



The End of the Novel

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I UNDEAD FORM

The title of Will Self's (2014) essay "The Novel Is Dead (This Time It's for Real)" tells us two things about declarations of the end of the novel. First, there are past proclamations that have turned out to be not "for [r]eal," which shows that the death of the novel is a particular historical *discourse*. Second, there is a sense that "this time" the question of the form's fate is particularly urgent. Self's missive is fairly typical of this discourse in that it brings together several (not necessarily compatible) versions of the claim. First, there is the *form-specific* claim that the history of the novel culminated with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), an achievement that reduces all post-1939 novels to the status of "zombie novels, instances of an undead art form that yet wouldn't lie down" (Self 2014, n.p.). Second, there is the *media-historical* claim that "the physical book [is] in decline" (n.p.), as the codex format finds itself assaulted by a proliferation of screens. These screens, more often than not, connect readers to the diversions of the Internet; when they increasingly come to replace the printed page, then, screens function as engines of distraction that dissolve the attention

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required to absorb long and difficult works of fiction. Self's third version of the death of the novel considers it as a deficient and obsolete *technology of attention*, no longer able to solicit "deep and meditative levels of absorption in others' psyches" (n.p.). These different aspects—the consummation of the novel's formal affordances, the demise of the codex format, and the lost struggle for attention—come together in a rueful assessment of the novel's declining *cultural role*: "The literary novel as an art work and a narrative art form central to our culture," Self writes, "is indeed dying before our eyes." Indeed, contemporary culture is marked by "an active resistance to difficulty" (n.p.).

Four months after his essay, Self published the novel *Shark* (2015), which underscores that declarations of the death of the novel are less empirical observations than rhetorical interventions. A prequel to his 2012 novel *Umbrella*, *Shark* continues that novel's sprawling, continuous, disorienting prose that, uninterrupted by quotation marks, chapter headings, or even paragraph breaks, can by right be labelled "difficult." That it also carries the label "a novel" is no surprise, as that label is a notoriously loose one. The novel is a form that, in Terry Eagleton's words (which echo those of Virginia Woolf), "cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together" (2005, 1). If Eagleton's description—like Henry James' (2011, 84) famous definition of novels as "large loose baggy monsters"—evokes Frankenstein's monster, it thereby underlines the novel's monstrous capacity to warp distinctions between the living, the dead, and the undead. As a mere fiction of human life, the novel is never as lively as we want it to be; as a format eminently capable of reflection on its own insufficiency, it continues to survive itself. As Srinivas Aravamudan remarks, "the novel as meta-genre can never die even as its subgenres come and go" (2011, 22). Frank Kermode has noted that it is "the special fate of the novel, considered as a genre, [...] to be always dying" (1965, n.p.). For Peter Boxall, "the novel has always risked its own death as part of its struggle to live," and the current sense of its precariousness is "not a sign of its demise, but the very condition of its being" (2015, 140). Self's quasi-simultaneous dismissal and perpetuation of the novel form is then entirely characteristic of the form's weary resilience—an *undeadness* that declines the certainty of death as much as it refuses affirmations of vitality.

Death, as we know, is not the end—and the death of the novel is not quite the same as the end of the novel. If "the *death* of the novel" by now constitutes a "vocabulary of literary ennui [...]" so familiar that it produces its own kind of boredom" (Sacks 2013, n.p.), it is remarkable that there is

no elaborate discourse about “the *end* of the novel.” Just compare this to the ubiquity of reflections on the end of art. The “rumour,” as Eva Geulen calls it, of the end of art has been a staple of artistic reflection at least since Hegel, and Geulen’s study of this topos discusses its trajectory through the oeuvres of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, and Heidegger. Locating the end of art is less an empirical observation—as in the case of the novel, art continues (and will continue) to be produced—than a spike that anchors a particular *narrative* of the development of art. Importantly, such a narrative also encodes a *normative* account about the essence of art, about what does and does not count as real art (Geulen 2006, 2). Designating, say, abstract expressionism as the culmination of art history implies a particular claim about the nature of art—for instance, the centrality of the visual arts and the vital importance of art’s capacity to reflect on the specificity of its own medium. Self’s reference to *Finnegans Wake* seems to have a similar function: It communicates a particular story of the development of the novel and a particular understanding of what is essential to the form. By embodying that essence, the claim goes, *Finnegans Wake* concludes the story of the novel—it marks a moment of “genre exhaustion” (Greif 2009, 13). After this end, all novels will be novels after the end of the novel.

