal pursuit is expressive of the modern historical preconditions of art.

We need look no further than to the very beginning of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* in order to tie his concerns of the contemporary discussion about experimental writing: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" (ATHK 9).[27] This is the first sentence of Adorno's magnum opus, and a sentence that arguably articulates one of the central assumptions that govern Adorno's subsequent discussions of specific aesthetic issues. It certainly connects well

[26] Josipovici adopts this expression from Wallace Stevens's poem "The Comedian as the Letter C."

[27] A general note on the use of translations in this thesis: All quotations from existing English translations of Adorno's works are indicated by the corresponding abbreviations as noted in the abbreviations table; all quotations in English that are indicated by the abbreviations for the German original texts are my translations. All translations of the other German texts discussed in this thesis, with the exception of the quote from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, are mine, too. I have decided to present all longer (indented) quotes from Adorno's works in the original German language. The reason for this mixed presentation is that I do not want to interrupt the reading flow of the text yet still want to preserve, for the reader, Adorno's peculiar linguistic style in my discussion, as this style is crucial to Adorno's claims, but of which something is always lost in translation.

to the assumptions about our current cultural situation put forward by Smith, Josipovici, and Berry. In fact, it reads like a condensed phrasing of what all three of them are arguing. If we move on from the rather reticent *Aesthetic Theory* to Adorno's lectures, we find a somewhat more elaborate account of this premise:

> Aber jedenfalls soviel glaube ich doch vor Ihnen verantworten zu können, dass das Bewusstsein sowohl eines Prinzips, wie auch die konkrete Hoffnung, dass [die] Menschen dadurch ihrer selbst mächtig werden, derart verblasst [sind], dass die Substantialität nicht mehr die Gewalt hat, als ein objektiv Verbindliches die Kunst zu tragen. Es gibt keine Kunstbewegung heute mehr, und es ist eine Kunstbewegung heute überhaupt wohl nur sehr schwer denkbar, die ihre Kräfte daraus zöge, dass sie ein solches sinnvolles Moment als positiv gegeben annähme. (VA 123)

Adorno believes that we no longer have the consciousness of an objectively binding principle that would ground and govern any artistic endeavor (in terms of an artist's choice of her or his subjects, and the manner in which such a subject should be presented), give sense to it, and through which we might realize our freedom. The reasons Adorno lists for this historical situation are familiar ones: The contemporary situation of art has its origin in the "emancipation of the subject" that came about in the rise of civil society (AT 229). Adorno holds that in "closed societies," a work of art still had an exact "place, function, and legitimation" in the general social order (AT 236). The rise of the modern civil society meant the gradual abolishment of such orders (e.g., royal or religious ones) on behalf of the promotion of the liberation of the individual. In the course of this development, any generally accepted sense-giving principles for art were also abolished.[28]

Of course, it is not just the emancipation of the subject that brought about the abolishment of any sense-giving principles for art and for culture in general. The developments that have led to this state are far more complex and wide-ranging than that. However, this is not the place to attempt to do justice to these general developments that reach from the early modern period to the present. Rather, for our purposes, I want to focus on the more specific changes that have taken place in the realm of art in the course of these more general social and cultural

[28] To Adorno, Cervantes's early-modern *Don Quixote* is the first literary document of this historical development—as a novel that registers the end of the age of socially pre-determined generic forms such as romances of chivalry, in telling the story of the disenchantment of its titular hero, who eventually has to come to terms (for better or worse) with the reality principle, a conclusion that marks the generic disenchantment of art as such (AT 334-35). Michel Foucault makes a similar argument in *The Order of Things* (46-50).

ones outlined above. A reference to Hegel's end of art thesis is helpful here, as Adorno's own argument is heavily indebted to Hegel's philosophical account of the end of art.

According to Hegel's thesis, art has come to an end in the modern age—not literally, of course, but according to its highest purpose. Hegel holds that the highest purpose of art is to bring about a complete harmony of form and content in the work of art as the perfect, objective material expression of what a given community at a given time subjectively conceives of as the absolute—as god, as the highest form of knowledge, as truth (Hegel 23). In Greek art (what Hegel termed the "classical" period), this perfection was achieved in sculpture. Greek culture imagined the absolute in physical form—as gods in human bodies. Thus in sculpture, the idea of the absolute could be expressed appropriately (231). This changed in the early modern period. For Hegel, the most important development at this stage of Western history took place in religion, in the rise of Protestantism that, in Hegel's view, anticipated the Romantic spirit. In Protestantism, the idea of the absolute changed: inwardness and the prohibition of portraying God governed the spirit of Christian religion. People began to distance themselves from their own bodies, as the body was spiritualized. Art however necessarily remained material, and could therefore no longer correspond to the community's immaterial idea of the absolute in line with its rejection of sensuality. Greek art was the objective, external correspondence to a subjective internal idea. In the romantic period, as a consequence of the inwardness and spirituality promoted in Christian religion, people retreated into themselves, and no specific outer form of the inner idea of the absolute remained. Subject (the subjective idea of the absolute) and object (the material manifestation of this idea) disintegrated: this was the end of art according to its highest purpose. Hegel, of course, did not proclaim that art would not continue to exist in the coming ages. (And neither did he see the correspondence of subject and object to have become impossible. Rather, it now would have to be achieved in another discipline—in philosophy.) But the artist worked in a different situation now, in a different state of mind and consciousness: Since there no longer was any specific outer form to express the inner idea of the absolute, the whole content of external reality becomes potential material for the artist to work with. The withdrawal of the artist into inwardness makes the human subject the origin and prime instance of any artistic expression. The artist, as Hegel puts it, becomes the master of the whole of reality (223). Henceforth, works of art will primarily be expressions of the artistic subject. In their freedom, artists now can choose from any means and content to produce their works. But the content will always remain a randomly chosen thing, not the immediate and necessary substance of the artist's consciousness of the absolute (229).

Adorno sees the artistic productions of his time—of the twentieth century—still as a part of this continuum which started in the early modern period and found its most explicit expression in the philosophy of Hegel. Yet of course, Adorno does not merely transfer Hegel's assumptions to his time, but also submits them to critical reflection in view of the social and cultural developments that have taken place in and after the Romantic Age up to the time when he was working on his aesthetics. In the course of this, as we will see, Hegel's notion of modern art is transformed into a kind of inverse form of itself.

For Adorno, the major shift that has taken place between the time of Hegel's aesthetics and his own concerns the question of sense in art. 'Sense' can be generally understood as the quality of the work that makes us perceive it as something coherent and potentially meaningful—a basic principle or idea, according to which the work becomes apparent to us as a whole and according to which we can judge the work as a whole. Adorno believes that up to the most recent past, the central artistic question was "how sense can realize itself in art" (VA 118). This was certainly the case with Hegel. As we have seen, for Hegel, there is an absolute—a basic principle, an idea—that is realized in art and thereby gives sense to it. And even though art could no longer achieve this in the Romantic Age, the absolute remained, to be realized in philosophy, and to which art in turn again responded. This is what Adorno suggests in his assessment of Romantic art. Following Hegel, Adorno holds that Romantic art displayed the attempt to materially realize in art the truth that was conceptually articulated in philosophy. This is what he means when he claims that artists at that time were concerned with how sense can realize itself in art: the sense is already there, in philosophy, and art is then concerned with transferring this sense into its own realm. This is not to say that Adorno believes that art became merely illustrative in Romanticism. He acknowledges that artists were at pains to establish this exterior sense in the proper material terms of art, which would also lead some of the Romantics (contrary to the claims of Hegel) to the belief that truth can in fact only be revealed in art. Yet Adorno holds that such endeavors only succeeded to a certain extent—and the fact that we find different kinds of *Weltanschauungskunst* in that period—that is, works that are very obviously constructed according to a pre-conceived belief-system, or *Weltanschauung*—betrays this fact (Adorno notes the works of Wagner and Hebbel in this context). Rather controversially, Adorno also believes that this basic gesture is still apparent in Flaubert and even the expressionist movement in the early twentieth century (VA 118). All of these artistic movements, from Romanticism onwards, were still governed by the same question: after the end of art according

to its highest purpose, how can sense still be realized in art? This is the question that undergoes a fundamental inversion in Adorno's time:

> Demgegenüber hat sich die Situation, der die gegenwärtige Kunst sich gegenüber findet, heute radikal umgekehrt. […]. Sie fragt nicht mehr: Wie kann ein Sinn ästhetisch sich realisieren, wirklich ganz und gar realisieren, ohne dass er als Weltanschauung der Kunst infiltriert würde? Im Gegensatz dazu heisst es heute: Wie kann ein reines Material, wie können reine Materialvorgänge wiederum sinnvoll werden? (VA 118)

Why would such an inversion have taken place? We might need to remind ourselves here that Hegel, of course, still believed in the historical progress of humanity according to the principles of reason and rationality. In this respect, Hegel was still a philosopher of the Enlightenment. Adorno, as it is well known, has a quite different view of reason and rationality. The atrocities of the two World Wars of the twentieth century were proof for Adorno that reason and rationality do not necessarily lead to the freedom of humanity in history. Rather, they were proof that any kind of overarching sense-giving principle always carries within itself the potential of decaying into a dangerous ideology that leads masses into barbarity. Furthermore, Adorno also observed the detrimental consequences of another overarching principle: the exchange principle of the capitalist economic system, in which everything from simple objects to human beings loses its intrinsic value. (In Adorno's view, these two basic aspects of modern society—mass ideology and capitalist economy—are interrelated and as such enforce each other.) This, then, is why Adorno no longer believes in any exterior sense—because he, as a citizen of the twentieth century, experienced the possible consequences of such principles: devastating wars fuelled by overarching ideologies, and social alienation based on the capitalist submission of everything—including works of art—to the exchange principle. This is why the modern work of art cannot any longer rely on any external sense.

This displays in sum Adorno's extensive elaboration of the reason why modern art can no longer rely on a given tradition or convention. It shows that the modern work of art's eschewal of conventions and traditions does not happen by a mere whim on part of the artist, but is the result of and response to broader developments in Western history—the loss of a communal order in the rise of individualism in early modernity, and the detrimental consequences of mass ideology and the capitalist economy. The modern work of art is expressive of this—this is its historical quality. Importantly, Adorno's argument does not stop at the general point that the modern work of art must by way of a historical necessity eschew

traditions and conventions, but details in a more intricate way how such a work formally explores its historical preconditions. This reveals further crucial aspects about the historical quality of the modern work of art, and moreover raises the premises in which its other qualities—its critical and utopian ones—are based.

Adorno proceeds in his elaboration of the historical quality of modern art in a further consideration of the question of sense in modern art. With regard to this issue, he asks the following basic question: If the modern work of art can no longer rely in any way on a sense brought to it from the outside—from belief systems, shared customs, cultural and artistic traditions and conventions—, how can it then still attain any sense, that is, coherence and the potential for meaning? Adorno's answer to this question is illuminative about the particular formal character of modern art in terms of its given historical preconditions. The answer is already apparent in Adorno's stocktaking of the current situation of art, where he notes that art must bring about sense through its "pure material processes" (VA 119). How must this be understood? Adorno's notion of artistic "construction" is informative here. He holds that in a time in which any "binding norms for artistic design—traditional, conventional elements, topical elements […]—do no longer exist for modern art" (VA 211), sense can only any longer be achieved in that "the individual moments of a work of art come into a structural context of each other" (VA 211), a context in which "each single moment turns out to be necessary in the structure of the whole" (VA 212). Adorno holds that this is what the "concept of construction in art denotes" (VA 212): the generation of sense out of the inner principles of the dynamic that takes place in the artistic assemblage of materials.[29]

Yet Adorno also holds that construction equally denotes that the artist reigns over her or his material in the production of the work (in this, Adorno's assessment of the modern preconditions of the production of the work of art are close to Hegel's): as the sense of the work of art is not already given, it has to be willfully constructed (VA 103). But why, then, should we not understand Adorno's assessment of the contemporary state of art merely as an appeal to artists to arbitrarily command their materials, and give them whatever sense they want? Would not this also be an adequate expression of a time in which any general rules for the production of art have been abolished? Besides the fact that Adorno would not support such a view for political reasons (which will be addressed in more detail in the second section of this chapter),

[29] For an extensive discussion of the notion of construction in Adorno's aesthetics, see Robert Kaufman's "What Is Construction, What's the Aesthetic, What Was Adorno Doing?," as well as his "Red Kant, or The Persistence of the Third Critique in Adorno and Jameson."

there is also a simple logical point that shows why such an approach would not work: In order to express the singular status of the work of art which can no longer rely on any pre-established forms, the artists can also not rely on their prior whims or intentions in the production of the work. Rather, they must work at the service of the materials of the work in progress. Hence Adorno:

> Der Begriff der Konstruktion bedeutet also […] nichts anderes als die Anstrengung, rein aus der Sache und rein aus den Postulaten der Sache heraus—aber durch alle Anstrengung des künstlerischen Bewusstseins—eben jene Objektivität [any kind of objective sense] herauszuholen, die früher einmal von den den Künstlern vorgegebenen Formen, sei's wirklich oder sei's stets bloss vermeintlich, garantiert gewesen ist, ohne dass man irgendwelche Anleihen macht. (VA 103)

A certain arbitrariness on part of the artist might not be completely lost in such a work of art. In fact, the work of art will always retain this moment, as qua construction, it will always display its constructedness—the fact that it is made. Yet this arbitrariness, which is an expression of the artist's condemnation to freedom, will always also work at the service of the material, at pains to extinguish any trace in the work that does not contribute to its inner dynamic:

> Und wenn ich sage […], dass der Objektivitätsanspruch der Kunst [that is, its aspiration to be the carrier of sense] […] genau damit zusammenhängt, dass eigentlich der schöpferische Akt [that is, the creative act that the artist brings to the work] sich auf ein Infinitesimales, auf eine Art von Grenzübergang reduziert, der freilich nicht weggedacht werden kann, der aber im Grunde nichts anderes bedeutet als eben die Freiheit, dem, was die Sache rein von sich aus will, ohne Hochmut, ohne Eitelkeit und mit der äussersten Konzentration sich zu überlassen. (VA 110)

Yet what precisely does the material want on its own accord? What does it mean to produce a work of art in which materials bring about sense through their own interior dynamic? Is this even possible? Adorno would likely answer this last question in the negative. He suggests as much when he states the following:

> Nun aber ist auf der anderen Seite doch zu sagen, dass der Versuch einer reinen Konstruktion—dem Versuch also, dem Material rein dadurch Sinn einzuhauchen, dass man ihm sich vorbehaltlos überlässt—selber zum Scheitern verurteilt scheint, und zwar vor allem deshalb, weil

> dieses Material, mit dem man es dabei zu tun hat, ja selber auch nicht etwa [Naturmaterial ist]. (VA 120)

This registers a first reason why it is impossible to produce what Adorno calls a "pure construction": Any kind of material with which the artist works in the creation of the object is always and necessarily historically and culturally charged, preformed by precisely the traditions and conventions the artist attempts to avoid—the bronze material with which the sculpturer sculpts is as charged as the Petrarchan sonnet form according to which the poet writes a poem (VA 203-04). Here it is helpful to note that 'material' for Adorno means everything the artist is working with: obviously "words, colors, sounds," but also more complex, higher-degree elements of the work of art, from any "connections" up to fully-fledged artistic "techniques"—even specific artistic "forms" can become material (AT 222). In other words, material is everything artists are confronted with in the production of their work, everything "about which they have to make decisions" (AT 222). And in this sense, materials necessarily always refer beyond themselves—they always imply a context, a convention, a tradition. Adorno holds that

> diese vermeintlich nackten, reinen Stoffe […] über die dann die Konstruktion in all den Künsten verfügen kann, gar nicht nackt und rein sind, sondern dass sie unendlich viele Vermittlungen, würde man philosophisch sagen, also unendlich viel an Geist, unendlich viel an sedimentiertem Menschlichen stets auch bereits in sich enthalten. (VA 104)

Adorno also calls this the "linguisticality" (VA 104) of works of art: the fact that any kind of material communicates something, refers to something which it has achieved through spirit—through intellectual labor in history.

This first reason why it is impossible to produce a work of art as a pure construction is tied to a second and arguably more fundamental one. Adorno holds that there is a very basic "limit" to construction in art because in the realm of art, there can never "literally" be a construction (VA 130). Adorno explains this with recourse to the original technical meaning of the term construction. In engineering, construction means "a rational standardization of given elements, the law of which is […] that the thing in question, which is constructed in this way, functions" (VA 129). In this sense, a construction is a "good" construction if it manages to "fulfill" the purpose assigned to it "in reality" with an "exertion of force" that is as low as possible, "material costs" that are as low as possible, and is as "durable" as possible (VA 129). With regard to this, Adorno makes the point that in the realm of art, there is no such thing as a

"real functional purpose," as works of art are exempted from the "realm of purposes" (VA 130). More strongly even, Adorno holds that if the work of art would become a pure construction, it would abolish itself as a work of art. But why should this be the case—why do works of art necessarily serve no purpose, and why would they cease being works of art if they would become a pure construction?

Let me firstly address the first question: Why do works of art serve no purpose? It was established that the work of art, in order to be an adequate expression of its given historical preconditions, has to generate sense out of itself. Now, if it had a clear purpose, this sense would be transferred to the outside, as a purpose implies an exterior aim—for an object to work at the service of someone or something else. But sense has to come about from the inside of the work. Hence the modern work of art, by historical necessity, does not serve a purpose. A further consideration of the issue of sense in art gets us to a possible answer to the second question: Why do works of art cease to be art if they become a pure construction? For Adorno, a work of art has to have sense in order to qualify as a work of art: "the work of art as a whole, insofar as we in an essential sense understand it as art, has an intention, that it means something, that something appears in it which is more than mere appearance" (VA 74-75). In order for a work of art to have sense, in order for it to be more than mere appearance, the elements of the work have to be more than what they merely are. This comes about not only, as noted, in that the materials are always historically charged, but also in that the different material elements—or "sensuous moments," as Adorno also calls them—come into a "relation" with each other, an act in which the elements of the work transcend their mere materiality, their mere sensuousness (VA 222). Adorno suggests that no work of art can be thought without this process, as this process generates the general sense of a work of art, its "spiritual substance" (VA 222)—that which enables us to perceive it as something potentially "meaningful" (VA 223). Crucially, this means that in a work of art, there is a necessary moment of transcendence, in which the work goes beyond its literality. Literality, however, is precisely a vital aspect of a construction—in a (technical) construction, each element has an exact function in the overall structure of the thing, which is built according to the clear purpose of the thing. Adorno mentions a "suspension bridge" in this context (VA 130), which here might serve to illustrate the point: the purpose of a suspension bridge is to transport, for example, vehicles from one side of a canyon to the other. Ideally, the construction of that bridge will be built as efficiently as possible, so that each element in the bridge will serve precisely this purpose, will thus have a precise, that is, literal function. Hence if the work of art would become a pure construction, it would become a literal

thing, but if it becomes a literal thing, it loses its potential sense, and if it loses its potential sense, it would no longer be a work of art. This is why the work of art ceases to be a work of art if it becomes a pure construction. Briefly put, we can say then that construction is the principle by which the work of art in its modern preconditions aspires to attain a sense that is generated through the work itself; yet to ultimately arrive at such a sense, the work of art must eventually transcend its constructional moment.

A further term that Adorno uses in the context of explaining the transcending gesture of art that puts its at odds with its constructional aims is "semblance" (VA 74). It is useful to consider this term here as a final addition to the discussion, as it provides an important qualification of the particular ontological quality of the modern work of art, and moreover because it will be relevant for the discussion for the other basic qualities of the modern work of art. For Adorno, the sense that is generated in the work of art out of its internal dynamic is a semblance in two senses. On the one hand, it denotes the "more" that comes about in the dynamic process of sense generation apparent in works of art: semblance is the figurative gleam that emanates from the dynamic interaction of the material elements of a work, but that cannot be reduced to the mere materiality of the elements. Yet on the other hand, semblance also denotes the fact that this sense that appears to us in the dynamic relation of the elements of the work is something that is not real, but in fact only a semblance: A work of art achieves its sense in that its elements transcend their literality. This however means that the sense of the work cannot be literally determined—it is only a figment. (This is also why the work in another sense is an object without purpose: even if we would assume a purpose, this assumed purpose is necessarily only a figment—an imaginary, fictional purpose.) Hence to perceive the sense of the work of art as a semblance emphasizes the entwinement of two vital aspects of the work of art: that it is both a "more" and a "less." The work of art transcends its mere material being, yet in this at the same time makes apparent that this transcendence is but an appearance. As Adorno puts it in the *Aesthetic Theory*: "To wrest this more from that more's contingency, to gain control of its semblance, to determine it as semblance as well as to negate it as unreal: This is the idea of art" (ATHK 104).

And hence we arrive at Adorno's detailed formal account of the historical quality of the modern work of art: the modern work of art, by historical necessity, eschews given traditions and conventions—eschews being subordinated to any external sense. Yet the modern work of art, in order to remain art, has to have sense. Hence it attempts to generate sense from the inside of the work, by the logic of the work itself, the internal dynamic of its elements. As such, it

aspires to become a pure construction. In this, however, it comes into a fundamental contradiction with the both the historical and ontological necessities of modern art: historically, because it cannot rely on any exterior sense in which a pure construction is ultimately based; and ontologically, because the work of art has sense, and as such is always more than literal and thereby transcends its mere materiality, which is one of the basic characteristics of a pure construction. The formal consequence, thus, of the historical quality of the modern work of art is that it essentially becomes a contradictory object—a work of fundamental tensions, which attempts to be something it ultimately cannot be: it attempts to reveal its object according to this object's own logic, but must ultimately fail at this, for historical and ontological reasons. Crucially, Adorno in the proper fashion of the negative dialectician believes that this essential formal contradiction of modern art must not be resolved, but rather be carried out in a prominent way. Only as such will the work of art be the adequate expression of its modern historical preconditions—only in this will it realize its historical quality.

Adorno's specific account of the formally contradictive pursuits of the modern work of art that arise through its historical quality will not only turn out the be revelatory about the processes of current experimental writing (which will be considered in the subsequent chapters on contemporary literary works), but before that also help us to determine its other two basic qualities: the critical quality of the modern work of art, as well as its utopian one. In the next section, I will turn to the critical quality of the modern work of art.

The Critical Quality of Modern Art

For Adorno, the modern work of art, in its eschewal of traditions and conventions, and its essential contradictoriness, does not merely formally register its given historical preconditions. It also critically engages with these preconditions. This is the critical quality of the modern work of art. In order to elaborate Adorno's rather intricate account of the critical pursuits of modern art, resorting to Adorno's own philosophical critique of modernity is helpful. For our purposes, I will focus on one central concern of Adorno's critique of modernity that is particularly important for the discussion of his notion of modern art and consequently our assessment of the situation of contemporary literature and the status of experimental writing: Adorno's critique of rational discourse. For this, I will proceed from a consideration of the work that arguably displays Adorno's most programmatic and sustained critique of modernity, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which he wrote together with Max Horkheimer in the 1940s.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the promotion of reason and rationality in the Age of Enlightenment—that is, their establishment as the central principles of modern society—set up new paradigms that were no doubt beneficial in many ways for the development of humanity, as they substantially contributed to laying the foundations of modern human rights and advancements in various fields of research and technology. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer also perceive some precarious tendencies in this promotion: For them, it introduces a completely different approach of how we relate to the objects that surround us. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer describe this as the transition from "myth" to "enlightenment"—from a cultural state that is essentially founded on the belief in myths to one which is based in the principles of reason and rationality (DA 10-11), which can be exemplarily observed in the change that takes place in human beings' relation to nature: In mythical preconditions, that is, before the advent of the Enlightenment, human beings perceived nature (and thereby vicariously the objects that surrounded them) as an autonomous and spontaneous force—nature was heterogeneous, ambiguous, and proliferous. Adorno and Horkheimer's assessment of this state is twofold: it is both one of harmony and fear (DA 20-23). Importantly, both relations—harmonious and fearful—for Adorno and Horkheimer imply a mimetic approach to nature: human beings see nature as a creative force and attempt to bring about an image of nature that is formed according to nature's principles—human beings attempt to imitate nature, to adapt to it, either in subordination (if the relation is governed by fear) or in accordance with it (if the relation is seen as harmonious). Mimesis here means that the movements and works of nature are not yet rationally recognized by human beings and have therefore not yet become calculable. In a mimetic relation, human beings see nature not as an object but as a subject the spontaneous, creative force of which they attempt to imitate. In this sense, human beings attempt not to explain nature but rather to re-enact its movements, inspired by it. Yet the potential waywardness of nature is also an important aspect of this relation: As human beings are not able to predict the movements of nature, they are at its mercy, and therefore fear nature. This basic fear consequently leads to the attempt of human beings to wrench free of this mythical relation by means of their reason and rationality—this for Adorno and Horkheimer is the beginning of the rise of the enlightened spirit. In the course of this process, they hold, the power relation between human beings and nature is inverted: in the transition from the mythical state to the enlightened one, human beings become masters over nature. They do so by identifying nature as such: nature becomes an object of cognition, of science, as the human being becomes the cognitive subject. Crucially, Adorno and Horkheimer

hold that this actively enforced separation of human beings and nature into cognitive subject and object of cognition is accompanied by an act of alienation—as human beings become masters over nature, they become estranged from it. In this, the detrimental character of this development becomes apparent. Enlightenment as an overcoming of the arbitrary force of nature also leads to our alienation from it, a surrender of our organic relationship with it, and eventually our manipulation and mastery over it (DA 15). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the transition from a mythical state to an enlightened one is the beginning of the "administered world" (DA ix): the consequence of our power over nature is our power over other human beings and ourselves. Concretely put, it consequently means the suppression of the masses by ruling classes, parties, or groups, and the repression of our drives trough the self.

This transition from myth to enlightenment becomes acutely manifest in our use of language. Scientific discourse, which begins its advance in the transition from mythical times to enlightened ones, turns the "word" of language into a "sign" (DA 24). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the conversion of the word into a sign (which is accompanied by the separation of science and poetry) is the linguistic realization of the mastery of nature. Language as a system of signs brings about a rational system of calculation, in which the objects of nature can be recognized and classified. In mythical times, Adorno and Horkheimer hold, language was not the sign of nature, but its "image" (DA 17). Language as image means the cohesion of expression and intention, the materiality of the image and the sublation of every part in the whole of the appearance, in which everything that is there appears as such: the resembled appears wholly in the resemblance, as the resemblance makes apparent everything that is there. In mythical times, the relation between language and nature was governed by resemblance and familiarity. This expresses not only the equality between language and nature, but also their difference, in that they are not identical. In the language of science, resemblance turns into representation—the exact reproduction and thereby recognition and mastery of the natural object in rational language.

With regard to this mastery Adorno and Horkheimer hold that it is based in a false conviction, as the rational language of science can never wholly attain its object. In the act of cognition and determination of the object, something is left out of the object: our concepts of things do not comprehensively cover them. Concepts, based on the rational sign system of scientific language, explain objects to us, but they do not capture them in their fullness and familiarity. Rather, conceptual language makes objects available to us, and disposable, as every sign system is essentially arbitrary—for being founded on a symbolic relation between sign and

object—and can thereby be charged, to a certain extent, with ideology, which is ultimately not interested in capturing the object in its fullness, but rather with fitting it into a belief-system at the service of which it will then function. (Naturally, Adorno and Horkheimer see this emphatically realized in capitalist economy: rational language is a strong aid to the capitalist exchange principle, according to which every thing can be replaced by another thing.)

From this vantage point, Adorno's writings and in particular his major theoretical work, *Negative Dialectics*, can be seen as one comprehensive attempt to establish a form of philosophy that might do justice again to the object and restore something of that which has been lost in the process of rational identification. Any kind of rational, that is, conceptual identification necessarily misses out on some aspects of the identified object and yields that which Adorno famously calls the "nonidentical," which is the result of the act of identification: that which is not captured in the process of rational identification and is thereby repressed by it. A negative dialectics attempts to restore the nonidentical of the object, by establishing the contradictions that arise from the identifying procedures of rationality—from the synthesis of a traditional dialectics, hence the negativity of Adorno's variant of this philosophical method—and by attempting to find a form of conceptual expression which, even if it cannot escape the shortcomings of these procedures (as it necessarily remains embedded in them), recovers something of the object that has been lost in them.

In this project of a comprehensive critique of rationality, modern art attains an especially important status for Adorno. In a nutshell, Adorno claims that modern art's role in this project is its presentation of a particular kind of challenge to rational discourse—namely by being both rational yet also that which goes beyond rationality. This, then, is how the historical contradiction of modern art is sublated in a critical way: art is at the same rational and also beyond rationality. Unpacking this contradictory claim will help us establish the critical quality of the modern work of art. Simon Jarvis's comment on the importance of the aesthetic to Adorno's philosophy is illuminative in this respect:

> For some twentieth-century thinkers aesthetics has seemed a discipline of subsidiary importance. It is regarded as heavily dependent on prior epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions and hence as secondary to epistemological or metaphysical inquiry. Its significance for Adorno's thought, however, can scarcely be overestimated. This is because of the way in which, as we have seen Adorno and Horkheimer arguing in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, art has been systematically separated from science in the language of modern rationality. Adorno wants

> aesthetic theory to challenge this separation by showing that art has a cognitive content, albeit a content which cannot in any simple way be extracted in a series of propositions. (90)

Jarvis argues that on the one hand, one of the central imports of Adorno's aesthetic theory was to re-establish the "cognitive content" of art—its rationality—in view of the twentieth-century cultural developments that have shown an advancement the separation of value spheres that Max Weber diagnosed for modern society (45-49). This separation relegated art from the scientific, rational pursuits of cognition: modern twentieth-century culture no longer accepted art as a discourse that could produce knowledge. Against this current, Adorno retorts that art is in fact cognitive, is rational, or as he more emphatically and famously put it: that art has a "truth content" (ATHK 157-80). Importantly, as Jarvis notes, Adorno not only held that art has truth, but on the other hand also that this truth is fundamentally different from the kind of truths that scientific discourse generates—what Jarvis calls the "non-propositional" (90) truth of art.[30] This relates to our initial claim. It emphasizes that art presents a challenge to rationality in a two-fold way: Firstly, by being rational, which challenges the strict separation of scientific (academic) and artistic discourse; secondly, in that it displays a form of rationality which goes beyond the rational procedures of scientific discourse.[31] In order to explain this further, let me proceed from the established view of art that Adorno struggled with in his time. This will give us a vital input for a further clarification of the critical quality of modern art.

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[30] This is arguably the central issue that governed Adorno's thoughts on art in the context of the epistemological disputes that took place in his time (as documented in the book *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*). In Anthony J. Cascardi's view, the last decades have shown an intensification of the processes of rationalization that Adorno addresses in his aesthetics—processes that not only seek to disqualify art's claim to truth but also, in that, establish positivist truth accounts as singularly authoritative. In his view, this all the more demands, today, a return to Adorno's aesthetics and his reflections on the truth content of art (Cascardi 37). Cascardi is not alone in his assessment of the current cultural climate and his call for a restoration of the proper truth content of art.

Beyond the contemporary reception of Adorno's aesthetics, there are a number of scholars that pursue a similar objective. To mention only two pertinent and influential texts in this respect: a collection of essays on recent German aesthetics, titled *Falsche Gegensätze*; and, famously, Alain Badiou's *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. More generally, there has been a resurgence of aesthetic questions in both philosophy and literary studies in recent years, which seems to substantiate Cascardi's claim that we need a renewed scholarly appreciation of the cognitive and cultural importance of art today: Works like *The New Aestheticism*, Isobel Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic*, or Jonathan Loesberg's *A Return to Aesthetics*, while quite different in their pursuits and not centrally concerned with the relation between art and truth, all in their way attempt to re-establish the particularity of art and the aesthetic against reductive discourses that in their view prevail in contemporary academia.

The current return to questions of artistic truth and the generally renewed interest in the particularity of the aesthetic seem to substantiate my claim that Adorno's aesthetics is an important pre-text for our time.

[31] For Ruth Sonderegger, this entwinement is of the utmost importance to the potential success of the critical pursuit of art. For her discussion of this entwinement, see her entry on "Ästhetische Theorie" in the *Adorno Handbuch*, especially page 420.

Adorno in his lectures on aesthetics notes that art, not only in rational academic discourse but also in popular belief, constitutes a "domain of irrationality, […] a domain of the unconscious, […] a realm in which one is discharged from the criteria of logicity" (VA 21). Adorno calls this a "prephilosophical" (VA 21) view of art, the "conception of art as something merely intuitive and hence something separated from thought, from any effort, any strain" (VA 30). Art in this sense is a mere playing field of the unconscious and the irrational, as Adorno states: a merely intuitive thing. This last popular description of art as intuition is particularly informative for our purposes. But what does it mean, precisely, that art is merely something intuitive? Does Adorno mean that art is seen, in both scientific and popular discourse, as something lively, vivid, even picturesque, and nothing more than that? Already the translation of the German *anschaulich* as intuitive generates certain potential terminological problems. Yet precisely these translational issues might yield some clarifications about what Adorno means when he speaks of the "conception of art as something merely intuitive."

As Waltraud Naumann-Beyer remarks, *Anschauung* is a term that is notoriously difficult to translate from the German into another language, as it has acquired, through its history, a depth and variety of meanings (212). Arguably, all of these meanings somehow feed into Adorno's use of the term. Naumann-Beyer establishes that in French and English there is a whole set of terms which work as translations of *Anschauung*, all of which basically derive from the Latin terms "visio, intuitio, evidentia, [and] contemplatio" (212). *Anschauung*, hence, can mean 'vision,' 'intuition,' 'evidence,' or 'contemplation,' in the many different senses of these individual terms, and also everything in between them. In order to establish at least some clarity about the term, Naumann-Beyer proposes a basic distinction between two types of *Anschauung* that govern its various contextually specific meanings: on the one hand, there is the "elevatory-emphatic" (213) type of *Anschauung*, on the other there is the "sober" (216) type of *Anschauung*. The elevatory-emphatic type suggests that in the process of an *Anschauung*, the experiencing subject gains a kind of insight of the thing which it experiences that has more "depth or height" (213) than insights gained through the other human faculties. This is *Anschauung* as a quasi-religious experience—a kind of vision—according to which art becomes an exceptional realm that lies beyond the procedures of reason and rationality. The sober type has two related meanings: according to the first meaning, an *Anschauung* is nothing more than the "mere" or "immediate givenness" of a thing (in our representation of it) (216), in the Kantian sense of the term; according to the second meaning, an *Anschauung* is "the mediation of something by another thing; but without an elevatory emphasis" (216). Hence

according to the first meaning of the sober type, the work of art is reduced to a mere object to be processed by reason and rationality. And in terms of the second meaning, the work of art becomes a mere aid in communication, which presents an object from another discourse in a "better" or "more vivid" yet not higher way (216); for example, it conveys an abstract notion through a concrete, material object. One might think of the related German term *Veranschaulichung* here: art as a kind of visualization, illustration, or exemplification, meant for the uses of "pleasure" and "instruction" (217).

Importantly, in both types of *Anschauung*, the work of art is separated from the processes of reason and rationality: it either lies beyond these processes (as in the elevatory-emphatic *Anschauung*), is subordinated to (the second kind of the sober type) or even excluded from (the first kind of the sober type) them. Now, Adorno precisely inverts this point, holding that art is very much embedded in these processes—this is what he means when he argues that art is rational, that it has "logicity." One might argue here that this is already suggested in the second kind of the sober type of *Anschauung*. After all, it seems to suggest rather complementary relationship between the work of art and that which it presents in illustration or exemplification. Naumann-Beyer quotes the famous passage from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with regard to this issue: "'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'" (216). In this sense, works of art need reason and rationality, as reason and rationality need art. But this is precisely not what Adorno has in mind when he states that art has logicity. To say that art has logicity does not mean that it is contributive or complementary to the processes of reason and rationality—such a conception would still be based on their separation. Art, rather than being a complementary part to the processes of reason and rationality, takes up these processes in itself: art itself is rational.

Here we arrive at the point where the second and arguably more vital aspect of Adorno's notion of art that challenges rationality comes into play: art is a challenge to rationality not only because it is rational—it does not simply replicate the processes of rationality (and reason)—but in the act of taking up these processes in itself, it also qualitatively changes them. Why is this case? Because art can, after all, never fully transcend its *anschauliche* character—nor should it. As Adorno puts it in the *Aesthetic Theory*, art is

> Begriff so wenig wie Anschauung, und eben dadurch protestiert sie wider die Trennung. Ihr Anschauliches differiert von der sinnlichen Wahrnehmung, weil es stets auf ihren Geist sich bezieht. Sie ist Anschauung eines Unanschaulichen, begriffsähnlich ohne Begriff. An den Begriffen setzt Kunst ihre mimetische, unbegriffliche Schicht frei. (AT 148)

Art is not merely an *Anschauung* because its material is not merely sensuous data, but sensuous data that refers beyond itself to something spiritual. This spiritual aspect of art is that which brings it into the proximity of reason and rationality, yet it does not become purely rational, as the spiritual always and necessarily remains tied back to the material, the sensuous: art transfers concepts to their sensuous character—their materiality—while it also goes beyond mere sensuousness in the spiritualization of its material. Thereby, it "protests" (ATHK 126) against the separation of *Begriff* and *Anschauung*, the spiritual and the sensual.[32]

This of course is akin to the peculiar contradictory dynamic between construction and sense in the modern work of art in its specific historical preconditions. We need only remind ourselves that Adorno identifies the spirit of a work of art with its sense. In the context of the dynamic between construction and sense, this means that the pure purposeless construction that modern art aspires to be is something like a pure intuition, as in a pure construction, each element has a precise literal meaning and thereby is an element of mere materiality and sensuousness. The essential purposelessness of the work of art is also important in this respect, as an exterior purpose of the object would again subsume it under a rational principle, that is, the work would come to fulfill a rational function. Yet as we have seen, the work of art has to generate sense in order to be art, and in this act, it transcends the mere materiality of its construction. The sense, as the spiritual aspect, is the unintuitable in the intuition: that which is literally invisible, immaterial—that which betrays that the work of art is no mere sensuous thing. Yet this spiritual aspect (the sense of the work of art) is, as we have seen, only a semblance—a figment, an illusion, a fiction—as it arises from and necessarily remains closely tied to the materiality of the elements that yield it by coming into a dynamic relation with each other. This is the "intuition of what is not intuitable" (ATHK 126) in the work of art, its contradictory in-between state between concept and intuition.

Yet why exactly is the peculiar sense of the work of art to be identified with the rational character of art—and also with that which points beyond it? Adorno notes that in its generation of sense, art adheres to "all the formal constituents that characterize [rational] thought" (VA 303). That is, "synthesis, differentiation, recollection, expectation, the making of proportions"

[32] As we will now properly return to Adorno's discussion of the cognitive and thereby critical import of modern art, I want to note that, subsequently, I will for practical reasons use the pair of terms *intuition/intuitive* when discussing Adorno's notion of *Anschauung/anschaulich*, on the assumption that the reader will understand them in this context to contain the meanings established through Naumann-Beyer's discussion of *Anschauung*.

(VA 303), all figure as vital aspects in the experience that generates sense in the work of art: we only detect sense if we make recourse to these formal constituents. This is how works of art present themselves as an "intrinsically motivated complex of sense" (VA 21). Consequently, in our aesthetic attitude, we assume that the object in front of us makes, in a certain way, sense, that all its individual aspects are somehow related in an inner dynamic of the work of art (even if the work displays itself in broken or fragmentary form). This is the rational aspect of the sense of the work of art, that which takes it beyond its mere materiality.

At the same time, however, Adorno holds that works of art lack one crucial trait that is arguably essential to any act of logical reasoning: the act of objectification, or, after Husserl, "the objectifying act" (VA 303), that is, "an act in which something becomes objective to us in a determinative manner" (Drummond 149). Importantly, an objectifying act "presents an object to consciousness" and "establishes both the act's objective sense and its referent" (149). In Adorno's loose and implicative adoption of Husserl's term, the objectifying act means the forming of a determinate concept of a thing by which then the concept becomes a clear reference to that thing in the act of this identification. And this is precisely what the work of art does not or even cannot do: it neither works as a determinate and clear reference to a thing, nor does it allow the recipient of the work to fully determine it. (This, again, reflects the essential purposelessness of the work of art.) According to Adorno, this is "the highly peculiar logic [of art], in which everything remains, but in which the relation to something predicated, something asserted, to an Is [*ein Ist*], ceases to exist, a logic without copula [that is, without a grammatical identification], one might almost say" (VA 303).

What is the reason for this? Generally speaking, one could say that this has to do with the fact that the perceived complex of sense of the work of art leaves it open to the recipient to determine the potential specific meanings (or lack thereof) of this complex of sense. As Adorno puts it in the *Aesthetic Theory*: "The logic of artworks demonstrates that it cannot be taken literally, in that it grants every particular event and resolution an incomparably greater degree of latitude than logic otherwise does" (ATHK 181). There is not just one way to integrate the particular events of a work of art in its experience, nor is there, consequently, a single solution for it—that is, there is no authoritative interpretation of the work. The distinction between sense and meaning is important for properly understanding this point. Jan Urbich in his *Literarische Ästhetik* notes the following about this distinction:

> 'Sinn' bezeichnet im literarischen Kontext […] in 'objektiver' Perspektive sinnvollerweise die 'Gesamtbedeutung' (Jannidid, Lauer, Martinez, Winko 2003, S. 27) eines Werkes, d.h. den Einheitspunkt der Vielfalt der Zweitbedeutungen, der notwendig angenommen werden muss, damit die formensprachlichen Zusammenhänge auch wirklich Zusammenhang haben und die literarischen Bedeutungen sich auf denselben Bedeutungsraum beziehen. (98-99)

According to Urbich, we must always assume a general meaning in the interpretation of the literary work of art—a basic theme, moral, or message. Without such a point of orientation, Urbich holds, we would not be able to establish connections between the individual parts of the work and forge an interpretation of its potential meanings. This general meaning is the sense of the work of art on which its potential secondary meanings are based. If we modify this slightly, we arrive at what Adorno has in mind when discussing sense and meaning in the work of art: With Adorno, we must not necessarily assume a general meaning in the work of art, but simply and more basically that there is a kind of (however loose) unity to which the individual elements of a work contribute in a dynamic way. This, then, is the intrinsically motivated complex of sense—the quasi-rational character of the work of art that allows us to assume that the work is meaningful, that its elements run together in a way so as to suggest meanings in-between them. Yet importantly, in the work of art, this process is, as stated, not a determinate one: We assume that the work makes sense, has a certain logic, reason, or rationale. We must do this for without this assumption, the work of art would fall back into being a mere intuition. Yet we have no clear instructions about how precisely the individual elements of a work of art dynamically relate to each other (and how the work of art relates to other works of art and certain conceptions of art as such), as there is no clear identification in the work itself: the work does not have a copula, that is, no judgment, proposition, or purpose, according to which it comes to represent, as a predicate, a certain subject. This is what brings the work of art back to its intuitive character.

In generating this irresolvable dynamic between intuition and concept, art critically challenges the procedures of reason and rationality in that it complicates and thereby reveals the one-sidedness of the identifications of objects in rational processes—art's rendering of an object is open, contradictory: intuitively rational, rationally intuitive. Of course, this is still a very general assessment of the peculiar critical dynamic that takes place between the conceptual and the intuitive in the work of art. Moreover, the way this dynamic was depicted in its general assessment can be held to be fulfilled in any work of art, as almost any work, to a certain extent, creates a structure of potential polysemy and ambiguities—so it does not seem to be really helpful to determine the specific status of the modern work of art and, consequently, that of

experimental writing in our contemporary cultural context. Yet in fact precisely because of this is it very useful for our purposes: the point that the modern dynamic between concept and intuition as it was just presented can be attributed to almost any kind of art—be it traditional or avant-garde—betrays the fact that the modern work, and consequently the experimental one, are not a forms of art that are fundamentally different from other kinds of art. Rather, they make apparent that which lies in any work of art, yet in a more emphatic way. Adorno suggests as much when he states the following:

> Und diese Gebrochenheit des Sinnzusammenhangs bedeutet eben nichts anderes, als dass in der neuen Kunst, und zwar in allen Bereichen, das Kunstwerk in der Anschaulichkeit nicht mehr sich erschöpft. Aber es verhält auch darin sich so, wie es sich [...] in vielem Betracht überhaupt mit der neuen Kunst verhält. Das heisst: Es werden in ihr nur Dinge evident, sie nimmt nur Dinge offen auf, macht sie, wenn ich so sagen darf, thematisch, die in Wirklichkeit die gesamte Kunst eigentlich bereits durchherrscht haben. (VA 297-98)

This is a crucial point, not in the least because it undermines certain accusations against formally experimental art that see in its promotion a renewed separatist discourse—between high and low, elitist and popular art—in contemporary culture. More importantly, however, this claim suggests how we might arrive at an understanding of the more specific engagement of the conceptual-intuitive dynamic of art in the modern work: by considering in what ways the dynamic between intuition and concept might be engaged in a conspicuous, that is, formally prominent way. This emphasis, then, also displays the critical quality of the modern work of art: it is an extensive formal engagement with the peculiar character of rational discourse and its potential limits.

How, then, can the tension between intuition and concept be conspicuously realized in the form of the modern work of art? If we perceive intuition and concept as two ends of an aesthetic spectrum, I suggest that a conspicuous rendering of the tension will be one which can be located at the ends of that spectrum and at its transitional point. In order to explain why this is the case, let me address once more the question why works of art are no mere intuitions, but are also conceptual (that is, rational), but from a slightly different angle provided by Adorno in a for Adorno untypically straightforward way. In a longer passage in his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno elaborates the intuitive-conceptual character of works of art via a reference to the philosopher Theodor A. Meyer. Meyer's approach to the issue is also of particular interest to our purposes, as it concerns the specifics of the artistic medium of literature. As Adorno

recounts, Meyer in his reading experience observed that the popular claim (ever since Lessing's *Laookon*) that "poetry inspires in us sensuous images, that is, representations, intuitions—that this claim about the vividness of poetry through the arousal of images is not true" (VA 298). Adorno humorously notes that Meyer came to this conclusion "with a pleasant Swabian naivety," realizing, as he was he reading poetry, "that in the reading of any great poetry, the sensuous images, the quasi-optical representations, did not ensue" (VA 298). For Adorno, following Meyer's consideration, the reason for this is precisely that literature has words as its medium, which by their nature have a very basic proximity to concepts.[33] As literature is language, it is always and necessarily "suffused with the nonsensuous, in accordance with the oxymoron of nonsensuous intuition" (ATHK 127).

In this respect, one modern work of art that makes the tension between intuition and concept emphatically apparent is the work that resides at the transitional point of this spectrum: the point where the intuitive verges on the conceptual, and where the conceptual in turn verges on the intuitive. What does this look like concretely? In literature, we might find this in a work that is made up seemingly simple elements, that is, elements that are easily comprehensible and refer to certain sensuous, that is, intuitive objects. This work then generates a peculiar dynamic of these elements so that they transcend their seeming referential materiality and mere sensuousness. In this act, the intuition becomes nonsensuous—conceptual. However, whatever is yielded in this dynamic act is something that we cannot actually contain conceptually. Hence what is yielded is something that cannot ultimately be brought to consciousness in that it cannot be fully reified—the imagination fails at this. This gesture, in turn, will revert the rational process of bringing the elements of the work into a dynamic relation, by which their intuitive character is again brought to the fore. In this sense, as Adorno pointedly notes, the modern work of art takes to an extreme the gesture of "fantastic art" that "presents something nonexistent as existing" (ATHK 25), yet whereas the latter presents us with something impossible as if it were real (Adorno probably has in mind here the adherence to realist conventions of much fantastic art), as if it were "immediately existing" (ATHK 109), the former does not allow for any such reification. Adorno also likens such a modern work to a "tour de force" that performs a most difficult "equilibristic act" (ATHK 140), by finding "the point of indifference where the possibility of the impossible is hidden" (ATHK 140), yet in the sense "as if the possible were

[33] Adorno here also notes that the distinctive conceptual character of literature does not relieve the other arts from the tension between intuition and concept: artistic forms like painting and music also proceed conceptually, in that they also in one way or another adhere to the formal constituents of rational thought (VA 298).

for them possible" (ATHK 222). Let me put this in different terms in order to elaborate this dynamic in a more straightforward way: the work of art that proceeds at the transitional point is that which generates a high tension between the intuitive character of art and its rational procedures. The works of art that achieve this are those that conspicuously integrate aspects of the intuitive (here in the sense of vividness: empirical, concrete words, simple words, words that refer to the sensuous), with aspects of the conceptual (abstraction in the overall structure of the work, a strong implication of rationalization, rational procedures). Adorno suggests this as well when he states that

> in den Kunstwerken [ist] alles und noch das Sublimste [i.e., that which transcends our imagination, our consciousness, and our conceptual capabilities] an das Daseiende [i.e., the concrete, the empirical, etc.] gekettet […]. [Phantasie rückt] was immer die Kunstwerke an Daseiendem absorbieren, in Konstellationen, durch welche sie zum Anderen des Daseins werden. (AT 258)

Yet as noted, generating an extreme form of the tension between intuition and concept—as the extension of the transitional point from one to the other—is not the only possibility by which modern works might achieve an emphasis of this tension and thereby a critique of reason and rationality. The other options are more easily conceived: The modern work of art also prominently unfolds its critical potential if it closely moves towards one of the ends of the spectrum, that is, if it approximates a wholly intuitive or a wholly conceptual state. A modern work that approximates a wholly intuitive state would be one that engages with just the one side of the dynamic discussed above: such a work proceeds by the use of simple, empirical, sensual materials, and attempts to produce a form which, as a whole, represents a simple empirical object. According to Adorno, this would be a work of art that has become "speechless" and merely expresses a "*Here I am* or *This is what I am*, a selfhood not first excised by identificatory thought from the interdependence of entities" (ATHK 147; emphasis in original). Or as he puts it in a more poetic (and comical) way, the modern work of this kind becomes as expressive as a rhinoceros: "Thus the rhinoceros, that mute animal, seems to say: 'I am a rhinoceros'" (ATHK 147). In turn, a modern work that approximates a merely conceptual state would be one that extensively engages with the other side of the dynamic as discussed above: a work that extensively proceeds by the use of concepts, rational procedures, and rational argument. This would be a work located at the boundary between artistic and

rational discourse. In literature, we might imagine a text that becomes almost essayistic—a kind of quasi-rational, quasi-argumentative treatise.

As we will see in the following chapters of this book, experimental writing is essentially concerned with bringing the tension between the intuitive and the conceptual to the fore in one way or another. This is its critical quality, its challenge to rational discourse: by generating conspicuous tensions between the intuitive and the conceptual in the presentation of its object, experimental writing in a contradictory way makes apparent those aspects of the object that are repressed in the process of its rational identification. For the purpose of preparing the readings that will follow in the next part, I want to introduce an additional and more specifically literary-critical term here that further elucidates how this emphatic critical engagement of the tension between intuition and concept is realized in modern art: that of 'estrangement.' As the elaborated tension between intuition and concept is quite abstract, this term is helpful, for it elaborates in a less remote way how experimental works carry out the tension introduced above. Also, a recourse to this central term of Adorno's aesthetics will allow us to briefly relate his notion of experimental art to another notion that is firmly established in literary critical discourse and to which Adorno's notion of estrangement betrays a certain proximity: Brecht's notion of the alienation effect (what in the original German is called the *Verfremdungseffekt*). A comparison of Adorno's estrangement with Brecht's alienation effect will further clarify the critical import of the modern work of art—and consequently that of experimental writing.

What role, then, does estrangement play in the context of the tension between intuition and concept? As established, Adorno in his critique of modernity holds that we live in an estranged society, largely due to the described processes of reason and rationality. Modern art responds to this situation: it is both the formal expression of and challenge to this estranged state. In his lectures, Adorno discusses the possible ways by which art can confront the estranged state of society. In this, he extensively considers the common assumption that an artistic realism is the most feasible way to engage with the modern estrangement of society: If art wants to be an expression of a social state of estrangement, and a challenge to it, then it is important that this social state of estrangement is rendered as tangibly as possible in the work of art, which can then present to us concretely what is wrong with this state and how it might be changed, in a "partisanship with the oppressed" (VA 91). In order for art to have this effect, "empirical reality" (VA 235) must enter the work as undistortedly as possible: Art must represent reality in a way that is as close as possible to how we experience reality outside of art. This is what artistic realism is commonly assumed to achieve.

In Adorno's view, this assumption is erroneous, as it suggests that our experience of the estranged world, which the realist work of art represents, is itself not estranged—that we have a direct, undistorted access to empirical reality. Yet Adorno holds that this is not the case: our experience of the world is itself estranged—what immediately appears to us as empirical reality is already distorted (VA 235).[34] Hence the work of art, in order to be a proper expression of the estrangement of the world, must itself be an estrangement of this estrangement:

> Nur dadurch, dass die entfremdete Gestalt, in der die sogenannte natürliche Welt uns entgegentritt, von dem Kunstwerk selber aufgehoben und in eine andere versetzt wird, wird sie ebenso als eine entfremdete durch das Kunstwerk bestimmt, das dadurch uns gewissermassen mit fremden Augen in die Welt zurückschauen lehrt, die uns bereits mit fremden Augen zwingt, sie anzusehen. (VA 236)

Adorno suggests how the modern work of art might proceed in this: the properly estranged work is one in which the "empirical elements of reality"—that is, any kind of element in the work of art that we might assume to be a direct representation of the empirical world as we apprehend it outside of art—are "heteronomous" with respect to the overall form of the work. The overall form of the work for Adorno reflects our encompassing experience of the world, and hence the heteronomy between the empirical elements of the work and the overall form of the work reflects our estranged experience of reality (VA 236). In this, it reverberates the modern work's contradictions between construction and sense, between intuition and concept.

According to Adorno, realism in this respect is the most precarious of styles in art, as it suggests that the work of art has a direct access to reality, and that our experience thereof is unestranged. As Adorno notes about so-called realist literature:

> Wenn irgend etwas von der Realität ablenkt, dann sind es die pseudo-realistischen Gestaltungen des verschiedensten Typus […]—, diese Art sogenannter realistischer Literatur, deren Realismus

[34] As Adorno puts it in the *Aesthetic Theory*:

> Denn was an dieser aufgeht [i.e., what appears to us as empirical reality], koinzidiert so wenig mit der empirischen Realität [i.e., with empirical reality as such] wie, nach Kants grossartig widerspruchsvoller Konzeption, die Dinge an sich mit der Welt der 'Phänomene', der kategorial konstituierten Gegenstände. (AT 104)

Adorno's famous dispute with Georg Lukács about modern art circles around precisely this issue (VA 316-17). For further material on this dispute, see Adorno's essay "Reconciliation Under Duress" and Lukács's "Realism in the Balance" in the reader *Aesthetics and Politics*.

> genauso verlogen und so scheinhaft ist wie der des nächstbesten Films, in dem zwar jedes Telefon genauso ist, wie es in der Wirklichkeit aussieht, und in dem jeder Briefkopf einer Firma so aussieht, wie ein Bankbriefkopf aussieht, in der aber kein Mensch so ist, wie die Menschen sind. Ich sage also: Genauso verlogen wie dieser Filmrealismus ist jener Realismus auch. Er hat eine durchaus ablenkende Funktion, während viel eher der Schock, der von den avancierten Kunstwerken ausgeht, und die Verfremdung der Welt, die sie bewirken, doch auch—auf welchen Vermittlungswegen auch immer—in Praxis übergehen kann. (VA 318; see also AT 341)

Modern art, in order to be an expression of the estranged state of society and a practical challenge of it, cannot adhere to the principles of artistic realism. Rather, art must estrange its relation to the world, must problematize it. This however does not mean that art must become decidedly anti-realist. While realism is certainly the one literary style that among other artistic styles is the most dubious for Adorno, it is not the only and maybe not even the main target of Adorno's critical reflection of artistic pursuits in an estranged society. More fundamentally, Adorno's rejection of artistic realism is directed against any broadly established artistic tradition and convention: the effect of established artistic traditions and conventions is that they become naturalized, and thereby make us believe that they communicate in a transparent way a given subject matter, which we in turn accept as given. Yet transparency is precisely that which the modern art of an estranged society can no longer achieve. Hence art must give expression of this state by estranging conventions—by becoming itself estranged:

> Die Entfremdung der Welt ist […] im Kunstwerk überhaupt nur dadurch wiederzugeben—und ich glaube, an dieser Stelle hat Brecht als Theoretiker jedenfalls etwas sehr Bedeutendes gesehen—, dass man darauf verzichtet, das Vertraute, weil es nämlich ein Konventionelles und Präformiertes ist, als Vertrautes hinzustellen. Die Aufgabe der Kunst ist es wirklich, das Vertraute zu entfremden und auf diese Weise in eine Perspektive zu rücken, die die Perspektive des Wesens und nicht mehr die der blossen Erscheinung ist. (VA 128)

Artistic conventions make things appear familiar, yet the familiar thing is not the thing as it is, but rather the thing in a distorted, estranged, and ideologically charged way. Modern art must revert this process by estranging the familiar, in order for us to become aware that the familiar thing, as it appears to us, is but a semblance. Through this, we might then negatively approach the essence of the thing: by becoming aware of the essence's absence in its appearance.

The reference to Brecht in the above quote is interesting in this context. Adorno acknowledges his debt to Brecht in his discussion of artistic estrangement. Yet does this make

Adorno's artistic estrangement a mere kind of the Brechtian alienation effect? After all, Brecht's notion of alienating art was that alienation effects introduce elements into the work of art that shatter artistic conventions with the aim of pulling spectators (Brecht established his notion of estrangement in theatrical terms, as the theatre was his preferred artistic medium) out of their complacency and passivity and become reflective of the action that they witness on stage. This is precisely the aspect of Brecht's notion of art that Adorno supports: modern art is a means to estrange conventions and the familiar in order to make us critically reflect that which we are confronted with in a given work of art (AT 361).[35] Yet here, the difference between Adorno and Brecht also becomes apparent. For Adorno, Brecht understood that in order to raise consciousness in the recipient one has to break with established artistic conventions. However, Brecht did not stop there. In addition, he also filled his works with didactic messages like the following ones:

> dass es die Reichen besser haben als die Armen, dass es unrecht auf der Welt zugeht, dass bei formaler Gleichheit Unterdrückung fortbesteht, dass private Güte von der objektiven Bösheit zu ihrem Gegenteil gemacht wird; dass—freilich eine dubiose Weisheit—Güte der Maske des Bösen bedarf. (AT 365)

Adorno holds that this is rather unfortunate, as this didacticism precisely hinders the aim of Brecht's alienating work to provoke consciousness and critical thought in the recipient. For consciousness and critical thought only "originates" in the "ambiguity" of the work, against which the "didactic style" of Brecht is "intolerant" (ATHK 361). This succinctly articulates what artistic estrangement means for Adorno: The primary aim of estrangement in modern art—its shattering of artistic conventions—is not to impart political messages, but to set up ambiguities that necessitate a critical reflection of that which is presented to us in art and the particular form in which it is presented.[36] This, then, is the concrete result of the contradictions

[35] There is a whole list of potentially alienating effects in theatre, among them the introduction of epic elements in the play and the breaking of the fourth wall by having the characters address the audience during the staging of the play. See Brecht's essays "On Experiments in Epic Theatre," "On Experimental Theatre," and "*Verfremdung* Effects in Chinese Acting" in the collection *Brecht on Theatre*. It might be noted here that Adorno's artistic estrangement is not only close to Brecht's alienation effect, but also to Viktor Shklovsky's notion of literary enstrangement (or defamiliarization), as elaborated in his essay "Art as Device." For a discussion of the similarities between Adorno's notion of artistic estrangement and Shklovsky's notion of enstrangement, see Eysteinsson 44-47; Schweighauser 76-80.

