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Literary Endgames: The Post-Literary, Postcritique, and the Death of/in Contemporary Literature

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ABSTRACT

Since the millennium, contemporary novelists have produced innovative works of fiction that rely upon an in-built awareness of the novel's demise in a post-literary age. Don DeLillo, Julian Barnes, Tom McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro and J.M. Coetzee utilize the exhaustion of the novel form to hone a new realism more attentive to the repressed forms of embodied life that underpin the novel's tradition of liberal humanism. Whilst other critics have noted how contemporary fictions produce new forms of (non) human subjectivity by estranging the forms of the novel, this essay emphasizes the fundamental contingency of the materialism presented by each of the postmillennial novels discussed here. To be embodied in space is also to be embedded in time. I trace how the postmillennial novel underwrites this insight by framing life as necessarily bound to death. This sense of living through death – through a relation to ending – is seen as fundamentally modernist and I trace its theoretical articulation in the narratologies of Frank Kermode and Walter Benjamin. Finally, I explore how this co-implication of life and death emerges through a post-literary esthetic that disturbs some of the key arguments behind the coeval movement of postcritique.

“We live in time – it holds us and moulds us – but I’ve never felt I understood it very well” – Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*, 3.

Introduction

This essay seeks to test the proposition that we are living in a post-literary age. This proposition is premised, I argue, on an incapacity to deal with death. This is despite a proliferation of death that has been proclaimed by some as the return of history since the millennium; from the “master signifier” (Vermeulen 15) of the September 11 attacks to the Arab spring and the rise of post-truth politics. Yet such a return of history has not, seemingly, brought about a revival of the literary. As Lars Iyer argues in his 2011 “Nude in your hot tub, facing the abyss (A literary manifesto after the end of manifestos)”: “We have not run out of things to be serious about – our atmosphere boils, our reservoirs of water go dry, our political dynamic dares our ingenuity to permit catastrophe – but the literary means to register tragedy have exhausted themselves” (Iyer). Of the same year, Ben Lerner’s writer-narrator in *Leaving the Atocha Station* emblemizes this state, and all that is left for Lerner to do is to perform his character’s apprehension of “a profound experience of the absence of profundity” (9). The failure of fiction to flourish in a post-fact age is a bittersweet irony but, as Lerner’s example attests, this might only be a certain kind of fiction. Rather than adduce evidence either for or against a general failure, I seek instead to elaborate a conceptual field of the post-literary, in relation to death, and to hint at a kind of writing I identify in several contemporary novels that

might inform a revival of the literary in terms of a critical apprehension of our shared material and finite life.

To say that we live in a post-literary age is not to say that writing, novels, and books no longer sustain our desire for what **Frank Kermode**, in the 1965 *The Sense of an Ending*, terms “concord-fictions” (62): narrative means through which to determine the intermediate period between birth and death that the narrator of Julian Barnes’ 2011 novel, of the same title, terms life.¹ As Iyer points out, there are “more readers and writers than ever before”; the “prognosis is good”. The internet “marks the rise of a deeply literate culture [...]. The mighty Amazon, the infinite feed, the endless Aggregation, the Wikiwisdom, the Recommendations, Likes, Lists, Criticism, Commentary. We live in an unprecedented age of words” (Iyer). Such a proliferation thus marks an abundance of life, of the instruments through which to frame, order and, ultimately, constitute life. Yet, such a proliferation of words does not detract from the loss of a fundamental belief in the Word. As Iyer elucidates: “And yet ... in another sense, by a different standard, Literature is a corpse and cold at that [...]. The *dream* has faded, our *faith* and *awe* have fled, our *belief* in Literature has collapsed” (Iyer). Iyer dates this collapse to the 1960s. The Nobel-winning novelist **J.M. Coetzee**, in correspondence with Paul Auster, is a little more precise:

Something happened, it seems to me, in the late 1970s or early 1980s as a result of which the arts yielded up their leading role in our inner life. I am quite prepared to give heed to diagnoses of what happened between then and now that have a political or economic or even world historical character; but I do nevertheless feel that there was a general failure among writers and artists to resist the challenge to their leading role, and that we are poorer today for that failure (98).

In Coetzee’s terms, the triumph of life in contemporary technological culture also engenders an impoverishment of life in another sense; specifically, in an ethical sense. In the works explored below the affective dysphoria of the present marks a contemporary post-literary esthetic that, far from eschewing critique, instead invokes a reflexivity derived precisely from the failure to both achieve but also to shed our attachments, literary and otherwise.

To prognosticate about the end of literature is to further entrench a dialectic of creative destruction that lies at the heart of literature, especially in the form of the novel. From Cervantes to Barth, through disillusionment or exhaustion, the anti-novel is inseparable from the novel itself. As **Pieter Vermeulen** writes: “the history of the end of the novel becomes almost co-extensive with modern literary history as such” (2). Such a state of history is of course reminiscent of the post-apocalyptic end-times of **Samuel Beckett’s** *Endgame*: “the end is in the beginning, and yet you go on” (126). This dialectic of creative destruction reaches a zenith with modernism, defined in temporal terms as “the negation of the past within the present by the new” (Osborne).² One could indeed define such a dialectic in terms of the novel’s critical capacity, or at least in relation to a sense of critique that is inextricable from literary modernity. As Foucault writes, Kant’s 1784 text *Was is Aufklärung?* inaugurates this modern sense of critique by exploring reason as a “historical problem” (Foucault 147) for the first time. Kant bequeaths to literary modernity the “question of the present” (139); no longer can human beings be assumed to have some hidden or transhistorical essence. It is not surprising therefore that renewed assertions of the end of literature should run parallel with a movement that fervently proclaims the end of critique. The movement of postcritique, spearheaded by Rita Felski, challenges scholars to return to “aesthetics, beauty, and form” (Felski 154). “Are we not missing something crucial,” Felski asks, “when we treat works of art as nothing more than cultural symptoms of an historical moment [...]?” (154). However, in this essay I will argue that a return to form, and to the affective apprehension of artworks, should not preclude an engagement with the “question of the present,” and that by seeking to overcome such an engagement postcritique risks returning to a liberal humanism that is premised upon an unchanging model of the human (such a universalist model is of course complicit with populist variations of identity politics and the very definition of political theology, as discussed below in reference to Nazism).