But what does this mean, exactly? What is it that has ended for the novel? Here debates over the end of art can be instructive for an understanding of how the notion of the end of the novel animates contemporary literature. Philosopher Arthur Danto—arguably the thinker most readily identified with these debates—explicitly disentangles his case for the end of art from observations of its death; indeed, the notion of art’s end is perfectly compatible with the observation that “art should be extremely vigorous and show no sign whatever of internal exhaustion” (Danto 1998, 4); “empirical disconfirmation” is strictly irrelevant (25). What has ended, since the 1960s, is not the production of art but the force of a compelling narrative about the meaning of art. As very different artistic forms and tendencies proliferate, there is no longer any particular form that is “historically mandated as against any other art” (27). It is such authorisations that are decidedly things of the past. In the modernist period, heroic critics decreed what was essential to art. In the case of Clement Greenberg, for instance, the development of art showed how “the conditions of representation themselves become central” (7). If a development like surrealism seemed to complicate this story by being more interested in mimetic elements than in a heroic struggle with the flatness of the canvas (for Greenberg, the defining feature of painting), it was simply banished from the story of art.

Particular accounts of art were also mandated by artists themselves, most importantly in the quintessential modernist genre of the manifesto. Manifestoes, Danto writes, were powered by “a perception of the philosophical truth of art: that art is essentially X and that everything other than X is not—or is not essentially—art” (1998, 28).

The criticism of Greenberg and the genre of the manifesto show that, in the modernist period, art became aware of its philosophical nature and committed itself to embodying that essence. Yet when pop art shows that there is no visible difference between art and non-art, Danto writes, “there is no further direction for the history of art to take” (1998, 36). Purity makes room for promiscuity, and art after the end of art can no longer be measured by one universally valid criterion. Art, that is, achieves freedom by abandoning the “pursuit of a visible distinction between itself and the world” (Horowitz and Huhn 1998, 31). The end of art, Danto writes, is really a claim about the future rather than about the past: It claims “not that there will be no more art, but that such art as there will be is art after the end of art” (1998, 43).

2 AFTER THE END

So what does this mean for the contemporary novel? For one thing, it reminds us that modernist innovations of the genre coincided with the grand theories of the traditional realist novel—think of Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Ian Watt. Reflection on the novel form, in other words, coincides with the modernist cultivation of the form’s capacity to interrogate itself—a capacity that postmodern (and postcolonial; see Mukherjee 2008) novels continue to flaunt through their embrace of metafictional elements. In this modernist context, declarations of the death of the novel serve to declare the advent of a form of literature that more adequately captures the essence of literature. The most famous example is perhaps T. S. Eliot’s 1923 review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922). *Ulysses*, for Eliot, demonstrates that “the novel is a form which will no longer serve,” and that what is needed instead is “something stricter” (1975, 177–78). That something is the “mythical method” developed by writers like Joyce, Yeats, and Eliot himself. Eliot’s intervention belongs to the age of the manifesto, as it defines, in Danto’s words, “a certain kind of movement, and a certain kind of style, which the manifesto more or less proclaims as the only kind of art that matters” (1998, 28). What characterises the contemporary novel—that is, the novel after the end of the novel—is that resolute

claims such as those of Eliot have lost their binding force. The same goes for other such claims: Lukács' promotion of realism, Woolf's insistence on the perspective of "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day" (1994, 160), or Robbe-Grillet's backgrounding of plot and character: All of these continue to inspire contemporary novelists (think, among many others, of Russell Banks' realism, Tao Lin's impressionism, or Tom McCarthy's debunking of conventional psychological realism), but none of them even remotely enjoys a consensus.

The absence of an authoritative aesthetic is not the same issue as the lack of a clearly discernible "dominant" (to use a helpful term from the Prague School) in recent literary production. The proliferation of labels such as metamodernism, the new sincerity, or performatism reflects that many early twenty-first-century developments are simply too recent to capture (see Eaglestone 2013). The phrase "the end of the novel," modelled on Danto's notion of "the end of art," signals something quite different from this *epistemological* challenge: It foregrounds that the lack of a clear job description and a compelling poetics for the novel is itself a concern in much contemporary novels. Many novelists consciously inhabit the aftermath of the novel, and they make that awareness an organising dimension of their works. Russell Banks interrogates the transfer of realism from a national context to a globalised world (see Wegner 2014); Tao Lin knows that his minute notation of impressions cannot avoid banality; McCarthy's emptied-out characters, for their part, are a deliberate update of the liberal humanist subject (see Vermeulen 2012); and the juxtaposition of Self's essay and *Shark* shows that the latter's high modernist style is consciously written in the shadow of *Finnegans Wake*. The contemporary novel's unbinding from any clear aesthetic decree is not adequately described as a blissful release into pluralism. For many writers, the unavailability of a sense of mission and cultural influence is a stubborn motif in their work.