[36] I should emphasize that while Adorno here clearly holds that commitment is secondary to modern art, he still concedes that, in the case of Brecht, the "quality" of modern works is "inseparable from the commitment in that it becomes their mimetic element" (ATHK 321). This suggests that Adorno's attitude towards commitment is more

the modern work of art sets up: the historical contradiction of sense and construction and, in terms that more specifically reflect the rational procedures that have contributed substantially to the estranged state of society, the contradiction between concept and intuition. In emphatically carrying out these contradictions without resolving them, the modern work of art becomes of field of tensions that incessantly stimulates critical reflection in the recipient. This is the critical quality of the modern work of art: It estranges conventions and sets up contradictions that formally reflect the estrangement of modern society, yet without spelling out any concrete instruction how to change it. Only this provokes reflection, and contributes to the "cultivation of consciousness" in the recipient (ATHK 317).[37]

As such, the modern work of art is therefore not just an expression of the given historical preconditions of art, but also presents a critical challenge to this situation. Yet the historical and critical qualities of the modern work of art do not yet comprehensively reveal its potential. This becomes apparent if we once more consider what Adorno notes about artistic estrangement: "The purpose of art is […] to estrange the familiar and to thereby offer a perspective of it that is the perspective of its essence and no longer merely that of its appearance" (VA 128). So far, the estranging gesture of modern art was determined as a basically negative one. In terms of the above quote, this means that modern work of art brings about the essence of its object by making apparent the absence of any essence: by shattering artistic conventions, estrangement in art reveals that what such conventions present to us as essential is in fact something

complex than often assumed in the reception of his work, which predominantly determines his position as one that is decidedly against any form of artistic commitment.

[37] In a more straightforward way, the contradictions between sense and construction and concept and intuition are also apparent in the modern work of art as the contradiction between content and form. With regard to the contradiction of form and content, Adorno holds that forms

> wachsen […] den Kunstwerken nicht geradewegs zu, so als ob sie einfach den Inhalt von der Realität übernähmen. Er konstituiert sich in einer Gegenbewegung. Inhalt prägt den Gebilden sich ein, die von ihm sich [formal] entfernen. Künstlerischer Fortschritt, soweit von einem solchen triftig geredet kann geredet werden, ist der Inbegriff dieser Bewegung. (AT 210)

The form of a work of art must hence come into a contradiction with its content—it must be estranged from it. Only through this can the modern work of art bear witness to the estranged state of society:

> Geschichtsphilosophisch hat die Emanizaption der Form allgemein ihr inhaltliches Moment daran, dass sie die Entfremdung im Bild zu schmälern verschmäht, allein dadurch das Entfremdete sich einverleibt, dass sie als solches bestimmt. Die hermetischen Gebilde üben mehr Kritik am Bestehenden als die, welche fasslicher Sozialkritik zuliebe formaler Konzilianz sich befleissigen und stillschweigend den allerorten blühenden Betrieb der Kommunikation anerkennen. (AT 218)

unessential. Thereby, it motivates us to critically reflect it. However, in the above quote, Adorno also seems to suggest that there is a more positive sense in which the estranging work of art captures the essence of its object—a way in which something essential is truly made present in art, and not merely by its absence. It is this quality of the modern work of art that I will consider in the next section of this chapter. The decision to conclude my discussion of Adorno's aesthetics with a consideration of the potentially positive quality of his notion of the modern work of art is also rhetorical: More often than not, Adorno's aesthetics is seen as prominently negative one—an overly critical, elitist, pessimist, and even fatalist aesthetics, in which the work of art comes to be an autonomous object that severs any ties to culture and society and only any longer communicates by its radical refusal to communicate. While this is certainly an important aspect of Adorno's aesthetics, it should not be regarded as its only distinction, as such a view would miss out on an important part of his assessment of contemporary art and culture. Granted, his notion of modern art is negative, yet there is also a positive side to it—what Adorno suggests when he argues that the modern work of art reveals the perspective of the essence of an object. In this, the modern work of art attains what I would call (in line with the Marxist tradition to which Adorno is indebted) a fundamental utopian quality: by revealing something of the essence of its object, the work of art points towards a nonexistent state that lies beyond the given contradictions of an estranged society.

The Utopian Quality of Modern Art

In order to approach an answer to the question how the estranging work of art positively reveals the essence of its object, it is helpful to firstly assess what Adorno means by the term 'essence.' We get an idea of this by considering a statement of Adorno one the difference between "commitment" and "tendency" in modern art: Adorno holds that tendentious art merely wants to "correct unpleasant situations" by "making recommendations," whereas committed art "aims at the transformation of the preconditions of situations" (ATHK 320). In this gesture, Adorno holds, commitment "inclines toward the aesthetic category of essence" (ATHK 320). 'Essence' hence comes to denote in this context the preconditions of a given situation. Yet of what situation: the situation of society, of culture, of history? As we have seen, the estranged work is both an expression of a historical situation and a critical challenge to it, as a formal presentation of the contradictions of this situation. Yet in this, there is also a more specific situation at stake in the estranging work—a situation the preconditions of which the modern

work of art most explicitly elaborates through its estrangement: the situation of art itself. This means that estrangement in art is essentially about an inquiry into its own preconditions. In this sense, the perspective of the essence in art is the perspective of the preconditions of the situation of art as such—a revelation of the essence of art, of that which distinguishes art as art.[38] In a way, this gesture of modern art has been apparent all along: while the contradiction between construction and sense in the modern work of art is an expression its historical preconditions, it is also an expression of the essential contradiction of art itself. And while the contradiction between intuition and concept conveys art's critical challenge of its historical preconditions, it also foregrounds the fact that art is always unavoidably held between these two states. Importantly, by inquiring into its own historical preconditions and revealing something of the essence of art, the modern work also points beyond these very preconditions that determine it: As the modern work of art reveals its essence, it reveals that which distinguishes art as art. In Adorno's view, the modern work of art in this comes to express something that is only expressible in art and thereby perform a restorative mimesis that points beyond the contradictions of its given historical situation. How precisely this works is suggested by Adorno in a particularly illuminative passage from his lectures on aesthetics:

> Es ist leicht, vom Standpunkt der modernen Kunst aus zu sagen, dass die Kunst nicht nachahme, sondern dass die Kunst Ausdruck oder dass sie ein Geistiges […] sei. […]. Ich würde sagen, dass in der Tat die Kunst ein Moment der Nachahmung entscheidend in sich enthält, aber nur mit einer Einschränkung, nämlich nicht also Nachahmung von etwas, sondern als nachahmender Impuls, also als Impuls der Mimikry, als der Impuls gleichsam, sich selber zu der Sache zu machen oder die Sache zu einem selber zu machen, die einem gegenüber steht. Mit anderen Worten also: Kunst ist zwar Nachahmung, aber nicht Nachahmung eines Objektes, sondern ein Versuch, durch ihre Gestik und ihre gesamte Haltung einen Zustand wiederherzustellen, in dem es eigentlich die Differenz von Subjekt und Objekt nicht gegeben hat, sondern in dem das Verhältnis der Ähnlichkeit und damit der Verwandtschaft zwischen Subjekt und Objekt geherrscht hat anstelle jener antithetischen Trennung der beiden Momente, die heute vorliegt. Der schöne Satz von Schönberg in seiner Vorrede zu den Bagatellen für Streichquartett von Anton von Webern, op.9, es sei der Musik eben möglich, etwas zu sagen, was nur durch Musik gesagt werden könne, gibt dem sehr genau Ausdruck. Es will sagen, dass zwar die Musik oder überhaupt die Kunst etwas sagt, etwas ausdrückt, man könnte sagen, etwas nachahmt, aber nicht

[38] Earlier on, I noted the closeness between Adorno's notion of artistic estrangement and Shklovsky's notion of enstrangement. With regard to this, one might hold that this passage highlights a fundamental difference between Adorno's estrangement and Shklovsky's enstrangement: Whereas Shklovskian enstrangement is primarily concerned with the thing that is rendered in art, Adorno's estrangement is primarily concerned with art itself.

> etwa qua Gegenstand, nicht ein Objekt abbildend, sondern sich ähnlich machend in ihrer ganzen Verhaltensweise, in ihrem Gestus, in ihrem Sein, könnte man an dieser Stelle beinahe einmal sagen, um auf diese Weise den Sprung rückgängig zu machen. (VA 70-71)

Adorno's paraphrase of Schönberg is important here. Schönberg holds that it is possible for music to say something that can only be said in music. This in other terms articulates the just elaborated point that the modern work of art expresses something that is only expressible in art. In terms of the above passage, we can see why this denotes a peculiar kind of mimesis on part of the modern work: the modern work does not mime an object that lies outside of it and the realm of art, but rather is mimetic of itself. By bringing about that which can only be brought about in art, the modern work brings about itself. Thereby, the modern work of art becomes an imitation of itself—the revelation of its own essence. Adorno holds that the modern work therefore becomes restorative: As a mimesis of itself, the modern work of art displays an "attempt to restore, through its gestures and complete attitude, a state in which the difference between subject and object virtually did not exist" (VA 70). This, of course, is precisely the state that was abolished in the historical establishment of reason and rationality as the governing principles of humanity, as this was the development that brought about the split between subject and object and consequently the domination of the object by the subject. Adorno holds that the modern work of art it its peculiar kind of mimesis reverts this development. This, then, is the *utopian* quality of the modern work of art: it formally gestures towards a restoration of a state in which the separation between subject and object does no longer exist and in which the detrimental consequences of this separation are overcome. As Adorno notes:

> Und ich darf vielleicht noch hinzufügen, dass, wenn man nach dem ästhetischen Kriterium sucht—also wenn man danach fragt, wann nun ein Kunstwerk mit Grund ein bedeutendes Kunstwerk genannt werden kann—, dass dann wohl doch das entscheidende Kriterium ist, wie weit ein Kunstwerk es vermag, [...] die Widersprüche seiner eigenen realen und formalen Bedingungen in sich aufzunehmen, die Widersprüchlichkeit auszutragen und, indem es diese Widersprüchlichkeit im Bilde vielleicht schlichtet, sowohl auf ihre Unversöhnlichkeit in der Realität hinzuweisen, wie doch auch schliesslich auf das Potential der Versöhnung, das im Begriff der Utopie gedacht wird. (VA 169)

This quote is particularly interesting because it implies a close connection between the critical quality of that modern work of art and its utopian one: By carrying out its given contradictions (between construction and sense, between intuition and concept), the modern work critically

indicates the irreconciled state of modern society. Yet in this, the modern work of art also points beyond this state, as its carrying out of the contradictions of modern art reveals something of the essence of art and thereby performs a mimesis that restores the split between subject and object that lies at the heart of these contradictions. The close connection between the critical and the utopian quality of the modern work of art is also indicated in a further and more concrete way: As an object that is a mimesis of itself and thereby nothing but itself, the modern work revolts against the all-pervasive exchange principle of capitalism, in which everything becomes potentially replaceable by another thing. In this sense, the modern work of art becomes inexchangeable:

> Nur noch durch die Unvertauschbarkeit seiner eigenen Existenz, durch kein Besonderes als Inhalt suspendiert das Kunstwerk die empirische Realität als abstrakten und universalen Funktionszusammenhang. Utopie ist jedes Kunstwerk, soweit es durch seine Form antezipiert, was endlich es selber wäre, und das begegnet sich mit der Forderung, den vom Subjekt verbreiteten Bann des Selbstseins zu tilgen. Kein Kunstwerk ist an ein anderes zu zedieren. (AT 203)

Having noted the close connection between the utopian and the critical in modern art, it is important to underline that the utopian gesture of the modern work must not be conceived as one that is subsumed by its critique. Adorno's reflections on the use of dissonances in modern music nicely illustrate this:

> Wenn ein Künstler, etwa ein Komponist, heute seine Dissonanzen setzt, dann tut er das nicht etwa, um durch die Dissonanzen das Grauen der Welt zu verdoppeln, obwohl sicherlich in diesen Dissonanzen und in ihrer Ausschliesslichkeit und ihrer konstruktiven Verwendung auch immer etwas von diesem Grauen gegenwärtig ist, sondern er tut es zunächst einmal auch deshalb, weil eine jede solche Dissonanz allein schon durch ihre Differenz von den eingeschliffenen Convenus und dann noch viel mehr durch das Unergriffene daran, durch das Neue und durch ihre Geladenheit mit Ausdruck, immer auch etwas Glückvolles ist. (VA 66)

This conveys the distinctive character of the utopian in the modern work and its immediate impact on the recipient: Its difference from artistic conventions that comes about through its inquiry into itself is a difference that in the reception of the modern work is initially experienced as an expression of happiness, as it in a very concrete way articulates that the different and the new is still possible in art. And yet Adorno reminds us that this straightforward positive quality

of the modern work of art should not be overestimated, as it in another sense gets caught up again in its own premises:

> Utopie heisst aber [...] wiederum, dass sich dieses Sich-Erheben über die bedingte Welt hinaus [...] ja selber nicht gelingen kann. Wenn man suchen würde nach einer metaphysischen Theorie von der Leere des ästhetischen Scheins, dann wäre die Theorie wohl nirgends anders zu suchen, als [darin], dass die Kunst die Utopie als eine gegenwärtige unter uns festhält, aber allerdings um den Preis ihrer Wirklichkeit. (VA 163)

Given that every work of art is essentially a semblance, the utopia of the modern work must always and necessarily be but a fiction, an illusion, and ultimately an impossibility. This becomes apparent in the fact that the modern work displays a productive engagement with the contradiction between intuition and concept and an attempt to resolve it, but ultimately fails at this pursuit, just as it fails at resolving the contradiction between construction and sense. As such, it must rather be seen as a formal attempt that gestures towards its possible realization while bearing witness to its impossibility: The modern work of art carries out contradictions the resolution of which it can only gesture towards. For Adorno, only this renders modern art truly utopian—a disclosure of something that is not and that cannot be. The truly utopian work is "allergic" against

> jeden Versuch, das was sie [die Kunst] eigentlich meint, als ein schon jetzt hier Seiendes, als ein Unmittelbares einzuschmuggeln und dadurch die Antagonismen und das Leiden zuzuschminken, die in Wirklichkeit Schuld daran tragen, dass diese Utopie eben nicht erfüllt ist. (VA 228)

In this sense, the modern work of art is a broken utopia—it must be one, as it must remind us that this utopia is not realized in reality. If the modern work would not register this, it would become a merely consolatory object that would cover up reality's contradictions and thereby perpetuate them. As Adorno puts it in his typical dialectical manner:

> Zentral unter den gegenwärtigen Antinomien ist, dass Kunst Utopie sein muss und will und zwar desto entschiedener, je mehr der reale Funktionszusammenhang Utopie verbaut; dass sie aber, um nicht Utopie an Schein und Trost zu verraten, nicht Utopie sein darf. Erfüllte sich die Utopie von Kunst, so wäre das ihr zeitliches Ende. (AT 55)

The utopia of modern art is broken because an intact one would make it prone to serve precisely the ideological ends it wants to challenge. The modern work of art must carry out its contradictions without resolving them. One might again be tempted here to understand this as a rather negative assessment of the utopian quality of the modern work of art that confirms the popular belief that Adorno's aesthetics is a defeatist one. However, it can just as well in turn be conceived as positive and productive statement: In carrying its contradictions without resolving them, the modern work of art invites us to critically reflect them and how they are informed and in turn inform the contradictions that lie outside of art. As Adorno in a more convoluted manner puts it: "As figures of the existing, unable to summon into existence the nonexisting, artworks draw their authority from the reflection they compel on how they could be the overwhelming image of the nonexisting if it did not exist in itself" (ATHK 110). As utopias, modern works of art convey the nonexisting, yet as they materially exist, they betray the impossibility of the nonexisting. However, because they do materially exist, they also suggest that the nonexisting might at some point come into existence: "However, the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting" (ATHK 174). This is the utopian gesture of art—a productive contradiction that as such compels us to reflection. But can this really be perceived as a positive and productive gesture on part of the modern work of art? After all, as Adorno famously put it, "art is the ever broken promise of happiness" (ATHK 178). This sounds rather resigned. Yet again, we might also understand this in a more positive, even optimistic way: While the promise of happiness of the modern work of art might in fact be broken, we might perceive precisely this broken promise as the humble happiness of modern art, for it is this which makes us think it. At least, this is what Ralph M. Berry claims about experimentalism in art, as he riffs on Adorno: "The work launches a context for reflection to follow. This is the promise of experimental literature. Or its happiness" ("Experimental Writing" 217).[39] Ending the section on the utopian quality of modern art with this quote is not only suitable because it succinctly sums up the positive, productive, and even optimist character of this quality and thereby of Adorno's aesthetics, but also because it reintroduces the experimental to the discussion of Adorno's notion of the modern work of art. In the concluding section of this

[39] The notion of art as a "promise of happiness"—of which other Frankfurt School philosophers, notably Herbert Marcuse in his *The Aesthetic Dimension* (see Marcuse 69), also made use—originally stems from Stendhal's famous dictum: "La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur." Berry's appropriation of Adorno's use of Stendhal's dictum fuses it with two lines from Lyn Hejinian's poetic text "Happily." The lines in question read as follows: "The day is promising / Along comes something—launched into context" (386).

chapter, I will recapitulate what Adorno's notion of the modern work of art implies about the practice of experimental writing.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter determined Adorno's aesthetics to be based in the same assumptions about the historical conditions of modern art that current critics note for the contemporary situation of Anglophone literature. Adorno holds that the eschewal of given artistic traditions and conventions is the fundamental and necessary gesture of modern art, which in the introductory survey was suggested as the basic distinction of experimental writing. This makes Adorno's extensive discussion of the specific implications of this gesture indicative about the particular character and importance of experimental writing today. Proceeding from this discussion, three basic and entwined qualities of experimental writing can be determined:

The first quality of experimental writing is *historical*: Experimental writing responds to the modern situation of art. In this situation, artists can no longer rely any external, pre-established sense in the creation of their works. The reasons for this lie in a two-step historical development. In Hegel's time, art could no longer materially establish an absolute truth, as modern culture's notion of truth has become immaterial. Sense can no longer fully inhere in the work of art. Rather, it is now generated externally, in philosophy, to which art responds. In Adorno's time (and ours), even this mediation of sense in the work of art has become impossible, as the historical atrocities of the twentieth century have shown that a reliance on any external sense involves the danger of the work becoming subservient to a given ideology, just as in capitalism things are alienated by being submitted to the external sense of the exchange principle. The gesture of experimental writing bears witness to this: It eschews pre-established traditions and conventions and attempts to generate sense merely out of its own material arrangement, yet without covering up the fact that this apparently objective generation of sense is initiated by the artistic subject that by historical necessity remains the arbiter of the work. The experimental work aspires to become a pure construction, in which its elements attain a state of literality. However, for various reasons, the experimental work cannot achieve this: Firstly, the modern work cannot rely on any external sense, but this is precisely what a construction does; secondly, as the experimental work is a modern work of art, it essentially has no purpose, as opposed to a construction; thirdly, in order for the experimental work to be a work of art, it has to have sense, by which it then transcends its literalness, and thereby comes

into a contradiction with its own constructional character. Hence the experimental work is a fundamentally contradictory work—trapped between construction and sense. Its constructional character directs it towards literality, yet by its aspirations towards sense, it transcends this literality and brings about the immaterial spiritual aspect of the work, that which makes it more than a merely material object. Yet as this more of the work is raised on a basic contradiction, it cannot hide the fact that it is but semblance—a figment, an imaginary, fictional thing—and thereby also a less.

The second quality of the experimental writing is *critical*: In the expression of its given historical situation, experimental writing also critically challenges this situation. It does so in a two-fold challenge of rationality—by being rational yet also by being that which goes beyond rationality. This becomes manifest in that the experimental work carries out the contradiction between intuition and concept. Importantly, this contradiction is one that is not exclusive to experimental art, but is essential to any artistic pursuit. As such, the experimental work is an inclusive kind of art, one that makes the fundamental contradiction of art as such emphatically apparent, and thereby not only resides at the salient points in the artistic spectrum between intuition and concept—that is, at the transitional point and ends of this spectrum—but might also be apparent in a less prominent way in more conventional works of art. The critical quality of experimental writing is a continuation of its historical one: the historical contradiction of construction and sense is critically reconceived as the contradiction between intuition and concept. But the critical quality of experimental writing can also be understood in a more general and straightforward way: as a gesture of estrangement. The critical challenge that the experimental work poses to an estranged society lies in its artistic estrangement of this estranged society. Essentially, this is achieved in the estrangement of artistic conventions, which reveals that our conventional approach to the world is not natural but in fact a convention and thereby a potentially detrimental distortion. By estranging conventions, the modern work of art makes us perceive them as such—it raises our consciousness of them and enables us to critically reflect them and what they convey. Estrangement in the experimental work is brought about by the setting up of tensions—between construction and sense, between intuition and concept.

The third quality of experimental writing is *utopian*: In estranging conventions, experimental writing comes to reveal something of the essence of art in its given historical preconditions. By rejecting conventions the experimental work must find out anew how to convey its object. Thereby, it becomes an inquiry into its own preconditions, and consequently

into the preconditions of art itself—of that which distinguishes art as art. In this sense, the contradiction between intuition and concept does not just critically challenge to preconditions of modern art, but also points beyond them in a utopian way—beyond an estranged state of society: In carrying out the contradiction between intuition and concept, the experimental work reveals the preconditions of its own medium and thereby expresses something that is only expressible in art. It thereby becomes a mimesis of itself, and thereby a restorative object that potentially overcomes the split between subject and object that was brought about in the establishment of reason and rationality as the governing principles of modern humanity. The utopian quality of the experimental work can also be witnessed in a very concrete way: In eschewing conventions, the experimental work yields exhilarating new or different forms, and thereby proves their aesthetic possibility. Yet the particular utopia of experimental writing always and necessarily remains but an unrealizable semblance: the experimental work fails to achieve the state that it gestures towards, as it fails to resolve the contradictions between intuition and concept, construction and sense. This is crucial, as this is a refusal on part of the experimental work to display a reconciled state as realized. Thereby, it evades the risk of becoming consolatory. On a more positive note, this irreconciled character is also that which invites us to critically reflect the work—its preconditions, those of art and society, and how they might be changed.

In sum, these are the three basic qualities of the experimental work of art in terms of Adorno's aesthetics. In the context of the current discussion about contemporary Anglophone literature, they convey that experimental writing is a literary pursuit that is far from having become obsolete. On the contrary, it is a kind of writing that conspicuously expresses the modern historical preconditions that determine contemporary literature. Yet this is not its sole distinction. In the same gesture, it also critically engages with these preconditions, and points beyond them in a utopian way. It is important to underline this entwinement of concerns on the part of experimental writing, as it shows that experimental writing is not a mere partisan art that attempts to dismantle ideologically dubious traditions and conventions in a radically negative fashion. While experimental writing does display such a critical character, this character is fused with a more positive and productive aim: the formal difference of experimental writing grants us new and refreshing experiences and aesthetically gestures towards a state that is not but that might at some point be. In the same vein, the entwinement of the critical and the utopian in experimental writing shows that it is not a mere novelty act that promotes formal difference

for its own sake, as the aesthetically innovative character of experimental writing remains closely tied to its political one.

Granted, such a highly charged notion of experimental writing potentially runs the risk of re-establishing hierarchical boundaries between different forms of contemporary fiction, which is of course what some of the critics involved in the current debate argue. As this notion establishes experimental writing not only as the emphatic expression of the preconditions that determine contemporary literature, but also as a kind of writing that engages with these preconditions in a critical and utopian way, this notion might easily be held to promote experimental writing to the exclusive status of the only true form of contemporary literature. However, I hold that the opposite is the case: Precisely because it reveals and engages with the preconditions that concern contemporary literature in general, and moreover aesthetically elaborates the essential modern preconditions of art as such, experimental writing in an inclusive way remains closely connected to all forms of current fiction. Importantly, this does not mean that experimental writing becomes a specific genre that works merely in the name of all contemporary literature, which would again promote it to an exclusive status. Rather, it determines it as a literary gesture that is potentially apparent in many different forms of fiction, as any given form of contemporary literature is in one way or another engaged in the very processes that experimental writing makes apparent.

Of course, literary works in this sense are experimental to different degrees, which in turn might prompt the objection that this promotes the more conspicuous experimental works at the cost of less conspicuous ones. However, I see the relation between more and less experimental works rather as a complementary one. This can be explained through a consideration of the relation between experimentalism and conventionalism in literature, which, as we have seen, is vital to the impact of experimental writing. With regard to this relation, one might indeed hold that the prominently unconventional character of the radical experimental work reveals and engages with the preconditions of contemporary literature, and literature as such, in a more conspicuous way. Yet in this, it reveals something to the readers that in turn will subsequently inform their perception of more conventional literary works. As conspicuous experimental works by their formal difference critically raise our consciousness of established conventions that we might otherwise take for granted, we subsequently take this experience also into the act of reading more conventional texts. Crucially, this will not just mean that conventional fiction will then merely appear to us in its conventionality, and thereby lose its impact. Rather, in that the conventionality of the conventional text becomes more transparent

to us, this not only gives us a clearer sense of the preconditions that determine the conventionality of a given text but also of the text's peculiarity that lies behind its conventionality, as no text is merely an amalgam of conventions. Succinctly put, the experience of conspicuous experimental works helps us perceive the experimentalism of more conventional works of literature. It makes us perceive them in a fresh way. At the same time, a conspicuous experimental work is also dependent on conventional works, as its difference from formal norms of literature, which is vital to its impact, can only be perceived if such norms exist. In order for the conspicuous experimental work to eschew conventions, such conventions must first be established: no experimentation without conventions. Moreover, literary conventions are not fixed entities, but are themselves liable to change. Any conventional work might in the process of time or in a different context be perceived as unconventional, just as any unconventional work might in time or by a different group of readers be seen as conventional: the conventional might become experimental, just as the experimental might become conventional.[40] It is in these senses that the relation between experimentalism and conventionalism is in a fundamental way complementary. Not only are they essentially based in the same preconditions, but they are also mutually dependent on each other for a comprehensive engagement with these preconditions, which arises from the tension between them.

Lastly, it might be added that the point of this discussion, which admittedly establishes a somewhat schematic notion of literature, is not to argue that the qualities experimental writing displays comprehensively determine the plenitude of cultural meanings that literature might attain. Literature obviously plays many different roles in different cultures and subcultures. It might establish a tradition, it might preserve one, or abolish it, it might entertain, criticize, educate, do several of these things at the same time, or nothing of them. Art is ideally a realm without many restrictions, hence the intention of this discussion is not in the least to impose any on it. Rather, it should be seen as a more specific contribution to understanding in a more complex way what this peculiar kind of literature called experimental writing is possibly about, and how the historical, the political, and the aesthetic, is entwined in its pursuits.

The close relation between experimentalism and conventionalism, and the inclusive notion of experimental writing it suggests, is also one of the governing principles for the

[40] This is one of the key arguments of the Russian formalist school in literary criticism. It is most prominently apparent in Viktor Shklovsky's "Art As Device" and Yury Tynyanov's "On Literary Evolution."

sequence of the following three chapters on literary texts that practically discuss the notion of experimental writing and its three basic qualities as theoretically established in this chapter: The sequence of the three chapters will move from the quite conspicuous experimentalism of Lydia Davis's stories via Tom McCarthy's intermediate work (in terms of the relation between conventionalism and experimentalism) to Jonathan Lethem's seemingly more conventional novel *The Fortress of Solitude*. In this, the sequence aims at establishing that the experimental is apparent in contemporary Anglophone literature not only in many different formal ways but also to various degrees.

CHAPTER TWO
LYDIA DAVIS'S *COLLECTED STORIES*

Introduction

The notion of experimental writing as elaborated through Adorno's aesthetics is a highly charged one: experimental writing has not just one or two but three basic qualities—it is, at once, an emphatic expression of the historical preconditions of modernity, their critical challenge, and a utopian attempt to overcome them. Moreover, in this three-layered gesture, the experimental work carries out various contradictions, prominently those between construction and sense, and intuition and concept. Given this high charge of the notion, one might legitimately assume that any discussion of a literary work in terms of this notion will likely theoretically overstrain it. Or one might fear that any work that is compatible with this notion is itself already theoretically overstrained. Lydia Davis's stories, with which I will begin the discussion of experimental writing in contemporary works of Anglophone literature, are interesting in this respect. These stories, at first sight, seem far from being overtly charged with historical, critical, and utopian purpose, or jarring formal contradictions, as they are essentially grounded in a peculiar plainness—in ordinary premises and plots, and in a language that is simple and confined, both lexically and syntactically. Their experimentalism is conspicuous in a quiet sense. This formal peculiarity is precisely what makes them an intriguing subject for a practical discussion of the notion of experimental writing as established in the last chapter.

Davis's stories have been published for almost 40 years (her first collection, *The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories*, was published in 1976), but only as of very recently has her work gained a somewhat more widespread recognition. Arguably, this is largely due to the publication, in 2009, of *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, which was extensively covered in many of the popular Anglophone literary journals and newspapers.[41] The publication of *The Collected Stories* also marked an important date for the critical reception of Davis's work. Bringing together four collections of Davis's stories, *The Collected Stories* covers 21 years of publication in a single volume. (The first collection in the book, *Break It Down*, was published in 1986, the last, *Varieties of Disturbance*, in 2007.) It enables critics to behold for the first time Davis's oeuvre in a coherent and comprehensive way. As James Wood noted, the more than

[41] In his review of the collection, Christopher Tayler notes that this was also the first book by Davis to be published in Great Britain since 1996 (*Guardian*).

700 pages of the book allow the "grand cumulative achievement" of Davis's stories to "[come] into view" (*The Fun Stuff* 171). They help us to perceive more clearly the aesthetic development of Davis's approach to her subjects—a development which Ben Marcus describes as one that consequently moves toward a more conspicuous kind of "formal innovation" (*Bookforum*), and which David Mattin sees as a "genealogy of an artistic vision […] that […] has been relentlessly clarified" (*Independent*). Because of these qualities, *The Collected Stories* is an indispensable book for any extensive critical assessment of Davis's work.

Presumably, the publication of *The Collected Stories* was influential as well for Davis being awarded the *Man Booker International Prize* for fiction in 2013. According to Michael LaPointe, this "expos[ed] her to an even broader audience," as her work is now available in "any mainstream bookstore" (*Los Angeles Review of Books*). Yet only recently, the author Teju Cole has noted that despite her current fame, Lydia Davis is still a rather underappreciated writer (*New York Times*). And there is at least one trenchant fact that lends support to such a claim, at least in our academic context: Despite the critical acclaim and over four decades of constant publication, Davis's work is still noticeably missing from any of the canonical literary anthologies in the Anglophone world. Neither the latest editions of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, or the *Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, contain a single story by Lydia Davis. Certainly, numerous reasons, based in the complex institutional and political machinations of academic publishing, do play a role in the inclusion or exclusion of a certain author in canonical anthologies. Nevertheless, there is one reason that seems to me to be particularly relevant for explaining the absence of Davis's work in the noted collections: the fact that her stories are notoriously difficult to pin down generically. In an essay on her work, Christopher Ricks grapples with precisely this issue.[42] Davis's stories, he holds,

> fling their lithe arms wide to embrace many a kind. Should we simply concur with the official title and dub them stories? Or perhaps miniatures? Anecdotes? Essays? Jokes? Parables? Fables? Texts, or in the Beckett idiom, *textes*? Aphorisms, or even apophthegms? Prayers, or perhaps wisdom literature? Or might we settle for observations? (*Times Literary Supplement*)

[42] Ricks was the chairman of the judges for the Man Booker International Prize in the year Davis won it.

Popular anthologies, which in contrast to academic ones do contain Davis's work, further consolidate this point: Davis's texts can be found not just in popular short story anthologies like the *New Penguin Book of American Short Stories* or *The Best American Short Stories 1997*, but also to an equal amount in anthologies of poetry, as in the volumes *The Best American Poetry 2001* and *The Best American Poetry 2008*. One might here simply assume that the explanation for this generic indeterminacy of Davis's work lies in the fact that her texts appear in various styles, registers, and shapes. And while this is in fact true to a certain extent—her work contains texts made up solely of a title and one or two lines as well as texts that can more readily be perceived to belong to established traditions of North American short story writing—these differences are but superficial: For all their apparent diversity, I hold that Davis's texts are essentially all cut from the same cloth, and as such, all in more or less the same way raise problems for their generic determination. In the next section, I will focus in more detail on the generic issues that surround Lydia Davis's stories (which I will continue to call stories for reasons that will be detailed below), as an elaboration of these issues, and a determination of the common gesture of the stories from which they arguably arise, will get us closer to an understanding of the particular experimentalism apparent in her work.

Genre Issues

What is it that makes it so difficult to assess Davis's stories on generic terms? What critics commonly agree on is that Davis's stories lack many of the central characteristics that traditionally distinguish a text as a literary story: William Skidelsky holds that Davis's stories lack "much of what we expect from a story," that is, they lack "a setting, sustained narrative, characters with names" (*Observer*). More specifically, Christopher Tayler states that Davis "doesn't go in for most kinds of narrative furniture. Where you'd normally expect elaboration and some kind of gesture towards verisimilitude, she reaches for such stark formulae as 'because of some complicated events' or 'then a series of incidents followed'"(*Guardian*). Likewise, David Mattin observes that "[t]his is stripped-down fiction, devoid of the pillars that support conventional 'realism,' so we find almost no physical description, none of the mechanics—'he smoothed a crease on his shirt'—that convention dictates are necessary to bring scenes to believable life" (*Independent*). Michael LaPointe notes that Davis's sentences often contain "no proper nouns, few concrete details, indeed nothing that typically signals creative writing" (*Los Angeles Review of Books*). And James Wood holds that

> [m]ost of these pieces […] are not what most people think of as conventional 'stories'—they usually feature people who are unnamed (generally a woman), are often set in unnamed towns or states, and lack the formal comportment of a story that opens, rises and closes (or fails to close, in the acceptably modernist way). There is no gratuitous bulk in Davis's work, no 'realistic' wadding. (*The Fun Stuff* 170)

In sum, this implies that Davis's stories eschew the key characteristics of a realist literary narrative. They lack detailed representation and verisimilitude, as existents and events are underdetermined in Davis's work: Characters are often unnamed or only generically named (this also goes for the narrators of the stories), objects and localities are only sketchily presented (there is no such thing as the Barthesian reality effect here), and the actions and happenings in the stories are, if at all, but vaguely specified.[43]

Yet Davis's stories do not just lack the prerequisites of a realist literary narrative. Rather, they in a more essential way display a lack of what traditionally distinguishes a fully elaborated literary narrative as such. Not only are existents and events underdetermined in Davis's work, which frustrates any literary realist notion of a narrative, but the stories also display further formal peculiarities that affect the literary character of her work in an even more fundamental way. This is perceivable in the overall composition of the stories. While there is almost always some kind of sequence of events apparent in the stories (though, most often, barely), this sequence is rarely presented in a traditional way: there is no clear beginning, middle, and end to the stories, no dramatic development that would fit Freytag's pyramid, no distinctive moments of surprise and suspense, and often not even a proper causality (which means that there is no proper plot)—the parts do not add up to a meaningful whole, as there is no clear point or moral to the story.[44] In other words, everything that traditionally distinguishes storytelling discourse is seemingly absent from Davis's work.

In order to illustrate this, here is one of her stories—"Disagreement" from the collection *Almost No Memory* (1997)—in full:

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[43] Christopher Knight notes that because of this, the "Americanness" of Davis's work has sometimes "been questioned," as much American fiction distinguishes itself through its close attention to local details and idioms (201).

[44] This brief discussion of the central characteristics of a literary narrative is based on the pertinent entries on the subject in Gerald Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology*.

> He said she was disagreeing with him. She said no, that was not true, he was disagreeing with her. This was about the screen door. That it should not be left open was her idea, because of the flies; his was that it could be left open first thing in the morning, when there were no flies on the deck. Anyway, he said, most of the flies came from other parts of the building: in fact, he was probably letting more of them out than in. (*Collected Stories* 201)

The generically deviant aspects of Davis's work become apparent in this text: The characters of the story, which is told completely in reported speech, are unnamed ("he" and "she"), the locality and objects are unspecified and only named in a general way ("the screen door," "the deck," "the building," "other parts of the building," "the flies"). Moreover, the implied sequence of actions (leaving the screen door open, closing it) is not recounted in detail; there is no clear beginning nor end to the story; there is no dramatic arch, as the story suggests that the sequence of actions (both the opening and closing of the screen door and the characters' dispute about it) is rather one of repetition, which also undermines potential suspense or surprise; there is no proper plot to the story; and while we might detect a certain point to it (the story potentially works as a presentation of the absurdity of everyday disputes, as they run into logical contradictions, which the last image of the story nicely illustrates: an open door might let flies out of or into the house), it is difficult to perceive a moral to the story in a traditional way, and to see it as a comprehensive and meaningful whole.

There are even more extreme cases of stories that seem to lack the proper qualities of literary narrative, as for example the story "Almost Over: What's the Word?" from the collection *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007)[45]:

> He says,
> "When I first met you
> I didn't think you would turn out to be so
> … strange." (*Collected Stories* 732)

This story proceeds in a similar vein as "Disagreement," as it seems to relate a conversation between two unnamed characters, but is yet further reduced: Even shorter than the already quite short "Disagreement," which in terms of length is itself a kind of deviation from story norms (even those of the short story), this story does not even contain hints of a scenery; it even less

[45] The original graphic presentation (spacing, line breaks, differences in font size, etc.) of the stories discussed in this chapter is preserved for the sake of the analysis.

displays a proper causal sequence of actions—the only imaginable action is possibly apparent in the change that takes place in the one character's perception of the other, as it implies a past sequence of actions that have been leading up to the current situation rendered in the story—and therefore even less of a plot; there is also no perceivable kind of moral to the story, and this story does even less appear as a comprehensive and meaningful whole.

But maybe this exclusive focus on external actions potentially hinders the proper narratological assessment of Davis's work. As many of her stories convey internal states—perceptions, impressions, thoughts, or consciousness (as "Almost Over: What's the Word?" shows)—approaching them on these terms might in fact prove more conclusive for their generic discussion. With regard to this, note the beginning of "A Position at the University," another story from *Almost No Memory* (1997):

> I think I know what sort of person I am. But then I think, But this stranger will imagine me quite otherwise when he or she hears this or that to my credit, for instance that I have a position at the university: the fact that I have a position at the university will appear to mean that I must be the sort of person who has a position at the university. But then I have to admit, with surprise, that, after all, it is true that I have a position at the university. (*Collected Stories* 299)

Narratologically speaking, and judging solely from this excerpt, this reads like an interior monologue. In addition, here is the beginning of the story "A Mown Lawn" from the collection *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2001):

> She hated a *mown lawn*. Maybe that was because *mow* was the reverse of *wom*, the beginning of the name of what she was—a *woman*. A *mown lawn* made a *long moan*. *Lawn* had some of the letters of *man*, though the reverse of *man* would be *Nam*, a bad war. A *raw war*. *Lawn* also contained the letters of *law*. In fact, *lawn* was a contraction of *lawman*. Certainly a *lawman* could and did *mow* a *lawn*. (*Collected Stories* 314; emphasis in original)

Again, we might readily conceive of this as a literary rendering of the interiority of a character, only this time not as an interior monologue, but as a kind of stream of consciousness in free indirect discourse. Are these the terms, then, which give us the narratological key by which to generically disclose Davis's work? Dan Chiasson addresses this issue as well in his review of Davis's work. He notes that "[m]ost of her stories happen inside her character's heads" (*New York Review of Books*) but hesitates to subsume her work to a certain literary modernist tradition. In fact, Chiasson holds that Davis "rejects the ready conventions for representing

consciousness: she could have written these very same stories had Joyce and Woolf never lived" (*New York Review of Books*). Chiasson does not elaborate this point, yet I think he is right in pointing out a difference between the established ways and aims of representing a character's interior state and the kind of interiority that is apparent in Davis's stories. This has to do with the diminished narrative frame in which they are presented: in the two examples just quoted, the characters whose interior states we somehow seem to be witnessing are neither named nor properly introduced, nor is a scenery in which these interior processes take place established. In fact, the stories are wholly made up of these rather brief discourses of interiority.[46] One of the effects of this is that we no longer perceive these texts as representations of characters, but rather as linguistic processes: thought and language itself become the main presence in the stories. This is most clearly apparent in the second excerpt: While this text does potentially characterize the thought process of a character in the story, it also seems to put as much emphasis on the words and language itself. It is as much about an associative play with assonances, onomatopoeia, and the anagrammatic, as it is about the rendering of a character.[47] This then, supports Chiasson's claim that Davis's work must not be readily subsumed under a certain modernist story tradition (in the vein of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* or Joyce's *Dubliners*, say).

The point about the presence of language itself in Davis's "A Mown Lawn" is important for another reason: it relates the fact that many of Davis's stories display a certain poetic quality—as assonance, onomatopoeia, and anagrams are devices primarily associated with the genre of poetry.[48] Many critics have noted this poetic character of Davis's stories (Skidelsky; Tayler; Chiasson; Wood, *The Fun Stuff* 170), and the inclusion of Davis's work in poetry

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[46] In both quoted examples, the excerpts make up roughly half of the text, which stylistically continues as displayed.

[47] For a brief but poignant reading of this particular story in terms of the relation between its poetic procedures and its representation of consciousness, see Lynne Tillman's "A Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On: On Lydia Davis's 'A Mown Lawn.'" In this essay, Tillman holds that a story like "A Mown Lawn" is "shaking words loose from their moorings, even exhuming them, to knock the stuffing or deadness out of them. To expose them" (*Quarterly Conversation*). This consequently has an impact on consciousness (that of the artist, that of the character, and that of the reader):

> Consciousness is like the daily language people use: it is available, it's what comes to mind; it is learned, it is what to say and how to say it. But consciousness's secrets live in the unconscious, where there is no volition. Residing beneath known words and acknowledged thoughts, the unconscious can at any moment rise up and undo what people think they think. In brief, that's how "A Mown Lawn" works. By undoing language, Davis also undermines conscious thoughts. (*Quarterly Conversation*)

[48] Accordingly, the line breaks in "Almost Over: What's the Word?" also imply a poetic procedure.

anthologies also bears witness to this. Importantly, it shows that the difficulty of generically coming to terms with Davis's stories lies not only in their formal diminishing of the traditional prerequisites of literary narrative, but also in that they appropriate the characteristics of other basic literary genres, in particular the genre of poetry. Davis's work is not just difficult to assess generically because it subverts the traditional aspects of a prose story, but also because it crosses the boundaries of that genre, moving from prose to poetry, and thereby complicating this generic distinction as well. Briefly put, Davis's work makes generic determination difficult from within, by diminishing the criteria of its apparent genre, and from without, by suspending the boundaries that surround this genre.

Yet this does not yet fully encapsulate how Davis's work generates generic difficulties. Her stories do not merely complicate generic determination from inside the realm of literature—they also achieve it by moving outside of it: Davis's stories do not just cross the borders between prose and poetry, they also go beyond the borders of literature itself, and even that of art. There are two prominent ways in which Davis's stories do this. First of all, Davis's stories do this by appropriating the characteristics of non-artistic—that is, non-narrative, non-fictional—discourses, primarily those of philosophy and essay writing. Again, this has been widely addressed by critics of Davis's work: Ben Marcus calls Davis "an essayist in story writer's drag, drilling perfect wormholes into the bedrock of philosophy" (*Bookforum*); William Skidelsky wonders whether her work shouldn't rather be considered as a kind of "philosophical reflection" (*Observer*); and Christopher Tayler sees her work to be "situated between fiction, jeux d'esprit, prose poetry, and philosophy" (*Guardian*). It is not difficult to see why critics have assessed Davis's work in that way. As shown above, her work diminishes the traditional prerequisites of literary narrative while in many cases being centrally concerned with the interior states of perception, impression, thought, and consciousness. In this, it approximates certain kinds of essayistic discourse. In addition, some of Davis's stories seem to leave out altogether any conspicuous literary traces, and treat subjects that we would traditionally associate with philosophical discourse, as in the following excerpt from Davis's tellingly titled story "Ethics":

> "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." I heard, on an interview program about ethics, that this concept underlies all systems of ethics. If you really do unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you, you will be living according to a good system of ethics. At the time, I was pleased to learn of a simple rule that made much sense. But now, when I try to apply it literally to one person I know, it doesn't seem to work. One of his problems is that he has a lot of hostility toward certain other people and when I imagine how he would have them do unto

> him I can only think he would in fact want them to be hostile toward him, as he imagines they are, because he is already so very hostile toward them. (*Collected Stories* 289)

The story is typically freed from any distinctive literary narrative characteristics: it is wholly made up of the language of reflection, which ponders a philosophical subject, that is, the ethic of reciprocity. This, and the fact that the thought process arises from an occasional event ("I heard, on an interview program about ethics") and pursues to reflect it in a practical way ("but now, when I try to apply it literally to one person I know"), makes it appear very much in the manner of essayistic philosophy. One might imagine (a more contemporary) Michel de Montaigne or Ludwig Wittgenstein proceeding in similar way.[49]

Logical reasoning is not only present in stories that essayistically deal with concrete philosophical issues, but also in stories that treat more traditional literary subject matters, as in "Wife One in Country," which is about the relationship between a mother, her son, and the current wife of her ex-husband. Here is the beginning of the story:

> Wife one calls to speak to son. Wife two answers with impatience, gives the phone to son of wife one. Son has heard impatience in voice of wife two and tells mother he thought caller was father's sister: raging aunt, constant caller, troublesome woman. (*Collected Stories* 170)

Here, the subject is approached with a conspicuous rationalizing rigor: characters are numbered according to a rational order ("wife one," "wife two"), and the story is presented in a chronological way, in simple words and clipped sentences containing only the vital information. In other stories, this rationalizing rigor shows in even more conspicuous ways, as in "The Family," in which an everyday situation—a family spending time in "a playground near the river"—is broken down to its single actions, which are exclusively rendered through external

[49] Several critics have noted the kinship of Davis's work to both of these writers (Tayler; Perloff; Knight). The latter connection is especially interesting: Davis's stories are in many ways reminiscent of the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*—they reflect their issues (which often concern reflection itself, as well as perceptions, impressions, and consciousness) in a seemingly simple-minded way. That is, they proceed from simple-seeming issues in a matter-of-fact language, only to reveal, through their unyielding (and sometimes circular) interrogation, the complexities and aporiae apparent in the apparently self-evident. Davis, in this sense, is an ordinary language philosopher-artist, that is, someone not only reflecting on philosophical issues apparent in ordinary language, but also presenting these reflections in such a language. For a further example of this kind of procedure, see also Davis's story "To Reiterate" (*Collected Stories* 215). A more extensive discussion of the closeness between Davis's work and the later Wittgenstein's philosophy can be found in the very informative essays by Christopher Knight and Marjorie Perloff on the subject.

focalization (which is quite rare for a literary narrative) and consecutively numbered as the situation unfolds in the story:

> (1) Fat young white woman pulls white baby by one arm onto quilt spread on grass. (2) Little black boy struggles with older black girl over swing, (3) is ordered to sit down on grass, (4) stands sullen while (5) fat white woman heaves her feet, walks to him, and smacks him. (*Collected Stories* 212)

Attaining the subjects, manners, and procedures of philosophical, essayistic, and, more generally, rationalist discourse, is the first basic way in which Davis's stories cross the borders of the literary and artistic into what one might commonly and traditionally perceive as non-artistic realms.

The second way in which Davis's work goes beyond the realms of literature and art is by integrating found material: one of her stories, "Extracts from a Life" from her early collection *Break It Down* (1986), consists more or less completely of excerpts taken verbatim from Shinichi Suzuki's autobiographical and music-pedagogical book *Nurtured By Love*; a story from her latest collection *Can't and Won't* (2014), titled "Hello Dear," is, as Justin Taylor noticed, entirely made up of "passages copied from actual spam emails" (Taylor n.p.); and the story "We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders" from *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007) is based on and integrates letters Davis's brother received when he was in the hospital as a boy. These three examples illustrate how Davis's work in a second basic way goes beyond the realms of art and literature: By integrating found material, and sometimes even by being completely made up of it, Davis's work breaks with certain persistent traditional aesthetic notions of invention, originality, and creativeness. Importantly in this respect, the found material that is integrated in the stories is often of a distinctly non-artistic nature.[50]

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[50] Another story by Davis that conveys this is "The Language of the Telephone Company," from her latest collection *Can't and Won't*:

> "The trouble you reported recently
> is now working properly." (77; quotation marks in original)

As Michael LaPointe notes, this story is made up of "malfunctioning corporate copy," which prompts him to liken it, and other such stories from Davis's oeuvre, to artistic "ready-mades" (*Los Angeles Review of Books*). Indeed, some of Davis's stories (such as "Hello Dear," or "The Language of the Telephone Company") do display a ready-made character. One might object here that this rather undermines their generically disturbing impact, as this is an artistic device that, since Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, has itself become an established procedure in contemporary culture, and thereby no longer manages to challenge traditional assumptions about art. In view of this, I would

In sum, Davis's stories complicate generic determination by subverting central prerequisites of the basic genre to which they by self-declaration—they are officially called 'stories'—belong: By diminishing the key characteristics of literary narrative; by crossing the borders between the distinctive genres of literature, in a substantial and extensive appropriation of poetic devices that upsets their apparent narrative purpose; and by going beyond the realms of literature and art itself, in an equally substantial and extensive appropriation of non-artistic discourses (philosophical, essayistic, scientistic) and an integration of found material that upsets their apparent status as literary works of art.[51] Davis's stories, then, challenge their own status as stories, and more fundamentally even their status as works of literature and art. In this, they are reminiscent of the kind of modern art that Adorno discusses in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

> Auf den Verlust ihrer Selbstverständlichkeit reagiert Kunst nicht bloss durch konkrete Änderung ihrer Verhaltens- und Verfahrungsweisen, sondern indem sie an ihrem eigenen Begriff zerrt wie an einer Kette: der, dass sie Kunst ist. (AT 32)

The quote from *Aesthetic Theory* also suggests how the generic peculiarities of Davis's stories might be conceived in terms of the historical quality of experimental writing. As Adorno notes,

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hold that because such traditional assumptions are also still very much prevalent in contemporary culture (as the various positions discussed in the introduction to this thesis reveal), this preserves the challenge of such an artistic act. Though I would also add that its success, and generally that of any integration of found material in art (of which the ready-made is but one particular exponent), always also depends on the specific content of the integration: It is important what specific object is brought into the work (or realm) of art in the act of integration. Certain objects might lose their disruptive impact in a given time and culture, but each time and culture will always also have objects that by their integration will achieve an aesthetic disruption. The success depends on the contemporary pertinence of the object. In 1917, this was a urinal on display in an art exhibition in New York; today, this might be a poetically edited spam email on display in a collection of stories.

[51] The qualification "substantial and extensive" is added here because the appropriation and integration (the former term suggests a more modifying character than the latter) of non-narrative literary discourses and non-artistic discourses in a narrative context are of course not gestures exclusive to experimental writing. Many essentially conventional forms of fiction appropriate and integrate other discourses, too, as for example the realist novel, which often makes use of non-artistic discourses (essayistic, philosophical, scientific) in the course of presenting its story. However, in the case of a distinctly conventional text, the appropriations and integrations are neither substantial nor extensive, and as such remain firmly embedded in the narrative context in which they are presented, which is then supported rather than subverted. A subversion, in turn, is only achieved by substantial and extensive appropriations and integrations.

It has to be noted that despite addressing the differences between conventional and experimental writing in terms of their respective appropriations and integrations, the above elaboration also highlights the fact that they also connect in a fundamental way, as both do appropriate and integrate other discourses, but just to various degrees. This again shows that the conventional and the experimental are closely related artistic pursuits. I will further consider these issues in the following chapters of the thesis, which deal with literary texts that are in many respects more conventional than the present ones.

I thank Ridvan Askin for pointing out these issues in his feedback to an earlier version of this chapter.

art's change of "procedures and comportments" and the calling into question of its own status as art is a response of art to its historical "loss of self-evidence" (ATHK 22): as we can no longer readily take up artistic traditions and conventions, the work itself has to become an expression of this. Davis's stories achieve this feat by bringing forth a form that cannot be readily subsumed under traditional and conventional notions of literary genres and art as such. Critics have also stressed the connection between the generic peculiarity of Davis's work and the particular historical situation in which it was written. David Mattin notes that there are "deep, underlying reasons for [Davis's] fiction's push further into the mind: among them are our distrust of third-person narrators, and the immediate, vivid physical mimesis provided by film and television" (*Independent*), while Christopher Knight holds that Davis's novel *The End of the Story* "works […] on the edge of story-telling" in order to be "in sympathy with the view that judges the novel, as traditionally executed, inadequate to our more heightened intellectual needs," and to "readdress this situation" (221). Knight takes his cue from Giles Gunn, who holds that

> there is a gathering sentiment that the artist *as artist* is no longer centrally in touch with the most representative or seminal experience of our time and that this experience is no longer necessarily susceptible to being rendered in the more traditional fictive forms. […]. [Rather,] 'the only forms capable of fully and accurately rendering the ironic, disjunctive, self-contradictory character of contemporary experience are critical, recursive, ratiocinative, and highly self-reflexive, just because the characteristic experience of our time centers on the human mind itself as it moves in brilliant but sometimes fitful and ever more disbelieving steps toward the end of its own tether.' (221-22; emphasis in original)

Mattin and Knight not only describe our contemporary cultural situation in a way that is similar to Adorno's description of the cultural developments in his time, but they also see the particular form of Davis's work as an artistic expression of this situation. In this, their claims support the point that the generic peculiarity of Davis's work might indeed be conceived in terms of the historical quality of experimental writing. The question remains whether the generic peculiarity of Davis's work might also be conceived in terms of experimental writing's critical and utopian qualities. There is a straightforward way in which this question might be answered in the positive: The refusal of Davis's stories to adhere to established conventions of storytelling, literature, and art in general, can be seen as a critical gesture on their part, as this brings about a generic disquiet that makes us more aware of our aesthetic expectations and even prompts us

to critically reflect them and thereby not see them any longer as given or natural. At the same time, this gesture of refusing to adhere to established ways of storytelling and creating art is a utopian one, as it yields new literary forms and thereby proves that change and the creation of something different is still possible in the realm of art. Such an assessment, however, does not fully do justice to the critical and utopian qualities of Davis's stories. While it relates the critical and the utopian in terms of the potential immediate impact of the stories, it does not yet comprehensively elaborate the intricacies of their experimentalism. A further consideration of the generic peculiarity of the stories is informative in this respect.

As assessed, Davis's stories raise generic doubt (about their status as stories and art) by diminishing the key characteristics of literary narrative, and by extensive and substantial appropriations (of the means of poetry and non-artistic discourses) and integrations (of found and often non-artistic material). One crucial aspect of this process has not been addressed sufficiently so far: that for all their complication of a generic determination, their raising of doubts whether they qualify as art, literature, and storytelling, Davis's stories do, after all, remain stories—as much as they do remain art. To use Adorno's metaphor for modern art: the stories might tear at their own concept (as if at a chain) as stories, as literature, and as art, yet they do not come free in this. This is important, for the historical, critical, and utopian impact of Davis's work depends on it—on her work remaining art, on her stories remaining stories. How, then, do Davis's stories remain stories? Of course, as her texts are officially labeled stories, the reader will likely adopt a responsive attitude that already in advance generically frames them as such.[52] In this frame of mind, the reader will be especially attentive to the formal characteristics that might potentially contribute to form a proper literary narrative out of the given texts. Yet this is not to say that Davis's stories qualify as stories by mere reader-responsive volition, as the narrative characteristics are also apparent on the page: For all their noted contestation of their own narrative form, the stories still adhere, in whatever minimal way, to the form of a literary narrative.[53] In the following, I want to come back to each aspect

[52] Although Justin Taylor notes that Davis's latest collection, *Can't and Won't*, displays this generic marker only in parentheses on the cover of the book, "as though whispering it, as though not entirely confident in the claim" (*Observer*). (This applies only to the edition of the book published in the USA; the English version does not have a generic term on the cover, but the term 'stories' is used numerous times in the blurbs printed on the back.)

[53] Davis notes as much in a conversation that William Skidelsky quotes in his review of her *Collected Stories*. Asked about her decision to call her texts stories, she responds that

> even if her stories don't appear to tell any sort of story, there usually is one, hovering in the background. "Even if the thing is only a line or two, there is always a little fragment of narrative in there, or the reader can turn away and imagine a larger narrative," she says. "I think as long

of Davis's stories that potentially contests their status as stories, literature, and art, and consider, in view of the stories discussed so far, how they nevertheless formally remain stories, literature, and art.

I have noted that Davis's stories diminish traditional storytelling characteristics. However, looking again at her stories, one must specify in this respect that diminishment does not mean abolishment. Rather, the diminishment might even work as a kind of clarification: through reduction, the essential characteristics of a literary narrative are brought to the fore. The first story that was addressed in this section, "Disagreement," illustrates this. While, as noted, it is a very sparse example of a literary narrative, it still displays the basic characteristics needed in order to be perceived as a story—it contains characters ("he" and "she"), a general setting ("the building") and other existents ("the screen door," "the deck," "other parts of the building," "the flies"), narrated speech (the dispute between him and her), sequences of action (their dispute) and implied action (leaving the screen door open, closing it). Moreover, there is even a certain element of suspense (their dispute) and, as noted, a final point to the story (the story comically reveals the stalemate logic at play in everyday disputes).

While one can more or less easily contrive a narrative out of the formal characteristics of a story like "Disagreement," this task looks much more difficult in view of the second story discussed above, "Almost Over: What's the Word?." As shown, the story is made up of a single sentence, which is presented in three line breaks. As such, this is an even sparser text, yet arguably one that still fulfills the basic preconditions of a literary narrative. That is, if we perceive the text as a kind of narrative kernel—or "germ" (James 57), as Henry James used to call it: "Almost Over: What's the Word?" displays a core narrative event (a sentence spoken by an addresser to an addressee) from which the reader is potentially able to unfold a much more comprehensive narrative. To briefly illustrate this: Given (part of) the title of the story, "Almost Over," we might perceive this utterance as the final words in a conversation that marks the breakup of a love relationship, which we might then go on to imagine as a more comprehensive narrative. (Quite literally, the reader might assume that this utterance is embedded in a much longer narrative). We might wonder what kind of longer story leads up to, follows, or surrounds such an utterance, and what kind of characters inhabit it: What kind of a person is "he" who states as a reason for the breakup that the other person is "strange"? How did the other person behave in order to be perceived by him as strange? When and where did they first meet?

