THE INVENTION OF ISOLATION

A Study of Experimentalism in the Selected Works of David Markson and Don DeLillo

Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy by

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“Something to be said for remaining in a place
far off, without name, without identity.”
Ann Quin, *Passages*

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Abstract

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Portrayals of human isolation in fiction have traditionally been examined using conventional literary forms. Some authors, however, have approached it using innovative literary techniques. The aim of this thesis is to analyse how two of those authors, David Markson and Don DeLillo, have done so and to extrapolate from a selection of their works how literary experimentation can be utilised for the examination of isolation. The critical methodology used for this study is three-pronged. Firstly, the textual analyses are directed by close readings predicated on the theory that literary form and content are indivisible. Secondly, existing experimental literature research will be utilised for the purpose of wider discussion and context. Thirdly, psychological studies will be incorporated to provide context and insights into the causes and impacts of isolation. The core of this thesis will focus on seven formally experimental novels. The first chapter will focus on a selection of David Markson's works: *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988), and the novels that comprise his 'Notecard Quartet': *Reader's Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* and *The Last Novel* (2007). The second chapter will focus on two works by Don DeLillo: *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010). This study reveals that versatility displayed in formal experimentation leads to unexpectedly realistic and insightful portrayals of isolation. A concluding chapter shows just a few examples of the continuing relevance of experimental portrayals of isolation, outlining the links between the works of Markson, DeLillo and three contemporary authors: Alicia Kopf, David Shields and Rebecca Watson.

INTRODUCTION

Experimental Literature and the Works of David Markson and Don DeLillo

Before any discussion of what constitutes what has become loosely – and, perhaps, problematically – known as "experimental literature" can take place, it is pertinent to recognise that the term itself is not easy to define. After all, *every* literary work is, in a sense, at the conceptual level at least, the product of some form of experimentation. Beginning as (often abstract) thoughts before proceeding to take shape through extensive reflection and written – and extensively edited – language, it would be remiss to not acknowledge that every writer engages to some degree or another in what can reasonably be described as "experimental" writing. Generally speaking, the "experimental" is that which, as yet, has not been tested. Therefore, it is fair to state that all literature bears the traces of its own experiments, in its concept first and foremost, and, latterly, its delivery onto the page, in both its respective form and its styles.

All that taken into account, rightly or wrongly there is a category of literature that has become known as "experimental literature." However, it is not easy to define what exactly it is – partly because very few people have been able to agree on what constitutes an experimental work in the first place. The issue is to do with delineation and extent. Where, for example, is the threshold that separates a merely *unusual* or, by normal standards, *challenging* novel from an overtly experimental one? Need an experimental work display a combination of thematic abstraction with stylistic experimentation or can one be regarded so by demonstrating just one of those features? The question of what literary experimentation means brings up even more questions. As Paul Stephens asks, "Is literary experiment simply synonymous with literary innovation? Is literary experiment in any sense truly systematic? To what extent does it entail a notion of literary progress? Is literary experiment simply a term relating to literary form? Or does it confer a kind of epistemological privilege on a humanistic

activity?" (144). There also remains the question of categorisation. Specifically, which books can be described as exemplifying experimental literature? Is Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016), composed of a single 274-page sentence, a work of experimental literature? Can Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), notable for its unconventional prose style, be considered an experimental work? If so, what is the relationship between such works and more formally atypical works like Alejandro Zambra's *Multiple Choice* (2013), the structure of which mimics the Chilean Academic Aptitude Test, or Georges Perec's *A Void* (1969), a 290-page lipogrammatic novel written entirely without using the letter "e"?