One crucial difference between Eliot's grand declaration of the obsolescence of the novel and Self's proclamation of its death is that the former, written in the age of manifestoes, clears the way for an aesthetic alternative, while the latter resigns itself to a cultural dispensation in which the novel is no longer central—a dispensation in which, as Philip Roth famously feared, "the audience for the literary novel will be about the size of the group who read Latin poetry" (Haven 2014, n.p.). In their critical revision of Danto's work, philosophers of art Gregg Horowitz and Tom Huhn emphasise that, far from embracing an "anything-goes" pluralism, contemporary art

continues to struggle for historical meaningfulness—a struggle that is not diminished by the rueful acknowledgement that it can no longer be won. Indeed, it is that knowledge that assures art's relevance as a marker of history: “[A]rt still cleaves to its struggle to know itself as other than the world it inhabits. That it will never finally win that struggle is the guarantee of its continued historicity” (Horowitz and Huhn 1998, 44). A particularly lucid statement of this novelistic disillusionment is novelist Lars Iyer's 2011 essay “Nude in Your Hot Tub, Facing the Abyss.” Subtitled “A Literary Manifesto after the End of Literature and Manifestos,” the essay registers that, in spite of all empirical evidence—the proliferation of texts, the broad availability of literary masterpieces—, a certain conviction is missing in contemporary writing: “The *dream* has faded, our *faith* and *awe* have fled” (Iyer 2011, n.p.). The only way for contemporary literature to relate to capital-L-Literature is by accepting the latter's demise. Iyer calls for a “literature that faces its own demise and survives” (n.p.). He points to Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* as “a novel, like all recent novels, that comes too late, but unlike most other novels it finds a way to address this lateness” (n.p.). The only way for the contemporary novel to avoid parody and kitsch is to “face the gloom and bitter humour of our situation” (n.p.).

On his own (paradoxical) terms (this is, after all, a manifesto “after the End of [...] Manifestos”), Iyer cannot be taken at his word. Many novelists continue to write without addressing the genre's end; unwilling to address the issue of the death of the novel, novelist Tom McCarthy claims, most middlebrow fiction “produces genuinely dead novels” (Kuitenbrouwer 2007, n.p.). Yet novels that do wrestle with the contradictions of their own condition do not always adopt the desultory disposition Iyer advocates. Iyer calls for an “unliterary *plainness*,” for a style in which the author “mark[s her] *sense of imposture*” and a “sense of gloom” (2011, n.p.). Yet as Iyer's own trilogy of short, hilarious, awkward novels illustrates, the end of the novel makes room for a broad range of intensities and affects. *Spurious*, *Dogma*, and *Exodus* mostly consist in the rambling, inconsequential, and hyperintellectual dialogues of Lars and W., two dysfunctional academics, which are constantly undercut by a sense of bathos, as their high-minded talk is embedded in the pedestrian triviality of their actions and relationships. Tragicomic and at times hilarious, Iyer's trilogy shows how the unravelling of the novel form makes room for more capacious forms of life. Iyer's manifesto calls on post-novelistic novelists to “resist closed forms” and to open the remains of the novel “so that the draft of real life—gloomy, farcical life—can pass through it” (2011, n.p.).

“Gloomy,” “farical”: If it is not quite clear what kind of life this is, it is most definitely not the liberal subject, the form of life most commonly associated with the novel. As Nancy Armstrong has noted somewhat hyperbolically, “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, the same” (2006, 3). Beyond that, the novel genre has been a genre that helped inaugurate and consolidate the nation, empire, and gender differences (see Ortiz-Robles 2010, 2). No wonder then, as Srinivas Aravamudan writes, that “any death of the novel would be a big deal, because it entails the death of *the literary avatar* of modernity and Enlightenment” (2011, 21). The novel after the end of the novel is then a genre that is unshackled from the forms of life to which it was historically confined.

The notion of “the end of the novel” lets us appreciate contemporary fiction’s strategies to inhabit the aftermath of the novel’s historical authority and to refunction it as a receptacle for unprecedented entanglements of life and form, which relate human agents to nonhuman ones, whether animal, technological, or divine, whether radically alien or merely different. In recent years, these entanglements have taken on a particular urgency, for which we can point to at least three accelerating developments. First, it has become increasingly apparent that human life is enmeshed with planetary processes such as species extinction, global warming, and energy depletion. These phenomena, which are often grouped under the rubric of the Anthropocene, make a firm distinction between human and natural agency untenable, and this forces the novel to move beyond its customary focus on individual psychology and social relations. Second, technological developments have led to the increasing importance of algorithms in the ways we communicate, act, and form beliefs; the rise of social media and real-time archiving means that the distinction between public and private, on which the traditional novel thrived, has been destabilised. Third, biotechnological innovations such as cloning, genetic engineering, or even de-extinction projects have changed the meaning of “life” in a way that prevents it from serving as a stable background for human culture. These three overlapping processes make the relation between cultural forms of life and biological life forms (a distinction I borrow from the anthropologist Stefan Helmreich [2009]) a decidedly messy one, and this intractability makes the novel after the end of the novel a paradoxically powerful tool for confronting these recalibrations of life. When these processes compel us to update quintessential modern notions such as freedom, democracy, and the human, the newly