The critical dialectic of creation and destruction, which arguably underpins literary modernity as such, is perhaps first diagnosed by Nietzsche – in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) – as the opposition between the Dionysian and Apollonian currents immanent to art. This dialectic manifests in Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* as a tension between new and old paradigms of expectation; paradigms that satisfy a desire to make sense of the world in the face of an ever increasing “accumulated scepticism” (35). The question of our post-literary age is thus this: have we reached the endgame of this dialectic of beginning and ending? Is the post-literary simply another moment in the dialectic of creation and destruction, or a qualitative shift in response to world-historical or technological changes? If not, how might the post-literary be differentiated from modernism and postmodernism, especially where the latter is wedded to a vapid market-place logic of ever-increasing surplus value, where the question of the end *qua* end is, by necessity, systemically withheld? As Iyer puts it: “Postmodernism, which was surely just modernism by a more desperate name, brought us to our endgame: everything is available and nothing is surprising” (Iyer). This situation aligns the post-literary with the affective sense of cruel optimism outlined in the writings of Lauren Berlant. Cruel optimism denotes a relationship to the present where the object of one's optimism has become a hindrance to attaining “the expansive transformation” (2) initially promised. The affective apprehension of a “stretched out” (5) or distended present – one that denies the sense of productive optimism that characterized modernism but refuses to allow for a way of moving beyond our conventional attachments – parallels Jameson's account of the postmodern as the schizophrenic production of “an eternal present” (Jameson 10). Felski's animus with critique draws upon a similar affective dimension. The commodification of skepticism that she sees as characteristic of Theory assumes a state of cruel optimism whereby the promise of demystification has become a roadblock to literary enlightenment.

As critics we might prefer to start reading literary works as ends in themselves, but contemporary literature is grounded in an affective-esthetic matrix that casts profound suspicion on attempts to separate the inner life (to borrow Coetzee's terms) from the outer. Insofar as postcritique borrows from the impetus of posthumanists and affect theorists eager to move beyond postmodernism or the linguistic turn, the challenge of these works to liberal humanist models of empathic identification does not automatically yield a notion of affect as “resistant to critique” (Massumi 88). Through a displacement of our attachment to the conventions of novelistic realism my chosen works usher in what Peter Boxall terms a “new realism” (112). Not only is it the case that, as Vermeulen writes, “[a]s linguistic constructs, literary works cannot dwell in uncodified affect” (9), but furthermore the new realisms of contemporary fiction reveal the inherently social rather than solitary ground of affective life. To suggest otherwise, these works divulge, is to perhaps uphold yet another version of the bourgeois or liberal-humanist fantasy of privacy long associated with the novel.³ By reflexively showing the inherently social character of affect through emphasizing the *temporality* of life – of life as a matter of unsettled ending – postmillennial writers can be seen to imply that it is the move beyond critique that is characteristic of the cruel optimism of the neoliberal present.

In the two sections below I explore the literary endgames posed above in terms of narrative engagements with death. In section one I take the opportunity to return, from a contemporary vantage point, to Kermode's seminal work and his distinction between fiction and myth. I do so to explore how Don DeLillo's prophetic 1984 novel *White Noise* situates death as fundamental to the tentative truth of life that emerges increasingly in postmillennial or contemporary fiction. By drawing upon Walter Benjamin's heterodox theory of narrative in his 1935 essay “The Storyteller,” I illustrate how the negation of life, death, becomes a figure for the falsity or fictionality of literary truth. This equation – life = truth, death = falsity – proves to be more than a neat pairing. Insofar as to be alive means that we necessarily “live in time”, as the narrator of Barnes' novel tell us, the narrative temporality of the literary work is embroiled with our affective and embodied apprehension in ways heightened by the reflexive forms of the contemporary novel.

In section two I explore several mid-2000 works by novelists including Barnes, Coetzee, Tom McCarthy and Kazuo Ishiguro. In McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

and Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) I locate a reflexivity with regard to pivotal novelistic conventions which are thereby deliberately undermined by being staged, much as Barnes' later *The Sense of an Ending* explicitly addresses questions of narrative fiction. They include a reflexivity with regard to the novel's traditional forms of emotional and affective solicitation, the novel's humanist legacy, and the ethical intersubjectivity that is assumed to result from a conjunction of these factors through the promotion of what; Nancy Armstrong terms "sympathetic identification" (442). By exploring the limits of the human, both biological and narratological, these works suggest a new contemporary form of realism less concerned with representation than with life. I conclude by exploring the ethical status of the postmillennial novel's emphasis not only on embodiment and affect but on the finite status of life as defined in relation to death.