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as there's a bit of narrative, or just a situation, I can get away with calling them stories." (*Guardian*)

Furthermore, the utterance also implies an intriguing subtext for the comprehensive narrative about a love relationship to be imagined by the reader: We might commonly assume that a love relationship is based on and cultivates familiarity and intimacy between one and an other, yet apparently, in this particular relationship, the other becomes ("turn[s] out to be") strange, that is, not just peculiar but also alien. Through this, a subtext about the tension between familiarity and strangeness in a relationship is set up that might inform our contemplation of the longer story we built up through this single sentence of reported speech.[54] Whereas we cannot know what this story might look like in detail, the brief illustration still proves that it is possible to create a more comprehensive narrative out of the few words that make up "Almost Over: What's the Word?." It is in this sense that the basic characteristics of a literary narrative are very much present in it.

The second noted aspect of Davis's stories that contests their status as stories concerns their appropriation of poetic discourse, which displays the transgression of a generic boundary that complicates an assessment of the stories as traditional literary narratives. At the example of the story "A Mown Lawn," I have noted that this turns some of her stories, given their diminished narrative quality, into quasi-poetic language games. Yet another look at "A Mown Lawn" shows how the narrative quality of this text is not only retained but also frames the poetic sequence of sentences: The very first sentence of the story is "She hated a *mown lawn*." This means that we assume from the outset that the following sentences, despite their verging into the poetic, do in fact work as characterizations of the thoughts of the character and thereby of the character herself. (This is enforced by the fact that in our readerly attitude, we approach the texts as stories.) And as with the story "Almost Over: What's the Word?," we might then begin to imaginatively unfold a longer narrative from the information contained in these few sentences: We might imagine a story about a woman living in a suburban area (where mown lawns are likely to be found), with potential gender issues (she has a quite strong emotional reaction to the expression "a mown lawn" because it contains a sequence of letters that is also

[54] There is also an intertextual aspect that might be taken into account in the imaginative creation of a more comprehensive narrative out of this conversational fragment: In *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (2001), the story collection that precedes *Varieties of Disturbance* (2007), in which this story is contained, we find a story titled "Almost Over: Separate Bedrooms," which goes as follows:

> They have moved into separate bedrooms now.
> That night she dreams she is holding him in her arms. He
> Dreams he is having dinner with Ben Johnson. (*Collected Stories* 498)

Given the chronology of the publication of these two stories carrying the same title proper, we might read this story as a first chapter in a larger scenes-from-a-marriage-like narrative.

contained in the word 'woman'; importantly, this sequence is present only in reverse order, which means that the association can only be made with a certain effort, which in turn suggests that the issue is very much present in the character's mind) and professional or personal relations to the law (she might be a lawyer or privately know or have known a lawyer) and the Vietnam War (she might have been involved in some way or known someone—a lawyer perhaps—who was somehow involved in the Vietnam War). As with the prior example, the point of this interpretation is not that it accurately extrapolates the data of the text, but rather that such an interpretation is possible at all, as this shows that this story, for all its forays into a poetic playing with language, still pertains to the premises of a literary narrative.

This works similarly in terms of the third noted aspect of Davis's stories by which they contest the premises of a literary narrative, that is, their appropriation of non-artistic discourses. As discussed, the story "Ethics" comes across as an essayistic philosophical investigation into the notion of the ethics of reciprocity. Yet as the reflection of this notion is based on the reflections of the narrator about the behavior of an acquaintance, this text as much works as both a characterization of that person and the relationship he has to the narrator and other characters. Without going into further detail, this suggests that the reader, once more, might construct a longer story about these relationships based on the philosophical subtext that is explicitly related in "Ethics." The stories that display, in language and overall structure, scientistic manners of logical reasoning, work in the same way. "Wife One in Country" and "The Family" introduce a style that very much counters our common assumptions about a literary narrative, as this style very much reduces narrative features of the texts. However, this reduction might in turn be seen to be contributive to the narrative process, as this invites the reader to imagine a more elaborate story on the basis of the sparse, analytical sentences on the page. That these stories will be read in this way is supported by the fact that their given subjects are ones that the reader might readily identify as subjects of traditional short story narratives: "Wife One in Country" is a story about divorced life, and "The Family" is a story about familial tensions in everyday situations.[55]

The fourth and last aspect of Davis's stories by which they contest the premises of traditional literary narratives, and more generally those of literature and art, is their integration of found material. This counters our common assumptions about artistic invention, creativity,

[55] In fact, quite a large part of Davis's stories are concerned with relationship issues that are also the subjects of many more traditionally written stories—they are stories about the relationships between lovers, married couples, exes, parents and children, neighbors, strangers, human beings and animals, and so forth.

and originality. Also, as this found material is in most cases non-artistic, it is material that we traditionally assume to lack precisely the specific qualities that turn a text into art and literary narrative. However, because of the particular way in which these materials are integrated in Davis's stories, do they unfold an artistic and narrative quality that might not have been as apparent, or not apparent at all, in their original context: From the fragments of Shinichi Suzuki's *Nurtured By Love*, the reader of "Extracts from a Life" forms a narrative which is not the narrative of the book *Nurtured By Love* about the real-life Shinichi Suzuki but a narrative about a literary character named Shinichi. This narrativizing transformation is even more conspicuously apparent in the case of "Hello Dear," as the assembled spam emails presented in this text imply—notably, in the form of a poem—a narrative about a character named Marina:

> Hello dear,
> do you remember
> how we communicated with you?
>
> Long ago you could not see,
> but I am Marina—with Russia.
> Do you remember me?
>
> I am writing this mail to you
> with heavy tears in my eyes
> and great sorrow in my heart.
> Come to my page.
>
> I want you please to consider me
> with so much full heartily.
> please—let us talk.
>
> I'm waiting! (*Can't and Won't* 238)

We might imagine a story here, about a relationship between the addressee and a character named Marina, who is from Russia, or with another character named Russia—a story about mistaken identities or missed opportunities ("Long ago you could not see, but I am Marina"). Again, the important point here is that in this story, as in "Extracts from a Life," the found materials are transformed into a text that suggests the narrative potential of these materials: they are turned into stories, into literature—into art.

On closer inspection, this is not strictly true. Or rather, such a description does not fully account for the particularities of the integration process that happens in stories like "Extracts from a Life" and "Hello Dear." While I think it is correct to state that such stories suggest the narrative potential of the found and in these cases non-artistic material they rearrange on the page, these materials are not actually, or at least not completely, transformed. That is, the act of bringing found material into the realm of art and literature does not merely turn A (found and non-artistic material) into B (art). Rather, A remains A in a context that at the same time turns it into or suggests it as B. Concretely put, a story like "Extracts from a Life" might rearrange its material so as to suggest an interpretation of this material as literary narrative, yet at the same time, the reader is still aware that this story is formed out of found material, from a different and strictly speaking non-artistic source. The fragmentary presentation of the excerpts from Suzuki's book turns the text into a work of art, yet each individual fragment of this text is detected as coming from another, non-artistic source: we detect this by close inspection of the language of these passages, a language that in the context of the other stories of the collection of which "Extracts from a Life" is part appears stylistically different; we certainly notice it if we have a look a the copyright page of the book, which states that "'Extracts from a Life' is adapted from *Nurtured by Love* by Shinichi Suzuki, and is used by permission of Exposition Press" (*Collected Stories*). We understand in the same way that "Hello Dear" is a story made up of spam emails. Again, the peculiar language of the text might give us this idea, and if we look up its words—as Justin Taylor, one of its reviewers, did—through an online search engine, we will find that they are in fact taken from existing spam emails. The poetic arrangement of these words on the page turns them into art somehow, yet they also remain as the non-artistic material that they were in their original context.

This point is crucial, as it not only relates a peculiarity of the integration of found and non-artistic material in Davis's stories, but a vital characteristic of all the processes by which her work contests the premises of traditional literary narratives. While all of the basic aspects that complicate the generic determination of Davis's stories contribute to their storytelling effect, they nevertheless also essentially remain aspects of complication. Like the found and non-artistic material, they retain their heterogeneity: The diminishment of traditional characteristics of literary narrative in Davis's "Disagreement" contributes to its storytelling, yet it still makes it a very diminished story. Likewise, in "A Mown Lawn," the poetic devices do contribute to the storytelling, but this does not mean that these devices are entirely suspended in the narrative frame; rather, they continue to work poetically in a substantial and extensive

way—"A Mown Lawn" might be telling a story about a neurotic woman living in suburbia, yet it is certainly also a linguistic play of poetic associations (of alliterations, assonances, and anagrams) on the expression 'a mown lawn.' And while the formal rationalizations in "Wife One in Country" and "The Family" are also contributive to their storytelling, this does not resolve their potential incongruousness in the narrative context, as the aesthetic and the rational in these stories remain ultimately incompatible.

In sum, then, the following can be assessed about the peculiar generic process that takes place in Lydia Davis's work: Her stories display aspects by which they contest traditional notions of literary narrative, literature, and art. In this contestation, however, the stories remain stories—they remain literature, and art—as they still display the basic characteristics of these notions, and as the contesting aspects are also made contributive to the very processes they unsettle. At the same time, however, the contesting aspects also remain as such—they are not resolved, but persist in their contestation, in their difference to the context and discourse in which they appear. The two added qualifications—that (1) the stories remain stories because they still display some of the basic characteristics of storytelling and because the contesting aspects are made contributive to this process, yet that (2) in this the contesting aspects also remain as such—are vital because only through them can we fully understand the particular experimentalism of Davis's work. For they convey that Davis's stories essentially internalize contradictions—generally speaking, between the non-narrative and the narrative, between different literary genres, between art and non-art. And as we have seen, the internalization of contradictions is essential to all three qualities of the experimental work of art: in setting up a tension between construction and sense, the experimental work becomes an expression of its given historical preconditions; in setting up a tension between intuition and concept, the experimental work unfolds its critical potential; and in presenting a state of reconciliation as one which is aesthetically unrealizable, the work becomes utopian. On the basis of this specific assessment of the generic peculiarity of Davis's stories, their experimental character can henceforth be determined. The following will consider it in view of the contradictions at the center of the three qualities of experimental writing.

As elaborated, experimental writing in its historical quality is concerned with the contradiction between construction and sense. In this context, 'construction' denotes the attempt in modern art to bring about an object that is formed according to its own logic. In this attempt, the work responds to its historical situation, in which given traditions and conventions are no longer acceptable. The experimental work of art, however, cannot become a pure

construction. This because the experimental work of art, in order to be a work of art, must have 'sense,' that is, it must be more than just the sum of its parts: in the generation of sense, the individual parts of the work enter a dynamic relation with one another and thereby transcend their literality. Yet precisely this literality is one of the distinctive characteristics of a pure construction. Hence we arrive at the historical contradiction of 'construction' and 'sense.' Davis's stories register this tension in the following way: Like Adorno's modern work of art, they eschew artistic traditions and conventions in the attempt to find ways of artistic expression in which their objects are rendered constructionally, that is, according to their own particular logic. This might be perceived in the employment in some of the stories of a quasi-objective, non-evaluative kind of language in the rendering of a certain object, as for example in the discussed presentation of a family event in the story "The Family": the story is rationally and analytically structured and is almost completely made up of simple, often concrete and denotative words. In this, it aspires to a certain literality that would yield the object as it is without any evaluative distortions. In a different way, a story like "Hello Dear" aspires to this as well, as this story integrates found material in its original form, it might be seen as an attempt to preserve the object (the spam emails) in its own shape. In this sense, such gestures, as found in "The Family" and "Hello Dear" do not only counter narrative traditions and conventions but also, and more importantly, they counter the disposal of the object apparent in traditional and conventional procedures, as such procedures have become naturalized and are thereby no longer perceived as such, meaning that we do no longer register that they effectively form and thereby distort the objects that they apparently represent. Yet as established (this concerns the first qualification of the initial premise), these gestures become themselves contributive to the very processes they also counter: the quasi-objective language of "The Family" becomes itself a catalyst in the process of narration, and the found material that makes up "Hello Dear" is turned into a story through its arrangement on the page, and through our readerly attitude. As in the historical tension of the experimental work, the constructional aspects of these stories cannot escape the fundamental artistic gesture of generating sense out of its elements. However, as noted (this concerns the second qualification of the initial premise), these constructional aspects are not completely resolved in a narrativizing, sense-making process, but are also retained as such: the quasi-objective language of "A Family" is not merely subsumed for storytelling purposes, but remains a heterogeneous element; as the found material of "Hello Dear" is not merely transformed into art, but persists, ultimately, in its resistance to this apprehension. It is

in this sense that the stories of Lydia Davis express the historical contradiction of experimental writing and thereby reveals in a practical way its historical quality.

In its critical quality, experimental writing is concerned with the contradiction between intuition and concept. In the expression of its historical situation, the experimental work also challenges this situation, in a challenge of reason and rationality that, in its instrumental form, is co-responsible for the ills apparent in contemporary culture and society. Modern art poses this challenge in two ways: by being itself rational and by going beyond rationality. Artistic processes are commonly conceived to be irrational, or, merely intuitive processes, as opposed to the conceptual processes of reason and rationality. The experimental work counters this assumption by showing that art is itself rational. Yet it also retains its intuitive character and in this displays that which goes beyond rationality. Thereby, the experimental work engages the contradiction between 'intuition' and 'concept.' The quite obvious critical process apparent in Davis's stories is of course their contestation of traditional storytelling procedures: By various means (non-narrative, poetic, non-literary, non-artistic), they contest traditional notions of literary narrative and art. Importantly, this contestation comes about not merely by the presence of contesting means in the stories, but also in that stories basically remain adherent to the notions that they contest—in that they remain stories, literature, and art. This is crucial for the potential critical impact of the stories, as only such a proximity—in that the contested discourse is itself present in the work—compels us to critically reflect it.[56] As Adorno puts it in his

[56] The ties that Davis's work upholds to the traditions it contests has prompted Marjorie Perloff to term this particular kind of fiction, interestingly, "postexperimental." In a discussion of the stories of Lydia Davis and Maxine Chernoff, Perloff holds that their works mark a development from an earlier phase of experimentalism in North American literature. In Perloff's view, the "first wave of postwar experimentalism" denoted "the 'self-reflexive' fiction of postmodernism with its elaborate distortions of narrative time (analepses, prolepses) and its complex modalities of voice and metafictional device" (200). One might think of authors such as John Barth, Robert Coover, and Ronald Sukenick here. Perloff holds that in the generation that followed this first wave, writers started to critically review the typical devices of early postmodern literature, as their works displayed a distinct "return to normative realism, to the recounting of ordinary incidents that stand synecdochically for the larger fabric of life" (200), that is, such works returned precisely to the premises that early literary postmodernism cancelled out or subverted:

> In […] criticizing what she calls Coolidge's 'refuge in experiment,' in arguing that fiction must transcend 'the inherent negation involved in writing' and renew, however elliptically, the contact words make with their referents, Davis suggests that her own poetics of fiction marks a return to 'the real,' to what she refers, with reference to Beckett, as 'the attempt to see and say' (96). It is a distinction Maxine Chernoff would surely endorse. In what we might call the 'postexperimental' fiction of these young writers, the *mise en question* of the language event, a mise en question that many of us first associate with the name of Wittgenstein, is centrally important, but it must be construed pragmatically. In the 'scramble system' that is ours, their stories imply, the word can never approximate the world. And yet—each and every language event continues to yearn for such approximation. (213)

lectures: "If tradition does not remain as a sublimated moment in whatever way, there also won't be the force of a truly revolutionary art" (VA 244). This is the conspicuous way in which the stories engage in a critical process: In the bringing together of traditional and non-traditional elements, the stories set up a tension which compels us to critically reflect the issues that pertain to them—they make us think critically about traditional and conventional notions of narrative, literature, and art, and the boundaries these notions set up, between narrative and non-narrative, between different literary genres, between literature and non-literary discourses, and between art and non-art.

More specifically, this gesture of Davis's stories also reveals the contradiction of intuition and concept that is at the heart of the critical quality of experimental writing: As the experimental work challenges the traditional distinction between intuition and concept by showing that art is itself rational, Davis's stories challenge the traditional notion of literary narrative as something intuitive by showing that conceptual processes are also contributive to the storytelling aims of a text. The philosophical discourse in the story "Ethics" contributes to its storytelling process, just as the analytical language of "The Family" and "Wife One in Country" contributes to the creation of a literary narrative out of these texts. Importantly, in the case of these stories, the rational means are not appropriated to fit the basic narrative purpose of the text, but are included as such. This emphasizes that they are not merely malleable elements in narrative discourse, but that narrative discourse itself might work on a rational basis.[57] This becomes apparent in "The Family." The story works as a kind of rational reduction of a proper story, from which then the reader might imagine a more fully formed literary narrative. As the style of the story essentially works as a reduction, it not only illustrates that the rational might be turned into the narrative—the conceptual into the intuitive—but that at its

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In terms of the specific historical developments of North American literature, Perloff's distinction between an earlier 'experimental' literature and a later 'postexperimental' one certainly makes sense. (Her historical distinction is also quite close to what John Barth discusses in his seminal essays "The Literature of Exhaustion" and "The Literature of Replenishment.") Yet I would hold that it does not necessarily contradict my labeling of Davis's fiction as 'experimental,' as my own notion of the term, albeit also a historical notion, is not as historically and geographically specific as Perloff's. The notion of experimental writing employed here is one that potentially subsumes both notions that Perloff suggests, as the phases they denote are both essentially grounded in the modern continuum that my notion of experimental writing relates to.

[57] Karen Alexander makes a similar point in her discussion of the "algebraic form" of Davis' storytelling. About Davis's story "Problem," Alexander notes:

> It is easy to imagine someone else fleshing out this schema and expanding it into a novel, but for Davis the story is sufficiently interesting in the sparse logical expression she gives. The algebraic form is enough to make a story, she seems to propose in this brief piece, one in which longing and love (to name only two emotions) remain discernible despite the cold, diagrammatic form in which the relationships are presented. (173-74)

core, a narrative might have a certain rational structure and causality to it. Likewise, "Wife One in Country" might be seen as displaying that the basic premises that govern the most intriguing storytelling are rational arrangements from which an intricately ramified narrative then imaginatively arises. And a story like "Ethics" might be conceived to suggest that at the core of any given story, there is a conceptual, philosophical issue that governs its actions and events—in this case, a premise of the ethics of reciprocity. All of these stories, then, in some way convey that narrative is in an essential way tied to rational processes and procedures.

This is one way in which the tension between the conceptual and the intuitive is engaged in Davis's stories, as an implied critique of the traditional notion of narrative as something merely intuitive, something that is non-conceptual. Yet as we have seen in our brief recapitulation of the critical tension between intuition and concept in the experimental work, the critical process does not work in a unidirectional way—the conceptual is not merely integrated in the work of art to subvert any notion that determines it as a merely intuitive, or in this case, narrative process, and to show that art is itself rational. Rather, the work is at the same time, if not first and foremost, also a critique of reason and rationality—a presentation of its shortcomings. Such shortcomings are revealed as well in "The Family": While its quasi-objective, analytical language and structure reveals the rational character of narrative and is made contributive to it, thereby criticizing the separation of intuition and concept, the story also, at the same time, holds on to the essential heterogeneity of this discourse. In reading the story, we do not really get the impression that its object (the family event) is revealed to us, as we feel compelled to fill out the blanks imaginatively.

The critical process of the experimental work, and of Davis's stories, works in both ways, then. And this reveals the crucial point about it—namely that the main target is neither just the conceptual nor the intuitive, but more fundamentally their separation. This is why it is important that Davis's stories, for all their success of integrating the intuitive and the conceptual, the narrative and the rational, uphold their heterogeneity, their difference—their separation. For only in this do they eventually exert their basic critical purpose: In retaining the tensions between the conceptual and the intuitive, the stories come to reflect the fundamental diremption brought about in the establishment of reason and rationality as the governing principles of modern humanity, and thereby compel us to critically think about it.

This brings us to the utopian quality of experimental writing. The utopian aim of art is to protest against this diremption, and to gesture towards a restored state that would not only yield the proper identity of the object, but more fundamentally also the harmony of subject and

object. The experimental work achieves this through its artistic integration of the conceptual and the intuitive, and also by its basic process: In its eschewal of traditions and conventions in the concomitant attempt to present the object on its own terms, the experimental work becomes an inquiry into its own preconditions and the preconditions of art as such. Its central concern with that which distinguishes art as art means that in its formal engagement with this issue, it comes to present something that is only presentable in art, something that is essentially of itself. In this, the experimental work becomes a formal placeholder of the restored object. To relate this again in terms of intuition and concept: by working through their tension, the experimental work points beyond it. The utopian gesture of the experimental work is also manifest in a more straightforward and affective way: the experimental work yields exhilarating new or different forms, and thereby proves the aesthetic possibility of change. Of course, this utopian gesture ultimately fails to realize the utopian: the experimental work fails to actually achieve the state it gestures towards, as it does not overcome the contradictions between construction and sense, intuition and concept, but persists in them. This is a logical necessity, but also an aesthetic demand: its inability to display a proper state of reconciliation also displays its refusal to become consolatory. Conversely, in persisting in its historical, critical, and utopian contradictions, the work stimulates critical reflection in us—a critical reflection of the preconditions of the work as well as the preconditions of art in culture and society, and how these preconditions might potentially be changed.

Lydia Davis's stories engage the utopian by working through the contradiction between the intuitive and the conceptual and gesturing towards its overcoming, as rational means are made contributive to literary narration, and literary narration is shown to be rational. Yet they also register the failure of art to ultimately achieve it, in that the rational and the narrative remain essentially heterogeneous. By registering this failure, however, the stories compel us to think about this failure and the issues that encircle it—to think about traditional and conventional notions of storytelling and art, about generic separations between literary genres, between the literary and the non-literary, the artistic and the non-artistic. Such reflections eventually bring us to consider the very nature of literature and art itself—what distinguishes literature as literature, and art as art. This is the consequence of a failure which is not one specific to the work of Lydia Davis, or experimental writing for that matter, but one that names an essential conundrum of art as such. In their presentation of this conundrum, Davis's stories pursue a utopian gesture, that is, to render an object according to its own logic. This object is art itself, the logic of which the stories reveal.

But this is merely a structural achievement of the utopian, as the objects in the content of the stories remain conspicuously withdrawn: The characters in "Disagreement" not only remain withdrawn from each other, they also remain, through the diminished character of the story, withdrawn from us; likewise, the family in "The Family" and the ex-wife in "Wife One in Country," through their rational reduction, ultimately resist any apprehension; the utterance in "Almost Over: What's the Word?," itself a potential expression of disconcertment, remains but a fragment, and thereby but a fragmentary insight into the relationship of the story's characters[58]; the passages from "Extracts from a Life" are precisely that: mere extracts from a

[58] Sue Im-Lee, in her book *A Body of Individuals: The Paradox of Community in Contemporary Fiction*, focuses more closely on how the peculiar style of Davis's work conveys a paradoxical form of interpersonal relationships:

> [The] dissenting community visions of alterity and singularity infiltrate Davis's construction of *anonymity* in intersubjective relations. Davis literalizes the inaccessibility of another singular being through a formal strategy. In most of her stories, Davis omits crucial exposition, such as information about the story's setting, context, characters' personal histories, or analysis of motivation. The most consistently omitted piece of exposition, however, is the proper names of characters [as apparent in "Wife One in Country" and "The Family"]. […]. Indeed, the simultaneous effect of generality and intimacy that emerges from Davis's omission of proper names reveals the paradoxical effect of anonymity. Anonymity at once speaks to the alterity of the other as well as to the intimacy with the other. (120)

Im-Lee holds that "In the absence of proper names or even pronouns, the story becomes a narration about subjects who are, ultimately, inaccessible to the reader" (122). She then goes on to elaborate on the ethical importance of this literary gesture:

> Indeed, the fundamental drama that Davis draws from mundane, ordinary moments of intersubjective opacity directly illustrates the compelling fact that 'people are strange' (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 6). Like alterity that is more than difference, strangeness here speaks to more than oddity or aberration. […]. In Davis's fiction, each being—spouse, ex-lover, friend, co-worker, acquaintance, even oneself—is strange because each being exposes a depthless meaning that is 'inimitable, untransportable, untranslatable" (Nancy 14). (123)

This assessment of the peculiar presentation of interpersonal relationships in Davis's work links up with my own claims about her stories' peculiar presentations of their objects according to their own logic, which of course also has certain ethical implications. And as in my notion of the utopian quality of the experimental work of art, the (in Im-Lee's terms) ethical (and more generally political) success of such a presentation of an interpersonal relationship is based on its essential failure. For, as Im-Lee in her intriguing study holds, Davis's stories come to be

> a literary enactment of dissenting community: a community founded not on transparency but on opacity, not on communion but on the very *im*possibility of communion, and not on the final telos of fusion but on the unbreachable singularity of each being. But to read Davis's fiction as a literary argument *for* a dissenting community is to miss a vital disjunction in her treatment of alterity. […]. Davis's repeated visits to the impossibility of communion generate an ambivalent community, a vision of community that *begins with* the alterity central to dissenting community but *moves towards* the communion of idealized community. That this quest is an ultimately hopeless one is irrelevant to the protagonists; what matters is the way in which they cannot help pursuing it. (123)

life, leaving blank spaces in it, and mere extracts from a different source, leaving a blank space between this source and the work of art that contains parts of it; and the material in "Hello Dear" remains pertinently incongruous.

However, in the end, the apparent diminishment, reduction, fragmentation, extraction, and incongruity of Davis's stories yields not only distance, but eventually also leads to a certain paradoxical closeness: Merely through the unconventionality of the formal procedures of the stories do we become more attentive in our perception of the objects rendered in them. Moreover, the fact that these objects appear only in parts or in spare outlines keeps us from merely recognizing them, and motivates us to continually invest in their imagination. This process of imagination works in the following way: The contradictions apparent in the stories make us critically reflect them, and since this critical reflection must proceed from very little given data, it moves us closer to what we actually find on the page. I have noted that the diminished character of the stories makes us imaginatively extend them (the same goes for the reduced, fragmentary, extracted, and incongruous). In this act, the imagination sticks closely to the material—any contextual or intertextual extension proceeds in proximity to the semantic, graphic, and even phonetic properties of the text. In other words, in a text that is made of very little but that invites critical reflection because it works through certain irresolvable tensions, every detail becomes important. And this, then, potentially yields an interpretation which closely follows the very logic of the object. Importantly, this procedure will yield a further contradiction: between the sparseness of the material and its potentially extensive interpretation. Because of this contradiction, any extensive interpretation will eventually fall back on the very little (in "Almost Over: What's the Word?," say) or incongruous (in for example "Hello Dear") data it proceeds from—a gesture which will then bring the text itself, in its very materiality, emphatically to the fore. Because of its diminishment, its reduction, fragmentation, extraction, and incongruousness, the particularity of the material will be all the more emphasized. In this sense, the stories of Lydia Davis might be broken utopias, but they are utopias nevertheless.

At last, it should be noted that each of these procedures also has a very immediate utopian effect: In their estrangement of the conventions and traditions of a literary narrative, they have a refreshing effect on the reader. Their contradictions might reflect and refract broader contradictions apparent in culture and society, yet they also bring about forms of literature that display that the different and the new can still be artistically achieved—that change in art is still possible. In this, they work much like Adorno's dissonances: They not only

"duplicate" the "horrors of the world," but, because of their "difference to ingrained commonplaces" and "even more because of the uncaptured in them, because of the new and because of their expressive charge," they are also "always something joyous" (VA 66).

This, then, is the particular experimentalism of Lydia Davis's stories in terms of the three qualities of experimental writing. In the remaining two sections, I will focus on two particular stories of Davis in more detail, in order to further elaborate in a practical way the given notion of experimental writing and the experimental character of Davis's work. For this, I have decided to consider two stories that in terms of their length, their content, as well as their form, are quite different from each other: The first story, "We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders," is at 27 pages one of the longer stories Davis has written. It deals with an accident of a boy and the reactions of his classmates in the form of get-well letters. The second story, "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:," is one of Davis's shortest—it is made up of six words and only together with the title makes up a whole sentence. This story deals with Samuel Johnson's journey through the Western islands of Scotland. In this sense, one of the general aims of the following discussions is to show that while Davis's stories have a shared aesthetic end, they also differ in their particular formal accomplishment of it.

On "We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders"

"We Miss You: A Study of Get-Well Letters from a Class of Fourth-Graders" is, as its title implies, a an unnamed author's 27-pages long analysis of 27 letters written by students to their classmate Stephen, who is in the hospital with osteomyelitis after a car accident in which his knee was hurt and infected. The analysis is written "nearly sixty years" (*Collected Stories* 536) after the accident, which happened in December 1950.[59]

The text is made up of the following sections: a brief account of the boy's accident, the infection of his knee, and his hospitalization; a description of the school the students go to; and a detailed analysis of the letters Stephen receives from his classmates as he recovers in the hospital. In the analysis, there is firstly a discussion of the "General Appearance and Form of the Letters," followed by a consideration of different grammatical issues under the following headings: "Length," "Overall Coherence," "Sentence Structures," "Compound Sentences,"

[59] As *Varieties of Disturbance* was published in 2007, this means that the fictional time in which this text was written roughly coincides with the actual publication of the story.

"Complex Sentences," "Compound-Complex Sentences," "Verbs," and "Imperatives." In addition, the author considers the "Style" and the "Content" of the letters (these sections also include considerations of the differences between the letters written by the girls and the boys in Stephen's class). The "Content" category is then looked at in more detail in terms of two subcategories: "Formulaic Expressions of Sympathy" granted by the students and different kinds of "News" (about events that happened during the boy's stay in the hospital) that the letters contain. In the conclusion to the study, the author assesses the letters in terms of how they give indication of "The Daily Lives of the Children, Their Awareness of Space and Time, and Their Characters and States of Mind." The text ends with an "Addendum," in which the author briefly discusses the rough draft of a thank-you letter Stephen wrote to a former teacher for a gift he received during his stay in hospital. In this, the author focuses on the grammatical mistakes apparent in the letter.

"We Miss You" is a particularly suitable story in view of the given issues not only because it extensively shows how Davis's appropriation of non-artistic discourses (here, the discourses of human sciences) in an artistic context works, but also because it furthermore integrates found material in the text.[60] In its combination of two of the noted characteristics by which Davis's stories challenge traditional narrative procedures, "We Miss You" encapsulates the complexity of the dynamic of experimental writing in a prominent way.

Let me first turn to the appropriation of non-artistic discourse apparent in the story. At first sight, the text actually looks like an academic paper that could have been written in the disciplines of sociology, sociolinguistics, anthropology, or psychology. Yet on closer examination, some of the aspects of this discourse appear somewhat incongruous, such as the author's following point about how the particular style in which a student describes the spatial

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[60] This last point has been an issue for some of the critics, who have wondered whether the letters are real or invented (Marcus; Chiasson). Dan Chiasson's discussion of the story is particularly interesting in this respect. Regarding the "Addendum" of the text, he notes that

> [t]he only person who would be in possession both of his classmates' letters and of the rough draft of his own thank-you letter and not the rough drafts—"if such existed"—of his classmates is, of course, Stephen himself--or perhaps his sister. In fact Davis's brother Stephen would have been in fourth grade in 1951. This isn't merely "personal" material—it is precisely autobiographical material, handled with rubber gloves. (*New York Review of Books*)

Davis eventually straightened out this issue in a 2008 interview with Eleanor Wachtel in *Brick*, confirming the actual existence of the letters:

> Davis: Well, it's based on reality. I found this folder of letters among my family's papers. My brother was in the hospital when he was in fourth grade, and the teacher assigned all the children to write get-well letters. (*Brick*)

relation between the school and the hospital conveys the closeness of the relationship between Stephen and the class:

> It could be argued that Scott, too, achieves a certain pleasing balance with his alternation, in the four sentences of his cogent letter, between 'over there' and 'here we are,' 'up there' and 'back here again,' in fact creating a seesaw motion and thereby tying Stephen more closely to the class than any of the other children. (*Collected Stories* 543)

This seems rather overly intricate and far-fetched. There are many more such rather overinterpretive assessments. Here is, for example, the author's note on the handwriting of Maureen, one of the girls in the class:

> Her handwriting is round and slants consistently to the right with one notable exception: the word *I*, which is vertical. It may not be going too far to suggest that these markedly contrasting *I*'s express a sublimated rebelliousness, a suppressed desire to be less conformist and obedient than she evidently is. (*Collected Stories* 544)

Other assessments are rather vacuous, such as the one about the use of imperatives in the letters:

> The only instances of use of the imperative (4, one softened by 'Please') are found in the letters of girls. This may imply a greater inclination to 'command' or 'boss' on the part of the girls than the boys, but may also be statistically insignificant, given the small number of letters in the sample." (*Collected Stories* 542)

This statement also exemplifies another peculiar aspect of the study, namely that it is based on a dearth of material. Throughout the 27 pages of the study, the author again and again comes back to the same aspects (such as one boy's usage of the verb "yank," or a girl's description of landscape after a sleet storm as a "fairyland"), which further illustrates that there is a general lack of salient information. The apparent vacuousness of the discussion is even heightened in some passages to a point at which the argument cancels itself out, as in this note on the student John C.'s script:

> His script is gracefully formed but unusually consistent in sinking down slightly below the line. This may indicate a desire for more stability on his part, a fear of imagination, or, *on the contrary*, an unusually firmly grounded personality. (*Collected Stories* 553; emphasis added)

The inconsistent character of the text is further consolidated in that we are never quite sure about the actual aims of the study (which are not disclosed until the end), and to which specific academic discipline it might be assigned to—rather than belonging to one of the disciplines noted above, it at best seems to be somewhere in-between them.

In this sense, the presented analysis might be perceived as a dual realization of the critical quality of experimental writing: The story appropriates rational discourse only to convict it of its own potential irrationality (in that it shows how it is grounded in undemonstrable speculation), contradictoriness (in that it shows that a phenomenon can be interpreted as both one thing and its opposite), and purposelessness (in that it shows that a procedure might be rational, but nevertheless might lack an overarching aim). Conversely, this appropriation also works as a critical challenge of artistic discourse, in its upsetting of certain traditional and conventional notions of storytelling.

While these are certainly effects of this particular story, I would hold that they do not display its main critical import. As noted above, the critical quality of the experimental work is not realized in a unidirectional critique of conceptual rationality by means of artistic intuition, or vice versa. Rather, the critical potential is to be found in the more complex tension between these procedures that the work maintains. In order to understand how this works, it is helpful to reconsider in what precise way the conceptual relates to the intuitive in the text—how the quasi-academic discourse of "We Miss You" relates to its storytelling aspects. What the examples above show is that the study in different ways deviates from the objective and logical standards of a proper academic discourse. This means that "We Miss You" is not a merely a reproduction of an academic discourse. Yet what the examples also show is that these deviations are rather subtle and as such make it difficult to comprehend the text as, for example, a parody. In this sense, the text is neither just rational challenge of artistic traditions by their complete displacement, which would be something achieved through reproduction; nor is it merely an artistic critique of reason and rationality by distortion, which would be something achieved through parody. The peculiar modulation of the tension between the conceptual and the intuitive in this text is more intricate: it not only works by contrast, but also through proximity.

The text's stylistic deviations from an objective and logical rhetoric illustrate this. While they might be perceived as an artistic contrasting of rational discourse, we might also comprehend them as an unfolding of the artistic potential of the rational: through subtle rhetorical shifts, the conceptual reveals its intuitive character, and vice versa. For example, the

peculiar rhetorical shifts in the discourse make us wonder about the person who is writing the study: Who would articulate such over-the-top interpretations, and get entangled in such logical contradictions? Does the author have a particular emotional investment in the subject? Here, it is not important how we imagine this author, but that we imagine her or him at all, for this means that we begin, in this act of imagination, to extend the given material to a narrative. The author is no longer a professional and anonymous academic, but becomes a fictional character. This is how the text yields a peculiar proximity between the intuitive and the conceptual.

Other aspects of the text convey this proximity as well: The rather spare and quasi-objective language of "We Miss You" might be perceived as a diminishment of the storytelling qualities of the material. Yet as in the stories discussed in the last section, this also works to the opposite effect—the distanced, matter-of-fact treatment of the data precisely compels us to imaginatively enhance the text to a literary narrative. Note, for example, the author's comment on the teacher's handling of the letters in the introduction to the study: "the children's teacher, Miss F., assigned them to write Stephen a get-well letter. She then corrected the letters sparingly but precisely and sent them in a packet to Stephen" (*Collected Stories* 535). The rather scant and objective description of the teacher's way of correcting the letters makes us wonder about her: Who is Miss F.? What does her way of correcting the letters tell us about her? What is her back-story? Granted, one might reasonably object here that we are not necessarily compelled to proceed from this information in such a narrativizing way. Yet I would hold that there are certain other aspects in the text that steer us into the direction of such an imaginative enhancement, as for example the phrase "sparingly but precisely" that informs us about the manner in which Miss F. corrected the letters: As the two terms employed here enforce each other semantically, they might make us pause and wonder about the person who is characterized thus. More importantly, however, this particular information comes across as somewhat incongruous. It is not self-explanatory why we would need to know in what particular way the teacher corrected the letters—it remains unclear how this benefits the declared aims of the study. This information does not contribute to the study in an obvious way, hence we might take it to contribute to the characterization of Miss F. Other passages in the study work in a similar way, for example the "Addendum" section: Even though the comments in this section are introduced as "Of interest" to the study (*Collected Works* 560), they do not really contribute something informative to it. Rather, this section seems to have a more prominent dramatic purpose, in that it provides a proper ending to the story by letting the reader know that everything turned out okay for Stephen.

"We Miss You" also displays more general aspects that implicate the proximity of the artistic and the rational in the text's narrative appropriation of non-narrative procedures. The most basic one is the very high probability that we approach this text as a story, as this is its official generic label (as the book in which this text appears is titled *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*). This is our basic epistemic attitude towards it. Hence from the outset, we might tend to interpret the elements of the text as contributive to its storytelling. And since this particular text in many ways impedes such a process, we tend to be especially attentive to any detail that might contribute to the literary narrative we assume it to be: the teacher is never extensively described in the text, neither in terms of her appearance nor her character, so we focus on everything that might yield some insight into the story of this person, as with the expression "sparingly but precisely." Yet the narrative of "We Miss You" does not merely come about because of the official generic predetermination of the text. There is another basic yet also more concrete aspect that supports such a narrativizing process, one that becomes apparent in the very first paragraph of the text:

> The following is a study of twenty-seven get-well letters written by a class of fourth-graders to their classmate Stephen, when he was in the hospital recovering from a serious case of osteomyelitis. (*Collected Stories* 534)

This sentence can be read as a typical first sentence of an academic text, as it presents the topic of the study. Yet at the same time, it might also be understood as the presentation of the basic plot of a story about a group of children dealing with a potential tragedy. Dan Chiasson has remarked that we might perceive the sentence in this way because it suggests a subject matter that is very close to the subject of "that cliché of story-craft, Raymond Carver's 'A Small, Good Thing'" (*New York Review of Books*). The point is that the very subject matter of this study is one that we can readily identify with a typical subject matter of a literary short story. This further suggests the proximity of the conceptual and the intuitive in "We Miss You," by showing that we are implied in a process of mutual information of the rational and the artistic in our reading experience of the story. Rather than merely setting up a contrast between these discourses, the story also works through their proximity. In terms of the critical potential of the experimental work, this unfolds an essentially ambiguous relation that more emphatically compels us to reflect it: it not only reveals the potential aporiae of a rational discourse by literary means and contests literary traditions and conventions by inclusion of a rational discourse, but

also, in revealing the closeness of these discourses, it makes us perceive their relation as a more complex one and thereby reflect it in a more complex way.

The proximity of the conceptual and the intuitive in their separation does not only have a critical import in its yielding of a more ambiguous and complex dynamic that compels us to reflect it. It also relates the utopian gesture of Davis's story. In setting up, in their separation, the proximity of the conceptual and the intuitive, the story, as Adorno would put it, "protests against their separation" (ATHK 126), and shows that there are ways in which the two discourses might be brought together. The utopian is also apparent on the more immediate level of the affective impact of the text: In establishing a non-artistic discourse inside the context of art, "We Miss You" creates a form of storytelling that not only challenges our established notions of how a story is told but, in this, also grants us a pleasurably different aesthetic experience. However, as the separation between concept and intuition remains intact in "We Miss You," its utopia ultimately fails. As much as the story conveys the closeness of the conceptual and the intuitive by implicating their mutual appropriation and information, it also holds on to their essential heterogeneity: Rather than generating one integrative intuitive-conceptual discourse, the text sets up two parallel linguistic processes—one is an academic study of school letters, the other a story about children dealing with a minor tragedy. While these two processes intersect at some points and mutually inform each other, they also remain essentially separated.

"We Miss You" is not just interesting because it extensively and productively carries out the experimental contradiction between the conceptual and the intuitive, but also because it places found material at the center of this process: the letters of the schoolchildren. This is a crucial gesture, for it conveys that the main pursuit of experimental writing is not merely the setting up of contradictions in an intricate way, but that these contradictions only arise in the pursuit of a more fundamental aim: to convey a given object according to its own logic. "We Miss You" underlines this crucial aspect of experimental writing by its inclusion of found material: The actual letters of the schoolchildren serve as the center and impetus of the tension between the conceptual and the intuitive. In this, they represent the object that the work experimentally attempts to convey according to its own logic.

The centrality of the letters to the story is quite obvious: They are the material on which the study of "We Miss You" is based and which the study is about. As such, the letters consequently also inform the literary narrative the reader imagines on the basis of the study. In this sense, both the conceptual (the study) and the intuitive (the story) actively contribute to

convey something of the letters. "We Miss You," then, is not merely a complication of the relation between the conceptual and the intuitive, but also an attempt to integrate these discourses in order to reveal something of the peculiarity of the letters: As the study unlocks the conceptual potential of the letters, the story reveals their intuitive import. By bringing story and study together, "We Miss You" hence pursues an integration of the conceptual and the intuitive that would be the adequate presentation of the identity of object itself—the proper logic of the letters. The fact that "We Miss You" is neither a mere reproduction of a scientific discourse in the context of art nor a mere artistic parody of it, but a more subtle integration of these two seemingly opposing discourses, supports this view: The story does not merely pursue a mutual critique of these two discourses, but in this also attempts to convey something of the given object from which they arise.

Yet can we actually say that "We Miss You" is centrally about the letters? Are the letters not rather the raw material for a text that is really about the children—a study of and story about a class of fourth-graders? The answer to these questions is both Yes and No: Yes, because the letters certainly work as the raw material for the study and the story; No, because this does not preclude their priority—their precedence—but rather enforces it. Indeed, the letters are the raw material of "We Miss You," but as such, they are also that out of which the study and the story are produced: As the material of the letters yields "We Miss You," the story comes to realize the potential of the material—what is stored up in it. The priority of the letters is further enforced by their particular presence in the text: In numerous instances, the study quotes from the material. This again underlines the priority of the letters, as the study is literally based on them. However, the really important aspect of the process of quoting is the fact that in this, the presence of the material in the text is always only partial: We never get to read the letters in their completeness, but instead only get excerpts from them. Paradoxically, this does not undermine their priority, but intensifies it. As we at no point in the reading of the story are under the impression that we perceive the actual letters themselves, in their completeness, we are moved to uphold our imaginative investment in them, and also come to accept their fundamental difference from the story that is based on them. "We Miss You" might reveal some of the intuitive and conceptual potential that is stored up in the letters, but it will never manage to capture the letters in their completeness. It can only ever convey them in a partial way. Lastly, the peculiar ontological status of the letters in the story further supports their priority: If the reader knows that these letters actually exist (as they do), this anchors the letters differently in the real world, which not only further enforces their separateness from the fictional discourse

in which they are presented, but ontologically priorizes them, as real letters, over the fictionality of the story; if the reader does not know whether the letters exist or not, this again priorizes them, as their ambiguous status will make it impossible for the reader to adopt a determinate ontological attitude on them, which will hold any identificatory judgment at bay, further support their unattainability, and hence their priority.

This is the way in which "We Miss You" conveys the historical quality of experimental writing—in its attempt to present an object according to its own logic. At the same time, this also makes apparent its utopian import. The utopia of experimental writing is a broken one because it fails to overcome the contradictions it is working through, and also because it avoids to present the utopian object—that which is apparent in its proper identity—in its fullness. It is a negative utopia that generates the presence of its object through its absence. This describes the utopian presence of the letters in "We Miss You": the letters achieve a priority through their merely extracted inclusion in the story. Only such a presentation will bear witness to what Adorno called the "nonidentity" of the object (NDA 5): whatever a given discourse—in this case, the discourse of art—conveys about an object, this will never be its whole identity, as the object itself will always elude the process of identification, remain unidentified, nonidentical. "We Miss You," in its partial presentation of the object that occasions the text, makes this act critically apparent.

In sum, Lydia Davis's "We Miss You" shows that experimental writing does not merely carry out contradictions in its form, but at its core also attempts to work at the service of its object: "We Miss You" approximates its raw material—the letters—in that it experimentally yields a peculiar discourse that potentially overcomes the distinctions between intuition and concept that keep us from grasping an object in its proper identity. It attempts to find a language that in a more complex way conveys the potential of its object. Importantly, "We Miss You" persists in this approximation, by preserving the separation of the discourses it makes use of. More substantially, it achieves this by avoiding a display of the complete object itself, as we only get excerpts from the letters that serve as the center and engine of the procedure of the text. The letters only become present by their ultimate absence—in a negative way.[61] This keeps

[61] The negative presence of the center is arguably akin to what Madeleine LaRue—in view of a Davis story that explicitly deals this issue, titled "The Center of the Story"—calls "a positive nothing," which Davis approaches in the following way:

> The empty center is, then, not within any story at all, but the point around which all stories orbit. As she strips her texts of more and more, she brings them closer to the center, so that when there is nothing in a story, everything will be in the center. The center will be made of nothing, but a positive nothing. (*Quarterly Conversation*)

the story from becoming consolatory, that is, from affirming the assumption that whatever is rendered in art can be rendered in a transparent and comprehensive way. Conversely, "We Miss You" bears witness to the fact that art can never completely reveal its object. Instead, it shows that the task of art is to persistently find new ways to convey the potential of its object, and to keep us, in this persistence, persistent in our critical reflection of the given object, and how this object is conveyed in art. Eventually, in this process of exploring the absence of the object, something else becomes present—that which is the only thing that art can properly present as such: the work of art itself. For what "We Miss You" in the end makes emphatically apparent is the essential process of the medium of literature—the fact that literature is necessarily a process that takes place as a contradictive entwinement of the conceptual and the intuitive—and the particular form in which this process in realized in the given story—in the form of a subtle narrative modification of a rational analysis that conveys both the closeness and separateness of the intuitive and the conceptual in the attempt to reveal something about the object of this analysis, that is, the letters around which the story revolves. In failing to reveal its object, the story itself becomes the object that is revealed to us.[62]

In LaRue's terms, this positive nothing also denotes an emotional state: a kind of equilibrium of the (artistic) temper, which is easily lost. LaRue notes this in regard of another Davis story, titled "New Year's Resolution":

> It is difficult work: "I'm pretty close to nothing all morning," she reports, "but by late afternoon what is in me that is something starts throwing its weight around." For Lydia Davis, the weight of being here away from the center proves, as always, both frustrating and fascinating. (*Quarterly Conversation*)

But of course, the unbalancing of the equilibrium of the positive nothing is what eventually also yields Davis's stories—what yields art: "But since her writing itself is part of that late-afternoon something, we readers treasure it, and carry its weight gladly" (*Quarterly Converation*).

[62] Marjorie Perloff seems to arrive at a similar conclusion in her discussion of a story from Davis's collection *Break It Down*, titled "Story," in which an unnamed narrator tries to make sense of the strange behavior of her partner. Discussing the quasi-logical rhetoric of "Story," Perloff holds that

> [e]vidence and inference, quantification ('how much') and simple opposition ('either…or')—these categories, so Davis implies, can never bring us closer to 'the truth.' The 'story' can never approach closure; just the same, it is only human to 'try to figure it out.' And ultimately the 'events' that have generated the hermeneutic puzzle all but fade into the background, for it is the puzzle itself that has become the narrator's obsession. (208)

In our context, the "events" come to signify the object, the "story" the work of art, "truth" the intrinsic logic of the object, and the "puzzle itself" that of the work of art. In this sense, the "narrator's obsession," as witnessed in many of Davis's stories, relates the pleasure of the reader in witnessing the intricacies of art itself in the work, which is less about the solving of the puzzle, but to render it transparent on the page in the act of reading. This might in the end also be revealing about one of the more cryptic statements of Adorno on the "enigmaticalness" (ATHK 157) of art. In the *Aesthetic Theory*, he holds that the "solution of the enigma [of art] amounts to giving the reason for its insolubility, which is the gaze artworks direct at the viewer" (ATHK 162). If we grant that art is an enigma, there must be something in it that is revealed to us by solving it: the object of art. As I tried to elaborate,

On "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:"

"We Miss You" is a story that helps us understand the centrality of the object in the process of experimental writing. This is a point that "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" also makes apparent, though in a quite different formal realization. Here is the story in full, including its title:

> *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:*
>
> that Scotland has so few trees. (*Collected Stories* 553)

What do we make of these few words? Colm Tóibín's comment on the sparseness of the story and Davis's very short work in general is a good point of departure for the discussion of the experimentalism of "Samuel Johnson is Indignant:":

> Some of Lydia Davis's stories are very short indeed. Some contain just a title and half a sentence. Samuel Johnson is Indignant is the title of one of her books. It is also the title of a story that runs as follows: "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant": (title) and then "that Scotland has too few trees" (story). Because of the amount of deliberation in the stories, and the fact that not a word is out of place and every angle has been considered, one is allowed to feel that these very short stories were, once upon a time, longer, but were eventually pared down to what Davis was sure about, what she thought was true. (*Daily Telegraph*)

In Tóibín's view, the very short stories of Davis are "pared down" from longer ones. This is a statement that is particularly interesting with regard to "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:," for in the case of this particular text, there actually is a longer story from which we might say this text was pared down. The text in question is *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, Samuel Johnson's account of the three months of traveling through Scotland he undertook together with James Boswell in 1773. The relation between Davis's very short story and the book is informative for our purposes.

How does Davis's story relate to Johnson's book? Can we say that "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" presents a pairing down of *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*? Does it

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this object cannot be revealed in art, because of the irresolvable contradictions apparent in art itself. The gaze that works of art direct at the viewer expresses this. What the gaze however also expresses is that as works of art fail to solve the puzzle of their objects, their own character (which, because of its essential contradictoriness, is the reason for the "insolubility" of the enigma) comes into view.

condense that which is "true" about it? What can be said is that trees were certainly a matter of concern for Johnson (almost to a fault, and to comic effect for today's readers) during his travels through Scotland late in his life, as the following passage from his travelogue shows:

> As we knew sorrow and wishes to be vain, it was now our business to mind our way. The roads of Scotland afford little diversion to the traveller, who seldom sees himself either encountered or overtaken, and who has nothing to contemplate but grounds that have no visible boundaries, or are separated by walls of loose stone. From the bank of the Tweed to St. Andrews I had never seen a single tree, which I did not believe to have grown up far within the present century. Now and then about a gentleman's house stands a small plantation, which in Scotch is called a *policy*, but of these there are few, and those few all very young. The variety of sun and shade is here utterly unknown. There is no tree for either shelter or timber. The oak and the thorn is equally a stranger, and the whole country is extended in uniform nakedness, except that in the road between Kirkaldy and Cowpar, I passed for a few yards between two hedges. A tree might be a show in Scotland as a horse in Venice. At St. Andrews Mr. Boswell found only one, and recommended it to my notice; I told him that it was rough and low, or looked as if I thought so. "This," said he, "is nothing to another a few miles off." I was still less delighted to hear that another tree was not to be seen nearer. "Nay," said a gentleman that stood by, "I know but of this and that tree in the county." (*Journey* 10-11; emphasis in original) [63]

This is the first passage in the travelogue that contains reflections on trees—or rather, the lack thereof—in Scotland, and further such ruminations follow throughout the book. The reasons for Johnson's indignation about the lack of trees in Scotland are not only aesthetic, but of course also practical: trees give shade and shelter, and are, as timber, an important source of income in the economy of Scotland.

In this sense, we can confirm that "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" is a paring down of *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, as it recounts a crucial experience of Johnson during his trip through the country—a certain truth of his book. Yet this does not yet seem to fully capture the impact of the peculiar form of Davis's story. The story, and its particular manner of paring down, can be further elaborated by considering it in terms of what has come to be known as Ernest Hemingway's "Iceberg Theory"—arguably the most popular modern theory about the process of paring down in literature. A widely quoted passage on this theory can be found in Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*:

[63] Johnson's observations are made in view of the surroundings of Aberbrothick, now Arbroath, a town in the council area of Angus.

> If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer has stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (191)

In other words, a minimalistic but careful description of the external details of an event will evoke in the reader the experience of the whole of the story—its emotional charge and its subtext. For Hemingway, this has something to do with the fact that prior to any subtext, prior to any story or the history of one of its characters, it is those details that we notice, and which thus also in literature have to be at the outset of the reader's experience. As he puts it in an 1954 *Paris Review* interview, reflecting on his literary apprentice days as a journalist at the *Kansas City Star*:

> What Archie [Archibald MacLeish, discussing Hemingway's technique] was trying to remember was how I was trying to learn in Chicago in around 1920 and was searching for the unnoticed things that made emotions, such as the way an outfielder tossed his glove without looking back to where it fell, the squeak of resin on canvas under a fighter's flat-soled gym shoes, the gray color of Jack Blackburn's skin when he had just come out of stir, and other things I noted as a painter sketches. You saw Blackburn's strange color and the old razor cuts and the way he spun a man before you knew his history. These were the things which moved you before you knew the story. (*Paris Review*)

In order to illustrate this, let me briefly present Daniel Wood's discussion of the Iceberg Theory through an interpretation of a Hemingway story that is very suitable in this context, as it is only six words long:

> FOR SALE:
>
> BABY SHOES,
>
> NEVER WORN. (Wood 101)

Proceeding from this very short story[64], Wood illustrates the Iceberg Theory in the following way:

> By any measure, those six words demonstrate the power of Hemingway's 'iceberg principle' at its heartbreaking best. On first reading, we infer that a newborn infant has died, although both its birth and its death have been absented from the text and pushed beneath the surface of the narrative. On further reflection, we infer that the death of the child has left its mother desperately impoverished and in need of financial aid, otherwise she would have no reason to advertise the sale of something as commercially worthless as a pair of baby shoes. From her prior purchase of the shoes, we then infer the joy and the nervousness she must have experienced in her anticipation of childbirth, and from this anticipation we finally infer the trauma and grief she must have experienced when her child died or arrived stillborn. (101)

How does "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" fare on such terms? My point is that we cannot really proceed in the same way in our reading of Davis's story. Of course, as noted above, the very short stories do invite us to imaginatively extend the diminished narrative material we are presented with. But this will only take us as far, especially if we are not familiar with Johnson's book; and even if we are, I would argue that we might not remember the implications of this issue, as it is, despite its reoccurrence in Johnson's *Journey*, just one of many subjects in the book. We might wonder about Johnson's rather intense reaction—he is "indignant" after all—to the fact that there are not many trees in Scotland: Why would such a rather mundane fact trigger such an emotional reaction? Does the tree symbolize something specific for Johnson? Yet such interpretive procedures will arguably soon come to an end. In any case, even though

[64] It has to be noted here that critics are still undecided about the authenticity of this particular Hemingway story, which is the subject of Wood's essay "The Other Seven-Eights of the Iceberg: Peering Beneath the Surface of Hemingway's Six-Word Story." Wood assesses this issue in his conclusion to the essay:

> [T]he story behind the story is itself *only a story*, since Ernest Hemingway never actually wrote the words that these public voices now want us to cherish him for writing. Professional researchers have reported as much. The myth busters at Snopes.com have debunked the story's attribution to Hemingway with reference to a ranger of alternative sources from which it might have truly originated. Having myself recently trawled through the entirety of Hemingway's published works, including posthumously published letters and private writings, I can confirm these findings. The story behind the six-word story is, at best, apocryphal: if in fact Hemingway *did* write this story, he wrote it only for his audience at that dinner table and withheld it from the world at large. This does not at all devalue its power, of course, but it does raise the question of how exactly Hemingway came to be credited as its author in the first place. (102; emphasis in original)

the story does recount an important detail of Johnson's journey through Scotland[65], it is—unlike Hemingway's own very short story—not a detail that implies Johnson's more comprehensive experience of this journey and hence does also not evoke it vicariously in the reader; also, it does not trenchantly imply a history of the individual Samuel Johnson, nor a prolific story context in which such an event might have taken place. The material of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" does not have a synecdochal or metonymic relation to a whole, nor does it display a condensation of any whole. It is at once too general and too particular, by which it attains a peculiar concrete kind of opacity.[66]

But how does the story work, then? The critic Michael LaPointe discusses the same issue in his review of Davis's latest story collection, *Can't and Won't*. He also notes that readers might be prone to attempt to comprehend the very short stories in terms of Hemingway's Iceberg Theory, given the importance of this theory for the North American short story tradition:

> Readers of American fiction are trained by "show don't tell" protocol to search for stories between the lines. Confronted with stories as spare as those of Lydia Davis, we might think she can be read like Hemingway, falsely believing we've encountered superior examples of American minimalism. But the economy of a Davis story is not that of the "iceberg effect," with the real story submerged beneath the surface. Rather, in many of her flash fictions, the surface suffices. (*Los Angeles Review of Books*)

LaPointe then specifies his point that "the surface suffices" by a description of the reading experience of one of Davis's very short stories:

> Certainly one can read between [the] lines and move away from the work. But Davis places a very definite limit on our usual interpretive method. The title gives us all the context we need. At a certain point not very far from the story, our inferences are useless, and cause us to miss what is actually happening. Perhaps we are unaccustomed to reading through, and not between, the lines. But when we allow the lines to become our thoughts, we experience what the story has to offer. (*Los Angeles Review of Books*)

[65] Christopher Ricks remarked that Johnson's notice of the lack of trees in his travelogue did actually lead to an increase in forestation in Scotland (*Times Literary Supplement*).

[66] This arguably reflects what Marjorie Perloff describes more generally as the peculiar style of Davis's language, which is made up of "a series of images and word clusters at once highly concrete yet indeterminate" (208).

LaPointe suggests that in whatever way we will interpret the story, this interpretation will have to stick very closely to the particularity of the given literary material: The aim is not to render it transparent towards a perception of the whole story and its grander themes behind it (this would mean 'reading between the lines')—in fact, we will soon be lost if we proceed in this way, as the lines of a story like "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" do not provide us with the characteristics (the telling detail, metonymy, synecdoche, condensation) that would support such a procedure. Rather, the aim is to make the material itself apparent in the process of interpretation—to make the lines themselves appear. In such terms, "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" implies a closeness between interpretation and material, one in which the latter will not be at the service of the former, but rather the other way around (this is what 'reading through the lines' means). And this is precisely what Davis's "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" and her very short stories in general achieve, and what distinguishes them as experimental texts. Before showing how this works in the case of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant," let me briefly reformulate the just described process in the key terms of experimental writing. This will help us understand more clearly the implications of the process for the particular experimentalism of Davis's very short stories.