disenfranchised novel after the end of the novel provides a laboratory space for imagining new life forms.

What intensifies the novel's engagement with (cultural, social, and symbolic) forms of life and (biological) life forms is its capacity to interrogate its own status as a *form*—that is, as a historically sanctioned and media-specific way of organising and patterning reality. Jim Collins' *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (2010) demonstrates the resilience of literary fiction through its engagements with broad mediascapes made up of apps, films, and television shows. Martin Eve's *Literature Against Criticism* (2016) highlights the resurgence of metafiction as a literary strategy to wrestle critical authority from academic readers. The very different novels Collins and Eve discuss derive their strength from accepting the demise of the old regime in which novels acquired value and negotiating new relationships to other forms, genres, and formats. Contemporary literature also has the capacity to reflect on its *medial status*. Christina Lupton claims that the novels of Ali Smith and Tom McCarthy are “machine[s] able to talk about [their] own materiality” (2016, 504), and to use novelistic techniques to interrogate the waning centrality of paper and print (in ways that are considerably more nuanced than the popular “myth of the disappearing medium” [Ballatore and Natale 2016, 2380]). Novels also reflect on their shifting position in the *attention economy*. N. Katherine Hayles has influentially documented a generational shift from “deep” to “hyper” attention. For Hayles, deep attention is paradigmatically instantiated in reading the proverbial “novel by Dickens” (2007, 187). Hyper attention, in contrast, has “low tolerance for boredom,” and is marked by “impatience with focusing for long periods on a noninteractive object such as a Victorian novel” (188). While Hayles emphasises the challenge this different cognitive style poses for teaching practices, she does not anticipate the way contemporary noninteractive literary objects have already begun to incorporate that shift in their projects. Think, for instance, of Kenneth Goldsmith's embrace of boredom and uncreativity as the proper condition of literature in a text- and media-saturated present; or Tao Lin's deliberately flat and affectless novel *Taipei* (2013); or the sustained uneventfulness of Karl-Ove Knausgaard's 3500-page autobiographical novel *My Struggle* (2009–2011). All these projects mobilise literary resources to reposition literary objects within the attention economy in which the Internet immerses contemporary writers and readers alike. The contemporary novel's cultural, medial, and formal reflexivity, like the massive reorganisation of human life it engages, confirms Nancy Armstrong's intuition that “[c]ontemporary

fiction clearly demands another critical model” (2011, 10) that provides a new analytical vocabulary to track these ongoing developments; yet Armstrong also believes that contemporary novels themselves are a privileged place for inventing and testing the terms that will help us make sense of an unpredictable future.

Ultimately, this reflexive potential allows the contemporary novel to leverage its disenfranchisement—the fact, in Will Self’s words, that the novel is “dying before our eyes”—as a paradoxical source of empowerment. Tensions surrounding the persistence of the form and its shifting relations to modern forms of life make the novel a space in which different forms of life can be engaged; it gives the novel after the end of the novel—liberated from a fixed cultural mandate, abandoned to a less stable and predictable cultural landscape—the versatility and power to question its own standing, to allegorise its own status as a medium, and to convey desires, hopes, and anxieties through formal and thematic innovations. Following (and quoting) Adorno, Sianne Ngai has expressed the paradoxical potency of art’s reflection on its own demotion in the following terms: “[B]ourgeois art’s reflexive preoccupation with its *own* ‘powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world’ is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural practice” (2005, 3). Transposing these words to the context of the end of the novel, this underlines that the novel’s (the bourgeois form par excellence) redundancy attunes it to as yet inoperative forces, affects, and forms of life. In the rest of this chapter, I suggest the diversity of such attunements by homing in on three novels that consciously engage the diminished prospect of the novel in order to open it up to other-than-human agencies.