Part 1: Before the End: Narratology, Truth, and Death

My initial premise – that the demise of literature, specifically of a literary way of thinking, is related to an incapacity to deal with death in contemporary culture and society – requires further explanation. Kermode's distinction between fiction and myth is operative here. For Kermode, myth names a form of fiction that has shed, or forgotten, its own fictional status: "Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive" (39). For Kermode, a prime example of this degeneration is anti-Semitism, which is seen as a "fiction of escape which tells you nothing about death but projects it onto others" (39). The degeneration of fiction to myth can be extended to account for other theocratic tendencies in contemporary social and political life, from globalization to populism to religious fundamentalism. Myths, insofar as they seek to plot and thus order life, are structured by a religious logic of immortality since they attempt *to put to an end the question of death, to put to an end the question of the end*. Such a radical disavowal of death spills over into a reckless disavowal of life; if the question of death is solved, we have no reason to care for life. Hence, the ends justify the means, no matter how violent. Theocracy meets theodicy.

Kermode's discussion of the Nazis recalls Don DeLillo's satirical campus novel, *White Noise*. Jack Gladney, a professor in the field of Hitler Studies at The-College-on-the-Hill, becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea of his own death and pursues a radical remedy for the terror, a drug called Dylar. The novel not only satirically explores the repressed underbelly of social mores and addictions, it also stages death as a psychopathology through which the individual is maintained in relation to both society and family. One's own most and unique encounter with oblivion becomes the foundation for a society of the spectacle insofar as what is imminent to us, in Kermode's terms, is displaced onto what is immanent. As Kermode writes of the theological responses to apocalypse and revelation that underwrite our modern world, the present is increasingly granted an "eschatological import": not only the present but now "the whole of history and the progress of individual life, have it also, as a benefaction of the end, now immanent" (25). DeLillo's rendering of the imminent end made immanent manifests in the form of the never arriving event, or of the event arriving only ever as a simulation, inextricable from a euphemistic mode that both names and displaces simultaneously; what is termed repeatedly as the "airborne toxic event" (136). Murray, an academic colleague, both sees through the illusion of the immanent end and perpetuates it. "Hitler is larger than death. You thought he would protect you. I understand completely" (330), he tells Jack. Jack's failure to assuage his fear through Hitler is seen as a failure to make sense of the event that is his own life, a life guaranteed through its ending, as Murray substantiates: "Your whole life is a plot, a scheme, a diagram [...]. To plot is to affirm life" (335). Murray's theoretical solution to Jack's plight, however, is a radical re-inscription of the murderous logic that lies at the core of Nazism; to kill another is to gain what Murray calls "life-credit" (334): "The more people you kill, the more credit you store up" (334). As this suggests, the real pathology staged in the novel is not the fear of death but the triumph of life in the form of a mythological monomania that is directly linked to the totalitarian death-cult of Hitler and the Nazis. The "concord-fiction" (62) or myth of the thousand year Reich sought to overcome death, as Kermode argues, by sacrificing the transitional

site of the present in the name of the future. The triumph of life that underscores Nazism comes at the cost of life itself, not just the lives of the slaughtered but the condition of life itself as one of temporal succession, what Kermode calls “chronos” as the stark reality of time. This reality intermittently pierces the narrative voice of DeLillo’s novel; the reality that the time of life is the same as – literally synchronic with – the time of death: “I heard a noise, faint, monotonous, white” (352).

Implicit in my account thus far is a relation between literature and death that does not negate life through a mastery of the end; through death. A relation that constitutes a narrative form that answers the problem Kermode delineates – that we “do not want [life] to be an indeterminate interval between the tick of birth and the tock of death” (58) – without ossifying into a mythological paradigm of sacrifice. What distinguishes fiction-as-literature from fiction-as-myth is, Kermode argues, is its status as “consciously false” (64). Myths are like fictions insofar as they seek to plot and thus order life, but they are unlike fictions in the sense that by forgetting their status as fiction they strive for an immortal status; their truth becomes absolute. Myths are impervious to clock-time, to temporal succession. Myths are thus structurally related to a religious and theological logic of immortal life since they attempt to *put to an end the question of death and contingency, to put to an end the question of their own end*. The postmillennial novels I explore below are each inscribed with this conscious falsity by precisely suspending and interrogating the novel form itself, by staging the end of this genre but also thereby highlighting the latent dialectic of beginning and ending that has always sustained it and that cannot be eradicated. These fictions might call upon us to suspend our disbelief but not so as to compel belief. The dialectic of ending that sustains them prevents the kind of absolute end that belongs to the order of belief; the kind of truth that shuts down the necessary falsity, the possibility of falsification, upon which it in fact depends. To acknowledge falsity is thus not the same as to negate truth, merely any truth claiming to be *the* truth, which is to say the end of truth. To the contrary, the truth of these fictions is their falsity, that is their incontrovertible status *as* fiction.