In terms of the notion of experimental writing pursued in this thesis, the closeness between interpretation and material reflects the closeness between the spiritual and the material: an interpretation is always a spiritual extension of the material, as it will perceive one (material) thing as another (immaterial, that is spiritual) thing. As we have seen in the discussion of the historical quality of experimental writing, the modern work attempts to form an object according to its own logic, that is, according to the logic of its very materials. This comes into a contradiction with the spiritual quality of the work: the work has to be spiritual in order to be a work of art (it has to have sense), but this means that it will transcend its mere materiality (its mere constructional character). A story like "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" responds to this contradiction: granting the necessary spirituality of the work—we have to interpret it—it aims at yielding an interpretation that sticks closely to material of the work. In this, it bears witness to the historical preconditions in which it was formed.

Moreover, the closeness between the material and the spiritual also reflects the closeness between intuition and concept in experimental writing. In terms of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:," this means the following: The material of the text is intuitive in the sense that its words and lines are rather plain and simple (with the important exception of the word 'indignation,' which will be addressed below) and describe a plain and simple situation in a

vivid way. As such, the material of the story displays some of the key characteristics of intuitiveness (as suggested by Naumann-Beyer in her discussion of the term)—plainness, simplicity, and vividness. In the reading of the text, we consequently proceed from the basic intuitive character of the material. Subsequently, we attempt to interpret the text. As noted, this reflects the spiritual extension of the material. Yet it also reflects the conceptual aspect of the procedure: The conceptual denotes the discourse of reason and rationality. As Adorno remarked, art is rational in that it employs "all the formal constituents that characterize [rational] thought, that is, "synthesis, differentiation, recollection, expectation, the making of proportions" (VA 303). These are of course precisely the basic constituents of any conventional interpretation of a work of art. In interpreting a work of art, we draw aspects of the work together, note differences between them, recollect earlier parts of the work in light of the present ones and infer things from this for the parts of the work which we have not yet encountered, as we generally attempt to put all of these aspects into a consistent and comprehensive relation to one another. It is in this sense that the peculiar relation of interpretation and material in "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" reflects the peculiar relation of concept and intuition in experimental writing. On these terms, the story makes apparent the conceptuality of artistic procedures. Importantly, this is a conceptuality that approximates the intuitiveness of the work, as the interpretive conceptualization of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" is formed in closeness to its intuitive parameters—the material particularity of its words and lines. Thereby, it critically challenges the separation of intuition and concept and approaches a potential harmony between them in a utopian way.

Let me illustrate how this works in terms of the story "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:." As noted, we might proceed in our interpretation of the text by extrapolating a more comprehensive story involving the character Samuel Johnson, Scotland, and trees. This story might be informed by our knowledge of *The Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, our general biographical knowledge of Johnson, our general knowledge of Scotland in Johnson's time, and our knowledge of trees in this context. However, the material of the story will impede any such interpretive process, as there is just not enough there to generate an interpretation of this kind. Because of this, we will rather turn to the very individual words of the story, their relation, and their appearance on the page. In this, the semantic will become closely related to the graphic and the rhythmic—to the very materiality of the text. In other words, as the sense turns back to the construction, the conceptual turns back to the intuitive. In this process, we might begin to wonder about the potential unusualness of the word 'indignant,' for example

about the somewhat archaic and arcane character of the word, about its semantic peculiarity as a negative kind of dignification, but also about its peculiar composition of letters—'indignant' contains three vowels, which are scattered in a sequence of six consonants presented in pairs of two, each of them containing the letter 'n.' Moreover, we might consider the unusual object of this indignation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'indignant' as "[a]ffected with indignation; provoked to wrath by something regarded as unworthy, unjust, or ungrateful; moved by an emotion of anger mingled with scorn or contempt" (OED).[67] This seems to be quite a strong emotional reaction in view of a rather prosaic circumstance: the lack of trees in Scotland. This tension, which also accounts for the arguable comic effect of the story, is not only semantically apparent, but also reflected in the graphic aspects of the words, as 'indignant' is a rather complex word, and 'trees' a rather plain and simple one. The basic point here is that as much as we might wonder about Samuel Jonson's indignation, we might wonder about the word 'indignation' itself. The very lack of words on the page, and their peculiar arrangement, make us proceed in this way.

This lack of words on the page suggests a further potential point about the close relation between the materiality of the story and its interpretation: Might not Johnson's indignation at the fact that there are "so few trees" in Scotland reflect something of the reading experience of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:"? As there are few trees in the landscapes of Scotland, there are few words on the page on which this particular story is printed. We might say, then, that

> *The Reader Is Indignant:*
>
> that "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" has so few words.

This illustrates a key aspect of the relation between interpretation and materiality in "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:": The interpretation not only proceeds closely from the particular materiality of the text, but eventually also becomes informative about this materiality. In experimental terms, this means that the conceptual proceeds from the intuitive and also comes

[67] The *Oxford English Dictionary* in its first entry on the term even lists a definition of the word from Johnson's very own *Dictionary of the English Language*: Johnson defined the state of being 'indignant' as being "inflamed at once with anger and disdain." The term also appears two times in *The Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, though not in connection with the lack of trees: Johnson uses the term to describe the reaction of locals to the "bad qualities of the whiskey" they have been given by Johnson as a present for their hospitality.

to reveal it.

This also explains the peculiar thingliness of Davis's very short stories (what Ralph M. Berry might call their presentness), which has been noted by many critics of her work:

> Davis's shortest stories, only a sentence or two long, float like little dinghies on the white of the page. They can't be followed the way stories ordinarily are followed, nor are they "told" in the usual sense of that word. They belong to the class "fiction" but also to the larger class made up of all things isolated in time or space: specimen creatures in jars, radar blips that promise interstellar life, Beckett's characters on a desolated stage, or John Cage's notes dispersed across silence. (Chiasson, *New York Review of Books*)

This is another way of saying that the stories impose their materiality on us. In this respect, Dan Chiasson makes the important observation that despite their "object-like" character, Davis's stories are not mute objects, as they still do "talk": they invite us to reflect and interpret them. Yet any reflection and interpretation will contribute to establish their very own form.[68] The lines of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant" do suggest more than their mere materiality, but this more (the spiritual aspect of the work, its sense, its conceptuality) is not a whole to which the lines—synecdochally, metonymically, or as condensations—belong: the lines are not merely part of an apparent but absent subtext of greater dramatic or existential import. Rather, the more reveals the spiritual potential of the present material, according to its own logic. (This is why the stories potentially appear opaque to the reader: they are ultimately not transparent towards something else, but rather towards themselves.) The self-reflexive gestures of the story convey this: the word 'indignant' becomes apparent as such in the story, as its trees come to reflect the very words of the text. In other words, the interpretation of the material turns it back on itself, which doubles and thereby more distinctly reveals it.

These gestures ultimately also reflect the critical and utopian quality of this story. By setting up a peculiar closeness of intuition and concept, "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" critically challenges their separation: It is a story that by its form makes manifest the scope and limits of any procedure based this separation, and it in a more concrete sense challenges the

[68] Maybe this is why Zach Baron noted that "Davis is as much a sculptor as a writer" (*Village Voice*). If we recall that for Hegel, the classical Greek sculpture represented the one historical form of art that managed to harmonize the inner representation of the absolute and the outer expression of it, such a statement makes sense in this context, as inner representation would denote the concept and the outer expression the intuition, which are brought together in Davis's work. Of course, unlike the Greek sculpture in Hegel's history of aesthetics, the stories of Davis eventually (and necessarily) fail in this pursuit. (This is telling about the differences between Hegel's dialectical system and Adorno's own negative dialectics, which critically reevaluates the premises of Hegel's thought.)

way in which a traditional kind of interpretation might proceed.[69] In reading the story, we cannot merely subsume the material of the work under a spiritual sense of the whole. The intuitive cannot be aligned to the conceptual, both in terms of the apparent longer story of the text and its themes, and the particular genre to which such a text might belong. Such identifications do not readily work in the case of this text. Importantly, while the story frustrates any traditional interpretation, it also invites an alternative interpretive process, one that sticks closely to the material and thereby contributes to reveal the material itself—the very form of the story, in its particularity. This is the utopian gesture of the story: It sets up a closeness between material and interpretation, between construction and sense, intuition and concept, and thereby aesthetically approximates a state in which their separation is overcome.[70] This becomes manifest in that the object itself is revealed to the reader in the process of interpreting the story, which consequently allows us to reflect it as such, in its essence. Subsequently, such a reflection will also make us reconsider the notions by which conventionally determine this object—our notions of the short story, of literature, and of art. This will reveal to us that this particular story—and any particular object—can never be fully identified by such notions, but will always remain, to a certain extent, nonidentical to them. In making its particular materiality apparent through the interpretive process, "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" bears witness to this nonidentity.

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[69] This shows that that the particular form of critique apparent in experimental writing ties the straightforward meaning of critique—as the finding of faults within the object of critique—to the more philosophical, Kantian meaning of the term, according to which a critique establishes the "extent and boundaries" of the object of critique, and determines its legitimate use, as Kant puts it in the preface A to his *Critique of Pure Reason* (101).

I thank Ridvan Askin for pointing out this issue in his feedback to an earlier version of this chapter.

[70] Perloff's essay on Davis is also notable in terms of the given discussion of the proximity of the conceptual and the intuitive in Davis's writing. Perloff in her reflections on the language of Davis's stories arrives at a similar assumption, though articulates it in different terms:

> "Ordinary Language," says Maurice Blanchot in a famous essay that Lydia Davis has translated, 'is not necessarily clear, it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths. This is inevitable. Every time we speak we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence' (Blanchot 59). The 'misunderstanding' inherent in ordinary language is the subject that animates Davis's own remarkable fiction. The word as physical presence: in Davis's work, vocabulary is stripped down to a bare minimum, words—frequently function words and pronouns—being put to the test through a series of permutations that yield, not knowledge of the signifieds to which they refer, but precisely the absence that Blanchot talks about. (205-06)

In this context, the "physical presence" of words denotes their intuitive side, while the "ideal absence" denotes their conceptual one. In this sense, Perloff suggests a similar dynamic as the one presented here: What she calls the words' undermining of their ideal meanings by their physical presence reflects what is here called the story's carrying out of contradiction between the conceptual and the intuitive.

Importantly, the nonidentity of the object is not only apparent in a relation internal to "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:," that is, in the relation between the story's material and its interpretation, but is also revealed in an external one. This concerns the relation between the story and *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. As noted, Davis's story recounts a detail from Johnson's book. While this detail is important to Johnson's narrative, it is not one that encapsulates his experience of traveling through Scotland, nor one that can be readily subsumed to it. Rather, it just recounts an idiosyncratic aspect of that book, and acknowledges it, for its own sake. In this, the story makes the nonidentical present as such—that which cannot be readily subsumed to the whole, that which might be lost in our concept of it.[71] In this, we could say that Davis's "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:," and many other of her very short stories

[71] Many of Davis's other very short stories pursue this as well, notably "Acknowledgement" and "Honoring the Subjunctive" (both of which have telling titles in this respect). Here are the lines of "Acknowledgment":

> I have only to add
> that the plates in the present volume
> have been carefully re-etched
> by Mr. Cuff. (*Collected Stories* 500)

The words are taken verbatim from John Ruskin's preface to the second edition of his *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, the whole sentence of which reads as follows:

> § 10. I have only to add that the plates of the present volume have been carefully re-etched by Mr. Cuff, retaining, as far as possible, the appearance of the original sketches, but remedying the defects which resulted in the first edition from my careless etching. Of the subject of the ninth plate, I prepared a new drawing, which has been admirably engraved by Mr. Armytage. The lettering, and other references, will, I hope, be found more intelligible throughout. (*Seven Lamps*)

And here is the other story, "Honoring the Subjunctive":

> It invariably precedes, even if it do not altogether super-
> sede, the determination of what is absolutely desirable and
> just. (*Collected Stories* 377)

As "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" dignifies an idiosyncratic aspect of Johnson and his book, "Acknowledgment," quite literally, acknowledges the material craft (the etching of plates) that goes into the production of a book and the person (Mr. Cuff) responsible for it, while "Honoring the Subjunctive" honors a verb form (also quite literally in the story itself, as it contains a subjunctive: "even if it *do*") that is no longer often used in the English language. This is not the place to go further into the details of these two stories, but I think it becomes apparent here that they all in a way are about the presentation of something peculiar on its own terms—for its own sake.

Other stories that work conspicuously in this way are what Christopher Tayler called Davis's "biographical fragments" (*Guardian*). These stories, like the one discussed in this section, are concerned with biographical peculiarities of literary and historical personalities. For this, see Davis's stories "Extracts from a Life" (on Shinichi Suzuki), "W. H. Auden Spends the Night in a Friend's House," "Lord Royston's Tour," "Glenn Gould," "Certain Knowledge from Herodotus," "Marie Curie, So Honorable a Woman," and "Kafka Cooks Dinner." In addition, there are also many more stories that focus on peculiar details of the life of more anonymous people and living beings, of language, and of everyday situations and objects. For this, see the stories "Collaboration with Fly" (on a fly), "Tropical Storm" (on the language of the news), "Hand" (on an everyday situation), "Nietszche" (on words), and "Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room" (on both a housekeeper and on language).

(and even, arguably, longer ones), work as a inversions of the reading principle that Roland Barthes suggests at the very beginning of his book *S/Z*: "There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean" (*S/Z* 3). In terms of Davis's very short stories, we could say that their point is to make us see a bean in a whole landscape. Or a tree, for that matter.

For all these claims about the critical and utopian qualities of "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:," one should not exaggerate the aesthetic and philosophical weight of the story. After all, Davis's very short stories are also just that: short notes that often work in the manner of cryptic or comical one-liners, or anecdotes.[72] Importantly, this highlights both their immediate utopian impact, as the unconventional form of the stories yields a pleasurable experience, as well as their subversion of their own utopian gestures: the fact that "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:" recalls merely a fragment of Johnson's travelogue highlights that the utopia of experimental writing is a broken one—not itself a restoration of an overarching whole, but just

[72] Scott Esposito has written an extensive and informative essay on the anecdotal character of Davis's very short stories, which Esposito believes to be their distinctive quality, and also that which determines the success of Davis's work:

> This is perhaps a large part of Davis' success: the world does not lack for talented authors dreaming of filling Kafka's and Beckett's shoes, but very few are capable, or desirous, of finding how this legacy might be compatible with smallness, cheer, and whimsical humor. In a world where darkness is generally equated with seriousness and comedy is thought to be a matter for light fiction, Davis' work is both courageous and refreshing. (*Quarterly Conversation*)

Furthermore, this anecdotal quality is helpful for a historical situation of her work between the context of its origins (Davis's work has first been published in the 1970s) and certain contemporary tendencies in North American fiction:

> Her anecdotes also provide a missing link between the minimalism of the '70s, the dominant school when she was producing her first work, and the flash fiction that proliferates in an Internet era. Davis often eschews plot, character, setting—really all the trappings of so-called realist fiction—and in this she clearly shares many of minimalism's aesthetic impulses, yet her work never feels "minimalist." I think this is because whereas a writer like Raymond Carver always makes you aware of everything he has stripped away from his stories—this is what makes minimalism minimal—in Davis we never feel the lack: her stories are exactly as large as they should be. They don't give the impression that they have stripped away all excess because there is simply no indication that there should be anything more than what we have. In this way Davis again references the anecdote, which never means to be any larger than it is and never gives the impression that it is a truncated version of something that's actually much grander. It is a form that's comfortable with being small because it simply is what it is. (*Quarterly Conversation*)

Esposito's assessment of Davis's ties to minimalism is similar to my own, presented above, with the potential difference that Esposito mainly emphasizes the self-containedness of the stories, which I also see as a distinctive characteristic of them, albeit one that in my assessment stands in a dynamic relation with what I believe to be their essentially fragmentary story character. Davis's texts, after all, are not anecdotes, but rather anecdotal stories.

a broken off piece of it.

The formal modesty of Davis's stories suggests yet a further point, one that is not only crucial to her texts but to the pursuits of experimental writing and experimentalism in art in general: The modesty of Davis's very short stories, and their closeness to the anecdotal form or the comic one-liner, shows that these stories, and experimental art in general, should never be perceived as completely earnest pursuits. Rather, experimentalism is always also a playful enterprise. Interestingly, it is precisely this aspect which makes some of Davis's stories literary failures in the eyes of certain critics. Michael LaPointe suggests as much in his review of Davis's latest collection of stories:

> Her fictions are praiseworthy for the cognitive opportunities they present, the trains of thought for which they lay the rails. In a story such as "Learning Medieval History," however—and even for a Davis collection, *Can't and Won't* is unusually full of flash fiction—this is also what gives them a sense of exhaustibility, even disposability. Although the humor is self-evident, one must question the lasting value of a piece such as "Housekeeping Observation": Under all this dirt the floor is really very clean. (*Los Angeles Review of Books*)

Conversely, I would hold that what might come across as an aesthetic deficiency of Davis's stories might just as well be seen as one of their distinctive qualities: In their exhaustibility and disposability, they make us critically reflect our own aesthetic prejudices and value judgments: Why are Davis's stories disposable and exhaustible? Why does this make them failures in an aesthetic sense? More importantly, however, they in this show that art, for all its seriousness, is not that serious after all. This is an impact that many of Davis's stories—not just the very short ones—display. For all their realizations of the historical, critical, and utopian qualities of experimental writing, the stories by their very form suggest that their importance should not be overestimated—or rather, that their importance lies precisely in their unimportance, for in this they make manifest that substantial matters are also present in the apparently marginal and transient.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to show how the notion of experimental writing established in the prior chapter is apparent in the concrete form of a contemporary Anglophone work of literature. Davis's stories are particularly suitable for this, as they do not only display a conspicuous

formal experimentalism, but also moreover prove that a complex theoretical notion might correspond to works to are not necessarily themselves theoretically overcharged. The latter point is important because complicates the still persistent view (apparent for example in Jonathan Franzen's discussion of William Gaddis's novels) that equals artistic experimentalism with the difficulty of erudition which aims at the breaking down of any pillar of our traditional notions of literature and art. Granted, Davis's stories are difficult, and they do present challenges to traditional notions of literature and art. Yet such a challenge is not the only distinction of her work. As much as her stories display a potential challenge to the traditional ways by which writers render things in art, they also present new and different ways of how a work of art might render such things. In these terms, the former might rather be seen as a result of the latter—critique as a result of innovation. The same goes for the apparent difficulty of the stories: Since we are not used to reading stories like these, they might appear difficult to us. This suggests that the challenges and difficulty of Davis's work is not necessarily inherent to it, but might rather arise from our readerly expectations. Davis's stories, because of their fundamental accessibility, make this point emphatically clear. In this, they come to express something that is apparent in many other experimental forms of literature and art: that the only requirement for reading them is an open mind and an interest in a different aesthetic experience.[73]

[73] Esposito in his own account of the basic accessibility of Davis's work is even more specific in terms of how this represents a certain literary lineage. He holds that this accessibility reflects a basic quality of literary modernism that is often neglected in the critical assessment of this period in literary history. Esposito believes that critics often approach the texts of Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, and Stein on the assumption that they are essentially difficult texts. In view of this, he conversely argues the following:

> But modernism is not that difficult, or, at least, its difficulty is greatly overblown. If the writing was really so willfully obscure, it would be self-satisfied garbage unworthy of our attention. But modernism is not self-satisfied garbage: it's some of the most ingenious writing I've ever read. Its art is in how carefully it uses language, not how difficultly. Syntactically, Kafka's sentences are not hard, yet he still manages to make them defy the mind, and that is why he is a great artist. The same for Virginia Woolf: I first read her *To the Lighthouse* as a complete modernist novice, and, despite her famously long, intricate sentences, I finished it in just a few hours. It was only later that I was to learn how I could return to these same sentences for a lifetime and never finish with them. Even Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* is not that demanding of a read: after you've gotten the hang of it, all of the awkwardness slips off like so many unwanted pounds and you're simply carried along by the beauty of her utterance. The same, I think, could be said even for the more ponderous modernist works—it's true that many sections of *Ulysses* are more complex than something like Kafka, but even *Ulysses* is surprisingly fast once you get used to its movement. And of course Hemingway… is there any more to say? (Esposito n.p.)

Esposito holds that the same goes for a more contemporary generation of literary modernists, to which writers like Thomas Bernhard, Roberto Bolaño, Javier Marías, or J.M. Coetzee belong. Davis is part of this generation as well, and her work is very important to it, for it makes the vital point that modernism (and its contemporary continuation) is not a willfully difficult kind of literature particularly apparent. In Esposito's words, Davis's work is "modernism made popular and easy to love" (Esposito n.p.).

CHAPTER THREE
TOM MCCARTHY'S *REMAINDER*

Introduction

In this chapter, I turn from North American short stories to a contemporary English novel. Like Davis's stories, Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* is quite an interesting object to consider in terms of the issues of difficulty and accessibility. Much has been made of the cultural debt of McCarthy's novels, and McCarthy himself has been outspoken about the fact that his books are influenced by pertinent works of Western philosophy, art, and criticism: from ancient Greece (Plato and the tragedians) through the early-modern stage (Shakespeare's plays, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*), nineteenth-century idealism (Hegel), romanticism (Melville's *Moby Dick* and *Bartleby*), and proto-modernist thought and art (Nietzsche, Baudelaire), to twentieth-century currents in continental philosophy and criticism (Freud, Heidegger, Bataille, Levinas, Derrida, Barthes), modernism (Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett, Burroughs) and the avant-gardes (Marinetti, Pinget, Robbe-Grillet)—and beyond these to some of modernism's potential postmodern descendants (Pynchon, Foster Wallace).[74] Apart from his three novels—*Remainder* (2005), *Men in Space* (2007), and *C* (2010)—McCarthy has also written a book of literary criticism, *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (2006), a work in which McCarthy, inspired by the mentioned philosophers and critics, and in particular by Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, discusses the essence of literature through close readings of Hergé's *Tintin* comics. Besides his writerly endeavors, McCarthy is, together with the philosopher Simon Critchley, one of the founding members of the International Necronautical Society, a semi-fictional and half-serious collective engaged in philosophical and artistic projects that revolve around such issues as death, technology, media, inauthenticity, capitalism, and democracy.

Most of these influences, endeavors, and themes are all in some way present in McCarthy's breakthrough novel—and arguably still his best-known work—*Remainder*. Approaching *Remainder* for the first time with this in mind, one might thus assume that reading

[74] Tom McCarthy has written or lectured on most of these writers—among other things, he has discussed Shakespeare's *Hamlet* together with Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster at the Tate Gallery, written an introduction to Alma Book's 2012 republication of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, and reviewed David Foster Wallace's posthumous novel *The Pale King* for the New York Times. Andrew Gallix curated an excellent but now defunct blog on the artistic and academic endeavors of Tom McCarthy at www.surplusmatter.com. The blog's archive is still available through archive.org.

the book will turn out to be a rather cumbersome, convoluted, and difficult affair. Yet while *Remainder* is a highly allusive and philosophically inspired work of fiction, in terms of its language, story, and overall structure it displays a striking accessibility: For the most part, its literary references are unobtrusive, and its philosophical substance is conveyed in a vivid and straightforward way, either through the distinctive commentary of the narrator, or by subsumption in the pared down, mimetic and linearly told action of the narrative.

This complementarity in *Remainder* of philosophical, literary historical, and aesthetic information on the one hand, and straightforwardness and vividness in terms of the storytelling on the other, makes the book a rewarding object for literary critics, as it allows for many different critical uncoverings of its apparent discursive substance. Hence, in the nine years since its publication, a range of critical articles have been published that establish *Remainder* as a literary exploration of various current academic issues: of trauma and its fictional representation (Boxall; Vermeulen, "Trauma"); of a "post-melancholic linkage of loss and identity" (Vermeulen, "Melancholia" 255); of the conception of literature as performance art (Butușină); of the "essence of fiction" and its peculiar space-time relations (Avanessian 156); of contemporary literature's modernist legacy and questions regarding the relation of humanity and "inhuman media" (Nieland 570); of authenticity and "contemporary subjectivity" (Lea 459); as well as of biopolitical issues (De Boever). My own approach will complement the already numerous readings of McCarthy's novel as I consider the question how the book fares as a work of experimental writing. The very aspect of the book just addressed—its peculiar entwinement of philosophical complexity and literary accessibility—is of importance to this issue and will be considered in more detail further below.

In anticipation of my argument, let me add that the answer to this question will be less straightforward with McCarthy's *Remainder* as it was the case with Lydia Davis's stories, as I contend here that the qualification of McCarthy's novel as an experimental work of literature is at once tenable (in a broader sense of the term 'experimental') and untenable (in a more narrow sense of the term). But precisely because of its problematic relation to the given notion of experimental writing, *Remainder* provides an excellent opportunity to again critically reflect on this notion and to draw out some of its further important implications that might remain hidden when it is discussed in terms of an unequivocal literary object. Accordingly, I will begin my discussion of *Remainder* by considering the novel in terms of Adorno's aesthetics and the notion of experimental writing as established in chapter two, and then continue by problematizing an identification of the novel in these terms. This problematization will yield

certain insights to the novel that, in turn, make it possible again to see it as a work of experimental art, in a way that will consequently help us understand the basic inclusivity and formal openness of the given notion of experimental writing in a more comprehensive way. Through this, the discussion will result in the suggestion that there is a close connection between experimentalism in literature and the genre of the novel—a point that will then be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

Remainder as an Experimental Work of Art

Ralph M. Berry, in the introduction to his essay on experimental writing for *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, addresses the potentially "quixotic" task of determining the "necessities" of a form of literature that, at the point of artistic modernism, has become the historical expression of the incalculability of art, of the critical inability to determine, in advance, its possible outcomes ("Experimental Writing" 200). This, in fact, is the necessity of experimental writing: its refusal to comply with any prior understanding according to certain established conventions and traditions. And this necessity is also its aesthetic virtue, for it betrays, as Berry points out with Adorno, "a deep bond between the topic of artistic experimentation, especially in literature, and the possibility of doing philosophy" ("Experimental Writing" 200). I have already addressed the closeness between experimental writing and philosophy in the second chapter of this book, but let me briefly recapitulate this relationship here in the terms that Berry introduces, as these suggest a useful connection between Adorno's aesthetics, experimental writing, and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*.

For the elaboration of the closeness between experimental writing and philosophy, it is helpful to specify Berry's initial claim: the deep bond that Berry suggests is not one between artistic experimentation and any given kind of philosophy, but between artistic experimentation and Adorno's own particular form of philosophy, that is, negative dialectics. At its core, negative dialectics is a form of philosophy that bears witness to the fact that a conceptual identification of an object in given discourses (in particular in scientific discourses) can never fully capture the object, but will always exclude something of it in the act of identification: the concept will never be adequate to the object. As discussed in the second chapter of this book, this incomplete act of identification yields what Adorno (in Hegel's terms) called the "nonidentity" between concept and object. Negative dialectics, then, is a form of philosophy that attempts to accommodate this nonidentity, yet not by establishing a kind of thought that

eschews identification—this is impossible, for as Adorno holds in his *Negative Dialectics*: "To think is to identify" (NDA 5). Rather, negative dialectics is "the consistent sense of nonidentity" (NDA 6) in the act of identification, that is, in the act of thinking—a manner of philosophical presentation that attempts to display the contradictions that arise from this act. As a contradiction implies a "nonidentity under the aspect of identity," it is thus the primary principle of a negative dialectics (NDA 6). By revealing the contradictions that arise from the act of identification, negative dialectics attempts to rescue something of the nonidentical in the object, something of the particularity of the object that has been lost in its appropriation by generalized concepts.

On the basis of this elaboration, the special status of experimental writing for such a form of philosophy can be explained: As addressed in the second chapter of this book, experimental writing is a writing in the name of the object, that is, a kind of literature that attempts to form its object according to its own logic. Crucially, in the attempt to attain such an impossible end, the experimental work eschews given traditions and conventions. This aggravates any kind of conceptual identification. Berry even goes so far to state that in experimental writing, there is a "resistance to every preconception" ("Experimental Writing" 201). While I consider this a somewhat exaggerated claim, I would grant that experimental writing is a kind of writing that certainly complicates any determination by pre-established concepts, as was shown in the chapter on Lydia Davis's stories. And in this, then, it attains its exemplary status for philosophy: In its engagement with experimental writing, philosophy comes to acknowledge the potential drawbacks of approaching an object with pre-established concepts, and as such concepts do not readily apply to the experimental work, comes to perform a kind of critical thinking which proceeds closely from the particularities of the object itself. Furthermore, as more conventional objects (that is, more conventional works of art) might not readily motivate us to do this, experimental writing (and experimental art in general) becomes, as Berry calls it, a "paradigm" ("Experimental Writing" 201) for all objects—experimental or not, artistic and non-artistic: An experimental work presents to us a particular form that serves as a reminder of the priority of objects in our engagements (philosophical and otherwise) with them.

So much for the distinguished relation between experimental writing and philosophy. The main point of this recapitulation is however not to restate, once more, the importance of experimental art to Adorno's aesthetics and Berry's more contemporary appropriation of it. Rather, it is a phrase from Adorno's work that Berry uses in his own brief elaboration of a

negative dialectics that is of particular interest in this context. He notes that negative dialectics means that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a *remainder*" (NDA 5; emphasis added). This quote introduces the title and arguably the central term of McCarthy's novel to the discussion of Adorno's aesthetics and Berry's reflection of it with regard to of the topic of experimental writing. Yet what precisely is the link between Adorno's aesthetics, experimental writing, and McCarthy's book? It is useful to have a look at the whole sentence from which this phrase is taken. It appears in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, and constitutes what is one of Adorno's most succinct definitions of his own form of philosophy: "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy" (NDA 5). In terms of the prior elaboration of Adorno's negative dialectics, the remainder hence is that which is left over of the object after the act of its conceptual identification. In other words, it is the material proof of the nonidentity between concept and object, the reminder that no concept can ever comprehensively capture its object—that any kind of conceptual identification will always result in a loss on part of the object. Philosophy (that is, philosophy in the vein of Adorno's negative dialectics) and experimental art attempt to recover this loss in their respective terms, as discourses in the name of the object, and it is my contention here that this is also a pursuit that McCarthy's *Remainder* is engaged in: The remainder that pervades the novel in different instances and manifestations, serves as a catalyst of the story, and gives it its title, is this dialectical reminder of the nonidentity between concept and object. Consequently, *Remainder* can be seen as a novel that extensively explores the contradictions between concept and object, and as an attempt to suggest how the resulting loss on part of the object might be recovered aesthetically. This claim, of course, demands further explanation. For the sake of the ensuing elaboration of these issues, let me begin with a brief summary of the novel.

The story of *Remainder* takes place in contemporary London. Its protagonist and narrator is a 30-year-old unnamed man who has an accident that involves an object falling from the sky and assumedly crushing him. (This cannot be ascertained, as the accident is never described in detail, because the man does not remember it.) The parties responsible for the accident compensate the man with eight and a half million pounds. In return, he contractually agrees never to talk about the accident in public. The accident leaves the man with damages to his body and brain that require him to relearn the most basic and everyday bodily actions in a lengthy recovery at the rehabilitation clinic. The process of re-learning the basic motor

functions requires him to consciously cognize any step of these actions in advance of performing them. This leaves the man, even after the successful rehabilitation, very self-conscious about his own movements and actions, which causes or catalyzes in him a fundamental feeling of inauthenticity. One night, at a party of an acquaintance, the man has a déjà-vu-like experience in the bathroom in which he remembers or imagines with clarity and in detail a quotidian scene from his life in which he felt particularly real and authentic—a scene involving, among other things, his apartment with a bathtub, cats on the roof of the neighboring building seen from his window, the smell of livers cooking on the stove in the apartment below, a tenant in the building practicing the piano, and another fixing his motorbike in the yard. (It never becomes clear whether the man at some point in his life actually experienced this situation or not.) With the damages he received from the parties responsible for the accident and the help of a professional facilitator named Nazrul Ram Vyas (called "Naz" by the narrator), the man sets out to painstakingly organize a re-enactment of his bathroom vision. This involves finding the right facilities and rebuilding them (the house, the apartment, the yard), furnishing them with the right objects, and hiring people to perform certain actions in this space—everything according precisely to the bathroom vision. The man presumes that if he is to actually relive his vision, he will feel real and authentic again. After months of building and rehearsing, the re-enactment finally takes place. However, the success of the re-enactment is only partial, as the man's hunger for authenticity and the peculiar elation he feels in experiencing it is not satiated yet in this particular setting, which compels him to organize further re-enactments. (Financially, this is not a problem, since the man successfully invests a large part of his money in risky speculative trading, which keeps generating more funds for his project.) As the man becomes more and more obsessed with his projects, his behavior becomes more and more erratic, and the re-enactments more and more intricate, weird, and dangerous. Eventually, he organizes a real bank heist as the final step of his re-enactment project. The heist goes wrong and two of the hired performers die. The man flees to the airport and enters a private plane organized by Naz, who accompanies him. As the plane leaves the airport, the tower instructs the pilot to turn back. Fascinated by the turnaround movement of the plane, the man threatens the crew with a shotgun and orders the pilot to repeat this movement in a never-ending loop. Continuously turning back towards the airport and turning away from it again, the plane leaves a smoke trail in the sky in the form of the figure eight.

How can this story be seen as an exploration of the contradictions of concept and object, and as an attempt to aesthetically recover the loss that results from the former's incomplete

identification of the latter? Why not begin with a carrot. As noted, after the accident the protagonist has to relearn his bodily movements again:

> The part of my brain that controls the motor functions of the right side of my body had been damaged. It had been damaged pretty irreparably, so the physiotherapist had to do something called "rerouting."
>
> Rerouting is exactly what it sounds like: finding a new route through the brain for commands to run along. (*Remainder* 19)

At the example of a carrot, he explains how this works:

> To cut and lay the new circuits, what they do is make you visualize things. Simple things, like lifting a carrot to your mouth. For the first week or so they don't give you a carrot, or even make you try to move your hand at all: they just ask you to visualize taking a carrot in your right hand, wrapping your fingers round it and then levering your whole forearm upwards from the elbow until the carrot reaches your mouth. They make you understand how it all works […]. Understanding this, and picturing yourself lifting the carrot to your mouth, again and again and again, cuts circuits through your brain that will eventually allow you to perform the act itself. That's the idea. (*Remainder* 19)

The important point here is that in this process, understanding and visualization of the act of lifting up a carrot precedes the actual act of lifting up a carrot. In other words, the concept precedes the object—the confrontation with it. The crucial situation, then, arrives when the predetermined concept is eventually confronted with the real object:

> But the act itself, when you actually come to try it, turns out to be more complicated than you thought. There are twenty-seven separate manoeuvres involved. You've learnt them, one by one, in the right order, understood how they all work, run through them in your mind, again and again and again, for a whole week—lifted more than a thousand imaginary carrots to your mouth, or one imaginary carrot more than a thousand times, which amounts to the same thing. But then you take a carrot—they bring you a fucking carrot, gnarled, dirty and irregular in ways your imaginary carrot never was, and they stick it in your hands—and you know, you just know as soon as you see the bastard thing that it's not going to work. (*Remainder* 20)

The real action does not match the imagined one, as the real object does not match the prefabricated concept. The concept is an immaterial ideal, and hence cannot take into account

the particularities of the object that arise from its physical qualities, from its materiality, and its exposure to its environment—its irregular weathered shape and the soiled matter that adheres to it. It is this experience on part of the protagonist that encapsulates the basic rift that runs through the novel—the rift between concept and object, or, more generally put, the rift between the ideal and the material—and sets into motion the further course of actions taken by the protagonist, who himself proclaims the significance of this experience (in capital letters, no less): "No Doing without Understanding: the accident bequeathed me that forever, an eternal detour" (*Remainder* 22). This rift, or contradiction, enforces a feeling of inauthenticity in the protagonist: he feels inauthentic because he can no longer spontaneously move in and interact with the world—can no longer forge an immediate connection with it. As a consequence, he sets out to re-establish an immediate contact to the things that surround him, to recover a feeling of authenticity, of realness. The protagonist attempts to achieve this through the re-enactments that take up most of the rest of the story. Crucially, this attempt is based on a fundamental misapprehension on part of the protagonist that is illuminative about the novel's exploration of the contradiction between concept and object—between the ideal and the material—and its more general engagement with the issues that concern the given notion of experimental writing.

As said, the re-enactments are attempts of the protagonist to establish a spontaneous interaction with his surroundings again, to overcome the detour of thinking in advance of doing, to overcome the priority of the concept over the object, of the ideal over the material. One might assume here that such a feat could be achieved by simply exposing oneself to the world, to a real situation, in which our ideas of things come into contact with their actual materiality, which sets off a dynamic interaction between concepts and objects. But this is not the path of the protagonist. Rather than exposing his ideas to the material world, he sets about to impose them on it. His notion of a harmony between concept and object is not one of reciprocity, but one of making the latter fit the former. In other words, this is a repressive notion of the relation between concept and object. The sequence of the re-enactments, then, tells the story of this misapprehension of the relation between concept and object, and of the gradual disintegration of this relation, which culminates in the final re-enactment of the bank heist.

As the term 're-enactment' implies, the staged events are not about a spontaneous contact with the world in the present, but about the exact recreation of (an idea of) a past event, imagined (the bathroom vision), real (the scene in the auto repair shop, the drug-related assassination), and as a conflation of the imagined and the real (the bank heist). In any case, the concept is there before the object, and the object has to align itself with the concept: every

material detail of the re-enacted event has to defer to the protagonist's idea of it—everything has to defer to his will. Initially, the reader might perceive this as the will of an obsessive and perfectionist artist-like character at pains to realize his particular vision of an event in order to convey it in a persuasive atmosphere of authenticity. Soon, however, one realizes that something different is at stake here. Whereas at first, the imposition of the concept does in fact serve the realization of a particular vision (note the meticulousness with which the protagonist and Naz organize the construction of the Madlyn Mansion site), it soon reveals itself as s self-serving pursuit: imposition takes place for its own sake—for the sake of power and control. This betrays the protagonist's fundamental misapprehension of the relation between concept and object, between the ideal and the material.

Several passages in the book make this apparent. In one episode, the pianist in the Madlyn Mansions has to go to an audition and in his absence plays back a recording of his rehearsals rather than perform them himself. He does so without telling the protagonist, who eventually finds out about it and is thrown into a raging fit. The pianist does not understand why it would matter whether he played the notes himself or not, as the protagonist cannot actually see but only hear him:

> "A recording of me. I made it myself, especially. It's the same thing, more or less. Isn't it?"
>
> It was my turn to go white now. There were no mirrors in the building, but I'm sure that if there had been and I'd looked in one I would have seen myself completely white: white with both rage and dizziness.
>
> "No! I shouted. "No. it is not! It is just absolutely not the same thing!"
>
> "Why not?" he asked. His voice was still monotonous and flat but shaking a little.
>
> "Because… It absolutely isn't! It's just not the same because… It's not the same at all." I was shouting as loud as I could, and yet my voice was coming out broken and faint. I could hardly breathe. I'd been lying on my side when he came up the stairs towards me, and had only half-risen—a reclining posture, like those dying Roman emperors in painting. I tried to stand up now but couldn't. Panic welled up inside me. I tried to be formal. I forced a deep breath into my lungs and said:
>
> "I shall pursue this matter via Naz. You may go now. I should prefer to be alone." (*Remainder* 147-48)

And why should it matter? Of course, one could argue that the experience of the actual rehearsal will be quite different from the experience of a recording of it. Yet this is not the point, as the protagonist does not notice the difference—this is why he is surprised to see the pianist in the

stairway. And when confronted with the same question by the pianist, he cannot answer it other than merely stating that the actual rehearsal and the recording are "absolutely not the same thing! […]. Because… It absolutely isn't! It's just not the same because… It's not the same at all" (*Remainder* 147). In other words, the whole thing matters because he says it matters. The real reason for his outrage, then, is that the pianist has disobeyed his orders, and thereby subverted his power. This is the logic of a despot, a point which is supported by the fact that the narrator likens himself to a "dying Roman emperor" in this scene, and further enforced by his rather regal use of the modal verb 'should' in the last utterance of this section ("I should prefer to be alone").[75]

The fact that power and control have become the main reason for the re-enactments is also strikingly apparent a couple of pages later, in an episode in which the protagonist recounts certain situations in which he let the re-enactors perform their acts without him actually witnessing them:

> Some days I didn't even leave my flat: instead, I sat in my living room or lay in my bath gazing at the crack. I'd keep the building in *on* mode while I did this: the pianist had to play—really play—and the motorbike enthusiast hammer and bang; the concierge had to stand down in the lobby in her ice-hockey mask, the liver lady fry her liver—but I wouldn't move around and visit them. Knowing they were there, in *on* mode, was enough. (*Remainder* 150; emphasis in original)

Again, the re-enactments here do not—or do not any longer—take place for the sake of the actual aesthetic experience of them, but primarily as an experience of the protagonist of his own power—it is the knowledge that people do as they are told which gives the protagonist his desired gratification. An even crueler expression of this is a scene in which the protagonist, like a child playing with his playhouse, places the figures of the re-enactors in the model of the

[75] At one point in the story and very typical of such despotic delusions of grandeur, the protagonist, eerily but also somewhat comically, even likens himself to the sun. Recounting his playing with the model of the Madlyn Mansions, the protagonist states the following:

> The day after that I lay beside the model looking at it from the same angle as the sun did. My gaze burst in through the upper staircase window and flooded the floor's patterned maze, then slowly—very slowly, almost imperceptibly—glazed, lost its focus, darkened and retreated, disappearing from the furthest edge of floor four hours and seven minutes after it had first entered. I did this for each floor I'd previously measured: four hours and seven minutes for the top down to three hours and fourteen minutes for the second. (*Remainder* 154)

In yet another passage of the book, the protagonist compares himself to a pharaoh, and perceives his staff, rather absurdly, as his pyramid (*Remainder* 255)—which is to say that he considers them his tomb. This is a particularly suitable image, as the novel is pervaded by the theme of death (see footnote 77).

Madlyn Mansions (which he has in his flat) in a certain way and then orders the re-enactors to be placed in the same way in the real building (*Remainder* 152-52). Again, at a certain point he starts doing this without even witnessing the event:

> The next day I placed my model on my living-room floor. I moved the figures around once more and issued instructions down the phone to Naz as I did this—only today I didn't go and look. Just knowing it was happening was enough. (*Remainder* 154)

These are only three of the many instances in the novel in which the detrimental consequences of an unequal relationship between concept and object—between the ideal and the material—are conveyed in the stark setting of *Remainder*. What the novel in my reading conveys is that any unequal relationship unfolds a power structure in which eventually power itself becomes the sole purpose, an encompassing force that replaces any ulterior aims and further consolidates the hierarchical relation from which it has sprung. In this sense, *Remainder*, through one of its many subtextual levels, works as a fictional and imaginative exploration of one of the key issues in Adorno's critical thinking.

Yet of course, the novel does not stop at this point. It does not merely stage the dangers of a conceptual appropriation of the object, ending in an depiction of the former's prevalence over the latter, of a distorted state in which the attainment, maintenance, and extension of power has become the all-pervasive aim. The novel does not merely show the fatal triumph of the concept over its objects—of the ideal over the material—but also its eventual collapse, as the repressed objects do not succumb to this surge, but do eventually return: in persisting in their materiality, the objects stage the downfall of the protagonist's idealist vision. It is on this account that McCarthy's novel forges a close alliance with experimental writing and its central aim of giving the object its due. This can be elaborated through the titular remainder of the book and the phrase from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder." For it is in the form of the remainder that the persistence of the object is conveyed in the novel—as that which cannot be consumed by the concept, as the resistance of the material against its idealist apprehension. With regard to this, I want to consider three episodes of the story that shed further light on the protagonist's idealist comprehension of matter, his ultimate desire to resolve matter in his idealism, and the eventual failure of this pursuit in the rather harsh collision of this idealism with the material world.

The protagonist's obsessive control of every material detail in his re-enactments is in a way already proof of his idealist approach to the material world: all objective aspects of the re-enactments have to fit his prior conception of them. However, his idealism runs yet deeper than that. This can be elaborated through a particular memory of the protagonist that he recounts at the beginning of chapter 6:

> In school, when I was maybe twelve, I had to do art. I wasn't any good at it, but it was part of the syllabus: one hour and twenty minutes each week—a double period. For a few weeks we were taught sculpture. We were given these big blocks of stone, a chisel and a mallet, and we had to turn the block into something recognizable—a human figure or a building. The teacher had an effective way of making us understand what we were doing. The finished statue, he explained, was already there in front of us—right in the block that we were chiseling away at.
>
> "Your task isn't to create the sculpture," he said; "it's to strip all the other stuff away, get rid of it. The surplus matter." (*Remainder* 87)

The notion of the sculpture being already inside the stone is one that is often attributed to Michelangelo. However, for the purpose of explaining how this passage conveys the protagonist's idealist apprehension of matter, it is helpful to return to Hegel's aesthetics: For Hegel, the highest purpose of the work of art (a purpose which is no longer attainable in and after Romanticism) is the perfect material manifestation, through a complete harmony of form and content, of what a given culture at a given point in history imagines as the absolute (Hegel 23). In ancient Greece, the perfect work of art was the sculpture, because Greek culture at that time believed that the gods (their notion of the absolute) inhered in human bodies. Hegel's account of Greek art is telling about the protagonist's own account of his art class exercise in sculpturing. For Hegel, what matters is that the work of art can wholly accommodate the absolute, which is another way of saying that matter becomes the pure expression of the idea—the material object becomes the pure expression of the concept. This idealist approach to matter is taken yet one step further by the protagonist: matter is not seen merely as the means to give the idea a perfect material expression, but this idea is seen to be already present in matter itself. This transfigures and enforces the priority of the concept over the object in metaphysical terms: Rather than saying that the concept appropriates the material which is neutral towards the concept, this episode implies that the concept is already inherent in it, waiting to be uncovered. Thereby the protagonist's idealism is consolidated in a much more fundamental way, as the usurpation of matter is conceived as a liberation of it.

The significance of this memory becomes apparent a page later, when the protagonist likens his art teacher's notion of sculpturing to his own rehabilitation process:

> I thought a lot what he'd said about stripping away surplus matter when I was learning to eat carrots and to walk. The movement that I wanted to do was already in place, I told myself: I just had to eliminate all the extraneous stuff—the surplus limbs and nerves and muscles that I didn't want to move, the bits of space I didn't want my hand or foot to move through. I didn't discuss this with my physio; I just told it to myself. It helped. (*Remainder* 88)

The protagonist, hence, understands his very basic physical actions in this idealist sense. What this extension of his idealism into matter means is that the latter can be treated as merely accidental to it, as it is essentially already an expression of it. The crucial aspect here, however, is that which the protagonist terms the "surplus matter" of the sculpture: the matter that is stripped away, removed in the act of uncovering the ideal in the material. For what happens to this material? As it does not vanish into thin air, it has to remain somewhere, and as such it has to reappear again at some point. This precisely is the crux of the protagonist's idealism, and that which in McCarthy's novel eventually leads to its demise.

This becomes apparent—to (tragi-)comic effect—in an episode involving the protagonist's car and two bottles of cleaning fluid, which is of particular interest not only because it shows how the protagonist's idealism eventually clashes with the material world, but also because it displays a further heightening of his idealism—its ultimate excess, which brings about its collapse. In this episode, the protagonist goes to an auto repair shop (which will later on be the subject and also the site of further re-enactments) to get a tire of his car fixed. Before leaving again, the protagonist remembers that his windshield washer system is out of cleaning fluid. After one of the boys at the garage has refilled it for him, the protagonist wants to check whether the system is working again and activates the system—but nothing happens:

> Liquid should have squirted out onto the glass, but nothing happened. I pushed it some more. Still nothing. I got out, opened the bonnet again and checked the reservoir. It was empty.
>
> "It's all gone!" I said. (*Remainder* 159)

The boys refill the reservoir, the protagonist tries again, yet nothing happens. They check the reservoir—again, it's empty:

> "Two litres!" I said. "Where has it all gone?"

> They'd vaporized, evaporated. And you know what? It felt wonderful. Don't ask me why: it just did. It was as though I'd just witnessed a miracle: matter—these two litres of liquid—becoming un-matter—not surplus matter, mess or clutter, but pure, bodiless blueness. Transubstantiated. I looked up at the sky: it was blue and endless. I looked back at the boy. His overalls and face were covered in smears. He'd taken on these smears so that the miracle could happen, like a Christian martyr being flagellated, crucified, scrawled over with stigmata. I felt elated—elated and inspired.
>
> "If only…" I started, but paused.
>
> "What?" he asked.
>
> "If only everything could…"
>
> I trailed off again. I knew what I meant. I stood there looking at his grubby face and told him:
>
> "Thank you." (*Remainder* 160)

Here we perceive the ultimate consequence of the protagonist's idealism in *Remainder*: his idealist desire is not only that the object has to fit his concept, or that the concept inheres in the object, but ultimately, that the object—materiality, matter—is completely resolved in it, without any residue, any surplus matter, any remainder. Yet the protagonist cannot remain in this state of idealist exaltation for long, as matter makes its return:

> Then I got into the car and turned the ignition key in its slot. The engine caught—and as it did, a torrent of blue liquid burst out of the dashboard and cascaded down. It gushed from the radio, the heating panel, the hazard-lights switch and the speedometer and mileage counter. It gushed all over me: my shirt, my legs, my groin. (*Remainder* 160)

And hence matter—the remainder—reports back, much to the regret of the protagonist.[76] At home and having gotten rid of his soiled clothes, he is lying in the bathtub reflecting again on the event:

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[76] Typical for the novel, there are various kinds of foreshadowing of this dilemma in the story. There is for example an episode early on in the novel, in which the protagonist, Greg, and Catherine are in the bar, toasting to the protagonist's newly obtained fortune. After they pop a bottle of champagne—which bubbles over—and click glasses, they are joined by a strange man at their table, who asks them:

> "Where does it all go?"
>
> Catherine turned away from him. Greg asked him:
>
> "Where does what all go?"
>
> The weird guy gestured vaguely at the table and the bottle.
>
> "That," he said.
>
> "We drink it," Greg answered. "We have digestive systems."
>
> The weird guy pondered that, then *tssk*-ed.

> It was something very sad—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. A miracle seemed to have taken place, a miracle of transubstantiation—in contravention of the very laws of physics, laws that make swings stop swinging and fridge doors catch and large, unsuspended objects fall out of the sky. This miracle, this triumph over matter, seemed to have occurred, then turned out not to have done at all—to have failed utterly, spectacularly, its watery debris crashing down to earth, turning the scene of a triumphant launch into the scene of a disaster, a catastrophe. Yes, it was very sad. (*Remainder* 162)

Needless to say, the protagonist of course then organizes a re-enactment of this episode in which the cleaning fluid actually disappears—so as to at least simulate in a secure and manipulable space the desired triumph over matter. Yet in reality, this triumphal procession has failed, ending in a minor catastrophe. The major catastrophe, however, is yet to come. It arrives with the last and final attempt of the protagonist to subsume the material world in his idealist vision: in the bank heist episode that makes up the final chapter of the book.

The bank heist, in a way, might be seen as the last logical step in the twisted progress of idealism that the story recounts—a step that takes idealism onto its ultimate level. Perceiving the heist in this way does not demand much interpretation, as the protagonist, in one of the most telling passages in his narration, makes this explicitly clear. The following passage is especially useful in this context because it not only addresses the importance of the bank heist to the

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> "No. I don't mean just that," he said. "I mean everything. You people don't think about these things. Give me a glass of that stuff."
> "No," said Greg.
> The weird guy *tssk*ed again, turned round and walked away. Other people were trickling into the bar. Music started playing. (*Remainder* 35)

The bubbling over of the champagne anticipates the bursting out of the cleaning fluid, as the strange man's question implies the dilemma at the heart of the auto repair shop episode. Another foreshadowing of this dilemma can be witnessed in an episode in which the protagonist observes the building site of Madlyn Mansions from Naz's office:

> One afternoon I stood in Naz's office gazing through the telescope. I gazed for a long time, watching people move around behind my building's windows. Then I lowered it and gazed at trucks and vans coming and going. They were mostly going, taking stuff away. It amazed me how much had needed to be got rid of throughout the whole project: earth, rubble, banisters, radiators, cookers—you name it. For every cargo that arrived, large or small, another cargo had to be taken away. (*Remainder* 120)

This reflects the irrepressible nature of matter and thereby anticipates the eventual collapse of the protagonist's idealism.

overall project, but also recapitulates the basic motivation of the protagonist for his actions, from the very first re-enactments to the last one:

> Why had I decided to transfer the robbery re-enactment to the bank itself? For the same reason I'd done everything since David Simpson's party: to be real—to become fluent, natural, to cut out the detour that sweeps us around what's fundamental to events, preventing us from touching their core: the detour that makes us all second-hand and second-rate. I felt that, by this stage, I'd got so close to doing this. Watching the re-enactors' movements as they practiced that day, their guns' arcs, the turning of their shoulders, the postures of the prone customers and clerks—watching all these, feeling the tingling move up my spine again, I'd had the feeling that I was closing in on this core. (*Remainder* 244)

Accessing the core means to transfer the heist from the re-enactment space to the real world. Why? The protagonist does not hesitate to elaborate on this himself:

> But to do this required a leap of genius: a leap to another level, one that contained and swallowed all the levels I'd been operating on up to now. […]. Yes: lifting the re-enactment out of its demarcated zone and slotting it back into the world, into an actual bank whose staff didn't know it was a re-enactment: that would return my motions and my gestures to ground zero and hour zero, to the point at which the re-enactment merged with the event. It would let me penetrate and live inside the core, be seamless, perfect, real. (*Remainder* 244-45)

This, then, is the last level of idealism that, in the spirit of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, sublates all prior levels—"contain[s] and swallow[s]" them, as the protagonist has it. It is the actual realization of his idealist vision in the real world: no longer taking place in a secure space where objects and actions can be controlled throughout, this idealism now finally prevails over reality itself. Its actions, thereby, are not merely "accurate" anymore, but finally become "*true*" (*Remainder* 261; emphasis in original): invested in the density of the real, and validated by it.

Yet how can such a vision of perfect, frictionless action—action that does not result in any remainders—be realized in the arbitrary sphere of reality, in a world of proliferating matter, and unforeseeable movements? The protagonist, in his deteriorated state of mind, believes in a simple ruse here: Meticulous planning will make it possible to anticipate the unruly sphere of the real world—any possible material deviation from the idealist plan can be calculated and thereby subsumed in advance, before it happens. This twisted logic arises from a situation in the rehearsals of the heist. At one stage in the rehearsal, the procedure of the bank robbery is

disturbed by a wrinkle in the carpet: one of the performers trips over it, to the amusement of the other performers. The protagonist then orders him to perform this tripping in every run of the rehearsal, yet without actually falling over. He believes that this way, the possible material deviation from the idealist plan in reality can be anticipated, and pre-empted: "I calculated that if he slightly tripped on purpose, this would prevent his tripping by mistake—forestall that event, as it were" (*Remainder* 238). Obviously, this logic does not work out. As the choreography of the actual heist eventually reaches the point where one of the performers stumbles over the wrinkle, there is, of course, no wrinkle there: the carpet is flat, the performer's stumbling is not caught by the wrinkle, and he actually falls over. This gets into motion the derailing of the choreography of the heist, and its ultimate and catastrophic failure. The remainder of the world could not be contained by the idealist vision. As the protagonist puts it: "Matter, for all my intricate preparations, all my bluffs and sleights of hand, played a blinder. Double-bluffed me. Tripped me up again" (*Remainder* 260). Ironically, when his idealism finally does collide, it is not because of an actual material surplus, but because of the absence of it: it is because the wrinkle is not there that the idealist vision fails.

The experience of this and the series of events it sets off eventually bring about a change in the protagonist's state of mind, in the form of his eventual acknowledgment of the matter of the world, its materiality. This is revealed when, after the catastrophic failure of the heist, the protagonist and Naz eventually end up on the chartered plane for their escape, and Naz has a kind of nervous breakdown. The protagonist observes this in the following way:

> [Naz] was still staring straight ahead—but now he was sweating and mumbling nonsensical half-words beneath his breath. Poor Naz. He wanted everything perfect, neat, wanted all matter organized and filed away so that it wasn't mess. He had to learn too: matter's what makes us alive—the bitty flow, the scar tissue, signature of the world's very first disaster and promissory note guaranteeing its last. Try to iron it out at your peril. Naz had tried, and it had fucked him up. (*Remainder* 281)

Beholding Naz, the protagonist comes to acknowledge that the world cannot be controlled, and that this is precisely what makes us alive: its arbitrariness, its unpredictability, its proliferation, which becomes manifest in the form of its matter, its materiality. The material remainder—or rather the absence thereof, in the form of the "ghost kink" (*Remainder* 273)—is that which brought about the failure of the envisioned event, but also that which made it real, made it verge from the envisioned event, made it unpredictable, but thereby also alive, made it matter.

This insight brings about the conversion of the protagonist's idealism to a materialist view of the world. Yet again, it seems to be one that is based on another misapprehension, as this newly found materialism is just an inversion of his prior idealism: Whereas up to the stumbling on the absent wrinkle, the protagonist attempted to control material objects through his conceptual appropriation of them, he now completely surrenders to these material objects—radical idealism turns into radical materialism. And as his radical idealism disintegrated into a self-serving dynamic of power and control in which his employees were treated as mere manipulable objects, this radical materialism ends up in a similarly amoral and unethical state. This can be witnessed in the protagonist's fascination with one of the shot performers: Rather than realizing, at this very moment, the dramatic and detrimental consequences of his actions—that people have suffered, that someone has died—, he merely muses on the material beauty of the wound and the pool of blood gathering around the body of the performer: "Isn't it beautiful?" I said to Naz. "You could take everything away—vaporize, replicate, transubstantiate, whatever—and this would still be there. However many times" (*Remainder* 277).