3 NOVELISTIC AFTERLIVES: TOM MCCARTHY, J. M. LEDGARD, AND DON DELILLO

The novels of Tom McCarthy—to date, he has published four: *Remainder* (2005), *Men in Space* (2007), *C* (2010), and *Satin Island* (2015)—all test the affordances of an undead form. McCarthy is also a conceptual artist, and it is then no coincidence that McCarthy—like, for instance, the self-professed “uncreative writer” Kenneth Goldsmith, who also has a background in the arts—is particularly interested in the constraints and potentialities of historical forms and media. Such formal and medial issues, he finds, often remain unquestioned by mainstream literary fiction. The “sentimental humanism” that dominates literary culture typically refuses

to question the vitality of the novel, and it ends up producing lifeless zombie products. Sentimental humanism, McCarthy notes, is “the official crap art of neoliberal regimes or orders,” just as “[t]he official crap art of Soviet regimes was Socialist Realism” (*Histories of Violence* 2016, n.p.). A literature attuned to a less destructive future, then, must consciously engage the obsolescence of such historical mandates; it must find its bearing as a novel after the end of the novel.

McCarthy’s (2015a) novel *Satin Island* situates the contemporary novel in a digital ecology that has thoroughly altered the media environment in which literary writing takes place. The problem here is not so much that writing has become impossible, but rather that it has become ubiquitous. In an age of Big Data, all our movements, consumer transactions, keystrokes, and click-throughs are relentlessly recorded, tabulated, and written into databases. The novel’s narrator, called U., works as a corporate anthropologist and is charged with writing the “Great Report”—a consummate account of contemporary life. U. initially struggles to start writing: “I’d begun to suspect that this Great Report was un-plottable, un-frameable, un-realizable; in short, [...] *unwritable*” (McCarthy 2015a, 126). The breakthrough comes when he realises that, in a data-saturated world, the Report is already being written in real time:

The truly terrifying thought wasn’t that the Great Report might be unwritable, but—quite the opposite—that it had *already been written*. Not by a person, nor even by some nefarious cabal, but simply by a neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself: some auto-alphaing and auto-omegating script un-plottable, un-frameable, un-realizable; in short, [...] *unwritable*—that that’s what it *was*. (133)

The task of the corporate anthropologist, then, who figures in the novel as a stand-in for the novelist, is not writing a report *on* this self-scripting process, but finding a way to participate in it.

Technology is not the only thing that writes in *Satin Island*. The novel is deeply interested in widely circulating images of an ongoing oil-spill. Remarkably, the novel imagines this natural agency as a form of writing: U. describes “the streaks and clusters taking shape as oil spread slowly inland,” which resembles “ink polluting paper, words marring the whiteness of the page” (98). Coupled with the rise of algorithmic writing, then, comes the realisation that in the Anthropocene, natural, technological, and human

agency are entangled in assemblages of action that make it impossible to isolate distinctively human behaviour, let alone a distinctively literary mode of writing.

Satin Island signals its engagement with this new digital and natural environment by abolishing a number of distinctions that have traditionally defined the novel form: Many of the thoughts of U. are lifted from essays by McCarthy (a procedure also used to great effect in, for instance, Ben Lerner's *10:04*). Also, *Satin Island* avoids a structure that compels attention through climaxes, recognition, or suspense, and is instead designed as a sequence of fourteen chapters made up of numbered subsections, very much like an anthropological report. In an essay (many of whose insights are remixed in U.'s monological narrative) subtitled "If James Joyce Were Alive Today He'd Be Working for Google," McCarthy (2015b, n.p.) notes that algorithms have taken on many of the traditional tasks of anthropology and literature alike: These days, it is software that "maps our tribe's kinship structures, our systems of exchange, the webs of value and belief that bind us all together"; algorithms transcribe human life into a "regime of signals" that is "omnipresent and insistent" and elides the role of a creative human author.

So if *Satin Island* fully acknowledges the end of the novel, how does it position itself as a novel after the end of the novel? The cover of the American edition displays struck-through genre categories: "a treatise," "an essay," "a report," "a confession," "a manifesto"; the only label that remains is "a novel." How does *Satin Island* insist on the residual distinctiveness of the genre? For the novel's corporate anthropologist, contemporary writing must resolutely *participate in* the different forms of writing that constitute contemporary life: He develops a practice of "Present-Tense Anthropology™" that aims at "participation-from-within" and situates itself "*inside* events and situations *as they unfolded*" (McCarthy 2015a, 78). This alters the status of the text we are reading: It is not a report on reality, but a participant in a process that constantly writes itself. Yet the novel functions somewhat differently from other participants in this scriptural ecology. This ecology (which goes under the name of the "Koob-Sassen Project" in the novel) is made up of two interlocking planes: on the one hand, a seemingly weightless "supra-governmental, supra-national, supra-everything" fantasy of accelerated connectedness (135), and on the other, the material and terraforming infrastructures that digital capitalism requires as it (often invisibly) relies on massive energy expenditure and giant poldering, draining, and cabling efforts (29). If digital capitalism officially disavows this