To substantiate this claim, that the truth of literary fiction depends on a certain falsity, I turn to Walter Benjamin’s heterodox narratology, which is framed through a heterodox literary history, as outlined in the “The Storyteller.” Benjamin juxtaposes two conceptions or orders of knowledge, defined respectively as “intelligence” and “wisdom”. Against the tyranny of intelligence as information, seen as verifiable and in correspondence with a world of facts, Benjamin asserts the wisdom of the storyteller. This wisdom Benjamin pithily describes as “the epic side of truth” (86). The wisdom of the story endures beyond both the moments of production and reception (moments of mere succession), but without transcending the finitude of embodied life in the name of an absolute or theological end. Benjamin describes how the story “was inclined to borrow from the miraculous”, in propagating a notion of life as more than a “concatenation of definite events” but as nevertheless “embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world” (95). The authority of the storyteller, who proclaims a wisdom without the finality or verifiability of the truths of either religion or science, is issued from death. Death, Benjamin argues, sanctions the authority of “everything that the storyteller can tell” (93). Death marks the proleptic structure of the story and the activity of reading; the anticipation of the end, or better, the anticipation of retrospection that the narrative end affords. It is death, therefore, that paradoxically elucidates what Benjamin directly refers to as the “meaning of life” (100). Benjamin illustrates this point thus: “A man [...] who died at thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five [...]. The nature of a character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement” (99). The narrative end secures the truth of the narrated life not by didactically telling us something but rather by metonymically allowing us to vicariously experience the truth of our own life; the death we *know* that awaits us but of which we will never gain the *wisdom* of experiencing. For Benjamin this desire for wisdom structures our reading: “the stranger’s fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (100).

To acknowledge the conscious falsity of literature is thus not to divorce the capacity of fiction from the ability to tell the truth or engender meaning. To acknowledge the conscious falsity of literary fictions is rather to acknowledge a kind of truth that we cannot know and, therefore, master. Benjamin's narratology thus allows us to safeguard against the relativism of fiction from slipping into the absolutism of myth.⁴ Coetzee establishes a similar safeguard, in relation to autobiographical truth, in a published correspondence with Arabella Kurtz:

What ties one to the real world is, finally, death. One can make up stories about oneself to one's heart's content, but one is not free to make up the ending. The ending has to be death: it is the only ending one can seriously believe in. What an irony then that to anchor oneself in a sea of fictions one should have to rely on death! (69).

This irony, I argue, lies at the heart of a literary way of thinking, exemplified by the works of writers such as DeLillo and Coetzee, that acknowledges the possibility of life in the impossibility of death. That is, life as possible both as a source of structure, meaning and truth, and in the sense of life as possible due to the reality of time as *chronos*, temporal succession and finitude. The two in fact are the same since death is singular to the individual – one's death cannot be delegated – and impossible for the individual since one can never *be* dead (death, after all, is not a state of being). Death structures the ending through which we order life but also prohibits any particular ending from attaining the status of a definitive or absolute truth.

To consciously acknowledge the falsity of fiction – an acknowledgment sown into the fabric of literature as both an activity of writing and reading – is thus to acknowledge an order of truth that is by definition never final. The truth of literature is perhaps simply that truth itself is always provisional, and this truth is neither empirically verifiable, internally consistent, nor physically demonstrable. These standards – variably termed logocentrism, positivism, instrumental reason, or simply what Benjamin terms “intelligence” – do not, after all, pertain in an artistic medium wholly concerned with falsity and fiction. Below I explore how such a truth might be considered material in a way that evades both transcendental and secular reasoning, both of which are seen to master the present through either sublimation or calculation, respectively. The materiality of the post-literary is thereby resistant to any truth that seeks to put an end to the question of the end, to truth as an end in itself no matter how abhorrent the means; to put to death the question of death through which literature itself lives. This is where the post-literary and postcritique clash, as the latter asks us precisely to no longer see literary works as a means to an end, but rather as ends in themselves; to give up the act of cutting “into a work at a judicious angle in order to expose its hidden interests and agendas [by] wielding the scalpel of “context” to reprimand ‘text’” (123). How, these texts ask, can a literary work be seen as an end itself if the very medium of literature as such refuses the possibility of neatly drawing the line between truth and falsity, fact and fiction, text and context, life and death?

Part 2: The Great Refusal: The Limits of the Human in Contemporary Fiction

Barnes' Booker-prize winning *The Sense of an Ending* presents a disquieting vision of warped memory through the confessional narrative of the first-person narrator, Tony Webster. Through an exploration of the grammar of the word “life,” Barnes' novel achieves an affective power aligned explicitly with failure: “How often do we tell our own life story? How often do we adjust, embellish, make sly cuts?” (95). Indeed, Tony's failure to recognize the buried truth of his life is encoded through a familiar novelistic dialectic of revelation and concealment. However, Barnes not only exploits but also pushes at the limits of the novel to narrate or encode Tony's failure within the failure of the wider redemptive structure of the narrative itself. The novel's failure to provide a redemptive stance (which only gestures to the more radical anti-humanism of the other post-millennial writers I address here) means that it stakes any claim to truth on its own falsity or ambiguity. By making self-revelation dependent upon self-deception Barnes opens an implicit *post-literary* critique of the cult of the individual that underpins the novel form.