In other words, the story relates how both radical idealism and radical materialism are states that cancel out any moral consciousness—that is, a critical, self-reflective consciousness—of one's actions. This of course is precisely the state that the protagonist aims for: to escape consciousness, to cut out the detour of thought, in order to attain a state of immediate contact with the world, in order to feel real again, authentic. Amorality, in this sense, is not a form of existential being that the protagonist consciously supports or aims for (nor are, in this sense, moral questions at the center of this book), but it is a consequence of his desire for a blissful unconscious state of being that is eternally perpetuated. This is what the very last image of the novel represents: the protagonist is held in an exalted space, up in the sky, in an act of trance-like repetition that is to be eternally perpetuated, as the plane keeps circulating in the form of the figure eight—the sign of infinity. And as such, it also displays that such a state cannot be upheld, as the plane will eventually run out of fuel, deplete of the matter that keeps it going. The protagonist acknowledges this, but he does not care any longer.[77]

[77] In a more Freudian reading, all of this might of course represent a kind of death wish on part of the protagonist. The protagonist's reflection (in an earlier passage of the book) of his fascination with the drug-related death of a man in front of the repair shop, suggests such an interpretation:

> To put my fascination with him all down to our shared experience, though, would only be telling half the story. Less than half. The truth is that, for me, this man had become a symbol of perfection. It may have been clumsy to fall from his bike, but in dying beside the bollards on the tarmac he'd done what I wanted to do: merged with the space around him, sunk and flowed into

But what, then, is the moral of the story? In my reading of *Remainder*, the moral of the story is this: Through the trials and tribulations of its protagonist, the novel relates that radical idealism and radical materialism are a set of wrong alternatives. In radical idealism, the subject appropriates its object in a way that disqualifies the aspects of the object that do not fit the subject's concept of it. The object's particularity is not acknowledged by the subject, but repressed by it instead. In McCarthy's novel, the remainder represents this particularity. The novel consequently stages the processions of such a radical idealism in the form of the protagonist's re-enactment projects, yet also the return of the remainder, which brings about the tragi-comic collapse of the radical idealism, and an acknowledgment on part of the protagonist of his folly. As a consequence, this leads the protagonist into a kind of radical materialism: a complete surrender to the materiality of the world and its objects. This seems to be the right answer to radical idealism, as a kind of compensation of its wrongs. Yet in fact it is only an inversion of it: As a radical form of idealism promotes the subject (and its concepts) and cancels out the object, this radical form of materialism promotes the object and cancels out the subject (and its concepts). In this sense, both relations are fundamentally one-sided. This is problematic, as it relinquishes the vital aspect in the relation of subject and object: its tension, contradiction, and ambiguity. This is precisely what the protagonist of the novel wants: the abolishment of any mediation, of any difference and distance between subject and object, between himself and the world—in order to feel immediate again, real and authentic. And arguably, in a twisted way, the protagonist eventually achieves this state. Yet crucially, by overcoming the contradiction, tension, and ambiguity between subject and object, between himself and the world, the protagonist also relinquishes that which should actually distinguish the relation between subject and object: the consciousness of it. The protagonist's state is not a conscious one, but one of oblivion—the state which he is pathologically driven towards. But obliviousness can never bring about an equal relationship between subject and object. The fact that the protagonist's actions are fundamentally amoral bears witness to this: only an awareness of the essential ambiguity of the relationship between subject and object, the tension between

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> it until there was no distance between it and him—and merged, too, with his actions, merged to the extent of having no more consciousness of them. He'd stopped being separate, removed, imperfect. Cut out the detour. Then both mind and actions had resolved themselves into pure stasis." (*Remainder* 184-85)

In this respect, the likely eventual crashing of the plane is not merely a consequence to be accepted by the protagonist, but actually the final fulfillment of the state of being he aspires to: this blissful unconscious state of (non-)being that is eternally perpetuated, this "pure stasis," is in this sense just another term for death.

them, their contradiction, yields a consciousness of this situation, which is the basis for any moral and ethical attitude and action, for any attempt to establish an equal relationship between subject and object.

This, then, is the fundamental problem of both radical idealism and radical materialism: In erasing either the object (radical idealism) or the subject (radical materialism) from the equation, both forms abolish any ambiguity, tension, and contradiction between subject and object. In this, they abolish the possibility of a consciousness of the relation. Yet consciousness is ultimately the only means by which any equal relationship between subject and object might be established. Only through thought, through a critical consciousness can any change in the potentially unequal relationship between subject and object be brought about. This might seem an odd claim to make: that equality is established through the act of thinking. For is not the act of thinking precisely that which brings about the unequal relationship between subject and object, in that it represents the subject's identification of the object, which is always, necessarily, an incomplete conceptualization of the object? It is, but this is precisely the point: there is a paradox at the heart of this relationship, and the failure of both radical idealism and radical materialism is that each form cannot accommodate it. To think means to identify, and identification necessarily leads to an incomplete conceptualization of the object. Radical idealism is oblivious to this incongruence in that it equates thought and object. Radical materialism might accept this incongruence, but reacts to it in removing thought, which again leads to another state of obliviousness. Both resolve the paradox, both end up in oblivion. The only way, then, to proceed is to persist in this paradox—to persist in this ambiguity, this contradiction, this tension: to persist in thinking, yet in the awareness that thinking will always mean an incomplete identification of the object—will always yield a remainder. In this, thinking becomes critical, aware of its own procedures, and thereby a potential corrective of its own wrongs. Only in this way might it establish, eventually, a certain proximity between subject and object.

This, of course, is the conundrum that lies at the heart of Adorno's negative dialectics, and it is also one that Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* in my reading explores: its protagonist cannot accept the rift between concept and object, between thought and world, but wants thought and world to merge, wants himself to merge with the world, first in a form of radical idealism, then in a form of radical materialism. In staging the ultimate failure of these two forms, the novel comes to articulate, negatively, that it is precisely an acknowledgment of this rift that might eventually bring about a closeness of thought and world, a proximity between

concept and object. This is the closeness between McCarthy's novel and Adorno's aesthetics. According to my argument, both works are engaged in re-establishing the priority of the object, and both works approach this on the basis of acknowledging the basic rift between subject and object—the ambiguity of their relationship, their contradiction, their tension—, which works as the necessary but productive base to re-establish a proximity between them.[78]

Proceeding from such an account, one might now readily assume that *Remainder* is a prime example of a contemporary experimental work of art, given its closeness to the central issues of Adorno's aesthetics, and the fact that the novel is, after all, a book about the remainder—precisely that which experimental writing, by its procedures, attempts to recover: the nonidentical. Yet as I have noted in the introduction to this chapter, it is my assumption that, despite its closeness to the concerns of Adorno's aesthetics, the relation of McCarthy's novel to the given notion of experimental is a problematic one. This can be elaborated through a recapitulation of the preceding discussion in terms of the three basic qualities of experimental writing.

Based on the preceding discussion of the book, one could argue that *Remainder* embodies the historical quality of experimental writing in that it essentially is a story about the modern historical situation of art and its protagonist a type for the modern artist: As the accident essentially erases the memory of the protagonist, he becomes a man without a past, or, as he puts it, a man with a "no-past" (*Remainder* 6)—that is, a man without a tradition. Like the modern artist, he has lost any notion of an external sense, of an overarching ideology that might infuse his life with meaning, yet strives to re-establish a meaningful connection to the world, in

[78] As such, *Remainder* is not only close to Adorno's aesthetics, but also to Simon Critchley's notion of poetry as elaborated in his book on the works of Wallace Stevens, *Things Merely Are*. For Critchley, Stevens's poetry oscillates between what Maurice Blanchot considered to be the two possible forms of modern literature. According to the first possible form, literature "is an act of idealization governed by the desire to assimilate all reality to the ego and to view the former as the latter's projection" (86). The second possible form of literature then is one that "does not aim to reduce reality to the imagination, but rather to let things be in their separateness from us" (86). For Critchley (as for Blanchot), both forms must eventually fail, as "all modern poetry fails" (87). Stevens's poetry, in moving between these forms, makes this failure manifest. This is crucial, for in this, it comes to express the modern preconditions of humanity, in which the self moves between states of hypertrophy and atrophy. In any case, this seems to sum up in different terms what I tried to establish with Adorno about the dynamic apparent in McCarthy's novel *Remainder*: as a work exploring both radical idealism and radical materialism, it conveys the two possible forms of literature that Critchley determines through Blanchot. And as Stevens in Critchley's reading, *Remainder* here makes the necessary failure of these pursuits apparent, and thereby comes to express the modern preconditions within which it is produced.

The intellectual closeness of *Remainder* to Critchley's notion of poetry is of course not a coincidence. In their mutual involvement in the *INS* (the two are not just the founding members but have appeared together in several *INS* events), and as commentators on each other's work, Critchley and McCarthy are close allies in their respective philosophical and literary pursuits. In any case, a closer inspection of the relations between Critchley's and McCarthy's works might likely prove illuminative about both authors.

what Gabriel Josipovici called the modern artist's "hunger for the 'relentless contact'" (166) with it: the protagonist wants to feel real again, authentic. He attempts to achieve this through the re-enactments. The re-enactments in this sense become modern works of art. However, there seems to be a crucial difference between the modern work that Adorno imagines—which is realized in experimental writing—and the re-enactments of the protagonist of *Remainder*: While the modern experimental work displays an attempt on part of the artist to aesthetically realize an object according to its own logic, the protagonist's re-enactments seem to display an inversion of this principle, as he rather wants to impose his own logic onto the objects he engages in his re-enactments. This is a crucial difference between the re-enactments and the experimental work. Still, both manifestations arise from the same historical premise, namely that the artists themselves are the arbiters of their works, only that in the experimental work, this power is employed in the name of the work, and in the re-enactments, it is employed in the name of the artist, the story's protagonist. What is particularly important in this context is that although the re-enactments in a way display an inversion of the gesture apparent in the modern experimental work, it essentially leads to the same result: Like Adorno's modern works of art, the re-enactments in *Remainder* set up a tension between construction and sense. Again, this takes place as an inversion of the procedures in the former work: While modern experimental art attempts to set up a pure construction (in order to bring about a work that is formed according to the logic of its object) yet inadvertently introduces sense in this process, the protagonist of *Remainder* in his re-enactments attempts to set up a sense that eventually comes into conflict with the constructional aspects of the re-enactments, that is, with the concrete materiality of the object that he employs in this process (in the form of the various remainders that appear in the story). Both kinds of work then set up the historically expressive tension between construction and sense, only that the re-enactments in a way are a kind of modern work of art in the negative: premised in the same historical preconditions, but taking the opposite path.

This negative path of *Remainder* also makes manifest the critical quality of experimental writing: The re-enactments represent the attempt of an excessive rationality to realize the conceptual in the sphere of the intuitive, as the protagonist attempts to realize in a carefully calculated way his visions of certain situations in the material world and its objects. The novel then critically explores the detrimental consequences of a such a pursuit: the deterioration of rationality into a self-serving dynamic of power and control, its essential amorality, and its ultimate failure, as the intuitive in the form of the material remainder—that which cannot be assimilated by rationality—makes its return. Importantly, *Remainder* in this does not suggest

that a purely intuitive form of being is the right alternative to a situation of hypertrophied rationality, but shows that it is as problematic as the purely conceptual—as amoral, as bound to failure. In this, the novel implies that preserving the tension between the conceptual and the intuitive is the only option that might lead to a productive engagement with the situation of which this tension is expressive, as it is the only option that yields a critical consciousness of this situation. Moreover, *Remainder* also pursues the critical aims of the experimental work by an artistic estrangement of this conflict of modern rationality: it explores the estranged state of modern society by estranging it, that is, by transferring it to the peculiar and unconventional setting of the re-enactments. In this, it presents the historical estrangement of modern society at a remove, which demands from the reader the effort to re-translate it by interpretation. In contrast to a more explicit literary presentation, which might unilaterally present a clear message to the reader, this invites the reader to engage with the given issues in a more active and thereby ultimately critical way.

The question then remains in what way *Remainder* engages the utopian quality of the experimental work of art. It is in terms of this quality that the tenuous relation of McCarthy's novel to the given notion of experimental writing becomes apparent. At first sight, one might claim that the novel does perform a utopian gesture in the following way: In imaginatively displaying that neither radical idealism's mere conceptuality nor radical materialism's mere intuitiveness can bring about an equal relationship between subject and object, *Remainder* implies that only in the integration of concept and intuition would the subject manage to adequately present its object. Thereby, the novel points towards a state in which the detrimental subject-object relation of modern society is overcome. Yet such a claim essentially misses the point, for the real question is whether the novel actually achieves an approximation of such a state in its own form. This is arguably the central aspect of the utopian quality of experimental writing: the experimental work does not only relate the modern contradictions of art, but also attempts to formally overcome them—it displays an actual formal attempt to present the object according to its own logic, by integration of the conceptual and the intuitive. Granted, it must fail in this, but this does not keep the work from trying. In my view, it is precisely in this sense that *Remainder* does not actually aspire to the same thing as an experimental work, in a strict sense of the term: The utopian gesture of *Remainder* is mainly apparent in its content (and subtext), and in a negative way at that. The novel promotes the object by conveying through its story (and themes) the consequences of a one-sided apprehension in the relation between subject and object, but it does not attempt to actually—that is, formally—present the object

according to its own logic. This apparent discrepancy can be perceived in the fact that the work which most closely resembles an experimental work of art is not the novel itself but, as shown in the discussion of its historical quality, the protagonist's re-enactment project, which is only recounted, and which in its twisted logic only represents an experimental work in the negative. In this respect, *Remainder* seems to be a work of telling rather than showing, a novel that works in the name of experimental writing, rather than being itself an experimental literary work.

The tenuousness of the experimentalism of *Remainder* can also be elaborated in terms of the titular remainder of the novel. As noted, the remainder is that which stands for the particularity of the object. In this sense, the remainder is the formal principle of the experimental work of art, which represents an attempt to recover it. In *Remainder*, this remainder is of course also of importance, in fact, the novel can be read as a plea for it. However, in this case, the remainder works as a discursive agent in a story that elaborates what happens if the remainder is neglected, rather than as a formal principle of the novel itself. *Remainder* does not itself seem to display an attempt to formally convey it. Yet precisely this is the main distinction of experimental works of art. As Berry notes, it is because of such a formal attempt that experimental works produce remainders for philosophical criticism: In their attempts to bring about the object according to its own logic, they eschew traditions and conventions and thereby turn into works that are no longer readily approachable through pre-established theoretical concepts. This is not what happens in McCarthy's novel, which seems to lack the formal daringness of much experimental writing. Despite its noted parabolic estrangement of the modern issues it engages with, the novel on a more basic level—in terms of narration, overall structure, and manner of representation—works quite conventionally. It does not represent a conspicuous and comprehensive attempt to establish an artistic form in which the particularity of its object might be expressed, and which in this counters our narrative expectations. One might recall here the formal procedure of Lydia Davis's "Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:": This is a text that not only focuses on an idiosyncratic detail of its object, but also more comprehensively attempts to present it in its form. In this, it breaks out of the conventional frame of literature, which consequently makes it difficult for the reader to approach the text on pre-established terms. Obviously, *Remainder* does not proceed in this way—while the novel might be held to promote such a kind of presentation, this does not become manifest in its own form.

One might assume, then, that *Remainder* is a novel at the service of a particular notion of art that it ultimately does not itself fulfill, which essentially deprives it of an experimental

status. Yet this would be a rather dull and theoretically uninspired point to make. Instead, the apparent notional incongruence of *Remainder* can be used productively, to elaborate in a more comprehensive way the particular form of the novel and, importantly, to complicate and thereby counter a potential narrowing of the given notion of experimental writing. The next section will address the issue in these terms. An additional reason for pursuing the issue further is that it directly applies to a minor debate about *Remainder* that has taken place in literary journals and magazines in the years following its publication. In this debate, critics have discussed the question whether Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, and his works in general, might or might not be considered contemporary exponents of avant-garde or experimental artistic practices. In this sense, a detailed elaboration of the relation between the novel and experimental art contributes not only to a closer comprehension of McCarthy's work and the given notion of experimental writing, but also more generally to an understanding of what the terms experimental and avant-garde mean in today's culture. For a discussion of these issues, I will return to Zadie Smith's essay "Two Paths of the Novel." This was arguably the most influential text in establishing *Remainder* as an experimental or avant-garde work of contemporary literature, and as such, it merits a renewed attention.

Is *Remainder* Really an Experimental Work of Art?

Zadie Smith's programmatic essay about the contemporary state of Anglophone literature, "Two Paths of the Novel," spread the view that Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* is an avant-garde work of contemporary literature, which has subsequently been confirmed or disputed by literary critics (Claybaugh; Wood, *Other Modernities*; Hallberg). In the following, I want to consider Smith's claims about *Remainder*'s avant-gardism and consider them in terms my own notion of experimental writing. This will help me to determine in more detail the precise relationship between *Remainder* and experimentalism in literature.[79]

As the title of her essay implies, Smith perceives two basic paths for the contemporary novel to pursue. The first path denotes what Smith perceives to be the predominant mode of novel writing of our time, a mode that she terms "lyrical realism" ("Two Paths"). As noted in the introduction to this thesis, this is a mode of writing built on the premises of "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self" ("Two Paths")—that is, precisely the premises that have arguably distinguished literary realism ever since its establishment as a genre in the early eighteenth century. Smith does not hold that our contemporary realism is a mere identical continuation of earlier practices of literary realism, for the current works display, in distinction from such earlier forms, a more explicit consciousness of the tenuousness of these premises—a point that Smith elaborates in an extensive reading of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, which to her is the prime example of this self-conscious contemporary realism. Nevertheless, Smith argues, for all its self-consciousness, this contemporary realism still upholds and thereby perpetuates these very premises. And this in Smith's view poses a problem for contemporary literature: As this is the most widespread form of literary production in our time, it essentially limits how we might conceive of the cultural function of art, of the relation between language and truth, and of the human self.

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[79] In fairness to Smith's excellent essay, let me note in advance here that her argument is arguably more complex than it is made out to be in parts of the following discussion. That is, in the following discussion, I proceed from the assumption that Smith considers *Remainder* to be a contemporary work of avant-garde art, and mainly discuss the passages of her essay that seem to elaborate this point in view of the formal aspects of *Remainder*. This is a useful approach to Smith's essay in order to explain in more formal detail my own point that the book has a rather tenuous relation to experimental writing. However, Smith's argument in fact seems to suggest in certain passages (admittedly, rather brief ones that are scattered throughout the essay) that her own view of the novel is more ambiguous. In other words, there are passages in the essay that suggest that she herself actually hesitates to call *Remainder* an avant-garde work of art. I have tried to accommodate this rather more complex view apparent in Smith's essay to a certain extent in the main text as well as in footnotes to the following discussion.

It is here where the second possible path of the contemporary novel opens up: This is a mode of writing that extensively challenges these very premises and attempts to establish a different conception of them. Smith does not label this mode of writing as explicitly as the other, but given her use of the term throughout her essay, one might call this mode a contemporary version of "avant-garde" ("Two Paths") writing. As Smith elects an example for the realist path of contemporary literature, she does so as well for its alternative. This is the function that Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* fulfills in the essay. For Smith, McCarthy's novel represents the prime exponent of a contemporary avant-garde, and in the second half of her essay, she elaborates why this is the case. In Smith's reading, *Remainder* in many ways presents a comprehensive formal challenge to the core premises of realist literature, in particular that of the self as a subject of fullness and continuity. The following assembles the main points that Smith makes in this respect.

First of all, Smith notes that *Remainder* presents us with a narrative that does not mention the proper name of its protagonist. She holds that this is the novel's first basic challenge to the realist notion of the self, as the proper name might be seen as the emblematic linguistic expression of the identity and individuality of the human subject. Because of this, Smith suggests that the reader of *Remainder* might have to make without the term 'protagonist' altogether, as she states the following about the central figure of the novel: "This is our protagonist, though that's a word from another kind of novel [i.e., the realist novel]" ("Two Paths"). Instead, Smith, alluding to the re-enactments in the novel, suggests calling him an "Enactor"—an anonymous literary entity that works as a kind of formal agent rather than an artistic representation of a fully-fledged individual.[80] Furthermore, *Remainder* eschews the realist way of telling the story of its protagonist (I will continue to use this term despite Smith's point that it does not really apply to this novel) by way of a sequence of meaningful and progressive experiences through which the protagonist comes to terms with his own self. Granted, such aspects are present in the narrative, but only in order to be dismantled: Smith holds that *Remainder* in its first 50 pages presents us with a "series of narrative epiphany McGuffins" ("Two Paths"), only to eventually reveal their artificiality and fictitiousness. This happens in the restaurant scene towards the end of chapter 3, where the narrator discloses to his readers that the event he just recounted was merely made up for the purpose of the story (*Remainder* 56). In Smith's view, this represents the point at which the narrative has a "nervous breakdown" ("Two Paths") and its remaining realist pretensions are

[80] Likewise, Smith holds that the second-most important character of the novel, Naz, "is no more a character (in Realism's sense of the word) than I am a chair" ("Two Paths").

abolished. The rest of the book, then, presents the story of its protagonist—a figure that is completely "emptied [out]" of any interiority" ("Two Paths") (as opposed to the complex characters realism presents)—in a quite different way: not by progression and subsumption (as for example a realist bildungsroman would), but by "accumulation and repetition" ("Two Paths"), to be witnessed in the sequence of re-enactments that take up the rest of the story.

Remainder, then, challenges the realist premises of the self by subverting its particular kind of character representation and its particular kind of composing a narrative sequence. Yet why should these premises be challenged at all? Because they essentially set up a relation between self and reality in which the latter comes to be at the service of the former—in order to bring about the fullness and depth of the self, reality, by dint of aesthetic form, is made a reflection of it. *Remainder* in Smith's reading is a reaction to this basic gesture of literary realism, but not just in the form of a challenge of its premises. Rather, *Remainder*, in true spirit of an avant-garde work of art, also attempts to establish a form of writing that inverts the realist relation between self and reality. In Smith's view, the novel achieves this by letting "matter *matter*" ("Two Paths"; emphasis in original), as she puts it along the lines of an INS speech held by Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy. In other words, *Remainder* in its representative mode attempts to let the things that appear in its narrative be what they are—not a reflection of its protagonist's interiority, symbols of his self, or that against which this self asserts itself, but as things that are merely there. Smith notes that *Remainder* achieves this by its formal attention to the details of the spaces that its protagonist inhabits, and highlights one particular passage of the novel in this respect: the description of the "well-worn street surface where the black man dies" (Two Paths"; *Remainder* 187-88). This passage notes the "'muddy, pock-marked ridges'" of the street, the various tiny things that are found in it—"the chewing gum, bottle tops, and gum," and the matter with which it is suffused—"the 'tarmac, stone, dirt, water, mud'" ("Two Paths"). Taken together, this brings about what Smith calls an "almost overwhelming narration" ("Two Paths")—overwhelming because it pays attention to the minutiae of the world without making it directly serve the progression of the story and the inner development of its main character: this is a world that resists the appropriation of the self, and thereby threatens to overwhelm it.[81] As Smith later on more generally puts it, *Remainder* is a novel that

[81] One might reasonably object here that the formal mode of writing that Smith determines as an avant-garde gesture on part of *Remainder* essentially displays what Roland Barthes called the "reality effect" ("The Reality Effect" 234) of realist literature, which does not disrupt the realist order, but rather consolidates it. In Barthes's view, such passages—in which the story attends to seemingly irrelevant details of the diegesis—suggest a narrative's immediate possession of the real without any distortion. But this is a mere ruse, as such passages remain firmly embedded in the basic narrative frame of the realist text, which, as a narrative, necessarily distorts the

> makes you preternaturally aware of space, as Robbe-Grillet did in *Jealousy*, *Remainder*'s obvious progenitor. Like the sportsmen whose processes it describes and admires, *Remainder* "fill[s] time up with space," by breaking physical movements, for example, into their component parts, slowing them down; or by examining the layers and textures of a wet, cambered road in Brixton as a series of physical events, rather than emotional symbols. It forces us to recognize space as a nonneutral thing—unlike Realism, which ignores the specificities of space. ("Two Paths")

In sum, this is the contemporary avant-gardism of *Remainder* in Smith's view: it challenges the approved modes of literary realism, and formally attempts to recover the loss these modes bring about, in bringing space, and the things that take it up, before us, in their specificity. Read this way, Smith's assessment of *Remainder* does not seem to be that different from my own in the preceding section. Her point that the novel presents a challenge to the realist exploration of the self might be readily identified with what I tried to establish as the novel's critical engagement with the idealist appropriation of the object: in both gestures, the problems of making the things of the world serve the human subject are revealed. And as *Remainder* in my reading essentially works as a plea for precisely these things, in its promotion of their nonidentity, it is engaged in a quite similar pursuit in Smith's argument: in the presentation of their specificity. The crucial difference, however, between her approach to *Remainder* and my own is that she distinctly sees the novel as pursuing these aims in a formal way. In Smith's reading, the novel formally subverts realist conventions and also formally attempts to recover the loss that these conventions bring about. Yet this, of course, is precisely what I hold it does not do: rather than exploring these issue in terms of its form, it relates them in terms of the themes of the story and its content. This point, to which the prior section added up to, and which is a crucial one, as it calls into question the status of *Remainder* as an experimental work of art, can now be elaborated in more detail, through a closer assessment of Smith's claims regarding the particular formal gestures of the novel.

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merely given material of reality—a fact that is however hidden precisely by such passages. In Barthes's terms, the important question hence seems to be whether such a mode of writing remains subordinated to the conventional narrative order of the realist text, or whether it breaks with this order in a substantial way—whether it gains the upper hand over the narrative, so to speak. This is an issue I will pick up (though not with regard to Barthes's criticism) in the ensuing discussion of McCarthy's novel.

I thank Philipp Schweighauser and Ridvan Askin for drawing my attention to this in their feedback to an earlier version of this chapter.

Smith holds that *Remainder* works in the spirit of Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* in its quasi-geometrical, observational and descriptive approach to the spaces of its story and the actions that take place in them.[82] Yet this is true only to a certain extent. Surely, the style of *Remainder* is reminiscent, in instances, of Robbe-Grillet's famous novel. In this respect, witness the following passage describing a scene from the first re-enactment, in which the protagonist observes the moving sunlight in the corridor of the building:

> The next day I went and watched the sunlight falling from the windows onto the patterned floor of the staircase. I lay on the small landing where the stairs turned between the second and the third floors and stared. The sunlight filled the corridors of white between the pattern's straight black lines like water flooding a maze in slow motion, like it had the first time I'd observed it some weeks back—but this time the light seemed somehow higher, sharper, more acute. It also seemed to flood it more quickly than it had before, not slower. (*Remainder* 210-11)

Compare this to the beginning of *Jealousy*:

> Now the shadow of the column—the column which supports the southwest corner of the roof—divides the corresponding corner of the veranda into two equal parts. This veranda is a wide, covered gallery surrounding the house on three sides. Since its width is the same for the central portion as for the sides, the line of shadow cast by the column extends precisely to the corner of the house; but it stops there, for only the veranda flagstones are reached by the sun, which is still too high in the sky. The wooden walls of the house—that is, its front and west gable-end—are still protected from the sun by the roof (common to the house proper and the terrace). So at this moment the shadow of the outer edge of the roof coincides exactly with the right angle formed by the terrace and the two vertical surfaces of the corner of the house. (39)

The similarities between these two passages are apparent. Yet in my view, they work quite differently in the context of the respective books. While the passage from *Jealousy* is representative for the overall style of Robbe-Grillet's novel—this is essentially its form of

[82] Given the closeness Smith determines between *Remainder* and the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, it is not surprising to see that the avant-garde notion of literature that Smith outlines in terms of McCarthy and Critchley's INS speech and sees fulfilled in *Remainder* is close to Robbe-Grillet's own notion of the *nouveau roman*, the purpose of which Robbe-Grillet describes in the following way in his book *For a New Novel*:

> No longer will objects be merely the vague reflection of the hero's vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires. Or rather, if objects still afford a momentary prop to human passions, they will do so only provisionally, and will accept the tyranny of significations only in appearance—derisively, one might say—the better to show how alien they remain to man. (813)

narration—, in *Remainder* it is contextualized in a quite different formal frame: In McCarthy's novel, such passages are embedded in a traditional kind of narration, which releases, to a certain extent, the kind of opaque tension in favor of the object that such a descriptive style potentially generates.[83] This traditional narrative foundation of the *Remainder* is apparent in several aspects of the book, prominently in its narrator, its plot (the way the course of actions is ordered in the story), and its general manner of representation (of existents and events).

Let me begin with the general manner in which existents and events are represented in the novel. As elaborated above, Smith conceives this manner in the vein of the objective form of Robbe-Grillet's writing, and certain passages in the book (as can be seen in the above quote) do in fact resemble it. Yet in other passages, this style is changed slightly, which yields a different form of representation. Note, for example, the following passage, taken from the chapter that recounts the protagonist's visit to the stockbroker office Younger and Younger—the office that takes care of the protagonist's investments of the large part of his compensation:

> The office turned out to be slightly to the station's north, facing the gardens of Buckingham Palace. The receptionist here made Olanger and Daubenay's sloanette look like a supermarket checkout girl. She wore a silk cravat tucked into a cream shirt and had perfectly held hair. It never once moved as she lowered her mouth towards the intercom to let Matthew Younger know that I was there or walked into a small kitchen area to make coffee. Above her, also sculpted into frozen waves, mahogany panels rose up towards high ornately corniced ceilings. (*Remainder* 42)

As in the above passage, the narration is attentive to the objective parameters ("the office turned out to be slightly to the station's north, facing the gardens of Buckingham Palace") and the particular details (the walls and ceiling of the room, the clothing of the receptionist, her

[83] Garth Risk Hallberg seems to arrive at a similar point when he states that "Robbe-Grillet is willing, unlike *Remainder*, to sacrifice the continuity and escalation of plot on the altar of a philosophical apprehension" ("How Avant"). Hallberg's essay as a whole is an intriguing critical discussion of Smith's claim that *Remainder* is an avant-garde work of art. Hallberg questions it by revealing the literary-formal and philosophical paradoxes at the heart of Smith's argument, and essentially challenges the dichotomy Smith sets up between two possible kinds of literature in contemporary culture:

> What we need, as readers and writers, is not to side with some particular "team," and thus to be liberated from the burden of further thinking. Rather, we need ways of evaluating a novel's form and language and ideas in light of, for lack of a more precise term, the novelist's own burning. We need to look beyond the superfices and cultural hoopla that mark books as mainstream as *Netherland* and *Remainder* as "violent rejections" of each other, and to examine the deep places where private sensibility and the world as we find it collide. A true path forward for the novel—Zadie Smith's or Tom McCarthy's or anyone else's—will run through those trackless spaces, and we must follow it there. Otherwise, we give the status quo the victory, no matter how ardently we might wish to dismantle it. *Vive la différance.* ("How Avant")

movements as she calls Younger through the intercom) of its existents and events, yet here, it also contains subjective evaluations of the scene on part of the narrator ("the receptionist here made Olanger and Daubenay's sloanette look like a supermarket checkout girl"[84]) and a use of metaphor ("Above her, *also* sculpted into frozen waves [like the hair of the receptionist], mahogany panels rose up towards high ornately corniced ceilings"; emphasis added) that contribute to turning this space into a rather cohesive whole charged with meaning implied by (and implying) its narrator. Briefly put, it would be quite difficult to distinguish this passage from a passage to be found in conventional realist narrative. Of course, one might argue here that this is precisely the point: that *Remainder* attains the realist style in order to subvert it. This is Smith's point, as she perceives *Remainder*'s use of realist tropes to be there only in order to be dismantled. And granted, the restaurant passage that Smith notes does in fact relate a kind of metafictional breakdown of a certain realist order. In my view, however, the narrative style does not substantially change after that. While the action of the story does get more peculiar, and the linguistic representation of the action to a certain extent reflects this (as in the above passage in which the protagonist observes the sunlight in the stairway), it also generally upholds the conventional characteristics that were just determined in this early passage of the novel.[85]

Apropos the plot of *Remainder*, Smith holds that the course of actions does not display a progressive kind of narrative, but one that works accumulatively and repetitively. Yet while one can reasonably state that repetition is an important issue in the novel, it would stretch matters too far to consider it as its basic formal principle. Rather, *Remainder* is structured in a quite traditional way. That is to say it is not hard to fit the development of the plot into a traditional and progressive scheme such as Gustav Freytag's pyramid.[86] The novel starts out with a clear *exposition*, in which the main character is introduced, the setting of the story is given (both geographically and thematically), and the prerequisites for the central conflict to be acted out in the story are established: in the first pages, the protagonist introduces himself, the city of London as the setting for the story, and the accident which leaves the main character traumatized and

[84] The term 'sloanette' is a variation of the common colloquial expression "Sloane Ranger," which denotes "an upper class and fashionable but conventional young woman in London" (OED).

[85] In this respect, consider for example the beginning of chapter 14, when the protagonist for the first time meets Samuel Edwards, the semi-reformed bank robber who works as an advisor for the re-, or rather pre-enactment of the heist (*Remainder* 227-28).

[86] The basic structure of Freytag's pyramid as discussed in the following is adopted from Professor Kip Wheeler's diagram at https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/freytag.html

occasions the series of events that make up the rest of the story. Then follows the *rising action*, the gradual building up of the story towards its climax: the protagonist hires Naz, together they start planning and then rehearsing the first re-enactment. Typically for the rising action, there is a complication of the action, that is, there are certain impediments that defer the climax: various—logistic, material—problems have to be solved in the production stage of the first re-enactment. Eventually, the story reaches its *climax*, the "point of greatest tension" (Prince 14): the first performance of the re-enactment takes place; appropriate to Freytag's scheme, this first performance takes place right in the middle of the novel, in chapter 8 out of 16 (*Remainder* 127-44). Importantly, this climax also serves as or brings about the *peripety* or *reversal* in the story, in which "an action [that] seem[ed] destined for success […] suddenly moves toward failure" (Prince 71): the first re-enactment does not as expected manage to fulfill the desires of the protagonist, but rather moves him to pursue further re-enactments, spurring his further deterioration. This further deterioration constitutes the *falling action* of the story, the gradual development of the story towards its end: further, more intricate re-enactments follow after the climax, and they foreshadow the ultimate and necessary failure of the protagonist's actions. The ultimate failure, then, arrives with the *catastrophe*, the "scene which brings the dramatic action to an end" (Prince 11): this is the bank heist that takes place in the last chapter of the book, the last re-enactment, which goes wrong, and brings about the *denouement*—the "untying of the plot; the unraveling of the complication; the end" (Prince 18). Notably, one might perceive here a certain defiance in *Remainder* of its classical structure, as the story does not actually completely unravel, but ends in anticipation of an only potentially catastrophic end: we might imagine the plane to crash eventually, but for the time being, it remains suspended in the air. Also, in the main character's *anagnorisis* (which is dispersed throughout the last chapter, and is most explicitly and extensively articulated in the passage discussed above; *Remainder* 281), that is, his change from "ignorance to knowledge" (Prince 82) in the acknowledgment of his follies, he determines his ultimate situation not only as a failure, but also as a success: "I know two things: one, it [the bank heist] was a fuck-up; two, it was a very happy day" (*Remainder* 260). *Remainder*, in this sense, refuses to comply with its potential tragic disposition, instead opting for a rather more ambiguous determination of its outcome, one between catastrophe and happy ending—between tragedy and comedy. Smith notes this as well in her essay, as she considers the debt of *Remainder* to its tragic forebears:

> *Remainder* wants to create zinging, charged spaces, stark and pared-down, in the manner of those

> ancient plays it clearly admires—*The Oresteia*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*. […]. But the ancients always end in tragedy, with the indifferent facticity of the world triumphantly crushing the noble, suffering self. […]. *Remainder* ends instead in comic declension, deliberately refusing the self-mythologizing grandeur of the tragic. Fact and self persist, in comic misapprehension, circling each other in space (literally, in a hijacked plane). ("Two Paths")

However, as shown, despite this final refusal to comply with a traditional notion of closure, *Remainder* still essentially works in terms of a classical structure of storytelling, rather than through the principles of repetition and accumulation, whatever these latter procedures might look like.[87] It is as with its appeal to the objective style of Robbe-Grillet: a deviation that essentially remains embedded in a more conventional narrative frame.[88]

The third and last aspect I want to address in terms of the question whether *Remainder* is an avant-garde work or not concerns the narrator of the story. Smith suggests that it is difficult to perceive the main character of the novel as a proper protagonist, as he is a rather anonymous and, importantly, nameless figure. In her view, this presents a basic subversion of certain realist premises. However, the main character is everything but an anti-realist cypher. Quite conversely, he is a loquacious presenter of his own story, who throughout the novel keeps reflecting and elaborating on his own actions. Granted, his view of the events and his own actions is rather skewed. This however does not turn him into an avant-garde storyteller, but rather reveals him as a traditional unreliable narrator, in the vein of the (notably also unnamed) protagonist of

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[87] For illustrative purposes, I would suggest David Peace's novel *Red or Dead* (published in 2013) about the legendary manager of Liverpool Football Club, Bill Shankly, as a book that extensively works according to the principles of repetition and accumulation. Note the following passage from an episode recounting Shankly witnessing an away game of Liverpool FC against Leeds United at the Elland Road stadium in the 1968-69 season:

> On the bench, the bench at Elland Road. In the sunshine, the late and rare Yorkshire sunshine. Bill watched Jackie Charlton and Ronnie Yeats cast long shadows, Mick Jones and Tony Hateley cast long shadows. And on the bench, the bench at Elland Road. In the thirtieth minute, Bill watched Billy Bremner strike a long, steepling pass towards the silhouettes of Mick Jones and Ronnie Yeats. And Ronnie Yeats came to meet the pass, to block the pass. Yeats kicking out towards the pass, towards the ball. But Yeats kicked out into the air, into the shadows. And Jones met the pass, Jones touched on the pass. Past Tommy Lawrence. Lawrence groping after the ball, Lawrence sprawling on the floor. And Jones touched the pass again. Jones struck the pass. And Jones scored. And in the sunshine, the late and rare Yorkshire sunshine. (269)

Notably, the novel proceeds in this way for almost all of its 715 pages.

[88] In a similar manner, *Remainder* does appropriate the romantic (in Friedrich Schiller's sense) "idea or hope or fantasy that in and through artistic creativity one might achieve fully significant action and selfhood—achieve a kind of restoration and wholeness of sensation, meaning, and activity in the face of present dividing antagonisms" (Eldridge 16). *Remainder* reads as a kind of anti-Künstlerroman, however as one that still very much works within the structure of the genre it seems to oppose.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," or *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert. These aspects contribute to establishing a rather clear-cut character, as we are never in doubt whose voice and whose point of view we are perceiving. As readers, we experience the fixed, internal focalization of a homodiegetic, overt, and unreliable narrator, who does not shy away to use well-established narrative phrases, as in the following excerpt from an episode in which he recounts the hiring (and firing) processes in the production of the first re-enactment: "*Looking at it now, with the advantage—as they say—of hindsight*, it strikes me that Naz could probably have devised a more efficient way of doing it" (*Remainder* 105; emphasis added). Phrases such as the highlighted one in this passage contribute to a clear framing of the narrative. Of course, the question here remains when and from where precisely this story is told (from jail? a mental home? the afterlife?), but this does not cancel out the traditional narrative set-up in which the story is presented. Importantly, the fact that the story is explicitly told from the protagonist's idiosyncratic perspective also has its effect on the story's less conventional aspects: the objective style inspired by Robbe-Grillet noted above is in this sense not a detached form of storytelling that attempts to bear witness to the facticity of things, but rather becomes the expression of a detached and deranged character, the representation of a subjective point of view. The potentially anti-narrative tendencies of *Remainder* are thereby again re-captured by a rather traditional form of narration. Concretely, this is perceivable in one fundamental narrative difference between the passage from *Jealousy* quoted above and the similar one from *Remainder*: the latter passage is pervaded by the "I" of the narrator (which appears three times in this short excerpt), which is an anchoring that is crucially missing from the lines of Robbe-Grillet's novel.[89]

The point of this is to show that the formal opposition that Smith sets up in her essay—her two opposed paths for the contemporary novel—does not readily work in terms of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. As noted, I think Smith is right to state that *Remainder* does pose a challenge to some of the basic premises that underlie literary realism: "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness

[89] Again, Risk Hallberg makes a similar point in his discussion of Smith's essay:

> Moreover, it's difficult, reading *Remainder*'s handling of things qua things, to find anything more disruptive than what Viktor Shklovsky was doing in 1925, or William Carlos Williams in 1935, or Georges Perec, quite differently, in 1975. In fact, the hospitality of *Remainder* to allegorical readings might just as easily be read as a failure of its ability to resist metaphor, or to foreground language's inability to do so—to capture materiality in the sense of "thingness." And again, notwithstanding the artful stammerings, elisions, and self-corrections of the first-person narrator, the linguistic subject these objects encounter is still a consistent, confessional, Cartesian (if unusually estranged) ‚I.' ("How Avant")

and continuity of the self" ("Two Paths"). Yet it is precisely that: a challenge of underlying premises, that is, of a certain philosophical, ideological, or metaphysical substance, rather than of a specific literary form that might be the expression of that substance. In fact, the concrete form of *Remainder* seems to suggest that one can not clearly and directly identify a particular form of writing with a particular (philosophical, ideological, metaphysical) substance, as it manages to bring about a critique of certain premises precisely in the form that Smith identifies with these premises—that is, by proceeding in the conventions that literary realism also makes use of. Of course, it would be wrong to state that *Remainder* is a textbook example of contemporary realist fiction. As shown, it does contain its deviations from the form—in its nameless protagonist, in its refusal to resolve its tragic tensions, and in its appeal to avant-garde modes of writing. Yet all of these deviations, I would hold, are ultimately subsumed in a more conventional framework. This is why, in my reading, *Remainder* is not an avant-garde work in Smith's sense of the term, that is, as a kind of writing that formally opposes the realist tradition.

There is a further reason why *Remainder* does not qualify as an avant-garde work of art. Besides its partial formal approach to certain avant-garde practices in the more general, generic sense of the term, the novel arguably also deals with avant-garde issues in its content. And it is this latter engagement with the avant-garde that also reveals *Remainder*'s rather ambiguous relation to it. Smith notices this ambiguity as well in her essay. With regard to one of Critchley's and McCarthy's INS speeches, which she uses as one of the critical sources for her interpretation of McCarthy's novel, she notes: "The INS demands that 'all cults of authenticity…be abandoned.' It does not say what is to be done about the authenticity cult of the avant-garde" ("Two Paths"). Smith seems to suggest here that there is a certain contradiction at the heart of the INS program, and consequently McCarthy's novel. However, this is something she notes merely in passing, in a bracketed remark, and which she does not follow up on. But the contradiction is quite informative, for the novel does engage with it: *Remainder* explores certain avant-garde issues and premises in its story (again, this is something that Smith notes as well, but does not consider in detail in her essay), and one can consequently detect many historical tropes of the avant-garde in the novel. For example, the avant-garde's typically ambiguous relation to technology is reflected in the protagonist: he both embraces technology (he invests in it, financially profits from it, and applies it in his re-enactment projects) and is threatened by it (he is literally struck by technology in the accident: "About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology.

Parts, bits." (*Remainder* 5)).[90] Most fundamentally, however, the protagonist's re-enactment projects reflect the avant-garde endeavors to transform art into life—to abolish the boundaries between these traditionally separated spheres: the final re-enactment of the bank heist is most expressive of this. Importantly, given that the protagonist's re-enactment projects can be identified as an avant-garde practice, this suggests a rather critical view of the objectives of the avant-garde, as these can then be understood in terms of the kind of detrimental idealism addressed in the first section of this chapter. The kinship between an all-consuming idealism and the avant-garde is of course something that has been suggested by critics before. As Tzvetan Todorov somewhat provocatively put it: "What dictators and avant-garde artists have in common is their radicalism, their fundamentalism. Both are prepared to start ex-nihilo, to take no account of what already exists, in order to construct a work based solely on their own criteria" (65). In any case, this is a relation that *Remainder* also seems to imply. The novel, then, seems not just to have an ambiguous relation to avant-gardism in terms of its form, but also in terms of its content—through its thematic exploration of certain contradictions apparent in the ideologies of avant-garde movements.

What can be concluded from this is that *Remainder* is a work that opts for neither of Smith's two paths of the contemporary novel in a strict way, but complicates their opposition: It is critical of certain premises that underlie literary realism, yet it still makes use of its formal conventions; at the same time, it approximates avant-garde techniques (albeit to a minor extent), and even seems to state a plea, through its themes and content, for a particular form of avant-garde writing (as the given notion of experimental writing can be seen as a form of art close to a more generalized notion of the avant-garde), yet it also critically engages with certain historical premises that have informed avant-garde movements.[91] It seems to me, then, that one

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[90] For a concise elaboration of the avant-garde's relation to technology and technological progress, I recommend Karlheinz Barck's essay on the notion of the avant-garde in the anthology *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* (see especially page 546 of this essay).

[91] Tom McCarthy himself has suggested this about his work. As he notes in an interview with the *White Review* about his novel *C*:

> It would have been conceivable to play out the concerns of *C* through some sort of much more avant-garde and experimental format. There are artists doing exactly that and it's great, but it's not what I wanted to do. I believe in narrative. And anyway, I'd kind of already done that with 'Calling All Agents' [an INS report by McCarthy published in 2003]. (*White Review*)

The same thing can arguably be said about his first novel, *Remainder*. In any case, I think Armen Avanessian is right to call *Remainder* a "post-avant-gardist novel," in which "the modernist criterion of 'aesthetic advancement' rather shows on the level of its fabula [Avanessian uses the narratological terms of Russian Formalism here] than in the manner of its narration (sjuzet)" (146).

rather misses the point when claiming *Remainder* for a certain formal tradition.[92] Rather, this is a historically self-conscious novel that is primarily interested in certain modern philosophical and aesthetic problems—including but not exclusively limited to issues concerning literary realism and the avant-garde—and attempts to find a literary form that might work through these problems in a productive way.

Of course, the crucial remaining question is whether *Remainder*, then, still qualifies as work of experimental writing. Does the fact that its formal gestures towards an avant-garde writing are subsumed in a more traditional (classical, realist) narrative frame keep it from fulfilling its aim of giving the object its due, of presenting it according to its own logic—of, as Smith had it, presenting the things that appear in its narrative in their specificity? The answer is both Yes and No. As suggested towards the end of the previous section, and elaborated here through a closer consideration of the formal aspects of the book in terms of Smith's claims, *Remainder* is a novel that makes a plea for an art that attempts to present its objects according to their own logic, to record them in their specificity. It even gestures towards such a form. Yet as it essentially remains a novel working in the terms of a traditional realist and classical narratives, its promotion of the object (of matter, as McCarthy and the INS might put it) is

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In terms of genres, one might also add here that if McCarthy's novel is close, in certain ways, to avant-garde works of literature like Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, it certainly also displays aspects that make it proximate to more popular fictions in the vein of Chuck Palahniuk's novels (in terms of the transgressiveness of these works and the kind of downward-spiral narrative some of them present; in these respects, especially *Survivor* would make for an interesting novel to compare with *Remainder*) or the works of Paul Auster (in terms of the concern of Auster's works with philosophical questions of identity, existence, authenticity, etc.).

[92] Oddly enough, Smith seems to suggest this as well at one point in her essay, where she notes that there is also a literary tradition that works at "the crossroads" of realist and avant-garde fiction, to which she counts writers like Melville, Conrad, Kafka, Beckett, Joyce, and Nabokov ("Two Paths"). Apropos this list of writers, Smith notes: "For though manifestos feed on rupture, artworks themselves bear the trace of their own continuity" ("Two Paths"). In the subsequent paragraph, Smith then seems to count *Remainder* among this tradition:

> So it is with *Remainder*: the Re-enactor's obsessive, amoral re-enactions have ancestors: Ahab and his whale, Humbert and his girl, Marlow's trip downriver. The theater of the absurd that *Remainder* lays out is articulated with the same careful pedantry of Gregor Samsa himself. In its brutal excision of psychology it is easy to feel that *Remainder* comes to literature as an assassin, to kill the novel stone dead. I think it means rather to shake the novel out of its present complacency. It clears away a little of the dead wood, offering a glimpse of an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward. We could call this constructive deconstruction, a quality that, for me, marks *Remainder* as one of the great English novels of the past ten years. ("Two Paths")

This is a rather more complex claim that seems to connect well with my own assessment of McCarthy's novel. At the end of reading Smith's essay, however, it remains unclear whether she considers *Remainder* an anti-realist avant-garde work or one at the crossroads of avant-gardism and realism.

primarily apparent in the content of the novel in a negative way, in that it tells the story of the disenchantment of certain premises (idealist, materialist, realist) that potentially stand opposed to the promotion of the object, of matter; and explicitly through the discursive commentaries of its loquacious and self-reflective narrator and protagonist.

However, I hold that this does not keep *Remainder* from being an experimental work—in a more general sense of the term that betrays the fundamental formal openness of the notion of experimental writing pursued here.[93] The experimental character of McCarthy's novel is indicated through the discursive commentaries of its loquacious and self-reflective narrator and protagonist. Together with the more straightforward storytelling aspects of the novel, they give rise to an intricate entwinement of the intuitive and the conceptual, which, of course, is a relation that is vital to the pursuits of experimental writing. It is this formal entwinement which displays the major experimental import of *Remainder*: not its gesturing towards avant-garde practices (which remain but gestures), nor its arguable subversion of realist conventions (which it does only partially perform), but its peculiar integration of the conceptual and the intuitive. The last main section of this chapter focuses on this aspect of *Remainder*, and attempts to elaborate how this aspect relates to what might be perceived as the broader experimental scope of McCarthy's novel.

Once More: *Remainder* as an Experimental Work of Art

The most intriguing aspect of the form of *Remainder*, which reveals its experimental distinction, is its particular entwinement of the conceptual and the intuitive. For the specific purposes of the given discussion, I will rephrase this as the relation between the *discursive* and the *intuitive*. The first term, 'discursive,' here denotes, along the lines of its common definition, the passages of *Remainder* that are "characterized by reasoned argument and thought" (OED), or, more specifically put, the passages of the novel that come across as a philosophical argument about or programmatic commentary on the more conventional fictional storytelling passages. These latter passages are, then, the 'intuitive' passages of the novel—the passages which seem to

[93] Calling *Remainder* an experimental work of art does not contradict the fact that it does not qualify as an avant-garde work. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, avant-gardism and experimentalism do not denote the same thing: Avant-gardism concerns artistic movements in the twentieth century that had specific goals in mind for art. Experimental art, in turn, concerns modern art, that is, the art of a much longer period in history; and while it also has certain goals in mind for art, these goals are much more general than those of the avant-garde. In this sense, experimental art potentially contains avant-garde art, but might also oppose it in some respects—as *Remainder* does.

imply a more "immediate apprehension" on part of the reader, notably "without the intervention of any reasoning process" (OED).

Remainder displays an intriguing integration of these two kinds of presentation. Other critics have noticed this as well, but not necessarily in a positive way. Michiko Kakutani, the *New York Times's* eminent literary critic, in her review of McCarthy's latest novel *C,* has called *Remainder* "an oddly ingenious book that reads like the work of an extremely precocious philosophy student" (*New York Times*). And indeed, one can see why Kakutani would suggest this: *Remainder* in certain instances seems to almost impertinently impose the philosophical ideas that inform its story on its readers. I have already discussed certain passages that display this: programmatic sentences like "No Doing without Understanding" (*Remainder* 22) that articulate the central dilemma which drives the actions of the story's protagonist; or passages like the one in which the protagonist extensively reflects on his actions and his reasons for pursuing them (*Remainder* 244). Importantly, these are not exceptions to the narrative—the novel is suffused with such discursivity. Particularly interesting in this respect is a passage on page 11. Here, an intuitive, that is, immediately descriptive passage, gradually develops into a discursive rumination which ends in another programmatic statement reflecting one of the central themes of the novel:

> I walked back to my flat, not down the road I'd come up but down one that ran parallel to it. I found the number, then set out again down the first road, the one perpendicular to mine. I passed my car again, its dent. The man who'd crashed into me had gone over Give Way markings, then driven off. Just like the accident itself: the other party's fault each time. I passed through the siege zone again. The man who the police had been looking for hadn't been in the house. When they'd realized this, the marksmen had wandered out from behind their cover and the regular officers had untied and gathered up the yellow-and-black tape they'd tied across the road to demarcate the restricted are. If you'd arrived there minutes later you wouldn't have known anything had happened. But it had. There must have been some kind of record—even if just in the memories of the forty, fifty, sixty passers-by who'd stopped to watch. *Everything must leave some kind of mark*. (*Remainder* 11; emphasis added)

The last sentence, then, displays a programmatic statement typical of the novel, as it articulates one of the key issues of the story and its subtext. Here, it also reads like a reflective recapitulation of the preceding straightforward presentation of a situation in the story.

There are even more extensive discursive mediations in the book, sometimes working as direct reflections of the story on part of the narrator (as in the above quote), sometimes as

quasi-philosophical discussions that engage with the many themes of the novel. In terms of quasi-philosophical discussions, there is for example the narrator's essayistic reflection of the artistic nature of forensics (*Remainder* 173), or his contemplation of the necessary mutual conditioning of beauty and violence as he reads up on fire weapons in preparation of the re-enactment of the drug-related assassination. Poignantly, the latter passage contains another programmatic statement that works as an encapsulation of one of the story's themes: "No beauty without violence, without death" (*Remainder* 178). The novel also offers numerous instances in which the narrator comments on and interprets the events of the story and his motivations for his actions. Besides the one already discussed, pertinent passages are the one in which the narrator extensively and explicitly interprets his obsession with the death of the black man (*Remainder* 184-85); and the one in which he considers at what moment in his recent past he "felt most real" (*Remainder* 222-23). Importantly, the latter reflection is prompted by a question by the "short councilor"—a character that might or might not exist in the diegesis of the story (as it is possible that he is a mere figment of the protagonist's imagination). This character appears in several episodes of the novel, and in each case acts as a sort of interrogative device or foil that elicits the narrator's interpretive discursive reflection of his own actions and the reasons for pursuing them.

A last notable discursive device of the novel is what might be called the novel's etymological excursions: There are several instances in *Remainder* in which the protagonist lets his assistant Naz look up words that are of interest to him. What makes these episodes pertinently discursive is that each of these words in some way reflects a central issue or theme of the novel. Note, for example, the following conversation between the protagonist and Naz on the word 'defile'—a word which Samuels, the reformed bank robber hired for the (p)re-enactment of the heist, mentions in his description of how the state of shock of the bank employees can be used to get the robbery done:

> "How do you do that?" I asked.
>
> "With shock," he answered. "Psychology again, see? You rush in, fire a frightener, point guns around—and the staff are too scared to push alarms, or to do anything!"
>
> […]
>
> "They're like bunnies in headlights: frozen. You step in and move them gently away from the counters, get them to lie down. You use their shock to create… a bridge, a… a suspension in which you can operate. A little enclave, a defile." (*Remainder* 232)

The protagonist then lets Naz look up the word 'defile':

> Naz's phone beeped just then. He scrolled through the display and read aloud:
>
> > "In military parlance, a narrow way along which troops can march only by files or with a narrow front, especially a mountain gorge of pass. The act of defiling, a march by files. 1835. Also a verb: to bruise, corrupt. From the French *defiler* and the Middle English *defoul*."
> >
> > "Very good," I said. "Very good indeed."
> >
> > "Yes," Naz said. "It's an excellent term. Marching in files."
> >
> > "A defile in time," I said. "A kink."
> >
> > "That too," said Naz. (*Remainder* 233)

The word 'defile,' in this sense, might reflect a point in time that is in some way suspended from the progressions of time—or a point in which these potentially arbitrary progressions can be manipulated by the people exempted from the suspension. Tellingly, the protagonist also calls this defiled state a kink, which of course anticipates the kink in the carpet—precisely that which eventually brings about the opposite outcome of the imagined defile: the point in time at which the imagined progression of the heist derails. However one might interpret the defile, the important point here is that it is a concept that potentially encapsulates the dialectical tension of the idealist apprehension of space-time relations that is a vital theme in the book. Other passages in *Remainder* that work in the same manner are the protagonist's reflection on the term 'speculation' (*Remainder* 116-17), or his contemplation of the semantic proximity between 'residual' and 'recital' (*Remainder* 248-49). All of these terms in their own way reflect themes and issues that pertain to the philosophical subtext of the novel.

These are some of the various ways in which *Remainder* introduces a more discursive, conceptual engagement of its themes to the narrative, which complement its more intuitive storytelling parts that present action in a straightforward and tangible way. It is this formal entwinement that displays the experimental character of the novel. As discussed in chapter 1, experimental art challenges the artificial boundary between art and rational discourse by showing that art is itself rational. At the same time, in its attempt to integrate the rational and the intuitive, experimental art conveys the other of rationality. As such it serves as a critique of rational discourse, and as a utopian reminder of a state beyond its dichotomies. In view of this, one might assume that the particular entwinement of the conceptual and the intuitive in *Remainder* counteracts these procedures of experimental art: In conveying its themes and issues

in an explicit and discursive way, *Remainder* might be seen to impose an interpretive frame on its readers, which narrows down the imaginative ambiguity of the work that is crucial to its critical import, and even turns the more intuitive passages of the novel into mere illustrations of the philosophical ideas conveyed in the discursive passages. Granted, there is a certain didactic quality to the book (in a sense, it is reminiscent of a parable or object lesson), but its particular entwinement of the conceptual and the intuitive benefits critical reflection rather than stifles it. In introducing a more discursive style to its procedures, the narrative of *Remainder* refuses to comply with the tacit command of tradition (still widely present today in reviewing sections of various influential newspapers) that a literary work must completely merge its themes and issues in the storyline of the book—in other words, that the conceptual must be sublated in the intuitive. In this sense, the refusal of *Remainder* to heed this command displays its critical potential not only in that it thereby challenges still popular generic boundaries (according to which art is essentially non-discursive, non-conceptual, non-rational), but also in that it keeps it from becoming a reconciliatory work of art: In rejecting the sublation of the conceptual in the intuitive and opting instead to make it apparent in its form, the narrative of *Remainder* prevents the possibility that its critical import be ignored.

But this does not yet fully explain the critical potential of the entwinement of the conceptual and the intuitive in the novel. More substantially, it presents a critically productive integration of the two spheres: the conceptual and the intuitive work in a mutually informative way in the book. Rather than making one appropriate the other, or merely bringing them together in order to challenge their separation, the narrative also introduces both as jointly contributive to a critical and imaginative exploration of its themes. The fact that the more discursive passages of *Remainder* make these themes conceptually available does not foreclose such an exploration, but rather catalyzes it. After all, the noted passages in which *Remainder* discursively relates its themes do not serve as conclusive explanations of them, but rather introduce another register in which they might be comprehended, which opens up, extends, and complicates the plane of their reflection, by adding another textual layer to be considered in their interpretation. Importantly, the textual layers then set up a productive tension: the discursive passages introduce phrases, terms, ideas, that are explored in a different way in the more intuitive passages of the book—and vice versa. One of Amanda Claybaugh's remarks about *Remainder* in her extensive discussion of McCarthy's novels is interesting in this respect. She holds that

> *Remainder* recalls the philosophical fictions of or Alain Robbe-Grillet, not only in its content, but in its icily ironic tone. And like their fictions, *it embodies ideas in character and enacts them in plot in order to throw new aspects of them into relief*. (73; emphasis added)

In terms of my approach, I would specify this in the following way: *Remainder* in its own narrative introduces certain ideas while at the same time enacting them in its plot. This yields a process of mutual information of different registers in which each feeds off the other, extends on, reflects, and refracts it, generating a more comprehensive configuration of its themes.