material substrate, *Satin Island* is interested in those moments when the smooth transition between the two planes fails: The book is full of delays, glitches, and anomalies that unsettle the belief that natural and technological realities can simply be enlisted for human ends. This is most obvious in one of the novel's sustained obsessions, the buffering sign that indicates a delay in digital communication. While this sign invites the user to imagine "hordes of bits and bytes and megabytes" in "a giant *über*-server," it dawns on U. that the sign might be "just a circle, spinning on [...] screen, and nothing else" (73–74). This insistence on the buffering, delays, and glitches that beset interaction of geological and digital processes is then what, for McCarthy, defines the job of the post-novelistic novel: It makes visible the entangled agencies that slowly exhaust even as they encompass the planet. The novel, on this understanding, is no longer the refuge of the human subject—it is, rather, a site where human agency is entwined with natural and technological processes without fully surrendering to them. If the traditional novel was always invested in recalibrating the relation between the individual and the aggregate (Armstrong 2006) or, in the case of the modernist novels, between the psyche and the world, *Satin Island* more explicitly locates its own intervention on the border of the human itself.

If *Satin Island* emphasises human life's implication in nonhuman processes, Scottish writer J. M. Ledgard's (2011) novel *Submergence* opens up the space of the novel to nonhuman realities while emphasising the irreducible gap between the human and the nonhuman. As we will see, this alternative account of the relation between human and nonhuman life goes together with very different formal choices and a substantially different understanding of the contemporary mandate of the novel form. Ledgard, a long-time foreign correspondent for *The Economist*, explores the relations between human and animal life and technology in his other works: the novel *Giraffe* (2006), which adopts the perspective of different animals, and the idiosyncratic *Terra Firma Tryptich* (2015), which poses questions of planetary belonging and technological progress (by, among other things, imagining a massive cargo drone network providing near-future African communities with commodities). In comparison, one strand of *Submergence* is thoroughly conventional: It presents the intense and brief love affair of Danny, a female biomathematician of colour working on deep ocean life, and James, a British spy working in Africa and posing as a water engineer. Set in a luxurious French hotel by the side of the Atlantic Ocean over a couple of days before Christmas 2011, this story is tinged by a muted, retrospective quality, as the affair is decidedly a thing of

the past; the story is framed by James' captivity in the hands of Somalian Jihadis—a hopeless situation that grants the love affair its melancholy slant. So far, so traditional, then: The novel here demonstrates its time-honoured “generic achievements” of combining depth psychology with the presentation of a broad—in this case, even a properly multi-continental—social scope (Woloch 2003, 19). The love story and the spy plot display the genre's traditional capacity to combine credible characterisation with riveting plots.

If *Submergence* continues the novel's traditional mandate, it also signals that the psychological and social dimensions it privileges are no longer enough. The novel complements the secrecy of James, who as a secret agent is “legally bound to hide behind a false identity” (Ledgard 2011, 112), to a more radical form of secrecy, which has less to do with intercultural or interpersonal concerns than with the limits of the humanly thinkable: Danny's knowledge of oceanic deep life, which is too complex to share with her lover. The love and spy stories are interspersed with historical, mythical, and scientific facts and fantasies about deep ocean life. Indeed, the novel resembles a compendium of scientific accounts, bits of English and colonial history, and excursions on religious and cultural histories ranging back to the Sumerians. The juxtaposition of all-too-human love and spy stories and accounts of nonhuman life radically expand the remit of the novel form. Traditionally circumscribing the limits and interactions of human *forms of life*, *Submergence's* formal decisions underline that contemporary life is essentially implicated in the deep history of nonhuman *life forms*. Without hydrothermal vents, tubeworms, and marine microbes, any understanding of life is irrevocably incomplete: Knowledge of these life forms, Danny notes, is necessary “to comprehend the scale of life on earth [...]. The fact that life can exist in the darkness, on chemicals, changes our understanding about life everywhere else in the universe” (137). *Submergence* shows that life forms such as “protists, archaea, fungi and especially bacteria” precede and exceed human life (156). The life of “teeming hordes of nameless micro-organisms that mimic no forms, because they are the foundation of all forms” (180), then, must figure in the novel's attempt to attune its forms to the ongoing reorganisation of life. Ledgard's novel submerges human life in “the pullulating life in the dark parts of the planet” (9). As a novel after the end of the novel, *Submergence* brings this radically nonhuman life into the fold of the life it circumscribes.