Additionally, there is the question of who is doing the measuring, and if such an endeavour can objectively be achieved. It would perhaps be best to conclude that such questions resist conclusions and to accept that there are some characteristics that experimental works of literature tend to, but not *always*, exhibit. As Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale collaboratively state in their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, it is a form of literature that is "irreducibly diverse" (1). Among the features identified in experimental literature are "unfettered improvisation and the rigorous application of rules, accidental composition and hyper-rational design, free invention and obsessively faithful duplication, extreme conceptualism and extreme materiality, multimediatility and media-specificity, being "born digital" and being hand-made – all of these, and many others, are ways of being experimental in literature" (1). Warren Motte argues that "Experimental writing is just like any other writing, only more so. By that I mean that experimental writing is mainly a matter of exaggeration. In other terms, experimental writing typically selects certain recognizable writerly gestures, topoi, or strategies, and heightens them, often to outlandish proportions, in order to make a statement about literature" (Motte, 7). Experimental writing also compels us to read experimentally. As Motte argues:

> We grope around the experimental text, seeking points of ingress. We test this strategy of reading, then that one, in order to make sense of the thing. We try this interpretation on for

> size, then reject it in favor of another that promises to make more sense. We go at the experimental text hammer and tongs, gradually realizing that the text has been conceived with that very process in mind and that in fact it anticipates our interpretive efforts (10).

Far from being motivated by novelty or mere contrarianism for Charles Glicksberg, the experimental is driven influenced by a deep and enduring creative impulse: "Experiments in the field of fiction are prompted primarily and in most cases not by a craving for novelty at any cost, not by an irrepressible desire to tear down an effete and outlived tradition, but by a compelling necessity of the creative spirit" (132-133).

In addition to scholarly definitions, it is also worth considering the insights of those who write experimental literature. Defending stylistic experimentation in the 1967 essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth argues that "virtuosity is a virtue" and what "artists feel about the state of the world and the state of their art is less important than what they do with that feeling" (64). Championing Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", the form of which mimics literary criticism, Barth's essay suggests that literary realism, which had served its purpose, may be counteracted through the formal experimentation of the kind Borges employs in his story. Raymond Federman argued that experimental literature's worth was linked with genre literature's diminished value. Writing in "Critifictional Reflections on the Pathetic Condition of the Novel in Our Time", Federman writes "The genre, having squandered its substance, no longer has an object. The character is dying out, the plot too. It is no accident that the only novels deserving of interest today are precisely those novels in which, once the universe is disbanded, nothing happens" (218).

The obvious problem of classification also needs to be addressed, not least because it shapes any discussion that has the topic as its focus, including this one. Therefore, it is worth asking: is experimental literature a genre in and of itself, a category or distinctive style of literature so easily identifiable that, like other literary genres, one can bracket all experimental works under the one heading? As will be explored, the extensive range and diversity of works that can be reasonably described as 'experimental', many of which incorporate clear

characteristics of defined literary genres pose a problem to the idea of emphatically classifying it as such. With this in mind, it might be more accurate – both in general and for this discussion specifically – to recognise experimental literature not as a standalone genre with specific conventions of attitude and methodology, but rather as a form that literature takes in different contexts and circumstances, emphasising conceptual and formal experimentation. Experiments occur when the need for them occurs. The scientist performs experiments to add substance to a new hypothesis about reality; the experimental writer arguably does the same thing.

If experimental fiction does take on a consistent or definable character, it is in its commitment to a rigorous versatility, a preparedness to test the ability of language to shape reality. As Bray, Gibbons and McHale surmise, "The one feature that all literary experiments share is their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself" (1). Generous in scope, this definition of experimental literature is a useful one, accommodating as it does a wider perspective of what literary experimentalism is and can be, rather than confining to a fixed genre or a form inextricably affiliated with a historical literary movement, such as modernism or postmodernism. With this in mind, it might then be reasonably posited that, in accordance with Bray, Gibbon's and McHale's aforementioned definition, experimental literature is literature that through clear deviations from traditional literary practice intentionally draws attention to its own construction and how it examines its respective thematic preoccupations. This definition will be applied to the following study.