This, then, is the main purpose of the integration of the conceptual and the intuitive in *Remainder*: it makes both registers contribute productively to an exploration of its themes, in a mutual information that works both through proximity and difference. This again relates, in a more basic sense, the critical potential of the novel: its integration of the conceptual and the intuitive is an attempt to find a particular form in which its concerns might be best explored in a critical way. Importantly, this is a form that irritates certain traditional assumptions about novel writing, but thereby also triggers reflection. At the same time, this integration also displays the basic utopian potential of *Remainder*: Refusing to uphold the difference between the conceptual and the intuitive, the novel shows that they can be related in a dynamic way to contribute fruitfully to the aims of the narrative.

In the end, however, I would hold that Claybaugh is right to put emphasis on the book's narrative and fictional framing of the philosophical substance that informs it: Despite its display of an approximation of the conceptual and the intuitive, the former arguably remains embedded in the latter: literally all of the discursive passages of the novel are uttered by or represent the thoughts of its narrator (rather than, say, being actual interpretive inferences in footnotes to the book articulated from a different narrative position). This is important, as it relates the utopian potential of *Remainder* in yet another way: Through attributing the discursive treatment of its quite serious themes and issues to the mind of its narrator, *Remainder* frames them in the quixotic failure of the pursuits of its fictitious protagonist, in accordance with the tragi-comic tone of the novel. This potentially introduces a certain unserious (because of the tragi-comic tone of the narrative) and imaginative freedom (because of the essential fictitiousness of the narrative) on part of the reader in the apprehension of the text, which arguably enables a more open and playful reflection of its themes and issues. In other words, it enables a form of reflection which is rational but also different from a strictly rational procedure. This reflection integrates gestures that mere rationality excludes—unseriousness, playfulness, imaginative

openness—and thereby potentially arrives at a different assessment of the given themes than if they are pursued by means of pure reason. It is in this sense that the novel is utopian—it sets up another state of mind. This, then, is how the intuitive and the conceptual are experimentally brought together in *Remainder*. While the novel does not attempt to render its object according to its own logic, it finds a different formal engagement of the dynamic of the conceptual and the intuitive that ultimately approximates the same end, albeit in a more indirect way.

In regard of this, let me address one last aspect of *Remainder*: the wide range of allusions to canonical works of Western literature and philosophy in the book. Again, the book's highly allusive character might be seen as an expression of the "precociousness" of its author. Yet its import is more substantial. The themes that pervade the novel—the relation of self and other, idealism and materialism, technology, media, consumer culture and capitalism, death—are culturally and historically framed through such allusions; at the same time, the works which *Remainder* refers to are reframed in its particular context. This extends the novel's particular dynamic between the intuitive and the conceptual. More importantly, however, the allusions, and the way they are used, are telling about the particular experimentalism of *Remainder*—its more indirect, mitigated character.

There is, for example, a recurring allusion to Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* in the novel: The protagonist's recounting of the memory of a romantic situation in Paris, when he and Catherine tried to ride a boat on the Seine (Remainder 25, 48), is similar to Krapp's recounting of a romantic scene he experienced in his youth, also involving a river and a boat. In its treatment of questions of self and other, repetition and change, past and future, *Remainder* echoes some of the central themes that pervade Beckett's play. Another prominent allusion is made to Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*: As noted above, the building site in which the first re-enactment is staged is called "Madlyn Mansions," which refers to the madeleine episode in *In Search of Lost Time*. The madeleine episode is the most well known example of Proust's literary representation of an 'involuntary memory,' that is, a form of remembrance that is triggered spontaneously and manages to recall the past in a somatically comprehensive way. This is precisely the kind of experience the protagonist has at his acquaintance's party, which is triggered by the crack in the bathroom wall. Subsequently, he attempts to revive the feeling of this experience through his various re-enactments. The protagonist in this sense is a kind of mad Proustian hero. Tom McCarthy himself has pointed out further allusions in the book: the protagonist's description of setting up the site at Madlyn Mansions is modeled after the beginning of Franz Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" (*The Believer*); the crack in the

bathroom wall is an allusion to Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *The Bathroom* (*The White Review*); and the interior decoration of the Madlyn Mansions is similar to that of Jean des Esseintes's house in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* (*The White Review*). Further allusions are made to Eugène Ionesco's *Le Solitaire*, Pierre-Albert Birot's *Le Grabinoulor*, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (*Dossier Journal*). In French existentialist terms, one might also mention Albert Camus, as the protagonist of *Remainder* clearly bears a resemblance to the disaffected Meursault in *The Stranger*. The novel also evokes older works of Western literature, such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, as the journey of the protagonist and Naz reflects that of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; or, as already addressed, the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes, the dramatic structure of which *Remainder* adopts.

The philosophical range of allusions matches that of the literary ones. There is, for example, an explicit allusion to Plato in the book: "Plato Road" is the name of the road at which the Madlyn Mansions lie.[94] This links the novel's critical exploration of idealist premises to the work of Plato, the arguable founding father of Western idealist thought. Arne De Boever notes another pertinent philosophical allusion in *Remainder*. Proceeding from Bernadette Buckley's discussion of *Remainder*, he suggests that the bank heist re-enactment in the novel is "a literary version of Baudrillard's fake hold up" in his influential essay "Simulacra and Simulations" (133-34). This underlines the shared concerns of *Remainder* and Baudrillard's text, such as the relation between reality and simulation, authenticity, and technology.[95] Alexander Müller, in turn, suggests Kierkegaard's *Repetition* as a pre-text of *Remainder*, as Søren Kierkegaard in this book consider the question "to what extent human experiences are renewable," which is of course a central issue for the novel's protagonist (Müller 2009). Further philosophical allusions are made to Simon Critchley's notion of art, as the title of his most extensive work on the subject, *Very Little… Almost Nothing*, is referenced in the opening page of the novel (*Remainder* 5; on the connection between Critchley's notion of art and *Remainder* see footnote 78); to Maurice Blanchot's notion of disaster, as witnessed in protagonist's description of the accident (*Remainder* 5; on the connection between Blanchot's notion of disaster and the protagonist's accident see McCarthy, *Ready Steady Book*); to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's

[94] This road actually exists in precisely the area of Brixton, London, in which the staging of the first re-enactment in *Remainder* takes place.

[95] Another author who fictively explored the relation between real events and simulated ones is Don DeLillo. *Remainder*'s re-enactment scenario, in this sense, is similar to the SIMUVAC project in DeLillo's *White Noise*.

I thank Philipp Schweighauser for pointing this out to me in his feedback to an earlier version of this chapter.

1910 manifesto "The Necessity and Beauty of Violence," in the novel's exploration of the close relation between beauty and violence (*Remainder* 178); to Georges Bataille's transgressive aesthetics, as suggested through the amoral apprehension of beauty embodied through the protagonist's perception of the deaths of the performers in the bank (*Remainder* 277); and to the Freudian death drive, as reflected in the passage in which the Protagonist elaborates his fascination with the black man's death (*Remainder* 184-85; see footnote 77).

Through such allusions, *Remainder* embeds its themes in the broader parameters of its culture and sets up a complex dialogue with canonical works of Western philosophy and literature. What this tells us about the indirect, mitigated experimentalism of the novel can be addressed through the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's comment on the way contemporary art engages with its past[96]:

> The ghost is one of the privileged conceptual figures of the art of our time. The very form of modernity—that is to say, the project of emancipation from tradition, the valorization of experimentation and the game, and the conquest of life by art—seems to have transformed itself into an exceedingly volatile gas circulating through a landscape of immanent forms. Some marks ornamenting a Grecian urn from the fourteenth century or a detail in a painting by Vermeer or Fragonard might thus today express a thinking that is perfectly at home beside that of Beckett or Mondrian. The emptiness that results from this—that is, from the place once occupied by the enunciator who has firmly fettered to his tools of enunciation—is now filled by a procession of ghosts. Although the past is past us, it returns ceaselessly, but in delirious shapes. Everything leads us to believe that our era is traversed by a multitude of spectral forms. Jacques Derrida made an inventory of "the specters of Marx" that wander in a world from which communism had been officially evacuated, and the art of the past infiltrates current modalities in the guise of polymorphic revenants. We know how to treat our personal ghosts: in the psychoanalytic cure, it is speech that destroys them by materializing them. Ultimately, art has the same faculty on a collective level: it takes hold of social structures and signs, of what resists, recurs, or produces symptoms. To paraphrase Lacan, the world is structured like a language. The artist reorganizes its forms to reveal an order that is hidden, or simply too visible to be read. (Bourriaud 34-37)

This eloquently describes how *Remainder*, through its allusions, relates to the various traditions that inform it. This is not a novel that breaks with artistic traditions in a radical way, what Bourriaud determines as the "very form of modernity." *Remainder* proceeds more in the spirit of what Bourriaud identifies with contemporary art: It sets up a dynamic relationship between

[96] It should be mentioned here that the following passage is taken from Bourriaud's introduction to *The Mattering of Matter*, a book that assembles the "Documents from the Archive of the International Necronautical Society."

different formal and thematic aspects of different traditions in order to figure out modern philosophical and aesthetic problems that still persist in today's culture. Given Bourriaud's distinction between an original "form of modernity" that "valorizes experimentation" and a contemporary one that sheds this principle, this then begs the question whether *Remainder* can still be called an experimental work of art. Bourriaud's reflections are interesting in view of precisely this issue. While he does make a distinction between an original modern art and contemporary artistic productions, he does not imply a clear-cut separation between the one and the other—between what is often perceived as the radical and pure forms of high modernism and the compromised forms of postmodern art. Instead, he perceives the latter as transformed continuations of the former. This is a crucial point, for it is in this sense that one might ultimately also understand the particular form of *Remainder*: The novel implies radical kinds of experimentation, but engages them in a more indirect, mitigated manner—more critically, and among more traditional styles of presentation. Thereby, the novel transforms the gestures of its origins. Essentially, however, it continues the project of modernity. This becomes manifest in the novel's formal engagement of the dynamic between the intuitive and the conceptual, which is, in Adorno's terms, modernity's essential artistic contradiction—and also that of experimentalism. *Remainder*, then, formally reframes the experimental, yet is also preserves its essential pursuit.[97]

Conclusion

Despite the fact that *Remainder* cannot readily be identified with an avant-garde challenge to the conventions of literary realism, and even remains firmly embedded in the conventions that literary realism adheres to, the novel can be seen as an experimental work of art. Ironically, the aspect of *Remainder* that at first seemed to disqualify it as an experimental work turned out to be the one that determines its experimental character. In my first reading, I concluded that *Remainder* is a novel that works as a discursive plea for an experimental form of writing rather than being one itself. In my second reading, it was this very discursivity that revealed the

[97] Here it becomes clear that my own assessment of contemporary art is different from Bourriaud's in one respect: While Bourriaud implies a clear historical sequence between more and less radical forms of modernity, I would say that both forms of art still exist today, and that they are both part of what I would call (following Adorno's notion of the modern work of art) the spectrum of the experimental. (Whether such a notion of the experimental is one that would look rather compromised in terms of Adorno's aesthetics is a question that remains to be answered in a different book or essay.)

experimental quality of the book: In its narrative integration of discursive practices, *Remainder* challenges certain traditional boundaries—between the rational and the non-rational, between philosophy and art—that still very much persist in our contemporary culture. Moreover, the work's discursive explicitness keeps it from becoming conciliatory. This displays the critical quality of *Remainder* in experimental terms. However, its experimentalism is not exhausted in these gestures. More fundamentally, *Remainder*'s narrative integration of discursive practices displays a productive integration of the intuitive and the conceptual: As noted, the novel explores themes that transversally pervade the history of Western literature and philosophy, the parameters of which are set up through the many allusions in the book. In its particular narrative integration of discursive practices, the novel establishes both a closeness and distance between the intuitive and the conceptual, and thereby sets up a field of tensions that motivates in the reader a critical reflection of these themes and the historical context they are embedded in. Ultimately, the novel's narrative integration of discursive practices also displays its utopian character: In this, *Remainder* not only eschews the separation of the intuitive and the conceptual and thereby counters the detrimental contradictions of contemporary society, but also shows that the intuitive and the conceptual can work together in the pursuit of aims that concern both—that is, in a pursuit of issues that concern both literature and philosophy. The fact that the dynamic between the intuitive and the conceptual is embedded in a narrative frame in *Remainder* adds to the utopian quality of the book: it inflects it in a way so as the imply a more imaginatively open and playful engagement with the themes the novel explores, which potentially yields an assessment of them that goes beyond one arrived at through mere rationality.

Generally, the value of *Remainder* for a discussion of experimentalism in contemporary literature cannot be overestimated. It proves that experimental writing can but does not necessarily equal an avant-garde literature that radically challenges the forms of predominant traditions such as literary realism. In fact, *Remainder* shows that even if a literary work remains largely embedded in traditional forms of writing, it can still qualify as an experimental work. Granted, the experimental gestures of *Remainder* are more indirect and mitigated, yet as we have seen, the novel still engages the central contradiction of experimental writing—between intuition and concept—in an effective way. In sum, this highlights the following central aspects of the notion of experimental writing as it is pursued here: Firstly, that the experimental can take many different and even paradoxical forms; secondly, that these forms may vary in their experimental degree, that is, the extent to which they eschew and challenge established literary

conventions and traditions; thirdly and most importantly, that these forms, for all their difference, remain tied to each other in an essential way, in that they all engage the central contradiction of experimental writing, which is the contradiction between intuition and concept. Together, these aspects show that experimental writing is not an exclusive form of literature that is essentially concerned with challenging established literary traditions and conventions, but an inclusive literary pursuit concerned with fundamental issues of modernity. This is a crucial point to make, as it directly responds to the more restrictive and negative views of experimental writing as apparent in the contemporary debate on the subject.

A brief comparison between *Remainder* and *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* helps to illustrate the inclusive and fundamentally modern character of experimental writing. Davis's stories are much more typically experimental than McCarthy's novel, that is, they are much more unconventional and challenging in terms of their form. However, despite this formal difference, *Remainder* and *The Collected Stories* have the same basic modern pursuit, which is to rehabilitate the object, and they both proceed in this aim by engaging the contradictive relation between the intuitive and the conceptual. It is in terms of this that their closeness becomes most clearly apparent: Both the stories and the novel yield a certain generic disquiet in their formal integration of the intuitive and the conceptual, by which they both establish productive tensions that express the historical preconditions of the works, benefits their critical impact, and their utopian scope. Of course, in concrete terms, their respective realizations of the formal dynamic between the intuitive and the conceptual work out quite differently: In Davis's stories, this dynamic is rather opaque, more comprehensively consumed by the terse form of the stories; in McCarthy's novel, it is carried out much more openly, not only in the content of the story and its apparent themes, but through its particular alternation of styles, which moves between a straightforward, almost descriptive kind of presentation, and discursively loquacious passages. This formal difference underlines the possibility of diversity in such an inclusive notion of experimental writing.

Concluding my discussion of Tom McCarthy's novel, I want to raise one further issue that seems to me to be relevant for the discussion of experimental writing in the context of contemporary Anglophone literature. It concerns the relation between experimentalism and the genre of the novel. This issue is relevant for the current discussion in so far as many of the participating critics assess experimental writing in novelistic terms. Moreover, for critics like Franzen, it is not literature in general but specifically the novel that is threatened by the incursion of the experimental in the realm of contemporary fiction: As the epitome of the

humanist tradition, the novel suffers most from the apparent subversive challenges of experimental writing. This perspective, I think, needs an adjustment. In view of the way in which *Remainder* formally stages the dynamic between the intuitive and the conceptual, I hold that this particular kind of experimentalism is one that can be closely related to the genre of the novel as such, and its historical genesis. Let me elaborate this claim by a consideration of the cover of McCarthy's latest book, *Satin Island* (published in February 2015):

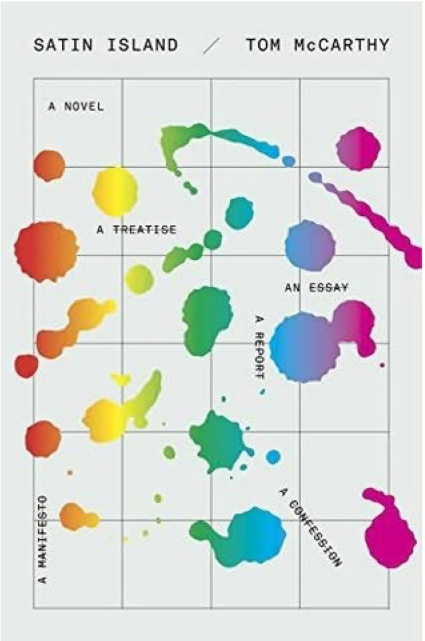

Fig. 1. Cover of the first Knopf edition of *Satin Island*, designed by Peter Mendelsund

Besides the title of the book and the name of its author, the cover also displays—as many book covers do—its generic category: "A NOVEL." Yet what is special about this particular cover is that it lists further terms that might describe the genre of the book. Notably, these terms are all crossed out: "A ~~TREATISE~~," "A ~~REPORT~~," "A ~~CONFESSION~~," "AN ~~ESSAY~~," and "A ~~MANIFESTO~~." This seems to illustrate that all of these terms were considered as generic markers of the book, but that it was eventually decided that 'novel' is the term that best describes the genre of *Satin Island*. Importantly, however, the crossed-out terms still remain on the cover. What the cover implies, then, is that this book also has something of a treatise, a report, a confession, an essay, and a manifesto.[98] As such, it could just as well be the cover of

[98] In philosophical terms, one could say that the cover makes use of Jacques Derrida's notion of a concept *sous rature*, as established (through the work of Martin Heidegger) in his *Of Grammatology*. As Gayatri Spivak holds in her translator's introduction to the book, a concept can only ever "be defined by its difference from its opposite," yet this "opposite, a metaphysical norm, can in fact never be present and thus, strictly speaking, there is no concept"

Remainder (except for the title, of course, and the graphics, which are specific to *Satin Island*), as *Remainder* is also clearly a novel (in the quite conventional sense of the term), but one which also has something of a treatise, a report, a confession, an essay, and a manifesto. Quite literally, this describes *Remainder*'s narrative integration of a variety of discursive forms, which, as argued, yield the particular intuitive-conceptual dynamic that displays its experimental character.

Yet I hold that the cover of *Satin Island* does not only tell us something about the particular works of Tom McCarthy, but conveys something about the novel genre in general. For one of the basic distinctions of the novel as a historical genre is its generic flexibility: The novel is a genre that appropriates other genres, integrates them, and adapts them to its time and purposes, forming a field of tensions. The novel takes up other genres (lets them appear on its cover), makes them its own (crosses them out), but also preserves them (leaves them crossed out on its cover). This is apparently what *Satin Island* does, appropriating the genres of the treatise, the report, the confession, the essay, and the manifesto. It is certainly what *Remainder* does. And, importantly, it is precisely this which determines its experimentalism. If, then, this kind of generic flexibility really is a basic distinction of the novel as such, this suggests that, as such, the novel is an inherently experimental genre. In the next chapter, I will elaborate this claim in more detail.

(xx). At the same time, "the concept must be used—untenable but necessary" (xx). This is why a given term is there, but crossed out at the same time: "under erasure" (xx).

I thank Philipp Schweighauser for pointing this out to me in his feedback to an earlier version to this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR
JONATHAN LETHEM'S *THE FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE*

Introduction

Experimental writing establishes formal tensions—between sense and construction, and centrally between the conceptual and the intuitive—that are productive in a historical, critical, and utopian way. As we have seen in terms of *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* and Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*, one way in which literary works engage these tensions is by integrating different kinds of discourses—prosaic and poetic, artistic and non-artistic, etc.—and setting up a mutually informative yet at the same time conflicting relationship between them. The discussion of *Remainder* ended in the assumption that the novel, because of its particular ability to appropriate other genres, displays a special potential to pursue this experimental aim. In preparation for the last discussion of a contemporary work of Anglophone literature—Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*—I want to consider this assumption in some more detail.

Experimental Writing and the Novel

Where does the generic flexibility of the novel—which betrays its particular experimental potential—stem from? A brief look at the historical origins of the novel proves informative. For this, Ian Watt's discussion of these origins in his seminal work *The Rise of the Novel* is very useful, especially because it makes apparent that the novel has a rather contradictory relationship to experimental writing, which is vital for understanding precisely in what way the novel proceeds experimentally.[99]

According to Watt's account of the origins of the novel, the genre (in the form that we still more or less identify with it today) came about in the early eighteenth century, in the course of a "vast transformation of Western civilization since the Renaissance" that, crucially,

[99] Let me note at the outset of the following discussion that Watt's account is by now considered to be dated. I take this into account further below, by discussing Michael McKeon's more recent reconsideration of Watt's historical view of the novel. This being said, I believe that Watt's point about the essential realism of the novel remains pertinent, as it is still implied in current literary debates and still reflects many readers' expectations when they buy a popular novel.

> replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages with another very different one—one which presents us, essentially, with a developing but unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places." (34)

This modern individualist order of Western society is precisely what the novel reflects: one of the basic distinctions of the novel at the time of its inception (and arguably one that still largely determines it today) was "its rejection of universals" (12). Instead, the novel's primary criterion for truth was "individual experience" (13). In this sense, the novel became the first form of literary narrative that presented readers with accounts of the stories of ordinary individuals—of characters with proper names that no longer have merely allegorical meanings or represent certain social types (21). Consequently, the main subject of the novel was an "exploration of the personality of [such an ordinary individual] as it is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness" (23); and accordingly, the novel's narratives developed "as though [they] occurred in an actual physical environment" (28). Importantly, Watt holds that this makes the novel the first realist genre, as the novel's focus on the "concrete particularity" (32) of individual human experience demands a linguistic style that aims to be an "authentic report" (35) of this experience. More specifically, this style is

> under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. (35)

This is how Watt assesses the novel genre at its origins: The novel is the exemplary genre of modern Western civilization in its focus on individual experience, which it attempts to capture truthfully and in its particularity. Hence the novel becomes the originary genre of realist literature. This is the historical distinction of the novel. The point about the novel's essential realism is especially important for our concerns, because it suggests that the novel's relation to experimentalism is not an altogether straightforward one. According to Watt's basic claims about the genre, the novel is—at its origins, and arguably has been ever since—historically tied, through the rise of individualism, to a realist kind of narration. That is, it is closely tied to narrative conventions that suggest, as Watt puts it, a "correspondence between the literary work and the reality which it imitates" (11)—a close connection between literary language and the world it reflects. In this, the novel proceeds from a basic assumption about the relation between

the work of art and its object that experimental writing, if anything, precisely attempts to problematize.[100] In the experimental work of art, this relation—between literature and reality, between the work of art and its object—is revealed as tenuous and conflicted, and through various formal means, the experimental work attempts to convey this in a comprehensive way.

Does this, then, not rather reveal the novel as an essentially anti-experimental genre? Not necessarily. On the contrary, I hold that its individualist realist tendencies are contributive to its experimentalism. This can be explained by turning once more to Watt's origins of the novel and critically reconsider them. Michael McKeon's essay "Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel" is helpful in this respect, as it presents a somewhat more complex account of this crucial period in literary history—and one that will help us understand more clearly how the novel might historically be understood as an experimental form of writing.

McKeon basically proceeds from the same historical assumptions as Watt, associating the rise of the novel with the rise of individualism in modern Western society at the beginning of the eighteenth century. More specifically, McKeon identifies this individualism with the establishment of the middle class and commercial capitalism, and "the concomitant eclipse of feudal and aristocratic modes of intercourse" (382). Like Watt, McKeon holds that this new individualist (middle class, capitalist) ideology manifests itself in the realist discourse of the novel: realism rejects the idealized fictions of feudal and aristocratic literature—one might think of chivalric romances here, as such works represent the stable hierarchical social order based on birthrights, and "celebrat[e] an idealized code of civilized behavior that combines

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[100] Watt himself of course questions these claims to a truthful account of reality that such a realist discourse seems to imply. As he states in the following passage:

> Formal realism is, of course, like the rules of evidence, only a convention; and there is no reason why the report on human life which is presented by it should be in fact any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres. (35)

However, Watt also grants that the lure of such a discourse might be considerably stronger than that of other literary discourses in terms of how we assume them to be truthful representations of the world as we know it. This because of the following reasons:

> [F]ormal realism allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than do other literary forms. Consequently, the novel's conventions make much smaller demands on the audience than do most literary conventions; and this surely explains why the majority of readers in the last two hundred years have found in the novel the literary form which most closely satisfies their wishes for a close correspondence between life and art. (36)

Interestingly, Watt seems to suggest here that the main reason for the priority of realist narratives in terms of truthful representations of life lies in the fact that most readers can readily and conveniently consume them.

loyalty, honor, and courtly love" (Baldick)—and shows the world as it is, in its depiction of the lives of ordinary individuals who achieve extraordinary feats by their own power. As McKeon notes about the realist works of Defoe, "aristocratic ideology was subverted and replaced by a brave new view of social signification. Virtue is signified not by the a priori condition of having been born with status and honor, but by the ongoing experience of demonstrated achievement and just reward" (391). However, contrary to Watt, McKeon does not see the novel merely as a literary realist complementation of the "progressive ideology" (396) of an individualist, capitalist middle class. While this might be the predominant style of the novel, he crucially holds that it is just one of its discourses, for the novel at the same time also internalizes the "aristocratic ideology" (396) of the prior historical age and its equivalent literary forms. Moreover, it even includes a third discourse, which corresponds to what McKeon terms a "conservative ideology" (396). This ideology represents the view that the recent changes in the social order "only replaced the old social injustice by a new and more brutal version of it, unsoftened now by any useful fictions of inherited authority. At the heart of this new system was the naked cash nexus" (392). Its corresponding literary discourse, then, is critical of the "naïve empiricism" of progressive ideology and therefore marked by an "extreme skepticism" (396). In terms of the plot procedures of such discourses, McKeon notes that they

> are far from hopeful about the overcoming of the social injustice and status inconsistency which they explain with such passion. Their frequent pattern is a retrograde series of disenchantments with all putative resolutions, and conservative utopias tend to be […] hedged about with self-conscious fictionality, strictly unfulfillable and nowhere to be found. (395)

So, rather than being merely the realist expression of a certain middle class ideology, the novel negotiates different and oppositional ideologies in its form. McKeon calls this the "double reversal" of the novel:

> Naïve empiricism negates romance idealism, and is in turn negated by a more extreme skepticism and a more circumspect approach to truth. Progressive ideology subverts aristocratic ideology, and is in turn subverted by conservative ideology. It is in these double reversals, and in their conflation, that the novel is constituted as a dialectical unity of opposed parts, an achievement that is tacitly acknowledged by the gradual stabilization of 'the novel' as a terminological and a conceptual category in eighteenth-century usage. […]. But at the 'first instant' of this broader dialectical reversal, the novel has a definitional volatility, a tendency to dissolve into its

> antithesis, which encapsulates the dialectical nature of historical process itself at a critical moment in the emergence of the modern world. (396)

McKeon presents us with a more comprehensive view of the origins of the novel in the early eighteenth century, and one that helps us to understand in historical terms the novel's generic flexibility: The reason for the novel's generic flexibility—its ability to appropriate other genres—stems from the fact that the novel, as a genre of a time of great social changes, is itself determined by a "generic instability" (397). This explains why it integrates other genres in its form. Importantly, the genres that the novel integrates are ones that are in conflict with each other. At the same time, the novel is grounded by a genre—realism—that seems to undermine its potential experimentalism. Yet it is precisely through this that the novel becomes experimental, as only this makes the novel a substantially contradictory form. Only as such can the novel then negotiate the essential contradictoriness of the experimental: Setting up a field of generic tensions, the novel comes to reflect the fundamental tensions that determine the historical, critical, and utopian import of experimental writing.

Together, Watt and McKeon's assessments of the origins of the novel provide an argument for its generic flexibility and its proneness to appropriate other genres in a conflicting way.[101] More strongly even, they suggest that the novel must necessarily proceed in this way. This consolidates the experimental character of the novel: As experimental writing is a fundamentally conflicted form, the novel, as an exemplary genre of historico-social conflict, is a particularly suitable genre to pursue experimental aims. However, while this conveniently explains the novel's experimental predisposition in a historical way, it does not yet comprehensively account for the general formal characteristics of the genre that benefit its experimentalism. This is why I will turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the novel in the next step. Bakhtin basically proceeds from the same historical assumptions about the novel genre as Watt and McKeon do, but in his many texts on the novel and its subgenres elaborates in more detail and in a terminologically useful way the general formal consequences of the novel's historical predisposition.

Both Watt and McKeon determine the novel's engagement with concrete reality as one of the main distinctions of the genre at its origin. Bakhtin supports this point in his theory, but also specifies that the important aspect of this engagement concerns its particular temporality:

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[101] Two further critics who arrive at a similar point in their historico-generic discussions of the novel form are Marthe Robert and Franco Moretti. See Robert 57-68; Moretti 555-63.

to engage with concrete reality means to engage with contemporary reality. For Bakhtin, contemporaneity is the main distinction of the novel, a point which he illustrates by comparing the novel to its arguable predecessor, the epic, in his essay "Epic and Novel." In the epic, "a national epic past […] serves as the subject" (13) of the story. This sets up an "absolute epic distance" between "epic world" and "contemporary reality, that is, […] the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives" (13). The inaccessibility of the subject of the epic is important, for this subject is "sacred" and "good" (15), that is, it is untouchable, and it also determines the aesthetic success of the epic: in its focus on a sanctified subject of national importance, in presenting a "single and unified world view" (35), the epic becomes whole, timeless and (in a sense) universal, and thereby fulfills the main characteristics of high art according to the notions of a traditional cultural order. The arrival of the novel, then, upsets the aesthetic order represented by the epic (in the name also of the other so-called high genres of literature, tragedy and lyric). For the novel is a literary genre that engages with the present—it is in "the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (11). This present is, as Bakhtin holds, "something transitory, it is flow, it is eternal continuation without beginning or end; it is denied an authentic conclusiveness and consequently lacks an essence as well" (20). As the present is the core principle of the novel, this fundamentally affects its aesthetic procedures, both in terms of its content and, importantly, its form. In terms of the contents of the novel, it means that it no longer deals with historically sanctified and thereby timeless subjects, but, conversely, with transitory ones that are potentially dated and outmoded in the future. More fundamentally even, as the novel engages with a completely open and ever-changing—essenceless—present, and as this present is the basic principle of the novel—its only source, so to speak—, its potential subject matter is not predetermined by a certain tradition, and thereby becomes, to a certain extent, a matter of arbitrary choice. This, then, of course also has formal consequences for the novel: as the subject matter is not predetermined for the novel, neither is its form—the novel is a generically open kind of fiction. Importantly, this does not merely mean that the novel opts in each case of its manifestations for a certain form to present its subject, but that each novel is in itself structured according to the transitory, flowing, incomplete character of the present. As Bakhtin holds, the novel is "plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself, subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality" (39). Crucially, Bakhtin also notes here that the novel's basic generic plasticity also introduces a certain critical moment to its

procedures: As the novel's form and content are not self-evident, that is, not predetermined by tradition, novelistic discourse will always proceed with a self-conscious agency and a critical distance towards its own procedures. Bakhtin emphasizes this "ability of the novel to criticize itself" (6), and also its ability to criticize other genres in the form of parody: "The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them" (5). Crucially, this critical act of the novel is at the same time also a liberating one: "the novelization of other genres [...] implies their liberation from all that serves as a brake on their unique development, from all that would change them along with the novel into some sort of stylization of forms that have outlived themselves" (39). The novel, in this sense, does not merely appropriate other genres as an expression of its own generic volatility or to parodistically expose their conventional confinements, but also in order to liberate them from precisely these confinements, by making them work according to the principle of the actual, manifold, and open-ended present—by bringing them into contemporaneity.

The closeness of such a notion of the novel to the pursuits of experimental writing is apparent here: In displaying a critical and liberating import that is based in a historically determined generic flexibility, the novel reflects the critical and utopian qualities of experimental art that arise, likewise, from a historically determined integration of different discourses. As elaborated, this integration takes place in experimental writing as different variations of the contradiction between the conceptual and the intuitive. Crucially, Bakhtin also determines the novel as a genre of contradiction. For him, the novel is an essentially contradictory form because it sets up tensions between the different discourses it integrates. His essay "Discourse in the Novel" is particularly illuminative in this respect, as it formally specifies how the novel's contradictory integration of different discourses works.

In "Discourse and the Novel," Bakhtin reiterates the basic point made in "Epic and Novel," stating that "the novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice" (231). He then goes on to determine the different stylistic unities that the novel might include in its integration of different literary discourses:

> (1) Direct authorial literary-artistic narration; (2) Stylization of the various forms of oral everyday narration (*skaz*); (3) Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary etc.); (4) Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial

> speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements [...]); (5) The stylistically individualized speech of characters. (231)

It has to be noted here that this list is of course not conclusive, but merely comprises a set of possible discourses based around the traditional narrative categories of and assumptions about the novel.[102] What is important in this context is Bakhtin's point that in its integration of different styles, the novel makes up a unity "that cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it" (231). There is not one style or discourse in the novel that governs and inflects all of the other styles and discourses apparent in it. Rather, the "style of the novel is to be found in the combination of its styles" (232). The term that Bakhtin famously coined to describe this novelistic phenomenon is "heteroglossia (*raznorecie*)" (232). Crucially, heteroglossia for Bakhtin has a central social import, which is revealed in the following passage from the essay that nicely summarizes the term:

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of *social* diversity of speech types (*raznorecie*) and by the different individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia (*raznorecie*) can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of *social* voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). (232; emphasis added)

It is important to stress the social import of heteroglossia, because it necessitates that the stylistic interrelationships established in the novel are fundamentally contradictory ones. For any contemporary society for Bakhtin always means "the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth" (234). This is what heteroglossia in the novel engages with (directly and indirectly), and it is why Bakhtin determines it as "always oppositional" (233): The novel's diversity, albeit horizontal, is not harmonic, but an integration of contradictory speech types, narrative levels, genres, forms, styles, that artistically renegotiates the contradictions apparent in the contemporary culture to which the novel belongs. And it is this particular qualification of the

[102] I would argue that the list is in fact is quite open-ended, as the novel might appeal to any genre and style that potentially benefits its particular integration.

novel that consolidates its alliance with experimental writing, as experimental writing also engages contradictions not for mere aesthetic purposes (if such a thing is possible at all), but in order to convey, if negatively, the contradictions that are apparent in its given socio-cultural context—after all, the central contradiction of the experimental work is one that reflects a rift between spheres—the intuitive and the conceptual—that Adorno determines as co-responsible for the detrimental historical consequences of the dialectics of enlightenment.

The brief survey of the novel's origins, through the accounts of Watt and McKeon, and the subsequent formal elaboration of its particular generic disposition, through the writings of Bakhtin, have shown that the novel is, historically and generically, closely tied to the pursuits of experimental writing[103]: The novel displays a historically determined generic flexibility, which it engages by integrating different discourses (genres, styles, forms, etc.) in a contradictory way (what Bakhtin calls the novel's "heteroglossia"). From this, the novel draws its critical and utopian (what Bakhtin calls "critical" and "liberating") force, as it aesthetically reflects and refracts the contradictions that surround and inform it in contemporary culture and society. This, of course, is precisely what determines the pursuit of experimental writing, as established on the basis of Adorno's claims about modern art. To recall Adorno on this matter:

> Und ich darf vielleicht noch hinzufügen, dass, wenn man nach dem ästhetischen Kriterium sucht—also wenn man danach fragt, wann nun ein Kunstwerk mit Grund ein bedeutendes Kunstwerk genannt werden kann—, dass dann wohl doch das entscheidende Kriterium ist, wie weit ein Kunstwerk es vermag, [...] die Widersprüche seiner eigenen realen und formalen Bedingungen in sich aufzunehmen, die Widersprüchlichkeit auszutragen und, indem es diese Widersprüchlichkeit im Bilde vielleicht schlichtet, sowohl auf ihre Unversöhnlichkeit in der Realität hinzuweisen, wie doch auch schliesslich auf das Potential der Versöhnung, das im Begriff der Utopie gedacht wird. (VA 169)

Of course, the point of this discussion is not merely to explain the experimentalism of the novel, but in this to further elaborate one of the central claims of this thesis, which is that the experimental is not an exclusive discourse limited to arcane fictions, but rather is an inclusive kind of writing that pervades modern literature in many different ways and forms—even seemingly conventional ones. Granted, this might dilute the notion of experimental writing, yet it just as well dilates it.

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[103] For an extensive anthological elaboration of this claim, see Steven Moore's monumental revisionist project *The Novel: An Alternative History*, of which the first two volumes have so far been published.

The novel with which I will conclude my discussions of literary works is particularly suitable to explore these issues in concrete terms: Jonathan Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude* (2003) engages precisely the contradictory dynamic of the novel as established through the works of Bakhtin (and Watt and McKeon). This is a generically intricate, thoroughly heteroglot work that on various planes reflects aesthetic tensions that are informed by and in turn inform in a critical and utopian way the socio-cultural tensions that surround it. Importantly, Lethem's novel is, in comparison to both *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* and *Remainder*, the work that arguably most readily displays the characteristics of a conventional novel, as it most extensively proceeds within the parameters of literary realism (though in a contradictory way, as will be elaborated below). It certainly is the most popular literary work of the three, if not in sales figures (though it is likely also that), then certainly in terms of accessibility. Because of this, *The Fortress of Solitude* is not only an excellent work to discuss the novel's particular experimentalism in a practical way, but also to show how the seemingly conventional pursuits of the popular novel are—or can be—tied to the seemingly aloof ones of experimental art.

The Historical, Critical, and Utopian Tensions of *The Fortress of Solitude*

Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* is a novel vast in its scope: It tells the coming-of-age story of Dylan Ebdus, born in Brooklyn in the early 1960s. As it follows Dylan through three decades of his life (the story begins in 1969 and ends in 1999), through various trials and tribulations with his family and friends, the story also becomes an account of the cultural history of Brooklyn, of the various developments that have taken place in the borough (and beyond it, in New York, and North America in general) in this rather epic time span. In this, the novel aesthetically sets up an intricately ramified, multi-determined web of heteroglot tensions, from which I have decided, for the sake of a clarifying argument, to isolate four that in my opinion are particularly suitable to elaborate the implication of *The Fortress of Solitude* in the experimental pursuits of the novel genre. These four tensions relate to four basic planes of the novel: a *literary-historical*, a *generic*, a *narrative*, and a *material* one. As these planes are interlinked, the following discussion of the four basic tensions of Lethem's novel will consider each tension as it leads on to the next one.

For the discussion of each tension, I will focus on a particular aspect of the novel that in my opinion reveals the given tension in a prominent way: The first, *literary-historical* tension of the novel will be considered in terms of the character Abraham Ebdus and his work. Abraham

Ebdus, the father of the novel's protagonist Dylan, is a late modernist artist working in postmodern times. In this sense, the literary-historical tension that pervades the novel is that between certain artistic premises of modernism and postmodernism. Out of the context of the tension between modernist and postmodern premises arises the second, *generic tension* of the novel. I consider this tension in terms of Aaron X. Doily's magical ring that introduces the story's fantastical dimension. The ring is an emblem of persistent socio-generic hierarchies in contemporary culture. They relate to the dispute between modernist and postmodern positions about the divide between high and low forms of art. In Lethem's novel, these socio-generic hierarchies are critically explored through a contradictory integration of the dominant and marginal genres of conventional realism (what Watt calls "formal realism" (35); see footnote 100) and comic book fantasy, respectively. In my view, the generic tension is the most idiosyncratic, salient, and substantial one that *The Fortress of Solitude* carries out—the title of the book, which is also the name of Superman's sanctuary in the DC comic book series, already implies as much.[104] More specifically, I consider the novel's generic integrations in terms of

[104] That genre issues are central to *The Fortress of Solitude* also becomes apparent in the fact that in wake of the publication of the novel, two further books by Jonathan Lethem were published that shared its generic concerns: *Men and Cartoons* (2005), a collection of short stories inspired by the traditions of genre literature—science-fiction, noir, and comics; and *The Disappointment Artist* (2005), a collection of essays on various pop- and sub-cultural subjects, such as John Lucas's *Star Wars*, John Ford's *The Searchers*, collecting comic books, and Philipp K. Dick. (In addition to these subjects, the essays in *The Disappointment Artist* also deal with other subjects that are central to *The Fortress of Solitude*: Lethem's childhood in Brooklyn, his parents, and, reminiscent of the art of Abraham Ebdus, the work of the late modernist Edward Dahlberg in the title essay of the collection.) In this sense, the two collections can be seen as literary and critical side wings of *The Fortress of Solitude* that reflect and extend on the book's central engagement with generic conflicts.

Besides Lethem, there are other writers today concerned with questions of genre and persistent and hierarchical distinctions in contemporary culture. Most prominently and productively, Michael Chabon has participated in various ways in this debate. His *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a story about two Jewish comic book artists in New York during WWII, introduced, if more cautiously than Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude*, the comic genre to the realm of so-called serious literature (the novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001), and Chabon has been occupied with genre issues ever since: His 2004 novella *The Final Solution* is a book that merges a Sherlock Holmes detective story with the story of the Holocaust—hence the somewhat precarious title of the book, which alludes both to the Jewish Question in National Socialism and Conan Doyle's initially last Holmes story, "The Final Problem." The story can be seen as a riposte, 50 years later, to William V. Spanos's seminal post-war essay "The Detective and the Boundary," in which he calls for a radical break in literature with all kinds of solution solving, that is, with teleological forms of fiction that propose closed totalities of meaning and work through hidden ideological consistencies—a structure that in Spanos's view is prominently realized in detective fictions of the kind that Arthur Conan Doyle (who is quoted in the epigraph of the essay) wrote. For Spanos, such a kind of fiction is complicit with the terror regime of the National Socialists and other totalitarian forces in the history of humanity (Spanos 17-39). Spanos's critical attitude reflects the general sensibility of post-war cultural criticism, which Chabon's short story might be seen to challenge or at least re-negotiate in a literary way. More recently, Chabon's *Gentlemen of the Road*, a work of "historical swashbuckling romance," as Chabon put it, was published as a serial novel in the *New York Times Magazine*, from January 28 to May 26, 2007; in the same year, his *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* was published—a generic hybrid novel of noir fiction merged with a counter-historical account of what would have happened if the Jewish people had lost Israel in 1948 and had to resettle in Alaska. Tellingly, Ruth Franklin began her review of this novel with the sentence, "Michael Chabon has spent considerable energy trying to drag the decaying corpse of genre fiction out of the shallow grave where

the premises of magical realist narratives, a form that the novel approximates but, crucially, ultimately fails to achieve. The basic reason for the failure of the novel—which is also its negative aesthetic success—to achieve a magical realist form is due to another persistence in contemporary culture—that of a specific notion of modern subjectivity. The conflicts of this subjectivity, which are closely related to the socio-generic conflicts the book explores, become most distinctly manifest through the stylistic narrative differences between the two main parts of *The Fortress of Solitude*, "Underberg" and "Prisonaires." I focus on this difference in the discussion of the novel's third, *narrative tension*. Finally, I elaborate how the socio-generic conflicts of Lethem's novel and its exploration of the dilemmas of modern subjectivity are manifest in the very concrete, material form of the book. This is the fourth, *material tension* of the novel—its ultimate and primary one. Specifically, this tension will be addressed in terms of different notions of property.

These four basic tensions of *The Fortress of Solitude* are considered in the following four sections. Between them, they display the contemporaneity of Lethem's book in the Bakhtinian sense: the novel's aesthetic integration of conflicting paradigms, genres, styles, and notions, reflects and refracts the current socio-ideological contradictions that surround it. Consequently, this also displays the book's experimental ties: the contradictory integration of different discourses reveals the particular novelistic way in which *The Fortress of Solitude* pursues the historical, critical, and utopian aims of experimental writing.

Abraham Ebdus and His Work (The Literary-Historical Tension)

The Fortress of Solitude sets up a basic literary-historical tension in the context of which its other tensions are embedded: a tension between certain modernist and postmodern assumptions about art. Historically, it is the contradictory continuum between the two closely related periods of modernism and postmodernism in twentieth century art that pervades the story of Lethem's novel and its form. The aspects of the novel that most conspicuously introduce this tension are the character Abraham Ebdus, his life, and his work: Abraham Ebdus in many respects represents (almost stereotypically) the quintessential modernist artist. Besides rather passively

writers of serious literature abandoned it" ("Frozen People"). This statement prompted Ursula K. Le Guin to write a response essay, "On Serious Literature," in which she comically showed up Franklin's literary elitism.

Besides their work as novelists and critics, both Chabon and Lethem have written for comic book series: Chabon for *The Escapist*, a comic book series adapted from his very own book *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay* (Chabon also wrote the screenplays for the second and third installments of Sam Raimi's *Spider Man* movie trilogy); while Lethem wrote stories for Marvel's reissued series of *Omega the Unknown*.

raising his only child Dylan, he is working on a film in his upstairs studio in the Ebdus's home in Dean Street, Brooklyn. This film is his "lifework" (*Solitude* 9)—a project that occupies Abraham throughout the thirty years of Dylan's life that the novel recounts.[105]

The film is in several ways a manifestation of modernist tropes. It is "an animated film painted by single brushstrokes directly onto celluloid," an "abstract painting unfolding in time, in the form of painted frames of film" (*Solitude* 9). The abstractness of the film is related in the novel as a consequence of Abraham's rejection of his earlier artistic work, in which he painted, in a "sentimental" (*Solitude* 9) mindset, nudes on canvas. Abstract painting on film panels becomes thus a typical modernist act, as a triple rejection of artistic tradition: the rejection of the traditional medium of painting (canvas), the rejection of traditional subjects (the nude human body), and the rejection of their traditional presentation (readily identifiable representation).[106] The modernist character of the film is further established in the narrative's reflection on the ultimate aim of this rejection, which is revealed in an evocative, ekphrastic description of the film's internal "progress" (*Solitude* 9; this is another term in line with a modernist notion of art: art as progress):

> The film was changing. In the early frames, the first four thousand or so, abstracted cartoonish figures had cavorted against a sort of lakeside, a shore and sky which might also be a desertscape sprouted with weeds. The figures he'd painted with his needle-thin brushes could be cactus or fungus or gas station pumps or gunfighters or charioteers or florid reefs—sometimes in his mind he named them as figures from mythology, though he knew the mythological allusions were a vestige, a literary impulse he should have already purified from his work. Yet without confessing it completely he had scrubbed a tiny golden fleece over the shoulder of one of the figures as it darted and wiggled through two or three hundred frames. […]. Now the figures, the airy dancers, were expunged from the frames. They'd melted into blobs of light. He'd shelved the thinnest brushes, the jeweler's tools, let them stiffen. The bright forms he painted now, the simpler and more luminous blobs and rectangles of color, hovered against a horizon which had evolved from the reedy, brushy lakeshore of the early frames into a distant blurred horizon, a sunset or storm over a vast and gently reflective plain. The hued forms in the foreground which he painted again

[105] This and all following quotes from the novel refer to the Doubleday edition of *The Fortress of Solitude*. The cover image of the novel displayed on page 240 is from the Faber edition.

[106] For Astradur Eysteinsson, the break with artistic traditions is the central characteristic of modernism—in fact, it is the only common denominator between the various contradictory assessments of this artistic period. As he puts it in his excellent study *The Concept of Modernism*:

> For the self-conscious break with tradition must, I think, be seen as the hallmark of modernism, the one feature that seems capable of lending the concept a critical coherence that most of us can agree on, however we may choose to approach and interpret it. (52)

> and again until he knew them like language, until they moved like words through meaning into nonsense and again into purer meaning—these were beginning to merge with the horizon, to flow in and out of the depths of the tiny celluloid frames. He allowed this. In time, over many days, the forms would become what they wished. By painting them again and again and again with the minutest variation he would purify them and the story of their purification would be the plot of the film he was painting. (*Solitude* 30-31)

This passage is telling in many respects. Here, the rejection of artistic tradition is revealed as an artistic progression towards purification in two aesthetic senses: a purification from the representational character of art (as the "figures […] [melt] into blobs of light," as the "forms" "merge with the horizon"), and a purification from the subjective, intentional impulses of the artist (as Abraham "allow[s] this," as "the forms […] become what *they* wished"). In other words, this describes the typical modernist process of a radical autonomization of art, as art is freed from its heteronomous determination by the outside world (in its rejection of representation) and by the artist (in that the artist's participation in the production of the work becomes passive and subservient). The ultimate aim of this becomes apparent in another episode in the novel, in which Abraham and Dylan attend a panel discussion with and about Stan Brakhage. In the course of this event, held "in the Cooper Union basement" (*Solitude* 140) in Lower Manhattan, Brakhage notes the following about his work: "'I would rather see my work as an attempt to clear aesthetic areas, to free film from previous arts and ideologies […]. Perhaps to leave it clear to be of use to men and women of various kind which might help evolve human sensibility'" (*Solitude* 140). As Abraham's film bears obvious resemblances to the work of Brakhage (this reference in itself is a further implication of the modernism of Abraham's art, as Brakhage's oeuvre is often considered to be of a distinctive modernist character), readers might assume that he also shares Brakhage's own notion of the aims of his art (which is suggested also in Abraham's admiration of the artist): the purification of art, freeing it "from previous arts and ideologies," as the fictionalized Brakhage puts it, works at the service of furthering "human sensibility" (*Solitude* 139). This, of course, is another typical modernist trope (which also highlights the residual romantic character of certain aspects of modernism): the evolutionary potential of art, its distinguished status to contribute, in proper aesthetic terms, to the project of human elevation.

But the aims are yet somewhat higher (or at least, less prosaic and pragmatic) for Abraham's film, in another decidedly modernist way that will ultimately suggest the conflict at the heart of the literary-historical tension of the book. For the evolution of human sensibility is,

in Abraham's view, not the primary objective of the film. Rather, it is a potential offshoot of a gesture that aims to transcend the human in the search for an absolute kind of aesthetic truth. The artist's passivity in the process of purification is telling in this respect: By purifying the work from subjective artistic impulses, the work approaches an objective truth (what in the above passage is called the "purer meaning" of the film) beyond the conscious reach of the human. Many passages in the novel suggest such a radical modernist notion of a properly autonomous art: Abraham the artist is likened to a "jeweler […] smooth[ing] away [the] diamond dust" of a precious stone, and to a "monk copying scrolls" of a holy scripture (*Solitude* 10). This suggests the passivity (and passion) of the artist as a mere aid to reveal a truth that is beyond the proper grasp of the human intellect.[107] Abraham's own comment on a recent part of his monumental film at one of its rare screenings is also telling in this respect. In the chronology of the story, this screening takes place in 1999, in the context of a science fiction convention organized by Zelmo Swift, an admirer of Abraham's work. Dylan, who is present at the screening, too, describes the part in the following way:

> [A] green triangle with blunted corners, one trying and failing to fall sideways against the phantasmic, blurred horizon.
>
> The triangle occupied perhaps a quarter of the frame's area. It trembled, tipped a degree, nearly kissed earth, jumped back. Progress was illusion: two steps forward, two steps back. Impossible, though, not to root for it. To feel it gripping like a foot for purchase. Daring, hesitating, failing. (*Solitude* 361-62)

After the screening, a member of the audience asks Abraham whether the triangle will manage to fall sideways, to which Abraham answers: "'I prefer not to speculate […]. That's the daily task, in my view. A refusal to speculate, only encounter. Only understand" (363). This, then, is the task of modernist artists in view their own work: to be a mere instrument in the work's production, to be at best an adequate aid in the work's process of revealing an absolute, aesthetic truth. This is the ultimate aim of the abstraction and purification of Abraham's film.

Hence Abraham Ebdus's film introduces a modernist notion of art to the narrative of *The Fortress of Solitude*: art as something abstract and purified, in search of a properly aesthetic truth that furthers the evolution of humanity but which ultimately lies, because of its radical

[107] One is reminded here of T.S. Eliot's supra-historical, impersonal notion of art in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (see especially page 506 of that essay), a key text for the kind of supreme modernism that Abraham's film in certain ways reflects.

autonomy, beyond human agency, in a quasi-religious way. Importantly, the novel also presents a reverse to this modernist notion of art, as it relates further implications of this notion that reveal its potential conflict with the context in which it is established. These implications are explored in another storyline of the narrative, which concerns Abraham Ebdus's other work as a cover artist for science-fiction books.

As Abraham does not earn any money with his art and, as a single parent, has to come up for the livelihood of his son Dylan as well as pay off the mortgage of their house in Dean Street, he at one point in his life accepts a job offer that reaches him through his former teacher Perry Kandel (*Solitude* 81). The job entails designing the covers of series of science-fiction paperbacks called "New Belmont Specials." Abraham grudgingly accepts, and his second career as a jacket artist for science-fiction literature is launched. The cover art not only gets him the money by which he can support Dylan and his own art, but also makes him more famous than his film: Abraham eventually wins a Hugo award (one of the most prestigious science-fiction awards in English-speaking world) for his cover designs in 1976 (ironically, he wins the award in the category "Best New Artist" (*Solitude* 199)); he is invited to panel discussions about the design of science-fiction book jackets; and his illustrations are also the real reason for the screening of Abraham's modernist film in the context of the science-fiction convention *ForbiddenCon 7*. Needless to say, Abraham does not cherish this work quite in the same way as he does the work on his film. While he appreciates (though he does not openly admit this) the "craft" and "praise" that are part of it (*Solitude* 133), he does not consider it to be art: this is contract labor to him, while his film is the real work of art. Yet crucially, the relation between the paperback designs and the film is not merely a pragmatic one. Rather, this is a conflicted, contradictory relation to Abraham, in a way that is revelatory about the literary-historical tension of *The Fortress of Solitude*.

The most salient passage of the novel that conveys this conflicted relation is the one which recounts the arrival of the first book Abraham designed in the Ebduses' home:

> Abraham found a thin package pushed through the slot, return-addressed with the name of his new employer. Though he guessed its contents instantly, he held the package in his gaze for a long minute, darkness massing behind his eyes, a sort of headache of pride and rage. When he finally tore it open a shudder of self-loathing went through him, and he nearly ripped the package in half down the center, destroying the thin mass-market paperback book before it was unveiled.
>
> *Neural Circus* by R. Fred Vundane, the first in a series called the New Belmont Specials, heralded as "Mind-Warping Speculative Fiction for the Rock Age." Jacket art by

> Abraham Ebdus: a third-rate surrealist landscape or moonscape or mindscape of brightly colored yet somehow ominous biomorphic forms, indebted to Miró, indebted to Tanguy, indebted to Ernst, indebted even to Peter Max, and repaying non of those debts in the least. The art department of Belmont Books had overlaid his gouache-on-pasteboard with an electric-yellow sans serif font meant to resemble computer-screen lettering. Abraham wished now he'd denied them the use of his real name, substituted a pseudonym instead, as the author apparently had: A. Fried Mothball or J.R.R. Foolkiller. The color he'd applied with his own brushes hurt his eyes. (*Solitude* 97)

Here, it becomes clear—to an almost parodic extent—that Abraham is more than merely disdainful of his cover work in aesthetic terms. He considers it derivative of real art in a bad way, and would be rather happy were it not identified with his name. But his negative aesthetic judgment of his cover work goes even beyond this. Later that evening, after cooking dinner for himself and Dylan, Abraham retreats to his studio to continue the work on his film:

> He dipped his brush, and focused his hot, onion-stinging eyes on the small celluloid frame where he'd left off work. His film's plot had lately turned to the banishment or purgation, by degrees, of color. By infinitesimal movements, small blottings and eclipses, black and gray were coming to dominate the zone above the horizon line at the center of the frame, and white and gray the zone below. What colors remained were muted, fading rapidly as though disheartened by the trend, their obvious death sentence. They'd seen the writing on the wall. *First they came for the crimsons and I didn't speak up, then they came for the ochres—*
>
> The New Belmont Specials were purgatory for the banished colors, Abraham decided now. By expelling onto the jacket designs his corruptest impulses—the need to entertain or distract with his paints, the urge to do anything with his paints apart from *seeing through them* to the absolute truth—he'd further purify his film. The published paperback art, he saw now, with a thrill that felt almost vindictive, would be a Day-Glo zombie standing in for his painting career, a corpse that walked. Meanwhile, thriving in seclusion, like a *Portrait of Dorian Gray* in reverse, would be the austere perfection of the unpublished, unseen film. (*Solitude* 98-99; emphasis in original)

The passage shows that on Abraham's own account, the difference between the cover art and his film is not merely one of degree in aesthetic quality. Rather, the relation between the cover artwork and his film is antithetical: The art of his film is not merely better than his jacket art, but essentially opposed to it. Yet this is a peculiar opposition, namely one of dependence: the aesthetic success of his film is contingent on the failure of the jacket, as the jacket design is a container for the aesthetic waste that the real work of art—his film—has to get rid of in order

to achieve a manifestation of what Abraham calls the "absolute truth" of art. In this sense, the cover art is the negative to the film's positive.

This, then, reveals the reverse side of Abraham's modernist notion of art—the drawback of the notion through which the literary-historical tension is set up: The purification of art, that is, the attempt to establish a properly aesthetic truth, is at the same time an act of purgation, that is, a banishment of other forms of artistic activity. In fact, this passage seems to suggest that the former only works because of the latter: purification means purgation, or, in other terms, aesthetic autonomy, the attempt to produce a truth that is inherent to art, only works through exclusion, by drawing a clear boundary between what belongs to art and what does not.

While it would be difficult to argue that an autonomous notion of art—a notion that attempts to establish a properly aesthetic truth—must necessarily mean the disqualification of certain forms of cultural production, this passage nevertheless implies that there exists a strong connection between these two gestures. It certainly puts another complexion on the aesthetic pursuits of Abraham Ebdus. His seemingly noble attempt to establish a purified art that conveys a properly aesthetic truth is at the same time a gesture of rejection—a rejection of the mass and popular culture of his time, for which his covers of the science-fiction novels synecdochically stand. Importantly, the success of Abraham's film essentially depends on this rejection, as it only succeeds culturally by distinguishing itself from other forms of art, and only succeeds aesthetically by feeding on such forms in a negative way, by ascesis.

This view of Abraham Ebdus and his work is suggested in numerous further passages in the novel. Most blatantly in Abraham's rant on his own cover designs in the panel discussion at the science-fiction convention in which he participates: "It's derivative, every last brushstroke. All quoted. Nothing to do with outer space, nothing *remotely*. Honestly, if you people hadn't put such a seal on yourselves, if you'd visit a museum even once, you'd know you're celebrating a second-rate *thief.* […]. But the work, the *true* work, is of course carried on elsewhere" (*Solitude* 346; emphasis in original); more subtly in episodes that account of Abraham's puzzlement with contemporary popular culture, as in the following one that recounts Abraham and Dylan watching *Saturday Night Live* on television: "Dylan and Abraham stayed up late to see *Saturday Night Live* but after ten minutes Abraham declared he didn't get it, and rummaged angrily for a misplaced Lenny Bruce record. Time was running backward, said Abraham. Things used to matter and be funny" (*Solitude* 77); and in a simile provided by the narrative in the episode in which Dylan for the first time encounters comic books at Isabel Vendle's house (brought there by her nephew, Croft Vendle):

> Dylan's gaze scattered against the comic-book covers. A man of stone, a man of fire, a man of rubber, a man of iron, a brown dog the size of a hippopotamus, wearing a mask. That was all Dylan saw before his sight blurred in the sun and shadow and the figures were liquefied into blobs like Abraham Ebdus's abstractions. (*Solitude* 39)

The association this passage sets up in a very pertinent way conveys that the abstraction that Abraham gradually establishes in his film is not one that merely progresses towards a certain kind of aesthetic truth, but is also one that progresses towards a complete erasure of the kind of art that Abraham despises—an art on which he however depends, not only financially, but also culturally and aesthetically.