Submergence codes its extension of the novel's purview as a shift from the sea to the ocean. It argues that the novel has traditionally been a form

beholden to land, sea, and sky, but not to the depths of the ocean. Even *Moby-Dick*, we read, “is the greatest novel in the English language about the sea. It is not concerned with the ocean” (95–96). Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), for its part, refers in its title “to the journey taken across, not down” (96). The downward journey to planetary darkness is the one *Submergence* proposes as the proper one for the contemporary novel. A crucial aspect of the novel’s imagining of life is that human and microbial life are *not* entwined with one another, and that their relation is not one of hybridity or intermixing. Kathryn Yusoff has emphasised that the Anthropocene foregrounds a geological dimension of life that resists localisation; hybridity, she writes, is “always a local affair, because it involves the meeting of entities [...] [a]nd so there is a neglect of the nonlocal elements that act through and within identity formation” (2015, 401). Microbial life is everywhere and nowhere, and even if it makes up human life, human life never directly encounters it.

Submergence reflects this insight by underlining that James remains ignorant of the dimensions of life that yet constitute him. James’ life is composed of forms of life that remain inaccessible to his experience; the life that the novel presents contains a nonhuman dimension that resists interpersonal or transnational circulation and connection—that escapes, in other words, the traditional novelistic patterns of a love affair and a spy thriller. Danny notes that she traffics in “a greater polarity” than that between rich and poor or between different cultures: “the division between life on the surface of the world and the life she studied in the Hadal deep” (39). The novel after the end of the novel, then, also incorporates life forms that cannot enter human experience—that can, in Danny’s words, only ever be “studied.” In this way, *Submergence* signals the limits of the traditional mode of operation of the novel while drawing on its aftermath for a less stratified constellation of the human and the nonhuman.

A last example of how the unravelling of the novel form makes room for the shifting natural and technological environments of human life is Don DeLillo’s (2016) novel *Zero K*. Like all of DeLillo postmillennial works—it is preceded by *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), and *Point Omega* (2010)—*Zero K* is a lean and sparse affair, in terms of both size and texture. Less interested in conveying a fully realised and densely populated fictional world (something earlier works like *White Noise* [1985] and especially *Underworld* [1997] did to great effect), it uses the space of the novel to circulate ideas, images, and soundbites in a crystalline and lucid prose. The story is told by Jeffrey Lockhart, a listless

34-year old man, who accompanies his father and his father's partner on two trips to "The Convergence," a facility situated in the region of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan that is dedicated to cryogenic preservation. The first trip results in the "long slow sabbatical" of the father's terminally ill partner (DeLillo 2016, 251); the second, more disturbingly, sends off the father himself, even if there is no medical urgency. For the father, it seems, the prospect of a radically different life in another time trumps the mere continuation of his current existence. A period of "cryonic suspension" (8) the novel seems to suggest, might find the human species in a better position to navigate its planetary environment.

The father's radical decision is rendered plausible by the novel's emphasis on some of the ills of the present: rampant capitalism, global terror, and a widespread situation of anomie. These afflictions converge in the life of the narrator, who drifts from one meaningless job (as "cross-stream pricing consultant" and "implementation analyst" [54]) to the next one (as "system administrator," "human resource planner," or "solutions research manager" [57]). Peter Boxall has remarked that DeLillo's twenty-first-century writing displays "an extraordinary lack of spatial or temporal awareness, a sudden and drastic failure of the bonds that hold us in time and space, an unravelling of [...] 'bound time'" (2013, 27). That unbinding of the alliance between individual psychology and social environment disturbs the traditional double operation of the novel and is also reflected in the barren and cold style of *Zero K*; Boxall characterises this as "a studiedly sparse, late style which displays an extraordinary historical disorientation. [...] DeLillo's late style [...] is a 'starveling' style" (28). No longer quite capable of imagining a broad social panorama nor the multifarious interactions between the individual and the social, DeLillo's recent novels withdraw to asocial and ahistorical places: New York traffic (in *Cosmopolis*, *Falling Man*, and again in *Zero K*), the Sonoran desert (in *Point Omega*), or the desolate plains in *Zero K*—a land "not battered and compacted by history" (30), a "huge cratered enclosure, where people maintained a studied blankness about their nationality, their past, their families, their names" (248).

The crisis that *Zero K* evokes is also a crisis for the language of the novel, which must now learn to do without markers of nationality, family, or past. The narrator finds himself struggling to find appropriate names for a new reality, "inventing names, noting accents, improvising histories and nationalities. These were shallow responses to an environment that required abandonment of such distinctions" (72). *Zero K*, then, is also an extended experiment in finding a new assignment for the novel beyond

national, historical, or identitarian markers. “The Convergence” is imagined as an unprecedented constellation of spiritual, technological, and artistic ambitions; a “[f]aith-based technology,” “science awash in irrepressible fantasy,” it is also “a new generation of earth art, with human bodies in states of suspended animation” (7, 16, and 257).