This effect is achieved principally by the novel's ending. The ending compounds the irony that is cast onto the novel as a whole both by the reflexivity of the title and the protagonist's own overt discussion of ends and endings, both narratological and biological. From the beginning we are made aware of the narrator's situatedness at the end of his life. Yet the confessional monologue both works to build up a sense of teleological progression but also to undermine our narrative expectations. For instance, the dramatization of the opposition between "objective time" and "subjective time" (122) alerts us to the classic narratological distinction between story and plot, or between the factual record and how we spin this into self-serving fictions. However, the first-person focalization prevents us from making this distinction ourselves as readers. The confessant-narrator's candidness or sincerity thus become peculiarly tainted; is this commentary part of the story itself or simply extraneous? And can this this distinction be maintained if we assume this level of self-awareness to be integral to Tony's character? Indeed, Tony's honesty cannot be extricated from the affective index of remorse that governs the work. Mortified by the discovery of a vile letter he once wrote to an ex-girlfriend, and the consequent chain of fatal events that followed, Tony reflects: "Remorse, etymologically, is the action of biting again: that's what the feeling does to you. Imagine the strength of the bite when I reread my words. They seemed like some ancient curse I had forgotten even uttering. Of course I don't – I didn't – believe in curses. That's to say, in words producing events" (138). The material action assigned to the feeling invites us to consider Tony's revelation with suspicion not because he is being insincere but rather precisely the opposite. The suspicion we feel as readers results not from our disbelief but from the intractable situation of a protagonist attempting to own something which cannot be possessed; his own life. By the end, Barnes' modernist inflected unreliable narrator – whose ironic self-evasion, as we have seen, occasionally slips into metafictional commentary – merges with a contemporary or post-literary emphasis on materiality by staging our temporal embeddedness.

The irony of the closing pages not only generates an ambiguity with regard to responsibility but also with regard to our own paradigmatic expectations as readers. In the end what matters is not death or the end of life itself but ending figured as "the end of any likelihood of change" (149). This signals how Tony's proleptic impulse is necessarily thwarted by the association of narrative closure not with a divine or revelatory power but with the negation of the very thing it is assigned to redeem: life. This reversal – where the end is made possible only by the possibility of change, since without this possibility there would be no way of differentiating the beginning from the end as all would necessarily remain unchanged – remains implicit, a product of the affective force of the work. The final lines, suddenly in the present tense, perform this insight by not only disarming us of our own proleptic narrative expectations but by gesturing toward a new material or post-literary dynamic of reading in the embedded and flux-like present: "There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest" (150).

Of the postmillennial anglophone writers discussed here no-one is more directly concerned with the post-literary, at least in terms of the end of the novel, than Tom McCarthy. McCarthy's vision of a contemporary literary esthetic is explicitly put forward in terms of modernism and the French avant-garde. The spirit of creative destruction permeates McCarthy's writings on the overcoming of the "middle-brow commercial novel" (McCarthy, *Transmission*) and, as commentators have noted, his appeal to a post-literary esthetic in *Remainder* can be seen as "a natural extension of poststructuralism's opposition to the subject" (Lupton 515). However, by emphasizing material causality over subjective agency McCarthy's novel not only bespeaks the conditions of a hyper-networked media age but also continues the tradition of a "style of thinking" (2) that Felski identifies with *critique*. This style distrusts surfaces and privileges depths, it includes "a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation" and an "emphasis on its precarious position" (2) vis-à-vis ethics and politics. Yet McCarthy's critical esthetics in *Remainder* do thereby automatically cede the novel's literariness to an intellectual agenda outside the work. McCarthy's materialism is not a form of ideology critique. By letting "matter matter" (Smith 90), as Zadie Smith famously remarked,

McCarthy draws upon an anti-humanist grammar of trauma to underwrite a materialist perspective on life as defined by death.

Remainder concerns an unnamed narrator's compulsive repetition disorder following a traumatic accident. The accident leaves the narrator totally estranged, and he sets out to recover a sense of the real by reenacting scenarios derived from his past. In what seems like another life, acts like "lighting a cigarette [...] had been seamless, perfect. I'd merged with them run through them [...]. They'd been *real*; I'd been real – *been* without first understanding how to be" (62). As Vermeulen argues, McCarthy presents an implicit challenge to the ethical pieties of "trauma literature" insofar as the latter continues to adhere to "the novel's unique epistemic power to render character's interiority" (28). By pushing trauma beyond the individual psyche McCarthy violates the novelistic tenets of interiority, emotional solicitation, and readerly empathy. The affective space opened by the narrator's estrangement is captured by the neutrality deployed and staged throughout through a lexicon of abstract material forms, inhuman elements, and failed connections:

I tried to visualize a grid around the earth, a kind of ribbed wire cage like on the champagne bottle, with lines of latitude and longitude that ran all over, linking one place to another, weaving the whole terrain into one smooth, articulated network, but I lost this image among disjoined escalator parts [...]. I wanted to feel genuinely warm towards these Africans, but I couldn't. Not that I felt cold or hostile. I just felt neutral (36–37).

As Vermeulen suggests, the lack of "psychological motivation" (31) or underlying emotional agency generates an affective remainder; *Remainder* "cannot but transmit the failure to feel, an 'unfelt' feeling that, while it is not the kind of empathetic emotional experience that McCarthy associates with middlebrow fiction, is also not neutral" (30). For Vermeulen, this critique of the liberal humanist individual endows reality, contra verisimilitude, with an "intangible intensity [...] the traumatic inevitability of matter" (35). Vermeulen concludes that this irreducible remainder also infects the novelistic enterprise itself insofar as the materiality of the conventional "affectual contract between novel and reader" (33) cannot be wholly overcome. In other words, the irreducibility of matter marks the necessary *living on* of the novel; a life after death. Yet what of the ethical consequences of this zombification of the trauma novel, with its gesture toward a new model of relation between text and reader?