The necessity of applying such an open, fluid definition of experimental literature becomes clear from the close analyses of the works of the two authors I primarily focuses on: David Markson and Don DeLillo. Both writers might appear radically opposed in their approaches to form. A conventional reading of both would suggest that while Markson is very evidently an experimental author, DeLillo is too stylistically and thematically accessible to be labelled the same. Yet DeLillo is a writer who experiments thoroughly and committedly in his

writing, which analysis makes abundantly clear. This prospect not only demands a reconfiguration of how we might perceive his work specifically, but how we might perceive experimental literature more broadly.

Defining experimental literature is one thing; but making sense of its function(s) and wider cultural weight is quite another. Consider, for instance, its relationship with more conventionally crafted literature, a topic explored by the experimental author Ben Marcus. Writing in an October 2005 *Harper's* long-form essay entitled "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It", Marcus argues literary experimentation's case from the perspectives of a reader and writer. Beginning his defence by referring to Wernicke's area, a region situated in the temporal lobe of the brain's left side fundamental to language development, Marcus suggests "If reading is a skill, with levels of ability, and not simply something we can or cannot do, then it's a skill that can be improved by more, and more varied, reading" (40). Reading diversely, he argues, has the potential to foster a more layered and enriching communion between the reader and the work of literature they are engaging with. "The more varied the styles we ingest", Marcus writes, "the better equipped we are to engage and be moved by those writers who are looking deeply into the possibility of syntax as a way to structure sense and feeling, packing experience into language, leveraging grammar as a medium for the making of art" (41). Responding to the idea that experimental literature is the domain of literary elitists disinterested in realism, Marcus contends that, in fact, the opposite is true. "The true elitists in the literary world", he proposes, "are the ones who have become annoyed by literary ambition in any form, who have converted the very meaning of ambition so totally that it now registers as an act of disdain, a hostility to the poor, common reader, who should never be asked to do anything that might lead to a pulled muscle" (40). While Marcus fails to acknowledge that *all* literature is, ultimately, elitist, in that it is produced only for those who can afford to read it - his wider point, that experimental literary styles can offer a different form of literary realism, as well as

new ways of engaging with literary works, is one that holds considerable merit. As this thesis will go on to discuss, stylistic experimentation can indeed be utilised to yield new and profoundly invigorating ways of perceiving both the potential of literature and how it can examine human behaviour and the complexities of individual psychologies.

On the notion that experimental works are uninterested in portraying realism, Marcus is adamant that this is also a misconception. Taking aim at American novelist Jonathan Franzen, Marcus writes "Of the many kinds of literary-fiction writers, it's the group called the realists who have, by far, the most desirable and the least accurate name", before going on to state "The notion that reality can be represented only through a certain kind of narrative attention is a desperate argument by realists themselves, who seem to have decided that any movement away from their well-tested approach toward representing the lives and minds of people would be a compromise*"* (41-42). This latter point about realism and its representation calls to attention questions regularly asked of works of fiction, and the often-contentious genres into which they are bracketed. What really constitutes *realism* when it comes to a work of literature? Given that literary texts amount, literally, to just words on pages, does labelling them as "works of realism" do a disservice to the idea of realism itself? If not, and we *can* say that a novel or a short story is a work of realism, what do those works need to display to prove their realist qualities? For example, do the plausible familial and social dramas depicted in the works of Franzen really reflect objective reality and its myriad layers? Is that really what the task of realism is? The argument can be made both ways. Perhaps the question worth asking here is not if there is a tension between experimentalism and realism, but rather if the case can be made that the former can be used as a means of examining the nuances of the latter in new and potentially invigorating ways. If the question of fiction is the question of reality itself, then they have a common purpose.

This thesis will posit that the versatility of experimental literature makes it well positioned to portray the complexities of lived experience in ways that more traditionally

constructed literature cannot. After all, how can a writer come close to replicating the unpredictability of interiority while working within the constraints of literary conventions? Likewise, it is also worth asking how the disfluent nature of real conversation can be accurately transcribed onto the page as lines of dialogue without the writer freeing themselves from the rules of the language. This is not to suggest that works of literature that adhere to such conventions and rules are, by default, artificial and unrealistic. Even writers who engage in stylistic experimentation work within particular parameters, often excessively so. Nevertheless, if something is categorised by the literary community (writers and critics alike) and the wider culture as realism, it implies an exclusivity that is worth interrogating, particularly if one has that sense that experimental writing literature can challenge this. As Marcus argues in his essay, there are numerous ways to examine the "real" through literature – not least because what is objectively real is open to interpretation itself.