In this, Abraham embodies another familiar critical assumption about modernist aesthetics, namely that it is essentially an elitist aesthetics based in a hierarchical distinction between high and low forms of culture, in which only the former are worthy of the name 'art.' This is what Andreas Huyssen argues in his influential study *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, and Postmodernism*. For Huyssen, "[m]ass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project" (47). He holds that in fact, many of the typical qualities of modernist art—e.g., autonomy, irony, ambiguity, or the refutation of conventional systems of representation (which all more or less apply to Abraham's film)—can be understood as oppositional to many of the typical qualities of mass- and popular-cultural objects, which are often seen as heteronomous (commodified), unambiguous, conventional, and so forth (54). Huyssen even understands the commonplace modernist "fear of losing one's stable ego boundaries" as a sublimated fear of the artist of being co-opted by the culture industry (55).[108]

This is the kind of problematic tension inherent to certain notions of modernist art, certainly to the one that Abraham Ebdus embodies: a tension between high art in its modernist manifestation and mass and popular forms of postmodern culture, between autonomy and

[108] This can be elaborated via Edvard Munch's canonical modernist painting *The Scream*. Fredric Jameson in his book *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* holds that this painting expresses the existential situation of the bourgeois modernist subject, the "unhappy paradox" (8) of the modern individual (in Hegel's sense), whose subjectivity is constituted as a "self-sufficient field and closed realm" (8), as a private being, economically and socially stable and independent. Yet Jameson holds that in this privacy, the subject also "shut[s] [itself] off from everything else and condemn[s] [itself] to the mindless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to a prison cell without egress" (8). This is what the existential anguish of Munch's screaming figure expresses. In Huyssen's terms, then, one might argue that the figure in *The Scream* might not in fact merely express its anguish of being trapped in its self, but also the fear of the modernist artist of losing this self in the brightly colored dawn of mass- and popular culture announced in the sky surrounding the figure.

heteronomy— a tension in which the elevation of the one is dependent on the degradation of the other. Crucially, this becomes a sustained tension in *The Fortress of Solitude* itself, as the novel, through the prism of its protagonist Dylan, tells precisely the story of the popular forms of culture that Abraham rejects. The episode in which the first book in the New Belmont Specials series arrives at Dean Street is telling in this respect: Abraham, abhorred by his own work, throws the book to the kitchen floor. Dylan then picks the book up and immediately starts reading it in the living room, finishing it by the time dinner is ready. Dylan is fascinated by the science fiction genre, devouring novel after novel; and he is equally intrigued by comic books, as the above episode recounting his first contact with them reflects. Beyond science fiction and comics, Dylan's arguable main interests, the novel also relates further pop-cultural phenomena: the genesis of urban hip-hop culture (in particular that of graffiti[109]); the rise of punk and new wave; the end of the golden era of soul music (the Motown sound) and the commercial take-over of funk and disco. Moreover, the novel also recovers marginal pop-cultural genres such as the jacket art of books and records (despite Abraham's dismissal of it) and, prominently, the liner notes found in them (part two of the novel is entirely made up of a fictional liner note written by Dylan (*Solitude* 293-307)). As Uh-Young Kim remarked in her review of *The Fortress of Solitude*, it is as if the pop history of the 1970s (on which the book most extensively focuses) has finally received a fictional body. I would put this in even a more emphatic way: Lethem's novel is essentially an extensive (if wistful) celebration of the popular cultural developments in New York (and beyond) in that decade.

It is through this contradictive integration that Lethem's novel sets up a literary-historical tension: By launching certain modernist premises (through Abraham Ebdus and his work) and the cultures these apparently reject (through Dylan, his interests, and the milieus he inhabits) into the same historical context, by setting up a historical continuum between them—their contemporaneity—, the novel establishes a conflicting dialogue between different assumptions about what distinguishes—can be seen as, accepted as—culture and art. In Bakhtin's terms, this is one way in which *The Fortress of Solitude* articulates heteroglossia—the language of different cultural registers that exist at the same time, intermingle, but stand in conflict with each other. And this, then, is one way in which the novel echoes the concerns of experimental writing: to bring into contact separated spheres in order to throw light on their

[109] Even the critic James Wood, altogether not favorable to the novel, lauded its "bring[ing] alive" the subject of graffiti, as opposed to DeLillo's earlier "theoretically overdetermined" rendering of this subculture in *Underworld* (*New Republic*).

separation, provoking the reader to critically reflect this separation, and its consequences on a culture and society.

In this context, it should be noted that in its particular novelistic, heteroglot appropriation of the dynamic of experimental writing, *The Fortress of Solitude* also comes to provoke a critical reflection of certain tendencies of experimental art itself. After all, Abraham Ebdus's film in many respects reflects an experimental work of art in the vein of Adorno's notion of modern art: it is an autonomous artistic object, estranged from established conventions and traditions, and crucially one that is based in the passivity of the artist, who attempts to form the object according to its own logic in order to establish a properly aesthetic truth.[110] By suggesting a drawback to such a notion of art (its potential elitism or cultural separatism), the heteroglossia of the novel, then, also comes to reflect critically the very notion that it is apparently based on. While this might seem to entangle the novel in an aesthetic aporia, I hold that this actually benefits its experimental character. The refusal to accept anything as self-evident is after all one of the basic qualities of experimental writing, which in consequence means that it does not stop before its very own concept. The novel, in its expansiveness and discursiveness, its flexibility and ability to appropriate different discourses, is a particularly suitable genre to pursue such a critique of its own premises.[111]

One more general issue remains in this context. Bakhtin stressed that heteroglossia in the novel is always a reflection of "socio-ideological contradictions" of "the present" ("Discourse in the Novel" 234). This begs the question whether the contradictions apparent in *The Fortress of Solitude*—between modernist art and postmodern popular culture—are actually present ones, that is, whether they are still current and relevant in contemporary culture. Huyssen believed that the success of postmodernity and postmodern thought can be measured "by the distance we have traveled from [the] 'great divide' between mass culture and modernism" (57)—a distance he saw covered in the mid-1980s, a time in which he believed the hierarchical distinctions put up in modernism had been leveled, its "dichotomies […] broken down" (66). Other critics confirmed this, such as Fredric Jameson, who noted "the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and mass culture" (Jameson 2) in postmodernity, and

[110] Not coincidently, Abraham is at one point in the story even explicitly introduced as an "*experimental* filmmaker" (*Solitude* 344; emphasis in original).

[111] This point is underlined by the fact that Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* displays a similar gesture, in its critical exploration of certain avant-garde tendencies that can also be closely related to certain aspects of the given notion of experimental writing.

Leslie Fiedler, who saw postmodern culture to "cross the border and close the gap" (271) between so-called high and low forms of art. And clearly, if one looks at the work done in literary and cultural studies in the last couple of decades, the fact that many academics seriously and extensively engage with subjects of popular and mass culture is probably the best institutional proof that things have in fact changed.[112]

Given that it was published in 2003, is Lethem's novel, then, but a nostalgic rehashing of an outdated conflict? Is it merely an account of a time in which modernism was waning in the rise of postmodern culture—of a time that is no longer contemporaneous with ours? Abraham Ebdus, after all, is rendered in precisely this way: as a late modernist artist not willing or able to come to terms with the present developments in the culture that surrounds him. At least, this is how Willard Amato, the critic reviewing Abraham's work for *Artforum*, puts it, understanding his film as "the last modernist artifact" in "the long heyday of modernism's toppling" (353-54).[113] Doubtlessly, the dynamic between modernism and popular culture has changed since the 1970s, much due to postmodern cultural theories and practices. Yet I hold that the literary-historical conflict the novel conveys—between high and low art, between what powerful cultural institutions accept and what they do not—still survives to this day, if in altered shape. *The Fortress of Solitude* itself is proof of this, as it becomes apparent in the rather peculiar reactions of eminent reviewers to the particular generic form of Lethem's novel. This

[112] The institutional establishment of cultural studies as an academic subject in the 1950s and the following decades was itself a historically pivotal moment in the gradual leveling of cultural hierarchies.

[113] In this sense, the reader might understand Abraham's gradual removal of mythological traces from his film as a typical late modernist gesture, much in the way in which David Lodge understands the aesthetic development of the work of Samuel Beckett: Lodge remarked that Beckett throughout his oeuvre was progressively concerned with the removal of any mythical markers in his fiction. This becomes most explicit in his short story "Dante and the Lobster," which Lodge sees as the starting point of this development in Beckett's work. The story proceeds by allusions to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which are however gradually subverted and ultimately given up towards the end of the story. For Lodge, this documents the disappearance of the "mythical method" (253) in art in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. In his view, this method was established by T.S. Eliot in his discussion of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and signified the process of "ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is [or, was] contemporary history" (253; Eliot, "Ulysses" 175-78). Lodge believes that this is the exemplary modernist approach to reality and history—a gesture of finding order in and through art that can no longer be found in the chaotic and confused state of the world. Subsequently, postmodern criticism exposed this gesture as an inconsequential carrying out of modernism's critique of reality. Postmodern critics held that for all their formal radicalism, "experimentation, obliquity and complexity, [the modernists] oversimplified the world and held out a false hope of somehow making it at home in the human mind" (256). For Lodge, Beckett's pursuit of purging his work of such mythical impulses marks, then, precisely the transition from the modernist approach to reality to its rejection in postmodernism, making him the exemplary late modernist artist. Accordingly, Abraham Ebdus shares this fate, if his own aesthetic procedures are understood in this way.

issue will be considered in detail in the following section, which is concerned with the generic tension of the book.

Aaron X. Doily's Ring (The Generic Tension)

The reviews of *The Fortress of Solitude* upon its publication in 2003 clearly show that the conflict between modernist and popular culture persists in our time in the form of a separation between high and low forms of art. Specifically, the aspects of the reviews that reveal the persistence of this conflict concern the generic peculiarity of Lethem's novel. This generic peculiarity arises from the gradual introduction of fantastic elements to the narrative that eventually unfold a dominant storyline of *The Fortress of Solitude*, which revolves around a magical ring that Dylan receives from the homeless Aaron X. Doily midway through the first part of the book.[114] Dylan and Mingus then use the ring for various purposes—superheroic and not—in ensuing episodes of the narrative. Literary critics responded to this fantastic side of the novel in ways that are telling about the persistence of hierarchical distinctions between different forms of culture: Most of them altogether avoided the fantastic plot in their reviews, and those that did not either misapprehended it, read it in a merely figurative way, or outright dismissed it in their assessment of Lethem's work.

The misapprehension of the fantastic plot is apparent in Tim Adams's review of the novel. About this plot, Adams notes: "In a wonderful surrealist twist Mingus, at one point, literally takes on the guise of a caped crime fighter from the comic books that Dylan tries to smuggle home past his tormentors: Dylan *believes* Mingus can fly" (*Observer*; emphasis added). Adams misapprehends the fantastic element as a mere figment of Dylan's imagination, rather than as an equally real part of the book's diegesis.

While Adams's misapprehension is rather exceptional, there are numerous reviews of the book in which the fantastic plot is read in an exclusively figurative way. In most of these reviews, the fantastic plot is understood as a racial allegory: Ron Charles sees the ring as an emblem of the longing for not merely a post-racial, but a raceless society (which the disguise of the superhero reflects), and its fantastic nature as an expression of the impossibility of such a society (*Christian Science Monitor*). Similarly, Jacob Siegel understands the ring and its powers as the reflection of the possibility of overcoming racial differences, in that Dylan and

[114] The fantastic element is already announced earlier in the novel, in Dylan's early sightings of Doily in the sky, and in the narrator's reflection of Doily's superheroic perspective (*Solitude* 39, 46).

Mingus share their use of the ring, and their superhero alias (*New Partisan*). But as for Charles, this utopian potential is undermined in Siegel's view, in that Dylan and Mingus put it to tellingly different uses when they employ it on their own, and also in that the ring itself grants them different powers. These differences, then, reflect the socially determined racial differences between Dylan and Mingus: Mingus uses the ring for his graffiti and later on for the stealing and dealing of drugs—two actions that converge in a episode in which Mingus puts up his tag on the Brooklyn House of Detention, "[a]utographing the emblem of his future imprisonment […], defacing and claiming his fate" (*New Partisan*). Dylan, in turn, can only levitate when "in the presence of other white people or when alone and outside of Brooklyn" (*New Partisan*), which is expressive of his racial shame and guilt, and ultimately of his self-pity, as he in his own view is the marginal figure in the predominantly black culture of the Brooklyn of his youth. Crucially in this respect, the ring grants Dylan a Tolkienesque power that it does not award to Mingus: invisibility. This is informative for the racial dynamics that the ring reflects. Invisibility, in Siegel's view, "seems to change not so much [Dylan's] racial identity as his identity in relation to race" (*New Partisan*). In other words, the ring becomes a means to fulfill Dylan's desire of no longer being conspicuous among black people—of becoming an inversion of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. But of course, Mingus remains the real invisible man: outcast as a drug addict (his invisibility eventually becoming literal in his physical fading away under the consumption of his crack addiction) and incarcerated as a felon, he is trapped in a social system that neglects and represses him. Mingus is the real inheritor of Aaron X. Doily's legacy, the man left freezing to death—unseen, invisible—in the gentrified streets of Brooklyn. As Mingus's substantial social invisibility undermines Dylan's desire for it, Mingus's flight is expressive of his own desire—for social freedom, choice, and equality, precisely the things Dylan already has access to. Such a reading of the fantastic plot is supported by A.O. Scott, who understands the story of the ring as a failed utopia that exposes the radical differences manifest in society between a black and a white kid, as Aeroman, or Arrowman, is eventually "powerless against the shape-shifting demons of racism" (*New York Times*).[115]

[115] These differences are also manifest in Mingus and Dylan's different understandings of the Superhero's name: Dylan's *Aero*-man implies transparency, immateriality, passivity, invisibility, while Mingus's *Arrow*-man implies solidity, materiality, activity, and visibility. Moreover, Mingus and Dylan's different understandings of the name also reflect their different upbringing and educational backgrounds: Dylan opts for the Latin word 'aero,' and Mingus for the more familiar term 'arrow.'

A good example of a dismissive reaction to the fantastic plot of *The Fortress of Solitude* can be found in John Leonard's review of the novel. For Leonard, the ring is not so much a powerful symbol of racial differences in contemporary North American society but rather a postmodern literary device that precisely annuls the novel's potential to engage with such issues: "*The Fortress of Solitude*, copping out, didn't so much cheat the reader as it threw up its hands and shrugged us off: I give up. Irony hasn't done the job, or nostalgia, so why not try wishful thinking?" (*New York Review of Books*). Yet above all, Leonard dismisses the fantastic element in *The Fortress of Solitude* as a disagreeable residue from Lethem's earlier novels (which were substantially informed by genre fiction) that in his opinion does not belong to the novel's otherwise "masterly, lyrical scan of childhood" and the "ligature of friendship and blood ties" (*New York Review of Books*). In other words, the fantastic plot does not work for Leonard because it is incongruent with the book's otherwise realist treatment of its themes. For this is how the novel to a large extent proceeds: *The Fortress of Solitude* in many ways evokes the realism of the culturally sanctioned Great American Novel. It is a literary amalgam of memoir, social novel, and bildungsroman, which deals with such grand themes as family, friendship, race and class, in a historically detailed rendering of a specific place (Brooklyn) through the stories of a large cast of characters, in the midst of which it tells that of its protagonist, Dylan, whose coming of age reflects the changes of his surroundings, making him a typical hero of such a novel, one that is both particular and general, representing an individual life yet also, at the same time, the broader culture of which he is part. Lethem's novel introduces a fantastic plot inside this particular literary discourse, and it is because of this that Leonard ultimately rejects it.[116]

This, then, shows in what form the hierarchical distinction between different cultural discourses survives in our time: While popular and mass forms of culture might today no longer be rejected on the strict premises of modernist art, they are expelled from the dignified realm of literary realism and its established themes. This becomes explicitly apparent in Leonard's dismissal of the fantastic plot in his review of *The Fortress of Solitude*, as he deems it inappropriate to and unworthy of its otherwise canonical realist procedures. Crucially, the hierarchical distinction between genre fiction and literary realism is also apparent in the other two kinds of responses: Adams's misapprehension of the fantastic plot can be read as a refusal

[116] For a more generalized critical account of Leonard's dismissal of Lethem's embracing of popular culture in *The Fortress of* Solitude—one which also considers similar arguments surrounding other contemporary writers (like Margaret Atwood or Kurt Vonnegut)—see Ray Davis's essay "High, Low, and Lethem."

to accept it on the same terms as the more realist aspects of the novel. And while the figurative readings of the fantastic plot as racial allegory do take it seriously, they wholly translate it into thematic terms in accordance with accepted premises. In this, all responses essentially miss out on acknowledging the fantastic plot of *The Fortress of Solitude* on its own terms, that is, in its proper generic dimensions. Yet this is precisely what in my opinion distinguishes a central dynamic of the novel: its setting up of a generic heteroglossia in the potentially conflicting integration of apparently opposed literary discourses—of a fantastic comic book discourse and the discourse of a canonical realism. This is the *generic tension* of the novel—a continuation of the literary-historical tension, its contemporary expression. Importantly, the generic tension does not only attest to the actuality of the literary-historical one explored in the novel, but also sublates it in a more distinctly formal way, which is crucial for understanding in more detail how this novel's heteroglot pursuits are linked to the concerns of experimental writing.

In the following pages, the generic tension of *The Fortress of Solitude* is elaborated in more detail.[117] For this purpose, I will consider the novel in terms of the basic premises of magical realism. A discussion of the novel's close but problematic relation to the genre of magical realism will not only be revealing about the critical and utopian scope of its generic tension, but also show that this tension is informative for precisely the racial issues raised by critics in their figurative reading of the fantastic plot: In the manner of Bakhtin's heteroglot novel (and Adorno's modern work of art), the formal-generic pursuits of *The Fortress of Solitude* are also estranging reflections and refractions of the socio-cultural conflicts that surround them.

As its name implies, a magical realist work presents magical events, according to Wendy B. Faris, "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (174), in the formal conventions of realism—as if they were real and self-evident. As Maggie Ann Bowers puts it, magical realism "brings together the seemingly opposed perspective of a pragmatic, practical and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same [literary work]" (3). Embedding magical events in the discourse of conventional realism was originally a means for writers to express their contradictory cultural influences: In Central and South America, where literary magical realism has its origins, it was a means for writers to express the clashing of local beliefs and cultures

[117] For a discussion of the generic dynamics in Lethem's work that focuses more closely on his earlier novels (in particular *Gun, with Occasional Music* and *Amnesia Moon*), see James Peacock's "Jonathan Lethem's Genre Evolutions." Peacock understands the generic peculiarity of Lethem's work as an engagement with certain ethical dimensions of evolutionary theory.

with those of the European colonizers in the process of cultural assimilation. Today, magical realism is generally understood as a formal means to "attack the definitions and assumptions" (Bowers 9) of a dominant cultural system. The contradictory integration of the magical and the realist expresses a state of unresolved conflict between a dominant and a marginal culture, as the result of the former's repression of the latter. In this sense, the formal realist foundation of the literary text represents the dominant culture, as it mimetically naturalizes a certain ideological order as real by means of representation and verisimilitude. The magical reflects the marginal culture, and its realist presentation in the text undermines the dominant one: the inclusion of the magical—that which is unreal, unauthorized according to the dominant cultural system—as real challenges the reality of the dominant culture, as it questions the naturalness and matter-of-factness of its laws, customs, and standards, and exposes them as such.

Yet the marginal culture is not naively presented in magical realist texts as a truer or purer culture that might replace the dominant one. The particular integration of the magical and the realist prevents this, as it sets up a complimentary rather than substitutional relation, which consequently affects both orders. As Bowers puts it, both "categories of the magical and the real are brought into question by their juxtaposition" (67). This is crucial, for the point of a magical realist discourse is not merely the exposure of the dominant culture's purported naturalness as second nature, but more fundamentally the advocation of a cultural state of difference. The apparent dualism of the magical and the realist is ultimately not expressive of a binary notion of culture, but is a reduced structural representation of a culture of difference—of heterogeneity, diversity, and plurality, in which different cultures critically inform each other. Yet of course, magical realist texts do present cultural difference in a dualist way, which is important, as this reveals the potentially repressive workings of a singular dominant ideology that does not allow for any difference. In this, magical realism "encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures" (Faris 165).

Besides its formal exposure of the dominant culture and the advocation of a state of cultural difference, magical realism is also extensively concerned with a more straightforward recovery of the cultures that have been marginalized in the repressive expansion of a dominant one (Bowers 16): While challenging the authority of the dominant culture through the intrusion of the magical in the seemingly real, magical realist narratives also tell the stories of marginalized cultures, accounting of their "communal histories which provide the necessary knowledge for establishing and articulating their cultural identities" (Bowers 85). In this sense, the magical is not inserted arbitrarily into the realist text, but arises from the specific culture

whose heritage and traditions the narrative explores. This highlights that the pursuits of magical realist narratives are not merely negative, in their questioning of the order of a dominant culture, but also positive, in that they give narrative space to marginalized ones.

The Fortress of Solitude displays these basic characteristics of magical realism. As mentioned above, the novel voices as of yet rather marginalized (at least in the context of novels of a wider cultural circulation) popular cultures of 1970s Brooklyn—such as the cultures of comic books, hip-hop, and punk—and certain genres that belong to them—such as the liner note, and the jacket art of science fiction dime novels. Accordingly, the magical aspects of the story are based in precisely the popular cultures that novel recovers in its narrative: the powers of the ring come straight out of the comic books that Dylan and Mingus read, and they are used, among other things, to create vast graffiti in exposed spaces of Brooklyn. Importantly, this magic is presented as real in the novel, that is, it is rendered in the same style and placed on the same ontological level in the diegesis as the more realistic episodes of the narrative (which is precisely what Tim Adams misapprehends in his review). With this, it challenges the solidity, naturalness, and predominance of the genre and the themes that the novel basically evokes—the Great American Novel presented in the form of conventional realism. In this sense, the conflict of cultures that Lethem's novel generically engages with is that between a dominant culture of literary realism—the forms and themes of which still prevail in today's literary culture and thus strongly determine our common notions of what distinguishes a great novel, American and otherwise—and the marginal popular culture of comic books (which metonymically stands for the different popular cultures presented in the novel), whose forms and themes have so far been marginalized because of the prevalence of literary realist paradigms. This prevalence showed in the various critical responses to the book, which in explicit and implicit ways rejected the intrusion of the popular magic of the marginal into the realm of a dominant and dignified literary realism.

Yet crucially, and in accordance with the tradition of magical realism, the magical itself is not left uncontested. While the fantastic elements in the novel challenge the dominant culture of realist conventions by subverting its prevalence and exposing its seeming naturalness as second nature, the marginal culture of the comic book genre, from which the fantastic arises, is itself put into question. This can be witnessed in the following passage from the book, which describes Aaron X. Doily (at that point still in possession of the ring) flying over Brooklyn:

> The elongated rectangular grid of the streets, these rows of narrow houses, seen from above, at dusk in late October: imagine the perspective of a flying man. What sense would he make of the figures below, a white woman with her black hair whirling as she struck with the flat of her hand at the shoulders and back of a black teenager on the corner of Nevins and Bergen? Is this a mugging? Should he swoop down, intervene?
>
> Who does the flying man think he is anyway—Batman? Blackman?
>
> These streets always make room for two or three figures alone in struggle, as in a forest, unheard. The stoops lean away from the street, the distance between row houses widens to a mute canyon. Our lone figure above flies on, needing a drink more than anything, and the woman's beating of the boy continues. (*Solitude* 46).

This passage displays not just how the comic book genre is introduced to the realist literary discourse—as typical comic book perspectives ("the elongated rectangular grid of the streets") are integrated into the form of the novel[118]—and thus destabilizes its verisimilitude, but also how this at the same time introduces the comic genre to a realist reflection of its premises: The ability of the superhero to make out a crime scene from a far distance, which is taken for granted in most series of the comic book genre, and which in a more substantial way reflects the genre's foundation in the assumption that one can clearly distinguish between good and evil, is critically put into doubt in this passage: "Is this a mugging?" The more specific and uncomfortable question implied here is whether an act in which a white woman beats a black teenager needs intervention? Here, the clear-cut distinctions of the comic genre are introduced to questions of social ambiguity and racial prejudice. This is also reflected in the appearance of the hero in flight: The typically immaculate superhero of the traditional comic genre has here turned into the anti-hero figure of Aaron X. Doily, a social outcast and homeless alcoholic, who has resigned from his calling because his superpowers can no longer help him (or never could have helped him) to resolve the complex conflicts in society that made him an outcast in the first

[118] For a more extensive display of the narrative's appropriation of comic book modes, see the passage in the book that recounts the several heroic small-time crime chasings Mingus and Dylan engage in as Arrowman/Aeroman (*Solitude* 225-36). This passage includes the typical tropes of a comic book discourse, such as hack newspaper reports of the capers, and an episode that recounts the use of superpowers for private purposes.

place.[119] In other words, this passage suggests that the traditional comic book register, in its simplistic duality, is unable to express and confront the complicated conflicts of reality.[120]

The character Aaron X. Doily suggests a further aspect by which the novel pursues the complex dynamic of magical realism: Doily is not merely a literary device that subverts the comic book genre he represents, but, in representing that genre, he is also the character that makes manifest how the generic dynamics of the novel reflect and refract the broader social and cultural dynamics that surround it. For Doily also represents the demographic that is neglected, excluded even, in the process of urban gentrification. As the narrator of the story in a later passage puts it: "Gentrification—say the word, nothing to be ashamed of, only what's this alcoholic coma victim doing here in plain sight?" (*Solitude* 135). Gentrification is a process that does not leave space for the social class that Doily stands for, as this class not only cannot afford to live in the newly valorized areas, but is also seen to potentially decrease the value of these areas, as it disturbs its polished façade. In this sense, Doily reveals the close entwinement of the social and the generic in *The Fortress of Solitude*, which further betrays its magical realist character.[121]

A last important aspect of the passage that reflects the novel's comprehensive engagement with the premises of a magical realist discourse is expressed in the following statement by the story's narrator: "Who does the flying man think he is anyway—Batman? Blackman?" The allusion to the classic comic book hero Batman is important for two reasons. Firstly, it displays a certain ironic distance of the narrative towards its own generic procedures. In this, the novel prevents a potentially problematic ingenuousness on its part, and thereby also preempts an easy dismissal of it in precisely such terms from a realist point of view.[122] Secondly, and more substantially, the reference to Batman signifies the link the novel creates

[119] This in a way suggests a kind of spiritual closeness between Aaron X. Doily and Abraham Ebdus, entwining, once more, the literary-historical tension of the book with the generic one: Doily's inability to clearly and rightly register a potential crime scene from the sky reflects Abraham's gradual erasure of representational aspects in his film: Both can no longer make out and understand the socio-cultural conflicts they encounter. In this sense, the book seems to suggest—in another integrative gesture—that the powerlessness of the modernist artist in contemporary culture is similar to that of the comic superhero.

[120] In this respect, it is telling that Aaron X. Doily remains but "an incomprehensibly lonely alcoholic with a funny name" after he passes on the ring to Dylan and thereby loses his superpower (*Solitude* 152). This seems to critically suggest that within the parameters of the comic book world, people only really matter as long as they have special powers. Others, at best, get saved.

[121] For a more extensive discussion of the novel's reflection of the process of gentrification and its implication in racial issues and questions of identity, see Matt Godbey's essay "Gentrification, Authenticity, and White Middle-Class Identity in Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*."

[122] For further such popular cultural references in the novel, see *Solitude* 154, 192, 213.

between the fictional reality of the comic genre in the book (through its fantastic plot) and the real comic book culture that exists outside of it (through the Batman reference, and through the extensive account of this culture in its narrative). In this, it complicates a simplistic distinction between the fictional and the real, which is precisely the ontological distinction on which realism not only justifies its primary status among other literary discourses, but on which it also rejects any kind of magical discourse. *The Fortress of Solitude* shows that the relation between these realms is more complex than what one might assume on the terms of the basic premises of conventional realism. In sum, hence, the Batman reference encapsulates that any kind of false naivety is eschewed in the narrative, both in terms of its magic and its realism, as the two discourses critically inform each other, and in their juxtaposition suggest, beyond their mutual contesting, a cultural state of difference.

This passage, then, also helps us understand how the magical realism of *The Fortress of Solitude*—its generic tension—is tied to Bakhtin's notion of the heteroglot novel, and by extension, to the pursuits of experimental writing. By integrating different and conflicting generic discourses (the magical discourse of the comic book genre and the realist discourse of conventional realism), the novel sets up an aesthetic realm in which these discourses critically inform each other and thereby advocate a state of difference, much in the sense of Bakthin's notion of literary heteroglossia. Importantly, and in accordance with Bakthin's heteroglot work, the generic contradictions that the novel carries out reflect and refract the broader cultural and social contradictions that surround it, such as the persistence of hierarchical distinctions between certain artistic forms in contemporary culture, or the processes of urban gentrification in contemporary society. As such, the novel also comes to reflect the basic qualities of experimental writing. Its conflicting integration of the magical and the realist is a specific contemporary manifestation of experimental writing's conflicting integration of the intuitive and the conceptual, which more generally reflects the *historical* preconditions of modern art: As the conflicting integration in experimental writing reflects the marginalization of the intuitive on the rational grounds of a predominant conceptual discourse, the conflicting integration in Lethem's novel reflects the marginalization of the magical (and popular culture) on the rational grounds of a predominant discourse of literary realism (and so-called high art). Moreover, as experimental writing yields a *critical* reflection of the intuitive and the conceptual, their separation, and the culture responsible for it, Lethem's novel sheds a critical light on both magical and realist discourses (and those of popular culture and high art), and how their contradictory relation reflects broader issues of the culture and society of which they are part.

At last, the generic tension of the novel also works in a *utopian* way: Experimental writing, for all its contradictions, displays an actual aesthetic integration of the intuitive and the conceptual and thereby gestures towards a potential overcoming of the conflicted social situation that their separation reflects. Accordingly, Lethem's novel also presents an actual integration of the magical and the realist, in setting up an aesthetic realm in which the comic book genre ontologically exists on equal terms with that of literary realism. In this, the novel gestures towards a state in which the distinction between high art and popular culture is abolished, and thereby more generally gestures towards a cultural state of difference.

However, the utopia of the novel ultimately fails, because the novel ultimately fails to fully realize its magical realism. Yet in the experimental sense of the term, this is a productive failure, for it reveals a further basic aspect of the contradictions of contemporary culture that the novel aesthetically engages with. The failure of the magical realist discourse of *The Fortress of Solitude* becomes apparent if we take another look at John Leonard's review of the book. Regarding the fantastic element of Lethem's novel, Leonard holds that "[s]uperpowers are not what magic realism was about in Bulgakov, Kobo Abe, Salman Rushdie, or the Latin American Flying carpets" and consequently dismisses the magical plot of the novel as postmodern "bombast about ephemera" (*New York Review of Books*). Leonard's statement is a provocation, of course, yet still, his distinction between magical realism and postmodernism touches on a vital issue that has been widely addressed in academic discussions of contemporary literature, and which is informative for the internal contradictions of the magical realism of *The Fortress of Solitude*. In the following paragraphs, I briefly want to outline the major points critics have raised about the distinction between magical realist and postmodern discourses, and then consider Lethem's novel on these terms.

Theo D'Haen's discussion of this issue is a useful starting point, as it reflects a common assumption about the difference between postmodernism and magical realism. D'Haen holds that for all their potential formal similarities (such as their generic hybridity), postmodern and magical realist fictions differ in the following essential way: while postmodern fiction is primarily interested in "the technical side of literary achievements," magical realist fiction is primarily engaged with "ethical and materialist concerns" (201). In this sense, the basic pursuit of postmodern fiction is "aesthetic consciousness-raising," while the basic pursuit of magical realism is "political consciousness-raising" (202).[123]

[123] D'Haen discusses this difference in view of the reluctance of literary critics to consider contemporary North American works of literature in terms of the magical realist genre, as such works are commonly considered to

According to other critics, however, magical realist and postmodern fictions already display this difference internally. In view of the magical realist tradition, Roberto González Echevarría holds that there is a basic difference in how its narratives introduce their magical elements: On the one hand, there is an "ontological magical realism," which "has as its source beliefs or practices from the cultural context in which the text is set" (Bowers 91); on the other hand, there is an "epistemological magical realism," which "takes its inspiration for its magical realist elements from sources which do not necessarily coincide with the cultural context of the fiction" (Bowers 91). This complicates D'Haen's distinction, because his notion of postmodern fiction is close to Echevarría's "epistemological magical realism": the former's interest in aesthetic issues implies a concomitant interest in epistemological questions, such as how a work of art presents or forges knowledge. Accordingly, D'Haen's magical realism is proximate to Echevarría's "ontological magical realism," as the political concerns of D'Haen's magical realist work arise from an ontological connection between its magical elements and the culture it represents: As the work's magic reflects the actual culture it is grounded in, it becomes political, because this ties the work to an extra-aesthetic realm of reality.

Linda Hutcheon suggests a similar internal difference for postmodern fiction. In her view, postmodern fiction has to be chronologically divided into two phases: An early phase in which its narratives were primarily concerned with aesthetic questions; and a later phase in which its narratives reintroduce such aesthetic questions to the specific concerns of the concrete historical context they are set in (5). Hutcheon famously termed this second kind of postmodern literature "historiographic metafiction," in which the "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" is made "the ground for [literature's] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5; see also 106-25). This closely relates this kind of postmodern fiction to what D'Haen identifies with magical realism, and thereby again complicates his distinction.

Consequently, D'Haen's basic difference between postmodern fiction and magical realism does not seem to hold: Postmodern fiction is not a discourse merely engaged with the aesthetic, as magical realism is not a discourse merely engaged with the political. This suggests that their difference must be conceived differently. Kumkum Sangari makes precisely this point in her essay "The Politics of the Possible." For Sangari, the difference between magical realism

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belong to the genre of postmodern fiction. D'Haen mentions certain exceptions in this context, notably the works of ethnic minority writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison, which are often discussed as magical realist literature.

and postmodernism is marked in a more fundamental cultural and historical way: she reminds us that postmodernism is a concept of the Western Euro-American axis, while magical realism represents the writing specifically of the Latin American continent and more generally of other non-Western countries (though it includes the texts of Western writers concerned with non-Western subjects, like Salman Rushdie). In view of this, Sangari holds that postmodernism at its core engages with the central problem of modernism, which is the modernist notion of the "bourgeois subject" as the center of society (902); and magical realism at its core engages with the central problem of colonialism, which is colonialism's confounding of native cultures and thereby a communal sense of social being. (Sangari emphasizes here that magical realism is an exemplary post-colonial form of literature.) In short, postmodernism essentially revolves around issues of subjectivity, while magical realism is centrally concerned with the issue of community. This yields two literatures that are formally similar but fundamentally different in their pursuit: The "non-linear" and "non-mimetic" character of postmodern narratives (918), their technical complexity, generic hybridity, and ontological tenuousness, implies the "autonomy of language" (905), which displays the "decenter[ing] [of the] postmodern subject" as both character and author of the text (918). The similar formal aspects of magical realism then imply something quite different, namely "the autonomy of story," which displays the existence of communal stories "above and beyond the storytellers who relate them, the language in which they are told, and the narrative structures in which they are held" (905).

The more detailed implications of this difference can be perceived in the respective temporalities of Western and Non-Western cultures. In Sangari's terms, Western cultures are determined by "synchronicity," that is, a form of temporal being in society in which many different cultural existences happen at the same time, close to yet ultimately in separation of each other. Crucially, this threatens and at the same time preserves the monadic being of the subject. Non-Western cultures, in turn, are determined by "simultaneity," that is, a form of temporal being in which cultural existences truly intermingle and form a larger, hybrid unit, which preserves differences, yet does not separate them. This is due to the fundamental changes colonialism oppressively induced in the social and economic structures of non-Western cultures (902). Postmodern narratives hence work in the temporality of synchronicity, which expresses the confusion and confinement of the subject in a pluralist society; while magical realist

narratives work in the temporality of simultaneity, which expresses the contradictory hybrid state of a colonialized society and the need to establish a shared, communal story in it.[124]

The important question in this context is of course how *The Fortress of Solitude* fares in terms of these distinctions between postmodern and magical realist narratives. Certainly, the novel materially refutes D'Haen's difference between an aesthetic postmodernism and a political magical realism, as the aesthetic issues it engages with are closely tied to political ones: the generic conflict of the novel—between the marginalized genre of the comic book and the dominant genre of conventional realism—reflects and refracts broader tensions of the culture and society the novel belongs to (prominently in the character Aaron X. Doily). In Echevarria's terms, the novel might be understood as an "ontological" magical realist work that roots its magical plot in the historically specific milieu of which it is part—the urban youth culture of 1970s Brooklyn—and thereby gives its aesthetic pursuits a political dimension. In my view, it is Sangari's distinction which suggests that that the novel's relation to magical realism is a problematic one. Obviously, *The Fortress of Solitude* does not represent a non-Western, post-colonial narrative. More specifically, I think that the novel is informed by precisely the dilemma that Sangari determines as the central one of postmodern literature: This is a novel that, despite its actual closeness to an ontological magical realism, ultimately confirms the postmodern primacy of the subject in the time of its apparent dissolution, attesting to the ultimate inability of this subject to transcend itself. In this, *The Fortress of Solitude* seems close to Hutcheon's notion of a "historiographic metafiction." Hutcheon holds that while historiographic metafiction destabilizes and decenters the bourgeois subject through a reflexive

[124] Sangari notes that this difference is often detrimentally conflated in Western criticism of magical realist texts, as "the synchronic time-space of postmodernism becomes a modality for collapsing other kinds of time—most notably, the politically charged time of transition" (916) presented in magical realist narratives. In its emphasis on "indeterminacy" and "the present" as the cognitive attitudes of the decentered subject, such criticism "conflates social contradiction into forms of ambiguity or deferral, […] [and] preempts change by fragmenting the grounds of praxis" (916). Imposing a postmodern concept on magical realist narratives in this sense means to preempt the stories of their political possibilities. D'Haen in a more general way notes this critical gesture, too, stating that "in international critical parlance […] a hierarchical relation is established between postmodernism and magical realism, whereby the latter comes to denote a particular strain of the contemporary movement covered by the former" (D'Haen 194). A canonical text that arguably displays this gesture is John Barth's "The Literature of Replenishment," which determines the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez as postmodern texts (Barth 35).

More recently, the strict distinction between Western and non-Western texts has been challenged in literary criticism. Concerning the Western influence on non-Western narratives, Gerald Gaylard—writing on postcolonial African literature—argues for an integrative approach that more closely reflects today's global cultural dynamics. He emphasizes, too, the "geo-political" (Gaylard 36) difference between writers of Western and non-Western countries. But for him, African writers, "political by instinct," are also influenced by "developments overseas and [adapt] their politics to global postmodernity" (63). Consequently, he speaks of an "African postmodernism and magical realism" in his book. Gaylard's makes a very important point here. Still, for the purpose of discussing Lethem's novel, Sangari's distinction remains a relevant one.

historical contextualization, it also recognizes "that even its own self-reflexivity does not eliminate the problems of the subject; indeed, if anything, it foregrounds them" (170).[125] Yet Lethem's novel, I hold, also genuinely attempts to approximate a magical realist narrative, a feat at which it to a great extent succeeds, yet at which it must ultimately also fail, as the novel must eventually admit to the subjective foundation of postmodern Western narratives. In this sense, *The Fortress of Solitude* is a magical realist work exposing its postmodern nature. This by no means diminishes the achievements of the book—its narrative account of the history of a hitherto marginalized culture, and its aesthetic-political engagement with generic conflicts. Rather, by exposing its subjective postmodern foundation, which frustrates its communal magical realist aims, it extends its productive exploration of given contemporary tensions, unfolding another heteroglot layer of the book.

I address this in detail in the next section, which focuses on a comparison between the two longer parts of the book, "Underberg" (part one) and "Prisonaires" (part three). In the context of the given issues, "Underberg" represents an approximation of a magical realist narrative, while "Prisonaires" reveals the novel's postmodern confinement. Together, these two parts display the *narrative tension* of the book, in which the shift from the one to the other sets up their mutual information and contestation, yielding an aesthetic form that is at once utopian, in its gesturing towards a sense of community, and critical, in its consequent subversion of this gesture by exposing its subjective grounds. In the spirit of experimental writing, *The Fortress of Solitude* is, after all, a broken utopia: an aesthetic approximation of a reconciled state, which it fails to achieve, yet thereby provokes us to critically consider it. This, then, adequately reflects the particular historical context from which the novel's tensions arise—the contemporary preconditions that determine the work, and to which it responds.

"Underberg" and "Prisonaires" (The Narrative Tension)

"When the narrative shifts, midway through, from Lethem's voice [sic] to Dylan's, it comes as a violent shock. But that's adulthood after all, when the mixed and melted images of youth get stuck in the fixations of a fully formed personality" (*Salon*), Peter Kurth remarked about the formal change in the narrative that occurs in the transition from "Underberg" to "Prisonaires," as Dylan's singular first-person narrative (manifest in a fixed internal focalization) in the third

[125] Hutcheon offers a mantric phrase for this entwinement of subject and history in postmodern narratives: "the subject of history is the subject in history, subject to history and his story" (177).

part of the book replaces the pluralist, third-person, and quasi-omniscient narration (manifest in a zero focalization) of the first part. Granted, this shift reflects a kind of rite of passage, the coming-of-age of the novel's protagonist—a transition from innocence to experience, from naivety to sentimentality. Yet on another plane, this narrative change also reflects an entwinement of a magical realist and a postmodern discourse in *The Fortress of Solitude*, which is apparent as a narrative tension in the book: "Underberg" displays the attempt to establish a communal narrative in the sense of Sangari's notion of a community of simultaneity, that is, of the hybrid togetherness of different existences; while "Prisonaires" subsequently subverts this attempt by turning it into a synchronous, subjectivist account. In this, the two parts reflect the tension between magical realist and postmodern discourse as suggested by Sangari in her essay, and thereby give rise to another heteroglossia of the novel: an aesthetic conflict that arises from the distinctive formal flexibility of the novel, and which is informed by and in turn informs a more general conflict that is apparent in contemporary culture—the conflict between subject and community. Accordingly, in what follows, I consider "Underberg" and "Prisonaires" in terms of how they reflect characteristics of magical realist and postmodern narratives, respectively, and how this sets up a tension between these two main parts of the book. I will begin with a discussion of the magical realist aspects of the first part, "Underberg." Importantly, this discussion will show that the distinction between the two parts in terms of a communal magical realist storytelling and a subjectivist postmodern one is not as unambiguous as it might seem, as "Underberg" itself already anticipates the eventual frustration of its narrative aims. Moreover, it will reveal that the magical character of magical realist narratives is not only apparent in the representation of actions that defy the physical laws of the world as we know it, but is also manifest in more indirect, subtle, and prosaic ways (on which the following discussion will mainly focus)—which, as will be addressed, benefits the political impact of magical realist works.

Bowers notes that the setting up of multiple perspectives in a narrative—the rendering of the points of view of different characters in a story—is a prominent way of engaging the tension between the magical and the realist in a more prosaic way: Multiple perspectives often evaluate the same event or subject of a story (or the story as a whole, through different subplots) in different ways, which complicates a gesture crucial to realist discourses, that is, the articulation of a singular, stable truth of the story (Bowers 78). Different points of view introduce contradictions to the narrative, they establish evaluative conflicts with regard to the presented event or subject that reflect the essential contradiction at the heart of magical realist

works. An exemplary passage in *The Fortress of Solitude* that displays such a perspectival contradiction arises through the transition from an episode recounting Abraham's moral outbreak upon discovering that Dylan and Mingus have sprayed "DOSE" on Aaron X. Doily's jacket to an episode recounting Dylan and the Dean Street Crew stealing aerosol cans at McCrory's (*Solitude* 142-48). In this, the narrative establishes a juxtaposition of different and contradictory views of the same subject—graffiti culture. For Abraham, graffiti are a signifier of social decay, a cultural representation of a loss of moral integrity and ethical responsibility. Hence his exclamation when he discovers the tag on Doily's jacket: "Maybe this is just a terrible place. Maybe in these streets, right and wrong are confused, so you and your friends run insane like animals that would do this to a human person" (*Solitude* 143-44). In the book, this episode is immediately followed by one in which Dylan and his friends steal aerosol cans from McCrory's store. Though the small felony in this episode might reflect Abraham's accusation, the episode as a whole mainly represents the creative and expressive side of graffiti—"of burners [coming] into life," as it is put in the narrative (*Solitude* 145). Most palpably, this is evoked in the very first sentence of the episode, which is an enumeration of the peculiar names of the colors contained in the cans: "The best colors all have the best names: Pastel Aqua, Plum, John Deere Yellow, Popsicle Orange, Federal Safety Purple" (*Solitude* 145). The literally colorful beginning of this episode contrasts the preceding one's apocalyptic evocation of shades of doomed black and grey. The direct sequence of these two episodes, then, sets up a contradictory account of graffiti in which neither the perspective of Abraham nor that of Dylan and his friends is prioritized. This subverts an unambiguous account of the subject.

But introducing different points of view to the story effects not just the establishment of evaluative contradictions. At the same time, it also contributes to an evocation of a narrative sense of community—what Sangari determined as one of the distinctive aspects of a magical realist discourse. The following passage from "Underberg" illustrates this point:

> Abraham did his part scraping toast while Dylan worked math problems at the table, a take-home test due in fifteen minutes, first period.
>
> Barret Rude Senior might be lighting a breakfast cigarette in the well of his basement entrance, stroking white stubble, patrolling the morning.
>
> Ramirez rolling up his gate, moms tugging first graders to P.S. 38.
>
> Henry was in his second year at Aviation in Queens, he'd grown a foot and a half and was the man you saw sometimes on the block who'd high-five with younger kids. (*Solitude* 197)

The passage, which accounts of various activities going on in Dean Street on an ordinary morning of the week, sets up a magical realist order of community in Sangari's specific sense of a culture of simultaneity: The passage presents diverse and separate activities that however go on at the same time, in the same place, and roughly relate the same general thing—morning rituals. This evokes a sense of togetherness in difference, which is concretely expressed in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic character of the story—Abraham and Dylan are Jewish Caucasian Americans, Barret Rude Senior and Henry are African Americans, Ramirez is a Puerto Rican American—and captured in the particular formal presentation of the episode: the different activities are closely drawn together through a quick sequence of economical description, and are made equally relevant to the evocation of the situation through their paratactical presentation.

Yet of course, such an equality in attention is only possible through the omniscience of the narrator. This suggests an authoritative point of view that seems to undermine the communal narrative gesture of this part: Are the characters, for all their diversity—which also prominently comes to the fore through the idiolectic rendering of their speech, to be witnessed in such as utterances as the following one by Aaron X. Doily: "Gohead, pick it up. I don't give a shit 'bout no fucking *graffiti*, man. Least of my problems, shit" (*Solitude* 102; emphasis in original); or Arthur Lomb's comment on his potential educational career: "Only thing that matters is the test for Stuyvesant. Just math and science. Flunk English, who gives? (*Solitude* 126)—not mere elements in the singular imagination of the narrator, their simultaneity rather that of players in the narrator's choreography? This seems to be strongly implied in other passages of "Underberg," as in the following episode recounting Rachel and Dylan's visit to Isabel Vendle's house:

> Croft and his mother explained it all to Dylan, word balloons in the bright panels on the pale yellow paper, while Vendlemachine moved her lips silently and eventually dozed in her chair, and the late October Sunday afternoon collapsed to evening, Abraham in his studio darkening squares of celluloid with brushstrokes, the nudes in the parlor below with no light to make them glow, the backyard window boxes and fire escapes black against the ruddy streaked sky, the street too dark to judge a throw properly so the spaldeen hit a kid in the face and anyway it was time for dinner. Dylan fell asleep in his chair for just a minute and for that minute he and Isabel had the exact same dream but when they awoke neither of them remembered. (*Solitude* 41)

This passage clearly displays the narrator's power of disposal over the situation. Again, it presents an account of different activities of various characters happening at the same time, yet as opposed to the prior passage, they are here presented as an imaginative associative montage on part of the narrator, which is reflected in the run-on form of the first sentence: Isabel Vendle's silent moving of her lips merges with the word balloons of Croft and Rachel's panels, which in their brightness are made to contrast Abraham's dark squares, as the act of darkening them reflects the dusk—the approaching ending of the day. Here, the simultaneous difference of the characters and their activities is sublated on a higher level of narration, made part in a more comprehensive literary orchestration of material elements and themes. This narrative sublation then culminates in the second sentence of the quoted passage: here, the two characters' difference is given up, dissolved in their sleep, as their minds merge in their dreams' identity. This sentence also most explicitly expresses the omniscience of the narrator, as only an omniscient narrator would know about the otherwise uncommunicated (and unremembered) dreams of the different characters of a story.

Tying a seemingly communal narrative closely to the omniscience of the narrator displays an important gesture of "Underberg." Through this, it anticipates the later exposure (in "Prisonaires") of the ultimate impossibility of achieving a proper communal narrative in the form of the contemporary novel. However, while emphasizing the priority of the narrator to a certain extent subverts the communal gestures of the narrative, it does not annul them—rather, it works as a necessary critical reflection thereof. Moreover, the very gesture that displays the narrator's power of disposal over the narrative material might itself be seen to be also contributive to establishing a sense of community and togetherness in the story, as the associative and imaginative montage of the different elements yields a cohesive form of an interminglement of potential contradictions, much in the sense of the basic pursuits of a magical realist narrative and Sangari's culture of simultaneity. Sublation, after all, also means (in a Hegelian sense) preservation and elevation: In the act of the apparent cancelling out of different elements for the sake of elevating them to a higher plane (which here is the higher plane of community), the difference of the elements is also preserved.

This point finds support in another peculiar aspect of the narrative strategy apparent in the quoted passage: In the sublation of the different activities in the overall associative composition of the passage, the narrator's very own particular position is sublated as well. In narratological terms, this is a direct consequence of the free indirect discourse of the passage: as the different discourses of the characters are merged in an indirect and untagged way, the

narrator's own distinct discourse is also swept up in this process. In other words, it becomes quite difficult to determine in a clear and distinct way who perceives, thinks, speaks in any given phrasal element of the two sentences: "Vendlemachine moved her lips" seems to represent the perspective of Rachel, since the phrase displays her personal nickname for Isabel Vendle; while the abrupt breaking off of the sentence's prior rhythm in "and anyway it was time for dinner" might reflect a verbal or physical reaction of a kid playing ball in the streets as it is getting dark. Above all, however, any attribution remains conditional, vague, and in-between. This affects also the position of the narrator, whose voice, thoughts, or perception can also no longer be clearly and distinctly determined. Omniscience thus employed sublates not only the difference of the characters, but also that of the narrator, for the sake of rendering the situation as a communal one.

The employment of the omniscience of the narrator at the service of establishing a communal discourse even shows in the narrator's approaches to individual characters, specifically in the narrator's attempt to articulate their interior states and their specific ways of perceiving their surroundings. The following sentence from "Underberg" is informative in this respect: "The only thing that moved on the block were the boys in the traffic, like insects skating on the surface of a still pond, the one white skimming among the black" (*Solitude* 25). This sentence represents Isabel Vendle's perception of Dylan passing by her house with the other boys of the neighborhood. Clearly, the language here is that of the narrator (this being a case of psychonarration), and as such, it is another expression of omniscience, in that a character's perceptions are accessed by and rephrased in the more literary register of the narrator. This seems to relate the subjective and singular grounds of the narrative, as opposed to any communal gesture. Yet on further inspection, the reader perceives that the literary imagery provided by the narrator is one which resonates with the personality of the particular character in question: The image is both classist, in its evocation of the pastoral estate of the Boerum family, the Dutch landowners after which Isabel Vendle wants to rechristen the Gowanus neighborhood as part of her gentrification project ("insects skating on the surface of a still pond"); and racist, in its highlighting of the skin colors of the boys passing Vendle's house ("one white skimming among the black"). Both aspects reflect the character and personal attitude of Isabel Vendle, a quality that is supported by the mere idiosyncrasy of the metaphor, which underlines the particularity of the person it reflects. This sentence, then, represents the general attempt of the narrator to come to terms with the difference of the characters whose story is told in "Underberg" by finding a linguistic expression that most closely reflects them.

As such, it is a true gesture of communication—of the narrator approximating a community with the characters through elaborating their difference in her or his own terms, and in this an attempt to communicate this difference to the reader (by way of the narratee), to bring each character closer to them, establishing a community between reader and characters. And then again, this particular narrative procedure does not only establish a proximity between narrator and character, and consequently between character and reader, but also, importantly, a distance: As readers are never in doubt that the words in a sentence such as the above one are distinctly those of the narrator, they will always know that any such form of representation of a character is precisely that: a literary representation. In this, the narrative eschews the pretense of suggesting that it is actually able to directly access its characters on their very own terms.

In sum, the following can hence be provisionally said about the communal gestures of the narrative in terms of its multiple perspectives and the omniscience of its narrator: "Underberg" establishes multiple points of view (which is, not coincidently, one of the typical characteristics of Bakhtin's heteroglossia) that complicate an unambiguous understanding of its events and subjects, promoting, instead, a magical realist discourse of difference and contradiction. The magical realist character of the narrative is further enforced in that the multiple perspectives of "Underberg" also set up a sense of community, in the specific meaning of community implied by Sangari, as the existence of different beings in simultaneity. The omniscience of the narrator subverts the communal aspirations of "Underberg," as it exposes the subjective grounds of the narrative; yet it also supports it, as the omniscient sublation of the individual elements of the story also promotes their difference in simultaneity. This is apparent in individual descriptions, which illustrate the narrator's attempt to come to terms with the particularity of the story's characters; at the same time, they also expose the fundamental distance between narrator and character. Again, this relates the ultimately subjective groundings of this narrative of community, which benefits its critical quality. "Underberg," then, seems to reflect Linda Hutcheon's notion of a later-phase postmodern discourse. For Hutcheon, such a discourse both subverts subjectivity and conveys its necessity, and it achieves this prominently through "multiple points of view" and an "overtly controlling narrator" (117)—precisely the aspects, hence, that distinguish the given narrative. Yet what ultimately distinguishes "Underberg" in its particularity is its extensive attempt to employ its postmodern qualities at the service of establishing a proper magical realist discourse, as the two aspects that Hutcheon mentions are employed to establish a narrative sense of community.

Importantly, this is not the only way in which "Underberg" approximates a magical realist discourse. It also presents other basic aspects that closely link it to the pursuits of magical realism and relate its basic contestation of the realist ideology of the dominant cultural order. In this context, it is crucial to emphasize again that magical realism not only challenges this order by introducing the physically impossible in its realist context, but also pursues such a challenge in more subtle ways. Specifically, it does this by implying that the realist discourse of the dominant order itself displays magical aspects. Sangari considers this as one of the key characteristics of magical realism, as it subverts any radical antithesis between the magical and the real, and in this expresses the refusal of magical realist writers to construct themselves as "other" and thereby to "consent unthinkingly to parallel and essentialist categories such as primitive and modern, tribal and rational" (901).

There are two prominent ways in which a magical realist discourse might imply the essential magical character of literary realism. Firstly, by showing that any act of storytelling—including, therefore, realist storytelling—is always an act of magic. According to Bowers, this becomes especially apparent in retrospective storytelling: In the act of remembering, the material that makes up the story is, temporally speaking, no longer present. In this, the act of storytelling is close to the magical acts of conjuring and evocation (Bowers 28). Secondly, by exposing the fundamentally magical character of figurative language. Faris holds that as a figurative language transforms one thing into another thing, it works akin to a magical spell of enchantment. Since no discourse is entirely without figurative language, this also betrays the magical contamination of realist discourses (Faris 175).

"Underberg" foregrounds both of these magical acts of narrative—the magic of (retrospective) storytelling and the magic of figurative speech—and it does so from its very outset. Witness the first words of the novel: "Like a match struck in a darkened room:" (*Solitude* 3). In fact, these words realize both narrative acts of magic mentioned above at the same time. Primarily, the words figuratively make up a simile that conveys the arrival of two white girls ("Like a match struck" implies the white flame of a lit match) in Dean Street, Gowanus, a place predominantly inhabited by black people ("in a darkened room" implies the blackness of an unlit room). Yet the image also has deeper implications. Made manifest by the very first few words of the novel, it reflects the conjuring magical act of an opening sentence: Opening sentences literally bring a narrative into being, they are invocations of a world, the imaginative match that brings light into a darkened room of the story—the magical creation of something

out of nothing.[126] Hence the biblical connotations of the simile, as it implies both popular notions of creation to be found in the Bible: "Let there be light" (Gen. 1.1), as well as "In the beginning was the word" (John 1.1). The given simile, as a simile, underlines the similarity between 'light' and 'word,' in reference to the creative character of language: Language is like a match struck in a darkened room—the word is like the light, as it brings a thing into being, makes it appear. Yet crucially, as the simile implies the quasi-material force of the immaterial, it also implies this materiality as something fundamentally immaterial: language creates things, yet these things will always remain preconditioned by its fundamental contingency. The flame of the match bears heat, yet it is also intangible, transient and partially transparent, without sharp contours. (Also, the intensity of its light might dazzle and deceive.) This subverts the apparent solidity of the linguistic act of creation, its apparent representation of the material world—exposes it as magical: The Solver girls become flames, become irreal. This point is enforced in further figurative determinations of the two girls on the same page: "The girls murmured rhymes, *were* murmured rhymes" (*Solitude* 3; emphasis in original); and they are described as an "apparition" in the eyes of the Puerto Rican men sitting in front of the bodega in Dean Street (*Solitude* 3). Of course, the spectrality of the Solver girls in a more straightforward way also reflects their apparent incongruence with their surroundings, as white girls in a predominantly black neighborhood—they do not fit the reality of Dean Street in Gowanus, Brooklyn. More specifically in such terms, they are also spectral because they are projections of Dylan's guilt-riddled desire—his longing for other white kids. Hence the telling name of the Solver girls: by fulfilling his desires, they solve his problems; yet at the same time, they also dissolve as his fantasy, as they dissolve in the simile of the first sentence, the magical immaterial materiality of language.