Following Barnes, an answer to this question lies in the original sense of trauma not as a matter of life or death itself but as a specifically *near-death* experience; as a non-mortal *wound*. The traumatic intensity of uncodified affect subverts any complicity with bourgeois transcendence because in *Remainder* the *near-death* experience of trauma is not compatible with a sublimation of life but rather constitutes what is left over: the necessity of change that constitutes life as inherently temporal and embedded. The novel's play with repetition and structural superimposition not only therefore emulates a poststructuralist critique of the subject but underscores how the impossibility of consummating an originary (pre-traumatic) presence is the same as the impossibility of categorical or definitive ending; the impossibility of a time beyond succession that can only belong to an order of life beyond finitude.

This relation between the affective matrix of uncodified trauma and temporal life as such is brought into greater clarity by Maurice Blanchot's account of the impossibility of death in the famous essay "The Great Refusal". Blanchot also helps to explicate the critical status of McCarthy's studied neutrality. Contained in the 1969 volume *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot's essay diagnoses a "refusal of death" that results from "the temptation of the eternal, all that leads men to prepare a space of permanence" (Blanchot 33). Language is complicit in the desire for an unchanging state, and Blanchot discusses how the act of naming distorts the truth of "the universal corruption that governs what 'is'" (33). Language negates the ephemeral or finite but through this very mastery of death language leaves behind an ineluctable remainder: "The name is stable and stabilizes, but it allows the unique instant already vanished to escape" (34). This remainder marks a sense of death beyond mastery or beyond the order of what Blanchot terms possibility: "Possibility [...] is more than reality: it is to be, plus the power to be" (42). This "truth death" (36), which escapes

the logic of means and ends that marks the complicity of speech and violence, is expressed by the neutral voice of literature. Literature accords with a temporality of death as impossible: “we are delivered over to another time – to time as other, as absence and neutrality; precisely to a time that can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse. A time without event, without project, without possibility” (44). This order of time does not transcend the historical or finite present, it does not return us to “that pure immobile instant” (44) that would enable the literary work to function as an end in itself, but rather reveals how this “mystic[al]” (44) or theological logic underpins the secular mastery of death through the discourse of possibility. It is this sense of impossibility that marks the material forms of uncodified affect or intensity in *McCarthy’s Remainder*. Far from drawing upon trauma as a source of ethical transcendence, McCarthy’s novel posits “poetry [as] a means and not an end” (40); as a site equal to the expression of finite life as neither a means to an end, whereby death becomes a purposive horizon, nor as an end in itself, whereby life loses the capacity for change. This literary writing of means without ends constitutes a thinking of finitude as paradoxically unlimited. By depersonalizing death Blanchot aims to open a social sphere marked by the impossibility of sacrifice. Similarly, in McCarthy’s work the neutral intensity of embedded and affective life is not neutral in the sense that it doesn’t concern us – pertaining only to an esthetic or transcendental realm – but neutral in the sense of concerning us, as material beings, without concerning *us*, as agential individuals. This emphasis on the material nature of affect is thus tied to the temporality of finite life that emerges as a key concern of the post-literary. As the narrator of *Remainder* reminds us: “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” (281).

This temporality of pure means, of unlimited finitude, reveals the putative theological gesture of critique to be in fact the fundamental movement of postcritique. Insofar as critique can be seen to sacrifice the now of the work on the altar of transhistorical or ideological meaning, seeing the work as an end in itself is also to commit the same fallacy; to refuse the “universal corruption” that governs everything and that therefore denies fixed meaning. Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2005 *Never Let Me Go* is another postmillennial work that hinges on an estranged vision of human life and its limits. The novel is premised on a dystopian future society whereby Blanchot’s sense of refusal of death has become so manifest that a thanatopolitics of cloning, or administered death, has come to overwhelm the meaning of human finitude. Through a post-literary esthetics of estrangement Ishiguro follows in DeLillo’s wake by exploring the subtle dissimulation of political theology at an affective level. Kathy H., the novel’s narrator and key protagonist, models a similar affectless neutrality to McCarthy’s nameless narrator. Kathy is a student at Hailsham school, a facility established to house clones who are eventually to be used as unwitting and sacrificial donors for their more fully human counterparts. Again a tonal neutrality is deployed through what *Nancy Armstrong* discusses as a “sinister undertow of unabashed euphemisms that lubricates the transformation of people into body parts” (455). Yet this neutrality or “studied lack of emotional drama or complexity” (*Boxall* 98) is far from free of pathos. What is leftover, what *remains*, underscores the distinction *Boxall* makes between pre-millennial or postmodern posthumanism and postmillennial or post-literary posthumanism. The former is defined by celebratory overcoming of the body in a cyber-age in which the signifier has become divorced from material reality. For the latter, however, “the body does not disappear into editable information, but rather returns as [...] a kind of embodied being that does not correspond to older conceptions of self-identical subjecthood” (91). Contrary to the liberal-humanist subjectivity associated with the novelistic tradition, *Boxall* aligns the contemporary novel with a set of “ethical imperatives” derived from a new “concern with the stuff of which the body is made” (91).