“Zero K” is the name of a special unit in “The Convergence” where people go to be frozen before they die. As such, as the novel has it, “[i]t’s predicated on the subject’s willingness to make a certain kind of transition to the next level” (112). “Zero K” (the unit) is then a figure for *Zero K*’s (the novel) own glacial ambitions. The novel “suspends” the existing conventions of novelistic language and tests the relations between different artistic, spiritual, and technological resources as a strategy for imagining life in a “cyberhuman form” in “a universe that will speak to us in a very different way” (64). It repurposes the space of the novel after the end of a novel as a site where the urgency of these questions can be entertained, even if this means that *Zero K* itself necessarily fails to provide a satisfying answer to those questions. *Zero K*, like “Zero K,” separates human forms of life from their underlying biological life form in anticipation of their later recombination.

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has developed the Wittgensteinian notion of a “form-of-life” to name the ideal of “life indivisible from its form” (2016, 206). Against all tendencies to separate human life from itself, a “form-of-life” is “a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life” (207). *Zero K*’s decision to radicalise such customary separations is offset by its fascination with embodiments of such an integrated “form-of-life.” Like Agamben, DeLillo finds these in monastic life, when the novel stages a monk who methodologically pursues “total emptiness” (89). There is also the narrator’s girlfriend who, as a former dancer, achieves a kind of choreography of everyday life—a coincidence of life and form—that contrasts with the narrator’s own “plotless days and nights” (187). Such figures point to the novel’s continued desire to shape an integrated life; at the same time, its decision to be a “freeze-frame of naked humans in pods” (146) rather than an achieved form-of-life signals an awareness that this struggle cannot be won.

4 CONCLUSION: FROM THE END TO THE CONTEMPORARY

Zero K shows that the novel after the end of the novel is perpetually out of sync with the present; its choreography of forms never fully coincides with itself. Crucially, while this noncoincidence is a feature endemic to the novel form, it only becomes a concern for the novel itself when the novel has incorporated an awareness of the demise of its historical mandate. I want to conclude by arguing that this temporal displacement makes the novel a privileged form for studies of the contemporary. In critical theory, the notion of the contemporary has been conceived less as a period or a historical category than as a particular relation to the present. The contemporary is a moment that is too recent to allow for customary forms of historical analysis, yet neither is it, as Theodore Martin has noted, “available to direct observation and immediate experience” (2017, 4); not every part of everyday life qualifies as contemporary. The contemporary is essentially a critical attitude to the present, “a means of negotiating between experience and retrospection, immersion and explanation, closeness and distance” (5). For anthropologist Marc Augé, such a radical contemporaneity is inaugurated by our “generalized situation of cultural circulation,” a globalised situation in which the subjects and objects of observation are inevitably entwined and every account of the world involves negotiation and decision (qtd. in Erber 2013, 34). For Giorgio Agamben, the contemporary is a posture of “noncoincidence,” of “dys-chrony”: it is “*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*” (2009, 41). The novel after the end of the novel, I have argued, is essentially a “dys-chronic” form, unable to take leave of a literary historical past it cannot return to even while anticipating a future whose shape it can only intimate. Novels that consciously assume their belatedness, then, can serve as privileged tools for approaching the spatial and temporal displacements that mark a reality that is too close to have congealed into history.

Novels like Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* (2013), for instance, engage new and obsolete media and forms (Powerpoint presentations, interviews, performance art, and photography) and extensively use analepses and prolepses (in the case of *A Visit*, even into the contemporary reader’s future) to extend the possibilities and update the relevance of the historical novel; in this way, they deploy the novel form to approach the contemporary as history in the making, as a history that has not yet been consolidated as a past.

Or take Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) or Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), which in their very form renounce the possibility of writing an achieved and stable account of a historical reality that is still emerging, and instead aim for a form of notation that is both more provisional and more attuned to the contemporary. Both novels are essentially *about* the writing of literature, and they both rely on a slight-of-hand in which their accounts of the failed effort to write a definitive work of literary art come to stand in for the masterpiece that remains unwritten. Their deliberately staged demise of a traditional literary form, in other words, leaves room for a more direct notation of contemporary life that, because it is written in the shadow of a literary history that is explicitly evoked, does, in Agamben's words, not "coincide too well with the epoch" (2009, 41). To the extent that these novels are novels after the end of the novel, I have argued, they are also fictions of the contemporary—fictions, that is, of a reality that can only be accessed through fictions yet cannot be left unaddressed.

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