This immaterial materiality of language—its essential magical character that subverts and disrupts any claim of a narrative to a solid, unambiguously reliable representation of that which it renders—is also revealed in many other passages of the book, in which metaphors translate the narrative's referential evocation of material things back into language: Barret Rude Junior's chest hair is described as "unfinished cursives on the flat brown page of his chest" (*Solitude* 73); gangs of kids in Brooklyn are said to "come and go noisily, the groups themselves like a form of human scribbling" (*Solitude* 188); the smoke rising from the crack pipe Mingus

[126] This generally seems to me to be a very suitable simile for the act of the imagination, as the literary imagination—especially that of remembrance—is like striking a match in a darkened room: an act that does not yield highly resolved images, but rather things in their contours—the atmosphere and feeling of things, situations, and so forth.

and Barret are smoking on the sofa "scribbled in the air between them, like exhausted language" (*Solitude* 482). Very fittingly, the book ends with a description of Dylan and Abraham, driving in Abraham's car back to Brooklyn, as (these are the very last words of the narrative) "two gnarls of human scribble, human cipher, human dream" (*Solitude* 511). Other instances of figurative speech do not explicitly foreground the linguistic foundation of the reality of the story, yet still have a disruptive effect: When Buggy's appearance behind the counter of the corner store is at one point likened to her "float[ing] out of the back like a pale bloated pickle in a jar to hover at the register" (*Solitude* 37), this temporarily suspends the realist relations of the story: because of the peculiarity of the simile, Buggy for a short instance becomes a bloated pickle. Like the metaphorical back translations, this disturbs the representational solidity of the narrative. [127]

One kind of disruptive simile employed throughout the book deserves particular attention in this context: the likening of the story's characters to comic book figures. This is most conspicuously present in the persistently reoccurring image of Robert Woolfolk—Dylan's nemesis—as Brooklyn's very own Wile E. Coyote, to be witnessed in the following instance from the text: "Nevins Street might as well have been a canyon into which Robert Woolfolk had vanished like a cartoon coyote, wordlessly, trailing puffs of dust" (*Solitude* 43). In another passage, Woolfolk is described in the following way: "You could practically feel Robert measuring Arthur's neck for a yoke, like Wile E. Coyote replacing the roadrunner with a roast chicken in his mind's eye" (*Solitude* 179). This kind of disruptive simile is especially relevant because it explicitly connects the text's magical disruptions of the realist order to the generic tension discussed in the prior section, and thereby suggests that the disruptions are made in the name of the culture marginalized by the dominant realist order that is subverted precisely by such disruptions. At the same time, it also highlights the fact that the effect of such similes is never just subversive, but also artistically productive in a more straightforward way: Similes such as the quoted ones effectively establish the comic register as worthy of a figurative use in the traditional sense, as reflections of the central themes and subjects of the book—Wile E. Coyote reflects the comic book theme of *The Fortress of Solitude*, as the similes likening things to writing reflect the subject of graffiti.

[127] Conversely, language becomes real when Isabel Vendle "inks" Boerum Hill into "reality" (*Solitude* 7). The linguistic erosion of the material is not only implied in the form of the narrative, but also takes place as an actual event in the story: Gowanus becomes Boerum Hill. This is not merely a simple change of names, but an invocation of a different status for the district—the beginning of its gentrification.

In sum, we can say that besides its juxtaposition of realist and magical elements through the fantastic subplot of the story, *The Fortress of Solitude* in its first part also displays further characteristics of magical realism: "Underberg" establishes different points of view as a more prosaic realization of the basic contradictiveness of magical realist narratives, and also of its communal aims (in Sangari's understanding of the genre). Importantly, the latter gesture is exposed as being grounded in the omniscient subjectivity of the narrator—an omniscience that is at pains to both contribute to the communal aim of the narrative and reveal it as impossible, much due to its own shortcomings. Moreover, "Underberg" also further reveals the shortcomings of a realist discourse—in view of its claims to truth, adequacy, and representationality—by foregrounding the essentially magical character of narrative as such, as apparent in the very act of storytelling and the use of figurative language. In its use of comic book metaphors, "Underberg" explicitly links the latter linguistic gesture to the generic tension of the novel, which betrays the common culture-political aims of its particular formal gestures.

As such, the narrative of "Underberg" very much reflects Bakthin's heteroglot discourse—especially in its employment of different points of view, which for Bakhtin is one of the main characteristics of heteroglossia, but also in its disruptive use of figurative speech, which Bakhtin considers an exemplary device for engaging with the broader cultural and social conflicts that surround the literary work. As he notes in "Discourse in the Novel":

> What is more, the very movement of the poetic symbol (for example, the unfolding of a metaphor) presumes precisely this unity of language, an unmediated correspondence with its object. Social diversity of speech, were it to arise in the work and stratify its language, would make impossible both the normal development and the activity of symbols. (235)

Yet the effect of such a particular use of figurative language is not merely disruptive and disturbing, but must also be understood as liberating. This is what the comic book metaphors in the novel imply: they dignify the comic register, deem it appropriate for metaphorical use, and thereby create new metaphors that extend the established literary register of figurative language. In this, "Underberg" reflects the close entwinement of the critical and the utopian in experimental writing: it is utopian, in its establishment of a new and more equal figurative language, and in its approximation of a proper communal discourse which such a language of equality reflects; yet it is also critical, in employing this language to subvert the still existing dominance of conventional realism, and in exposing its communal discourse as being grounded in the aesthetic subjectivity of an omniscient narrator. This second critical gesture is expressive

of the more general conflict apparent in the novel between the narrative premises of postmodernism and magical realism. The full scope of the novel's engagement with this conflict—which makes up its narrative tension—only becomes apparent in a subsequent consideration of the third part of the book: "Prisonaires" in many ways works as the negative image of "Underberg." In this, it highlights further important aspects of the contradiction between subject and community that permeates the conflict between postmodernism and magical realism, and extends thus on the novel's aesthetic reflection of contemporary cultural and social contradictions.

"Underberg" narratively exposes the postmodern confinement of the subject through its omniscient narrator, yet as part of a true approximation of the communal discourse of magical realism. In "Prisonaires," confined subjectivity is explored much more explicitly and substantially, as it tells the story of Dylan's engagement with this issue, both through his actions (as the protagonist of the story) and his account of them (as the story's narrator), which gradually leads him to recognize it as such. Yet what ends in recognition begins with a failure—the failure of Dylan to perceive the limits of his subjectivity and how this keeps him from any true communal form of being. This failure is reflected in the particular way "Prisonaires" is narrated: this part of *The Fortress of Solitude* is wholly based in Dylan's first person singular account of the events—his fixed internal focalization. The "I" of this kind of narration emblematizes its subjective limits, as it is introduced in the very first sentence of this part of the book:

> In the attic room *I* called my office sat a daybed that was usually spread with paper, the press packets which accompanied promotional copies of CDs and the torn bubble wrap and padded mailers the CDs arrived in. (*Solitude* 311; emphasis added)

The reader's shock that Peter Kurth noted about this narrative shift is certainly also one of fascination—of finally being granted direct access to the mind of the novel's protagonist. Yet more profoundly, the shock anticipates the feeling of loss that will gradually be established through this narrative: the loss of the contesting voices of "Underberg," of multiple points of view, of different interwoven storylines, of elaborate tropes, of the performativity and creativity of language.[128] This formal loss reflects and is enforced by the existential loss that Dylan

[128] For a passage representative of the more prosaic and one-dimensional style of "Prisonaires" see the beginning of chapter 3 of part 3 of the book (*Solitude* 338-39).

experiences but initially fails to identify correctly as the loss resulting from the singular "I" that is always already exposed to the reader as the negative narrative alternative to the pluralist storytelling of "Underberg." As such, Dylan's eventual recognition, at the end of the journey that "Prisonaires" recounts, is formally anticipated in the very first sentence of the part. At that point, Dylan understands the existential loss he experiences as the loss of his past, more specifically his childhood. Accordingly, his whole journey in "Prisonaires"—all of its trials and tribulations—can be seen as an attempt to retrieve and preserve it. Yet it is precisely his past that weighs him down and seals him off—in the seal of the "I"—from that which he has really lost, and what readers from the very beginning detect in the form of his narrative: Dylan has lost a sense of community, of an alleviation of individuation in the elevation of simultaneous difference. In his stubborn solitary attempt to recover his past, Dylan is kept from being together with others in the present.

Yet paradoxically, what seals Dylan off from regaining his loss—his singular perspective, his self—is inevitably and necessarily also the only basis on which Dylan might recognize and thereby partially overcome it: his "I" withholds its own undoing, but is also that which eventually achieves it. This fold of self-confinement and self-disclosure is apparent in the particular narrative form of "Prisonaires," which as such complicates a simple dualism between the two main parts of the novel: "Prisonaires" is not the mere negative to the positive of "Underberg," as a kind of radically reduced account of an unreflective, self-sufficient first person narrator. Rather, it is a narrative in which this first person constantly reflects itself in a retrospective recounting of events, as Dylan is both the past protagonist of the story and its present narrator. In this form, the first person singular is no longer just an impediment, but also a possibility—the possibility to bring past and present together, remembrance leading to reflection.

This peculiar narrative dynamic of self-confinement (and self-deferral) and self-reflection (and self-recognition) is on conspicuous display in the dispute between Dylan and Abby right at the beginning of "Prisonaires." In their heated verbal exchange, Abby directly addresses Dylan's self-confinement in his own past: "Your childhood is some privileged sanctuary you live in all the time, instead of here with me" (*Solitude* 319). Dylan at that point fails to confront this issue, and defers it instead. However, the retrospective Dylan, narrating this past event, re-evaluates his own immediate defensive reaction at that time. As Dylan the protagonist responds to Abby in the past, "My childhood is the only part of my life that wasn't, uh, overwhelmed by my childhood" (*Solitude* 319), Dylan the present narrator reflects this

response: "Overwhelmed—or did I mean *ruined*?" (*Solitude* 319; emphasis in original). Throughout the following account of the story of "Prisonaires"—Dylan's journey towards self-recognition—the voice of the retrospective Dylan keeps up this interfering commentary. This sets up a tension between Dylan as the past protagonist of the story and Dylan as its present narrator, between action and reflection, which as a whole reveals the contradictory dynamic of the "I" that determines this narrative. As such, the formal narrative loss of "Prisonaires" becomes a negative gain, in that it explicitly and substantially explores the postmodern confinements of subjectivity that determine the novel and which in "Underberg" remain more subtly and indirectly implied. Crucially, in its exposure—and consequent undoing—of the confinements of subjectivity, the narrative of "Prisonaires" also critically reflects the narrative of "Underberg," as it suggests in a more explicit way how the latter's formal procedures are also clearly implicated in such conflicts. Furthermore, "Prisonaires" also suggests a close relation between the narrative tension of the novel and its literary-historical one: by way of a set of specific literary references, "Prisonaires" forges a connection between the postmodern subjective conflict of the contemporary novel and the premises of literary modernism. In the following, I discuss the self-exposing undoing of Dylan's narrative in terms of passages that will shed light on these issues.

The earliest instance that exposes the problematic nature of the first person singular perspective is Dylan's contemplation of Abby's presence in his office during their fight:

> There, in slanted light, her white shorts glowing against her skin and the maroon bedspread, she made a picture—one suitable, if you discounted the Meat Puppets emblem on the thin-stretched white shirt, for the jacket art on an old Blue Note jazz LP. She resembled a brown puppet herself, akimbo, head propped angled, mouth parted, lids druggy. I would have had to be scowling Miles Davis to feel worthy of stepping into the frame. Or, at least, Chet Baker. Abby's whole being was a reproach to me. I loved having a black girlfriend, and I loved Abby, but I was no trumpet player. (*Solitude* 311-12)

The effect of figuratively likening a given scene (Abby standing in Dylan's office) to an object (the jacket art of a Blue Note LP) is quite different here from the aesthetic effects of the tropes employed in "Underberg." The difference is based in the fundamental narrative difference between the two parts: The narrator of "Underberg" is not part of the story, but an external, distanced, and quasi-omniscient spectator, whereas Dylan is directly and personally involved in it. This inflects the meaning of the respective uses of tropes: Tropes in "Underberg"

approximate what is happening in the story—they are literary ambiguations of meanings that elaborate the characters and attempt to sublate them in a communal narrative. Dylan's own simile is first and foremost an objectification of Abby (a racially charged one at that) and an expression of his own assimilative egotism. Abby becomes a foil for Dylan's personal projections—not part of a communal story, but only part of his story. As Abby puts it, Dylan is "Mr. Objective Correlative" (*Solitude* 317). The reference to T.S. Eliot is not gratuitous, as it suggests the conceptual grounds on which Dylan's narrative egotism might be elaborated, and moreover provides an interesting link to the literary-historical tension of the book.

Eliot understood the objective correlative as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (Eliot, "Hamlet" 48). In other words, the fundamental emotions that underlie and inform a story—that is, the inner states of the story's characters, the substance of feeling that fuels their actions—must find material equivalents in the work of art that will then trigger these emotions in the recipients as they follow the story and experience the course of events conveyed in it. In Dylan's case, this artistic device becomes existential and auto-referential: the world around him, and the objects in it—as exemplified in his record collection, what Abby calls his "wall of moods" (*Solitude* 317)—become correlatives of his embittered and sentimental inner state. Even Abby becomes a correlative of Dylan: not only things but even people are made outlets of Dylan's selfish concerns. And precisely through this objective correlation, Dylan manages to evade a proper verbal articulation of his feelings—the objects are containers for Dylan's conflicted emotions that allow him to eschew their direct confrontation. Dylan's problems, thus, are sublimated: everything becomes a projection of his "I," and in this, his "I" manages to cover itself up in the present of Dylan's past. (This makes Dylan a kind of contemporary variation on Shakespeare's Danish prince Hamlet, in terms of whom Eliot did form his notion of the objective correlative.)

Another modernist trope that appears in the narrative of "Prisonaires" further helps us to conceptually elaborate Dylan's reflexes. Recounting the last stage of his journey—right before Dylan meets Mingus in prison—Dylan reflects it in the following way: "Either way, I was nearly done here, the Proust's madeleine of 'Play That Funky Music' eaten" (*Solitude* 491). Here, Dylan likens the given situation—his final encounter with Mingus—to a Proustian involuntary memory, that is, the sudden and complete cancellation of current circumstances through the complete presence of a past moment in the present, an epiphany triggered by an

element in the present that was part of that past moment (Proust 47-50): Proust's madeleine, which is here present as Wild Cherry's "Play That Funky Music." The reference to Proust suggest his involuntary memory as another conceptual structure in which Dylan is trapped: Dylan is nostalgically and sentimentally confined by his personal past, which takes over his present, whereby he manages to evade it, just as the Proustian involuntary memory cancels out the real present circumstances by conflating it with the past through the past's evocation.

Through the peculiar use of figurative language and the reference to salient literary concepts, "Prisonaires" accounts of and exposes Dylan's egotism. As such, it is an expression of Sangari's claim that postmodern (Western) narratives like *The Fortress of Solitude* are necessarily predicated by a confining subjectivity. However, "Prisonaires" also tells the story of the gradual self-confrontation and self-recognition of Dylan, which is based in the very subjectivity that hinders this revelation and consequently explored in the particular form of the narrative that integrates Dylan as the past protagonist of the story and Dylan as its present reflective narrator. In the retrospective account of Dylan's solipsistic attempt to regain his past, Dylan faces and undoes it: the Proustian madeleine gets consumed along the way. It is in this sense that we have to understand Dylan's failed mission to free Mingus from jail as a success, as Dylan eventually recognizes that Mingus did not want to be freed in the first place. Yet Dylan does in fact free Mingus: In freeing his present from his past, Dylan frees himself of himself, and thereby also Mingus, and the other people around him, from Dylan. This ultimately seems to be one of the central, straightforward messages of the book: The only way to free another is to free the other from oneself first. For as Dylan realizes: "People were actual, every last one of them. Likely even the Solver girls, wherever they were" (*Solitude* 380). The Solver girls, Dylan eventually acknowledges, are real human beings, not mere projections of his desires.[129] This is the kind of insight that a self-reflexive exploration of subjectivity might lead to. "Prisonaires" in this finds a potential formal answer to the dilemma of postmodern literature (in Sangari's sense): While subjective confinements cannot be overcome in contemporary narratives, such narratives can however be turned on themselves, critically, and in this negatively reveal that which they ultimately cannot attain—the presence of the other, and of

[129] Accordingly, Dylan comes to accept the present shape of the neighborhood of his past, the home of his childhood: "Isabel Vendle was dead and forgotten, and Rachel was gone. Euclid's Boerum Hill was the real one. The fact that I could see Gowanus glinting under the veneer wasn't important, wasn't anything more than interesting" (*Solitude* 429). Dylan here acknowledges that his knowledge of the Brooklyn of the past is not elevating him to any higher claims of authority. Change—the present as present—has to be accepted as the governing principle of time, not preservation—the past as past.

self and other being in community. This is one of the central achievements of the narrative of "Prisonaires."

As noted, the exploration of this issue in "Prisonaires" also critically informs the narrative of "Underberg" and the literary-historical tensions of the book: Dylan's figurative objectification of Abby, though different from the tropes of "Underberg," still echoes them in a more negative way. More concretely, the fact that Dylan's crucial statement about the actuality of people—which articulates his ultimate overcoming of his solipsism—includes a mentioning of the Solver girls, and in this makes it a direct critical reflection of the narrative procedures of "Underberg": the Solver sisters are actual, no mere specters and apparitions in a figurative web of associations as which they are presented in part one of the book. And it is only through the recognition of their actuality that their dignity and difference can be established—precisely that which the consolidating vision of the omniscient narrator of "Underberg" attempts but ultimately fails to achieve.

The critical implication of the novel's literary-historical tension in the narrative tension of *The Fortress of Solitude* arises from the presence of modernist tropes in "Prisonaires": As Eliot's objective correlative and Proust's madeleine reflect Dylan's inhibitions, they suggest a connection between the contemporary conflicts of subjectivity and certain aesthetic premises of modernism. Such a connection is also addressed more concretely in Dylan's own reflection of his relation to his father: "For so long I'd thought [Abraham's] legacy was mine: to retreat upstairs, unable or unwilling to sing or fly, only to compile and collect, to sculpt statues of my lost friends, life's real actors, in my Fortress of Solitude" (*Solitude* 492). This suggests that the postmodern dilemma of subjectivity (embodied by Dylan) is a continuation of a modernist one (embodied by Abraham). However, as we know in the end, Dylan manages to self-reflectively overcome this heritage. Importantly, the symbolic representation of the relation between postmodernism and modernism through Dylan's relation to Abraham suggests that this development is also due to more aesthetically productive pursuits, as Dylan effectively manages to evade his father's fate by inverting his aesthetic attitude: While Abraham turns his back on contemporary popular culture, Dylan finds his liberation through it, quite literally—after all, it is Aaron X. Doily's ring, the emblem of popular culture, which is the device that propels the action of the plot, and hence brings about Dylan's gradual self-recognition.[130] The novel in this

[130] In a way, this is a very Bloomian dialectics of (literary) tradition—"reject your parents vehemently enough, and you will become belated versions of them, but compound with their reality, and you may partly free yourself" (Bloom 170)—but also a subversion of its relations: While Harold Bloom stresses the belated artist's struggle to overcome the father and his tradition (the canon), Dylan's struggle is not to appropriate his father's influence and

seems to suggest that postmodern literature can evade the fate of modernist confinements of subjectivity not only through a critical self-reflection of this heritage, but also through abolishing the cultural boundaries of modernism that reflect the isolation of the self from the other—an aim which postmodern literature might pursue through approximating the form of a magical realist discourse.

This once more underlines the more positive outlook of the narrative of *The Fortress of Solitude*, and it is in this way that we ultimately also have to understand the aesthetic pursuits of "Underberg": Despite its critical implication in the narrative of "Prisonaires," the particular form of the first part of the book still exists as a viable magical realist alternative that productively attempts to come to terms with the postmodern premises that determine it. This becomes particularly apparent in the reintroduction of the narrative form of "Underberg" in chapters 13 and 14 of "Prisonaires," which account of Mingus's side of the story. What Dylan recognizes in the end through the present critical self-reflection of his past—that he has always failed to perceive Mingus as Mingus, in his actual being—is here rendered more directly by offering the readers Mingus's own perspective of things. This implies that the other's view can in fact be approximated in a narrative, even if merely by the contrast that arises from differing modes of narration, or precisely because of it: *The Fortress of Solitude*, after all, is not a sequence of two kinds of narrative in which one supersedes the other. Rather, "Underberg" and "Prisonaires" work in juxtaposition, by mutual information and contestation—as a narrative tension. This, then, conveys the full scope of the novel: It both exposes the postmodern confinements of subjectivity and genuinely attempts to overcome them. By entwining both gestures in its form, it suggests that one cannot do without the other— the utopian is fused to the critical, and vice versa. Importantly, both major parts of the book also take this up individually in their form: "Underberg" is certainly the more utopian narrative, but it does not evade to imply the critical import of its utopian gestures; and while "Prisonaires" is obviously the more critical one, it nevertheless presents its critique as utopian. As this relates *The Fortress of Solitude* in terms of the notion of experimental writing, it also reveals how this notion is tied here to the specific qualities of the genre of the novel: The narrative shift from "Underberg" to "Prisonaires," which gives rise to the narrative tension of the book, expresses the particular flexibility of the novel, as the novel as a whole displays an exemplary case of literary

unwind himself from Abraham through the dialectical "instruction" of the father, but to unwind himself in establishing exactly the art forms excluded from the father's tradition (from the canon) as equally worthy objects.

heteroglossia, in its integration of different and conflicting forms of narrative discourses (free indirect discourse and first-person-singular discourse; zero focalization and fixed internal focalization), genres (comic book and literary realism), and artistic paradigms (modernism, postmodernism, magical realism) that reflect broader social and cultural issues in which this particular literary work is embedded.

One of the broader social and cultural issues that *The Fortress of Solitude* centrally reflects is the conflict between subject and community: Contemporary society forms structures that potentially confine the subject and hinder a proper experience of community. In this respect, the novel determines our culture-historical situation as a continuum between modernism and postmodernism: As our current, postmodern culture is preconditioned by the confinements of the subject, it preserves the central dilemma of a modernist culture. Yet crucially, as a *post*modern culture, it not merely preserves this dilemma, but also reevaluates it. This is what the novel makes aesthetically apparent: it not only conveys the persistence of modernist problems, but also critically exposes them as such, and even attempts to overcome them, by going beyond the aesthetic limitations of modernism. This is how *The Fortress of Solitude* responds to its contemporary historical preconditions. As such, it is obviously close in spirit to Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, which is also centrally concerned with the novelistic revaluation of persistent premises of modernism and modernity (in the way that Bourriaud understands our contemporary culture's engagement with its past); but also to Lydia Davis's stories, which in their formal attempt to recover their given objects on their own terms (be it get-well letters, or an idiosyncratic remark made by Samuel Johnson) also display an aesthetic challenge to the confinements of subjectivity.

So far, *The Fortress of Solitude* has been established as a book of literary-historical, generic, and narrative tensions, which reflect particular contemporary conflicts: between high and low genres of art, dominant and marginal ones, between literary realism and comic book narratives, between modernism, postmodernism, and magical realism. Importantly, all of these conflicts relate, in one way or another, the conflict between subject and community that pervades our society and culture. In the closing section of this chapter, I will consider how this conflict is apparent in yet a further tension of the narrative—a *material* one, which concerns the novel as a physical object.

The Fortress of Solitude (The Material Tension)

The argument I make in this concluding section is that the novel, as a cultural object, in the context of the tensions set up through *The Fortress of Solitude* arises as the concrete, material manifestation of the conflicts of subjectivity in contemporary society—their physical expression, so to speak. This is the *material tension* of the novel. Crucially, in showing how the conflicts of subjectivity are manifest in the material form of the novel, this tension reveals some of the politico-economic aspects of these conflicts. I will address the material tension of the novel through discussions of its title and the cover design of the book. (After all, as jacket art plays quite a vital role in the novel, it seems only suitable to consider the jacket art of *The Fortress of Solitude* itself in the discussion of the book.) Beginning with the book's title is especially useful, as its discussion gives me the opportunity to recapitulate the different tensions of the novel addressed so far, and thus establish how these tensions are connected to the material one, which finds its most explicit expression in the cover art of the book.

Adorno held that "[i]n a way, the paradox of the work of art recurs in the title, is condensed in it" (TL). Indeed, the paradoxes of Lethem's novel do recur in its title, as it serves as a condensed expression of the tensions addressed so far, and an anticipation of the material one to be considered in this section. First of all, one should note the straightforward reference of the title: "Fortress of Solitude" is the name of Superman's impenetrable hideout in the DC comic book series, his secret sanctuary to which he can retreat in order to recover from his strenuous adventures. In this fortress, Superman keeps various objects that are dear to him, such as his metal diary, and souvenirs and trophies from his journeys. The fortress has several built-in rooms: a laboratory, in which Superman tries to discover an antidote to kryptonite, the only substance that can harm him; an "interplanetary zoo," in which he keeps chambers with memorabilia of his friends and family; a "Hall of Enemies," in which he keeps his defeated opponents; finally, he also keeps Kandor, the capital of his home planet Krypton, in the fortress, shrunken to microscopic size. Occasionally, Superman shrinks himself, too, to experience adventures in Kandor, and to relive stories from his past. All in all, Peter Kurth holds, the meaning of the fortress is "to have everyone in the Superman saga present all at once" (*Salon*).[131]

Through this reference, the title reflects both the literary-historical and generic tensions of the novel. One might imagine a reader without any knowledge of the Superman series

[131] For an extensive account of the cultural history of *Superman*, see Les Daniels's *Superman: The Complete History*; for an introduction to the cultural criticism of Superman, see the essay collection *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*.

discovering Lethem's novel in a bookstore: Because of the poetic character of the title and the particular subject it suggests, this reader might assume that the book in question is a typical literary novel dealing with the canonical theme of the alienated or anguished character of modern existence, in the vein of a work like Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (a novel that is explicitly referenced in *The Fortress of Solitude* (*Solitude* 275)). As such, the title of the book implies an established, dominant genre of the novel, while actually naming a marginal one. This anticipates the Trojan horse character of the book's narrative—the fantastic plot arising from the context of the conventional realist novel, which reflects the generic tension of the book, and also the literary-historical one, as the former is based in the latter. Moreover, in conflating apparently oppositional genres, the title also establishes their actual proximity: By pointing to a potentially shared theme between canonical novel and comic book (the alienated character of modern existence), the title seems to temporarily erase their distinction, just as the narrative, in its hybrid form, brings them together and makes both contributive to the subjects and themes of the story. Yet of course, the title also has the quite straightforward function of promoting the cultural presence of the comic book genre: Naming the book after Superman's hideout establishes it as a suitable literary subject. This reverberates the book's extensive exploration of the comic book culture and urban popular cultures of the 1970s—as a work of cultural history and memory.

In a more metaphorical sense, the title also reflects the issue that was considered closely in terms of the narrative tension of the book: the "Fortress of Solitude" names the confinement of the subject, and the conflict between subject and community, in contemporary culture. Dylan, by living in his past, and attempting to regain it in the present, is like Superman dwelling in his fortress, surrounded by sculptures of his former friends in his interplanetary zoo, and reliving his past adventures in the shrunken city of Kandor. Yet Abraham Ebdus, too, is a kind of Superman figure: As Superman in the laboratory of his fortress tries to discover an antidote to Kryptonite, Abraham in his studio tries to discover, through the work on his film, an antidote to his own fatal substance—contemporary popular culture. In enabling an identification of both Dylan and Abraham as Superman in his sanctuary, the title suggests the close connection between literary-historical tension and the narrative one: one of the reasons for the confinements of the subject, its inability to exist in a communal way, is the persistence of boundaries in contemporary culture that seal people off from each other.[132]

[132] In this context, Rachel's leaving of Abraham might be understood as her attempt to overcome the solitary confinements of the culturally separatist subject, which later on leads her, together with her friends, to attempt the

It is important to add here that Dylan and Abraham are of course not the only solitary Superman figures among the characters of the narrative. In a more general sense, the title in fact names the solitude of everyone of them: Isabel Vendle is a solitary figure, a recluse spending most of her time alone in her house, living in a mental space that separates her, in a classist and racist way, from her surroundings—she lives in Boerum Hill, while the people around her live in Gowanus. The three Rude men—Barret Sr., Barret Jr., and Mingus—are solitary as well. Though living under one roof, they are estranged from each other, dwelling in separate realms. As it is described in the narrative of "Underberg": "[the] rooms of the duplex had become fortresses, the three generations of Rudes barricaded into their dominions in an unspoken war" (*Solitude* 206). And the later account of Mingus's life essentially draws him a solitary figure, socially outcast through graffiti, drugs, and incarceration, like Aaron X. Doily, the solitary homeless man. Arthur Lomb is another solitary white kid in the Gowanus neighborhood; and even Robert Woolfolk is essentially a solitary figure, roaming about in streets of Brooklyn alone, like Wile E. Coyote in a deserted landscape. Each and every character of the book, so it seems, lives in their own Fortress of Solitude. This further underlines the centrality of the conflict of subjectivity to the novel—its exploration, on several planes, of the inability of the confined subject to experience a communal sense of being.

This conflict is also at the heart of a material tension of the book: the material form of the novel is the concrete physical expression and perpetuation of the conflicts of subjectivity that *The Fortress of Solitude* explores in its narrative. And it is in this sense that we ultimately also have to understand the meaning of the book's title, which names not just the solitary being of its fictional characters, but also the real solitary being that results from its material form: "The Fortress of Solitude" is the name of the novel as such. The novel is a Fortress of Solitude, as its material form yields a particular solitude of those that are involved in it—that is, the author and the reader of the book. Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "The Storyteller" is informative for elaborating this point. In this essay, Benjamin discusses the historical transition in modern society from a communal tradition of oral storytelling to the solitary tradition of writing and reading novels. "The birthplace of the novel," Benjamin holds, "is the solitary individual" (363). In the novel, the production of the story does no longer take place in a

setting up of a communal space of living at Watermelon Sugar Farm—a scenario reminiscent of Richard Brautigan's *A Confederate General from Big Sur*. Like Brautigan's novella, Watermelon Sugar Farm is less a realized utopia, but more of a shattered dream: The project ultimately fails, the group around Croft Vendle and Rachel Ebdus breaks apart, as the land is sold for the construction of private, solitary home spaces for nuclear middle-class families (*Solitude* 502-07).

communal form of call and response, in a collaborative shaping of the story between tellers and listeners, but is written by the author alone: "the novelist has isolated himself [sic]" (363). Accordingly, the novel is then also consumed by the reader in isolation (372). It is in this sense that "The Fortress of Solitude" is the name of the novel as such: the novel is the material expression and further perpetuation of the dispersal of a sense of community in modern society, as it abolishes communal forms of storytelling by isolating author and reader from each other.

In line with Benjamin's political affinities, I see buried in his argument a more specific critique of the capitalist ideology. After all, a novel is not just an object written and read in solitude, but also a commodity to be owned solitarily, that is, exclusively: It is a physical property solely owned by its reader, and also a container of an intellectual property solely owned by it author.[133] In this entwinement of physical and intellectual ownership, the novel then becomes a prime exponent of one the most important pillars of capitalism: private property.[134] This is crucial, for it is my assumption (indebted to Marx) that it is precisely the promotion of private property in a capitalist society which is a strong catalyst for the alienation of the subject and the inability to establish a proper sense of community in contemporary culture that is registered in *The Fortress of Solitude*: Private property consolidates the private individual, who is the basis for the alienated subject separated from community, since the private individual, as the intellectual (in case of the author) and physical (in case of the reader) owner of a given property, potentially keeps this property from circulating freely in society, which would be one crucial precondition for establishing and perpetuating a cultural community.[135] This, I think, is especially true in the case of art, as artistic communities—and

[133] Benjamin at one point notes that "[i]n this solitude of his [sic], the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were" (372). This implies a connection between the peculiar possessive character of reading a novel and the fact the novel is indeed possessed, that is, owned, by its reader—the aesthetic character of reading hence becoming an expression of its economic preconditions.

[134] This is very much in line, then, with McKeon's point that the novel genre is closely tied to the rise of middle-class capitalism.

[135] Roland Barthes seemed to anticipate this when he stated in his "Death of the Author" that to posit an author as the only true signified of a literary text means to subscribe to the "epitome and culmination" of the capitalist ideology, which is the "prestige of the individual" (147). Hence in Barthes's account, the author seems to be the main representative of the private individual. More specifically, I hold that the author is but one part of a tripartite structure which yields a proper expression of the capitalist ideology, that is, as noted, that of author-book-reader. After all, it is the book that in a very straightforward, material sense yields the author and the reader, and as such is the physical property that is arguably one of the central factors in the establishment and perpetuation of a capitalist order.

ultimately the objects of art that result from them—thrive on both physical and intellectual exchange, on appropriation and re-appropriation—on openness and freedom.

This, then, is how *The Fortress of Solitude* is also the material expression of the conflicts of subjectivity: As a novel, it physically represents the modern abolishment of the oral tradition's communal form of storytelling, in isolating author and reader from each other. In this, it reflects and contributes to the general alienation of the subject from a cultural community, its confinement in a private sphere of being. This gesture must also be understood in a more specific politico-economic way: As an object to be owned in a double sense (as the intellectual property of its author, and the physical property of its reader), the novel becomes a prime exponent of private property, which is one of the central catalysts to promote the alienation of the subject from communal being in a capitalist society. Because of this, the novel establishes a material tension, as the very material form of the novel in a fundamental way contradicts the communal aesthetic gestures to be found in it. As the exemplary material manifestation of a capitalist ideology that lies at the heart of the communal alienation of the modern subject, it becomes a straightjacket of its own liberating movement. And yet, *The Fortress of Solitude* has one last symbolic response in store:

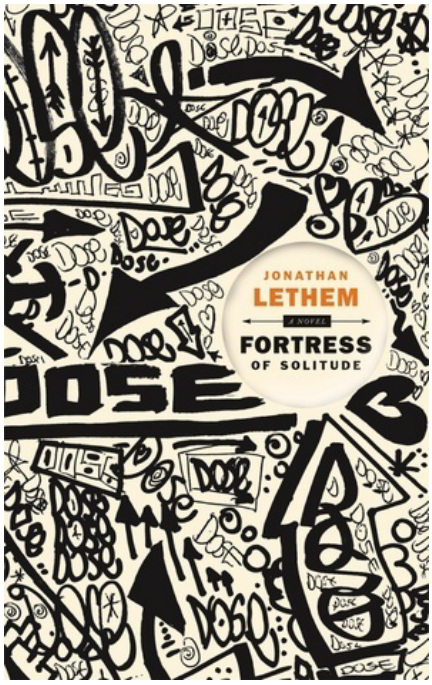

Fig. 2. Cover of the first Faber edition of *The Fortress of Solitude*, designed by Jonathan Gray

Graffiti at once reveal an object as a public or private property and mark a cultural community's claim of this property. Drawing on the surface of such a property means to reappropriate it;

putting one's name (be it an alias) on it means to reclaim it. Dose's covering of the cover of *The Fortress of Solitude* with graffiti marks a communal response to the private property of the novel—the community's demand for access, its urge for expression. If this act were real, it would potentially decrease the value of the book as a commodity; yet it would also increase the value of the book as an object of community—as an object to be shared by many.[136]

In "What Is an Author?," Michel Foucault argues that the author of a book is "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning, […] imped[ing] the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction" (186). By displaying graffiti on its cover, *The Fortress of Solitude* symbolically highlights the fact that the impediments of the novel are never just intellectual, but also always material. In this, it suggests that Foucault's "romantic" dream of "a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure" (186), is only to be fulfilled if it is realized materially as well—if physical property is again put at the disposal of everyone without being thoroughly constrained by individual ownership. This, I think, is one of the distinctive aspects of the novel as a contemporary cultural object: the novel conveys that any potentially restrictive order in a culture is always based in an entwinement of the material and the intellectual, and that hence any attempt to overcome such restrictions must work to find ways that affect both sides of this entwinement. (This of course, is a point that Foucault himself would readily support.) *The Fortress of Solitude*, by turning its internal tensions inside out, by materializing them, makes this conspicuously apparent.

In 2007, *Harper's* published an essay by Jonathan Lethem, titled "The Ecstasy of Influence," which very much works as a further exploration of the material tension set up in *The Fortress of Solitude*. In closing, I briefly want to consider this text, as it expands in a productive way on the issues raised in this section.

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[136] Of course, such an artistic act might also potentially increase the value of an object as a commodity, if the artist who performs this act is famous enough and the object is removable from open public access. This is precisely what happened with works by the street artist Banksy: In 2011, two of Banksy's works were "literally cut out of the cinder block and stone walls of the Palestinian Territory" (*Artnet)* on which they were originally drawn, and later on exhibited at Southampton Village Power Plant art gallery. In view of this, I hold that while such regrettable things can never be prevented, this does not generally deplete the communal power of graffiti, street and public art, given the proliferating nature of these creative practices.

I thank Philipp Schweighauser for drawing my attention to this issue in his feedback to an earlier version of this chapter.

The basic assumption that governs Lethem's argument in "The Ecstasy of Influence" is that contemporary culture is substantially based in various forms of appropriation. Lethem mentions numerous examples in support of this claim: Nabokov allegedly adopted the plot for his novel *Lolita* from a 1916 novella by Heinz von Lichberg; Burroughs used various existing materials for his cut-up fictions; Jazz and Blues are "open source" musical genres in which "pre-existing melodic fragments and basic song structures" are reworked; and Surrealist painting places familiar objects in unfamiliar contexts (60). Lethem sees Bob Dylan's work as the ultimate realization of this cultural principle, which as such to him marks the proper transition from a modernist culture to a postmodern one.[137] For Lethem, postmodernism is essentially modernism without "contamination anxiety" (63): While T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* was still busy enumerating his cited materials in the form of endnotes to his poem, today's artists are no longer anxious to disclose the influences on their work. Lethem believes that this is due to an exponential acceleration of cultural production: culture, in its various manifestations, is today both more easily accessible and more aggressively pushed on us—cultural stimuli are proliferating around us. Consequently, he holds that people living in today's culture are bodies of "untraceable citations," essentially and existentially plagiaristic, from every one of their utterances down to their deepest substance, their "soul" (68).

In view of this, Lethem holds that it is rather paradoxical that our culture still upholds strict copyright laws. Moreover, he believes that as such laws prohibit cultural material from circulating freely, they thwart "the collective public imagination" (68). For any culture only thrives on input and influence, on mutual information—on appropriation and reappropriation. Here, Lethem seems to explicitly argue what becomes apparent in the material tension of *The Fortress of Solitude*. Consequently, he calls for moderate copyright and trademark laws, for artists to freely offer their works for reuse, and for a more general abolishment of what he considers to be the spiritual equivalent of copyright, that is, the traditional order of aesthetic purity and originality.[138] For only an essentially open culture ultimately leads to the fulfillment of "the primary function for participating in the world of culture in the first place: to make the

[137] It is no coincidence, then, that the protagonist of *The Fortress of Solitude* is named after Bob Dylan: Dylan Ebdus is in this sense a type of the first proper postmodern generation that rises from the spirit introduced by the Folk singer. Accordingly, Mingus Rude receives his name from the Jazz musician Charles Mingus, another idiosyncratic and eclectic transitional artist of that time.

[138] This, again, reverberates the literary-historical tension of the novel, as Abraham Ebdus embodies the last representative of precisely this order, while Dylan Ebdus—in the name of Bob Dylan—becomes the first representative of its postmodern revaluation.

world larger" (65). The anxiety of influence, in this sense, must give way to the ecstasy of influence: "The name of the game is Give All. You, reader, are welcome to my stories. They were never mine in the first place, but I gave them to you. If you have the inclination to pick them up, take them with my blessing"(68). This, then, seems to me to be another vital way in which one might respond to the persistent material conflicts of contemporary culture and society.[139]

Conclusion

Closing the chapter on *The Fortress of Solitude* with a discussion of a tension that suggests how the contemporary novel is materially embedded in concrete politico-economic relations is very much suitable for a reflection of the particular role of Lethem's novel in the context of the current discussion about experimental writing: *The Fortress of Solitude* not only shows us how the intricate and apparently aloof procedures of experimental writing are present in formally more or less conventional works (as which *The Fortress of Solitude*, for all its contradictive gestures, still counts), but also how they are engaged with more concrete and specific cultural issues. In transposing the contradictive formal dynamics of experimental writing into the heteroglot relations of the novel, *The Fortress of Solitude* reveals the basic conflicts of the experimental work to be tied to vital literary-historical, generic, narrative, and material concerns of our time. Let me recapitulate this in terms of the three qualities of experimental writing.

As elaborated, experimental writing reveals the basic *historical* preconditions of modern art. These preconditions posit the artistic subject as one that can no longer rely on any external

[139] Lethem literally realized his proclamation in two ways. Firstly, the essay itself is more or less wholly composed of reappropriated quotes from already existing texts. (The above quote from page 68 of the essay, for example, is a reworking of a passage from a letter Saul Bellow wrote to his friend Dave Peltz.) In this, "The Anxiety of Influence" becomes an actual performance of the artistic principle that Lethem supports in his argument—a tangible illustration of the fact that the artistic "I is another" (68), as Lethem puts it in another reappropriation of a quite famous poetic statement. (One might also note here that even the collage-like form of the essay is taken from an already existing text: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* can be seen as a work that anticipates this formal gesture, a point that Lethem himself acknowledges in his essay (71).) This is no mere gimmick, for in performing this, Lethem shows that even excessive reappropriation can lead to the production of a new, different, and relevant cultural text—and at that one that does not devalue its sources. Secondly, Lethem in the wake of the publication of the essay set up "The Promiscuous Materials Project" on his website, where he offers a selection of his texts for a dollar a piece for artistic adaptations, thereby making it easier for artists to adopt his work in a legal way. For further information on the project and some of the adaptations, see http://www.jonathanlethem.com/promiscuous.html.

Besides this, Lethem also further pursues the promotion of popular cultural works. Most prominently, he served as the editor and annotator of Philip K. Dick's works for the Library of America anthology. Much due to the efforts of Lethem, Dick was finally allowed into the canonic realm of the Library's influential collection of North American works of literature—more than 25 years after Dick's death, nevertheless, which is arguably another proof of the tradition's reluctance to allow so-called genre fiction into its midst.

sense for the production of the work, and therefore attempts to form its object according to its own logic. This would yield the work of art as a pure construction. Yet by ontological necessity, art has to have sense in order to be art, and hence must necessarily rise beyond a purely constructional character—beyond the presentation of the mere givenness of the material. Hence there arises the basic contradiction between construction and sense in the experimental work. In the relations of *The Fortress of Solitude*, these basic historical preconditions of modern art are revealed in their more specific contemporary form, as a contradictory continuum between modernism and postmodernism, in which premises of the former persist in the latter, and in which the subjective attempt of the artist to convey the object according to its own logic turns into the attempt of the subject to establish a sense of community in art, which, like the objective logic of modern art, must ultimately fail.

Experimental writing does not just express its historical preconditions, but also *critically* engages with them. According to Adorno's aesthetics, the advancement of the conceptual discourse in modern society at the cost of an intuitive discourse—their separation and hierarchical distinction—was one of the determinative factors in the gradual establishment of these historical preconditions, which note the separation and hierarchical distinction between subject and object. The experimental work engages critically with this situation by forming a contradictive integration of the conceptual and the intuitive. In the relations of *The Fortress of Solitude*, this dynamic is again revealed in more specific and concrete contemporary terms: Concretely, the separation and hierarchical distinction between the conceptual and the intuitive is here revealed as that between different notions of art and between different literary discourses—between dominant and marginal genres of writing. Specifically, the novel reveals it as the separation and hierarchical distinction between high art and popular art, literary realism and comic book writing, the realist and the magical. Moreover, it also implies the contradiction between the conceptual and the intuitive in terms of the contradiction between private property and the claims of a public cultural community.

The contradictive integration of the conceptual and the intuitive also displays the *utopian* gesture of experimental writing, as it not only critically reveals but also attempts to overcome their separation—and hence that between subject and object, which historically preconditions it. In *The Fortress of Solitude*, this becomes apparent in its proper integration and hence equalization (in terms of artistic value) of high and popular art, of literary realism and comic book writing—an equalization that is further supported by the novel's extensive account of the comic book culture and other marginalized popular cultures. As the novel integrates these

forms in terms of the magical realist genre, this suggests how it in a more specific way attempts to overcome the modern historical preconditions that determine it: In the contradictory historical continuum of modernism and postmodernism, the novel displays a generic and narrative attempt to establish a proper sense of community that would overcome the confinements of the subject in contemporary culture and society. The graffiti on the cover of the novel mark this as well, as they display the public community's material reappropriation of the subject's private property. Yet of course, these marks are merely symbolic, and as such reveal the particularity of the experimental utopian gesture of *The Fortress of Solitude*: For all its generic, narrative, and material gain, it ultimately fails to realize its aim. However, in a truly experimental sense, this does not impede its positive impact, but rather critically charges it, as this moves us to reflect about the vital contemporary issues the novel raises.

CONCLUSION
EXPERIMENTAL WRITING AND EXPERIENCE

The discussion of Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* has shown that the seemingly arcane gestures of experimental writing are also apparent in works of a more popular kind—in terms of both form and subject matter. In this, the novel also granted the opportunity to address the concerns of experimental writing in more straightforward literary critical terms. This helped to illuminate how the complex philosophical conundrums of experimental writing, as adopted from Adorno's aesthetics, are closely related to more concrete political conflicts of contemporary culture: *The Fortress of Solitude* translates the contradiction between the conceptual and the intuitive of Lydia Davis's *Collected Stories* into the conflicts between the realist and the magical, the dominant and the marginal, the high and the low, the modernist and the postmodern—between subject and community. In the course of the general argument of this thesis, this translation was enabled by a third literary work—Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*. As a book that is heavily indebted to the philosophical and aesthetic issues that pertain to the given notion of experimental writing, yet one that formally explores these issues in a more or less traditional way, *Remainder* provides an ideal artistic linkage between Lydia Davis's conspicuously experimental stories and the more popular and conventional text of Jonathan Lethem's novel.

Together, the three books hence work as a literary triptych that supports the basic argument this thesis contributes to the current debate on the subject: Experimental writing is not a closed genre of formally radical literature that aims at the destruction of traditions and the re-establishment of aesthetic hierarchies. Instead, it is an open literary gesture that engages with the preconditions of modern art and their implication in specific issues of contemporary culture. This makes it a fundamentally democratic form of writing, not only because it engages with issues that in their essence concern all contemporary literature, but also because, as an open gesture rather than a closed genre, it allows for many different formal manifestations of this engagement, and a variability in their experimental extent—as the three books discussed in this thesis show. As such, experimental writing also belies the claims that its pursuits have become obsolete. To the contrary, the experimental in literature is a necessary reminder of the historical situation of modern literature and art, and how contemporary works might forge an aesthetic response to it: by expressing this historical situation, by critically reflecting it, and by pointing beyond it in a utopian way.

The present thesis renegotiates Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetics in an equal manner: By applying Adorno's aesthetics to the purpose of elaborating the given notion of experimental writing, it shows that his aesthetics must not merely be understood as an elitist and pessimist discussion of art, but as one that, for all its negativity, remains democratic and even hopeful at its core. Moreover, the fact that the current discussion about experimental writing essentially revolves around the very issues that were central to Adorno in the 1960s suggests that his extensive philosophical diagnosis of his own cultural situation is far from having become obsolete, but remains a vital document for our time.

In conclusion of my discussion of experimental writing in the context of contemporary Anglophone literature, I want to raise one further issue that to me seems to be a productive subject to be pursued further in subsequent studies on experimental writing and experimentalism in art in general. This concerns the relation between experimental writing and experience. Indeed, experience was one of the central concepts at the planning stage of this thesis (the brief comment on the relation between experimental writing and experience in the introduction is a residual reminder of this), but was at one point dropped on pragmatic grounds. Throughout the writing process, it however stayed at the back of my mind as relevant concept for understanding how experimental writing works, and it remains as such also at this point, now that this thesis is drawing to a close. The reason for intuitively conceding experience an important status in the context of experimental writing is a very simple one: Given the basic unconventionality of experimental writing, our initial reading experience of an emphatic experimental text will likely be an affective one. Such a text will confuse us, amuse us, irritate us, entertain us—or maybe even do all of these things at the same time. In any case, our response will almost certainly not be neutral. Ben Marcus, in his riposte to Jonathan Franzen's polemic, suggests as much when he states that experimental writing will appear "alien" to us when we read it for the first time (39). In defense of experimental writing, he then goes on to argue that, given a certain willingness and effort on part of the reader, this initial alienness will gradually recede to reveal experimental writing as a literary manifestation of "what it's like to be alive, to be a thinking, feeling person in a very complex world" (51). Rhetorically, this is certainly a useful point, as it underlines that the pursuits of experimental writing are not altogether that different from those of more traditional fiction, which helps to defuse Franzen's claim that experimental writing is essentially about the destruction of traditional literary values. However, I hold that what Marcus calls the alienness of the initial experience of experimental writing is

also relevant in its own right: This is a distinctive aspect of experimental writing, and as such, it will certainly prove informative for a determination of its particular quality and purpose.

Yet unpacking the experience of the experimental might not prove an easy task. As Martin Jay puts it at the beginning of his seminal intellectual history *Songs of Experience*, experience is a highly charged and notoriously "elusive" concept that has prompted a peculiar zealousness and even desperation in the many writers that attempted to critically disclose it: "Many, if not all, have done so with an urgency and intensity that rarely accompanies the attempt to define and explicate a concept" (1). In any case, the issue leads us right back to Adorno's aesthetics. For Adorno, the affective impact of the initial experience of modern art is central to its particular purpose in contemporary culture and society. The reason for this is that experience in a more general way figures as one of the key concepts of Adorno's philosophy. As Jay notes in his book, Adorno's philosophy essentially proceeds from the assumption that the "parlous state of genuine experience […] was one of the most telling indicators of the modern era's decay into barbarism" (312). For Adorno, the administered world of modern society disables any genuine experience, that is, any genuine encounter between subject and object that would establish a non-hierarchical relationship between the two, in which subject and object would come together yet still preserve their autonomy. Jay quotes Adorno from the *Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* in this respect:

> The regiment prescribed by positivism nullifies experience itself and, in its intention, eliminates the experiencing subject. The correlate towards the indifference towards the object is the abolition of the subject, without whose spontaneous receptivity, however, nothing objective emerges. As a social phenomenon, positivism is geared to the human type that is devoid of experience and continuity, and it encourages the latter—like Babbit [the eponymous hero of Sinclair Lewis's novel]—to see himself as the crown of creation. (PD 58)

The rational procedures of modern society—not just in academic discourse but in modern life in general—nullify experience in that they repress a "spontaneous receptivity" on part of the subject. The consequence of this is that the object becomes controllable by the subject—as this subject is no longer contingent on the arbitrariness of spontaneity—and hence subservient to it. However, the subject also essentially erases itself in this process, as its control over the object is based in a repression of precisely the qualities that are determinative for its very subjectivity: its spontaneity—or what might further be called its intuition, instinct, impulsiveness, and idiosyncrasy. Roger Foster holds that because of the centrality of the concept of experience to

Adorno's assessment of the ills of modern society, his philosophical project might consequently be seen as an extensive attempt at the "recovery of spiritual experience" (2).[140]

It is in this context that the experience of modern art attains an important role. As modern art is crucial for Adorno's philosophical critique of rationality, it is just as relevant for his project of re-establishing experience in modern society: Through its estrangements of conventions, the modern work of art stunts any attempt on part of the subject to approach the object in terms of ingrained, rationalized procedures, and thereby enables a (more) spontaneously receptive experience that will point to a genuine, non-hierarchical relationship between subject and object. In our established terms, this is another way of describing the utopian quality of modern art: the pointing of the work towards a changed and better state that could be, but is currently not. Importantly, this state can be witnessed—if fleetingly and partially—in the modern work of art. It becomes manifest in the affective initial experience it affords.[141]

This explains the importance of the initial experience of modern art to Adorno's aesthetics, as it viscerally makes manifest a non-hierarchical relationship between subject and object. Of course, the question then remains how this experience can become productive for a critical discussion of art. For Adorno, the task for critics is to articulate this experience in their discussion of the work of art—to take this affective experience into account in the interpretation of such a work. In his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, he calls this "the attempt to pursue intellectually the path taken" by "the instinctive reactions" of one's "nerves" (LND 29). Adorno explains how this might work in what is arguably his most important theoretical reflection of his own aesthetic methodology, "The Essay as Form." In this text, Adorno holds that the essay is the form of writing that can most successfully articulate the affective experience of the modern work of art. He enumerates the particular characteristics of the essay that determine its distinctive status: the "openness" (EF 17) of the essay's form; its pursuit of the given work of art in terms of "[l]uck and play" (EF 4); its close attention to that which is "transient" (EF 11) in this work; and its closeness to this work in terms of its own overall composition (EF 5).

[140] In this respect, Foster notes that an early title of Adorno's introduction to the *Negative Dialectics*, which in Foster's view "contains the methodological key to his work," was not by coincidence "theory of spiritual experience" (2).

[141] Adorno seems to suggest as much in a passage that was already addressed in chapter 1: In view of artistic dissonances, Adorno notes their very immediate utopian effect in the joyous feeling that they evoke through their unconventional and rationally uncaptured form (VA 66). This suggests that an affective response—in this case, a joyous feeling—is important to the utopian impact of the modern work of art.

These are all means by which the essay follows the "antisystematic impulse" (EF 12) of the affective experience granted by the modern work of art. Importantly, this does not mean that the essay abolishes conceptual thought. Rather, it changes the use of concepts in its procedures: In the essay, concepts are no longer defined at the outset and then applied to the given object in a rationally progressive discussion of it, but are introduced on the spot, in the process of writing itself, without any prior definition. As Adorno puts it, the essay "introduces concepts unceremoniously, 'immediately,' just as it receives them" (EF 12). Concepts, as they are used in the essay, accordingly "do not form a continuum of operations. Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet" (EF 13). Moreover, the essay also proceeds rhetorically with its concepts in a way that further subverts the principles of "discursive logic," by making use of "association, verbal ambiguity, […] a relaxation of logic synthesis," and by employing terminological "equivocations" (EF 22). In this, the essay "use[s] concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts" (EF 23)—in other words, that which becomes manifest in the affective experience of the object, the work of art. This is how the essay "invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories" (EF 10).

Here is not the point to go further into the details of Adorno's complicated aesthetic methodology. Rather, let me recapitulate what this short presentation of his thoughts on experience and modern art tells us about the potential importance of discussing experimental writing in terms of experience. First of all, it has to be said that Adorno's account of the state of experience in modern society is rather apocalyptic. One might legitimately doubt his point that experience is nullified in contemporary culture, and that modern works of art are the last aesthetic refuge where a genuine experience can be made. In my view at least, this is a typical Adornian hyperbole. Nevertheless, I think Adorno is right to highlight the affective experience of modern art, though for more practical reasons: Unconventional works prompt in us an important affective response that we might not get with more conventional texts. This response is important because it communicates, on a visceral level, certain aspects of the experienced object that we acknowledge to be informative for a comprehensive understanding of it. At the same time, however, we also acknowledge that this response, because of its affective character, cannot easily be translated into conceptual terms. Hence we are challenged to review our established interpretive procedures and search for new means—as Adorno does in his "The Essay as Form"—by which this response might be critically articulated. Subsequently, such

endeavors might prove informative for a more general discussion of methodological issues in literary criticism.

Moreover, Adorno's methodological reflections also imply that a close attention to the experience of the experimental work will turn its critical discussion itself into an experimental pursuit: As experimental artists struggle to convey their object according to its own logic, critics struggle to convey the experience of experimental works in the same manner—in a constant search for the right form of articulation of their subjective response that bears witness to the proper identity of the object. This suggests a peculiarly close connection between experience and experimentalism. It is precisely this close connection that interests Paul Grimstad in his pragmatist study *Experience and Experimental Writing*. Importantly, Grimstad argues in this book that not only discussions of the experience of the experimental are turned themselves into experimental writing in their attempt to articulate this experience. More fundamentally, he holds that any kind of writing which attempts to articulate an experience will necessarily manifest itself in an experimental form. For Grimstad, this is due to the fact that experience itself is an experimental pursuit. To him, experience does not mean, as often assumed, "getting inner representations to correspond with outer phenomena," nor does it entail the "securing [of] conditions of possibility for rationally justified knowledge" (1). Rather, experience is "an experimental loop of perception, action, consequences, further perception of consequences, further action, further consequences, and so forth" (1). Grimstad takes his cue from Stanley Cavell here, for whom experimentation means

> an activity taking the form of a search; one which does not know where it is going ahead of time, fashions provisional goals as part of the unfolding of the process, and remains open to the surprises that emerge from an attention to work as it is being made. (7)

For Grimstad, it consequently follows that any written composition concerned with experience will also necessarily be experimental. Crucially, this does not mean that experimental writing merely replicates the experimental character of the process of experience. More substantially, experimental writing stores up experience in its own form, and thereby becomes itself an experiential process. As Grimstad puts it, experimental writing is in this sense "a *source* of experience," as "both artist and beholder find the conditions for the work's meaning becoming shareable *in* the set of experiments that have led to the work" (12-13; emphasis in original). In other words, as experimental works are experiences to their creators, in that artists continuously

attempt to discover the conditions of their works—how works might eventually come to mean something—in the process of producing them, they as such become experiences for their recipients, in that the particular forms of the works present this very process, and consequently engage them in it.

In sum, Grimstad claims that the experimental is essentially experiential, as the experiential is essentially experimental.[142] In this, he not only challenges traditional philosophical notions of experience, but also common assumptions about experimental writing, which closely aligns his discussion with the general aim of this thesis: to establish a more open and comprehensive notion of what experimental writing is about—to show that it is not merely an obsolete form of aesthetic distinction and ideology critique that can exclusively be found in radical forms of art, but a kind of writing concerned with more fundamental processes, and consequently one that is potentially apparent in many different forms of literature. It is in the latter respect that Grimstad's book is particularly pertinent, as his experiential notion of experimental writing leads him to detect the experimental in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allen Poe, and Henry James. Grimstad acknowledges the importance of this gesture, as he notes that his study "fills […] a lacuna" in the scholarship of North American literature, by countering its "tendency" to "exclude major nineteenth-century American writers from the category of 'experimental writing'" (124).[143]

With this, I want to conclude my brief overview of a couple of issues pertaining to the relation between experimental writing and experience. Hopefully, it has shown that addressing this relation in depth should prove a productive endeavor in many respects: A discussion of the relation between experimental writing and experience is not only relevant for methodological considerations in literary criticism, but also furthers our understanding of the fundamentality of the process of experimental writing, which will ultimately also inform our decisions about what we allow into the canon of this kind of literature (if there can be such a thing as an experimental canon at all). If nothing else, this overview has certainly shown that the project in which this thesis participates—to determine the nature of experimental writing and its particular status in contemporary culture—remains far from finished.

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[142] The close connection between experience and experiment that Grimstad suggests is already apparent in the etymology of the two terms: Both 'experience' and 'experiment' are rooted in the Latin verb *experiri*, which means "to try, put to the test" (*OED*).

[143] Besides the mentioned writers, to which Grimstad dedicates individual chapters of his book, he also notes the works of Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson in this context.

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