In Kathy’s narrative the dissembling of the self-identical subject occurs through an estrangement of the novel’s conventional modes of emotional and empathic solicitation. This is despite the direct and intimate mode of address deployed throughout. Kathy’s first-person address is mediated by a second-person “you” which invites us as readers into an impossible shared world: “I don’t know how it was where you were but at Hailsham we had to have some kind of medical every week” (99; 13). The intimate address reminds us that what is estranging about Kathy and the clones is not their

distance but rather their proximity to us or to a human mode of being. Ishiguro continuously suspends the possibility of mutual recognition, between a first and second person, by establishing invisible barriers and demarcations in Kathy's world that ultimately place her, as Armstrong, "among third persons who are by their very nature ineligible for personhood" (448). Such barriers emerge through the odd behavior of the "guardians" at Hailsham, the human teachers assigned with safeguarding the students, but also through the euphemistic biotechnological discourse that permeates Kathy's perception of the self and its relation to the biological body. Nursing a fellow clone, Tommy, at a care facility, Kathy ruminates on the cost of the donations they are required to make:

[Tommy] was raising questions to which even the doctors had no certain answers. You'll have heard the same talk. How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed, you're still conscious in some sort of way how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line; how there are no more recovery centres, no carers, no friends; how there's nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off (279).

Here the price of medical progress, and a kind of thinking that has succumbed to what Blanchot terms the "temptation of the eternal", becomes clear: by securing the human body as immortal the fragility of humanity, and the very chance of humane conduct, is exposed.

Yet Boxall is right to point beyond this dystopian reading of the novel as a "reactionary attempt to bolster the human against the incursion of artificial life" (101). An alternative post-literary reading results from the pathos that remains after the failure of the connection between human and the posthuman. Ishiguro's rendering of Kathy's inner being as compromised by an exteriority is not a plea to return to the kind of novelistic subjectivity suited to empathic or sympathetic identification, but rather suggests a different relation between interiority and exteriority that depersonalizes the question of life (and therefore also death) without negating the materiality that makes it possible. For Boxall, this different relation is captured by Tommy's drawings of hybrid or disfigured creatures. Kathy and Tommy ordain to use the pictures to plead their human worth but, as Boxall writes, "Madame cannot read them, because she sees both Tommy and his art work across a boundary between the human and non-human" (106). Rather than suggesting a binary stratification of life between human-self and other, *Never Let Me Go* generates an ambiguity of both self and other through a proximity that suggests the complicity of the sovereign self, presupposed by the liberal-humanist novel, and the biopolitical engineering of the human. Ishiguro's post-literary esthetic thus moves beyond an ethics of sympathetic identification; as Armstrong argues: "This is life without feeling in Adam Smith's sense, but it is a life that feels intensely nonetheless" (453).

The postmillennial novels discussed so far all deploy a reflexivity with regard to their form. This has included a focus on narrative (Barnes), affective selfhood (McCarthy) and humanism (Ishiguro). In the postmillennial writings of J.M. Coetzee these elements are brought together as questions of ethical intersubjectivity that are intractably related to questions of the limits of the human, both finite and formal. In Coetzee's later works death figures less as a terminal horizon and more as an immanent property of life and every living moment. That death conditions life accordingly is addressed in Coetzee's metafiction through a thinking of finitude that stages of how the absence of meaning – the deathly absence that lies beneath every present moment – conditions the possibility of our invention of meaning *through* literature. Coetzee's works stage this in accordance with Iyer's prescriptions for the writer in a post-literary age: "The author must give up on aping genius. Rather show the author as ape" (4). Coetzee's author as ape is Elizabeth Costello, an Australian novelist of international notoriety, who appears in an eponymous novel as a woman late in life and anxious to address big moral issues regardless of the cost to her reputation. She is particularly vexed by the ethics of animal life and, in *Elizabeth Costello*, she discusses Franz Kafka's ape, Red Peter, who in the 1917 short story "Report to an Academy" is featured presenting to an audience of "esteemed academicians" (225) on the topic of his account of his transformation into a speaking animal. Costello then claims an affinity with Kafka's ape: she is also an "animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word

I speak” (*Elizabeth Costello* 70–71). This trauma or wound manifests as the loss of an authentic being prior to the corruption of reason and language; a kind of being we can only gain intimations of through what Costello terms the “sympathetic imagination” (80). That is, the potential of art to function as a form of affective identification and empathy. Costello’s account of the sympathetic imagination has strong resonances with Adam Smith’s 1759 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the eighteenth-century emphasis on sentiment and compassion “as a corrective to the violence of monadic individuality” (Marais 57).

However, throughout Coetzee’s late “biologico-literary experiment[s]” (*Slow Man* 114), the fundamental contingency of the human mode of being both expresses our shared finitude with animals but also pushes beyond the figure of the self as an ethical agent, suggesting instead that our mastery of self is complicit with a mastery of otherness which in fact negates the very possibility of ethics. As with Ishiguro, Coetzee’s works do not attack the human so as to be able to simply recover a stable sense of liberal-humanist subjectivity in a posthuman age. Costello’s appeal to embodied sympathy is thus compromised by its narrative embeddedness, and the latter is what discloses the more opaque ethical imperatives of the new materialism discussed throughout this essay. For example, Costello’s esthetic of the sympathetic entails a receptiveness toward a radical otherness that cannot be programmed in advance. This abnegation of authorial mastery is, however, also what opens Costello to change in herself; to a finitude that cannot be determined as primarily ethical. This finitude or limitedness is thematically substituted by her aging body, her contradictory statements, her vacillating moods; her subjection, in short, to time as *chronos* and succession. The fictions in which Costello appears thus consistently play with and disrupt Costello’s own doctrine of the sympathetic imagination. In *Slow Man* (2005), where she appears halfway through as the supposed author of the very fiction we are reading, Costello’s status as simultaneously an author and a character, creator and creature, suggests that to be a writer one must also be written. In other words, what conditions writing, art, and the very possibility of the sympathetic imagination – the finite and embedded present that opens the self to the future – is also what opens oneself to risk and potential death, whether literal or in the sense of the deathly inscriptions of reason and language that curtail the truly other from ever emerging.

In the 2004 short story “As A Woman Grows Older” Costello is envisaged visiting her son and daughter in Nice, France, for what she perceives to be a potentially final family reunion before her death. The narrative, in the third present tense, features an extensive use of free indirect discourse that creates a vertiginous irony. In the opening we are told of her anxiety facing her children, who she suspects are keen to make a proposal that would end her independence: “Whatever proposal it is that they have to put to her, it is sure to be full of ambivalence [...] Well, ambivalence should not disconcert her. She has made a living out of ambivalence. Where would the art of fiction be if there were no double meanings?” (“As A Woman”). Almost imperceptibly, the text here performs what it says: who is speaking here, the narrator or Costello or Coetzee? Do the comments apply to our reading of *this* fiction? Costello’s cantankerousness increases in the later sections of dialogue. She becomes an arch-deplorer; she deploras everything, the life of “nowadays”, the “course of history” (“As A Woman”), the eating of pizza whilst walking in the street. What she most deploras, however, is herself; her own act of deploring. This ironic doubling-gesture structures the progression of the narrative, in which Costello’s being as both creator and creature is staged and performed. The themes of death and aging emerge as metaphorical supplements for the sense of an ending which is taken to be both the chance and threat of literary truth itself; of Costello’s writing and Coetzee’s. This narrative mode, which propagates ambivalence and disavows any summative ending, resituates and embeds the consummating moment within the condition that makes it possible and impossible; time as succession, time as simultaneously life and death. Coetzee’s fictions thus fail to deliver didactic or extractable truths. The questions that are posed to us as readers – the question of how to read this short story – implicate us in the reality of time as temporal succession by refuting the possibility of an end that would justify the means. By finitising our reading, by making each narrative moment simultaneously full and empty of meaning, they convey a post-literary esthetic that necessitates the

thinking of truth itself not as simply embodied, affective, or material, but as finite. “What has it done me, all this beauty?”, Costello asks her daughter Helen, “Is beauty not another consumable, like wine? [...] The residue of wine is, excuse the word, piss; what is the residue of beauty? [...] Does beauty make us better people?” (“As A Woman”). Helen tries to placate her mother by answering that her work is significant “not because what you write contains lessons but because it *is* a lesson” (“As A Woman”).

Conclusion

In conclusion I want to address my initial assertion once more: that literature and death maintain an intrinsic relation that is at risk in a post-literary age of theocratic politics, one that is all too ready to assume the possibility rather than impossibility of death. Yet the post-literary works analyzed here all refuse to put to an end the question of the end. Through an esthetic that privileges means over ends these novels are inherently critical without being necessarily suspicious. Through a structural reflexivity about their very form they suspend the novel itself between life and death and redouble the matter of the end as a concern not of the future but of the finite present – the critical present of our reading – that is constitutively exposed to the unexpected, to the chance and threat of death that lurks at every juncture but conditions the possibility of our sense-making.

Kermode discusses the need to make sense of the world through ends and endings as universal: “fictions about time [...] testify to the continuity of what is called human nature” (44). If the sense of an ending, which cannot ultimately be abstracted from death, constitutes a universal horizon to human experience, it is through literature that the irony of this foundation is exposed most vividly: our life is guaranteed through our death, our consistency as human beings depends on our contingency as material beings. If the novel is associated with a legacy of individual and self-sufficient subjectivity, then a post-literary conception of literature is, indeed, linked to forms of life that breakdown the conventions and paradigms that have sustained individual subjectivity. By reclaiming the impossibility of death, the post-literary forms of the contemporary novel critique any possible justification for death. In Benjamin’s terms, borrowing from the miraculous requires a leap of faith that is willing to plead the truth of fiction *as* fiction. Such a leap is not a transcendental act but precisely that which is required to refute the transcendental inclinations of any claim to an ultimate, absolute, or categorical reading. This leap of faith – to stake one’s founding political or ethical position on an absence of foundations, on a perpetual rather than permanent mode of reading and critique – is what Kermode calls making the “experimental assent”: “If we make it well, the gain is that we shall never quite resume the posture towards life and death that we formally held. Of course it may be said that in changing ourselves we have, in the best possible indirect way, changed the world” (40).

Notes

1. Barnes’ narrator summarizes, toward the end of the novel, this particular vision of life as follows: “Sometimes I think the purpose of life is to reconcile us to its eventual loss by wearing us down, by proving, however long it takes, that life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be” (105).
2. Peter Osborne argues that this “splitting [of] the present from within (into the ‘old’ and the ‘new’)”, makes the “modern” an inherently “critical term” (Osborne).
3. As Berlant suggests, a “Deleuzian politics, or something like a politics of affect, is an oxymoron or worse, a bourgeois mode of sensational self-involvement masquerading as a radically ungovernable activity of being” (14).
4. Kermode writes: “Hannah Arendt, who has written with clarity and passion on this issue, argues that the philosophical or anti-philosophical assumptions of the Nazis were not generically different from those of the scientist, or indeed of any of us in an age ‘where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself’” (38).

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