For the purposes of delineation and as a way to appropriately frame this thesis, it is important at this point to discern the characteristics that are evident in *all* works of experimental literature. The answer lies less in specific forms of stylistic executions and recurring thematic preoccupations and more in a philosophical and artistic intent, notable for the ways in which it utilises stylistic diversity to explore and examine themes and experiences that are often abstract and difficult to easily process. Additionally, underlying all experimental literature is an interrogation of language itself and what, through literature, it sets out to capture. As Bray, Gibbons and McHale surmise, "The one feature that all literary experiments share is their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself" (1). It might then be reasonably posited that experimental literature is literature that, through clear deviations from traditional literary practice, intentionally draws attention to its own construction and *how* it examines its respective thematic preoccupations.

Experimental Literature – A Brief Overview

To appreciate how stylistic experimentation has evolved and what it can achieve – particularly in relation to the exploration and expression of interiority – it is important to look briefly back at literary history. Doing so reveals not only the multitude of ways in which experimental styles have been applied to literary works over the years but also, crucially, the varying extents to which experimentation can be evident in a particular text. Acknowledging this is of particular importance to this study, communicating as it will that while sometimes an author will be overt and radical in their experimentalism – as is the case in David Markson's experimental fictions – other authors – such as Don DeLillo – conduct their literary experiments more subtly. As stated, recognising this can lead to new ways of reading the works of both authors and understanding their respective practises, experimental literature and, by default, literature itself.

While it can be reasonably argued that the very first works of literature, were, simply by default, *experimental*, and indeed that all works of literature are the product of some form of experiment or another, it might be more efficient for this study to consider, briefly, works in which the author was *overtly* setting out to disrupt literary conventions, both at the formal and thematic level. As the discussion proceeds, and the range of ways in which experimentalism has been conducted are revealed, it will be pertinent, where appropriate, to consider their functions and, more specifically, to show how they reveal that experimental works can be said to exist on a spectrum that ranges from the subtle to the radical.

Published in a series of volumes between 1759 and 1767, Laurence Sterne's unorthodox and playfully crafted *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* was perhaps the first overtly experimental work of literature in the English language. A fictional autobiography of a fictional character named Tristram Shandy, Sterne's sprawling and intertextual work is notable for its narrative playfulness, its employment of textual jokes (most famously a blank page onto which Shandy encourages the reader to actively interact

with the book's world and create their own image of the Widow Wadlow) and its atypical punctuation. Additionally, Sterne's novel contains a hand-marbled page, parallel texts rendered in Latin and English, incomplete pagination and a chapter – its 136th – a mere line in length. Uncommonly modern for his time, Sterne is regarded as postmodern literature's forefather. With its innovative styles and devices and its consistently versatile examination of philosophical themes *Tristram Shandy*, to this day, reads like an inexplicable text of the future.

The first artistic movement that openly advocated literary experimentation was Modernism. From its inception towards the end of the 19th century, the movement signalled a thematic and stylistic shift away from the more optimistic, moral-centric art of the Victorian era. Modernist authors displayed enthusiasm for stylistic experimentation and placed emphasis on revealing the complex psychologies of their characters, many of whom were acutely introspective. The expanse and variety of Modernist literature is arguably most emphatically exhibited in the fictions of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Both artistically driven by examining the interaction between interior and exterior worlds, their works are noticeable for the extent to which they are preoccupied with time, the literal experiencing of consciousness, and identity, the nature of which is abstract, disjointed and, so often, deeply troubling for an individual to navigate and make sense of. Markson and DeLillo are not explicitly modernist in their craft (both authors are more obviously aligned with the postmodernist movement), but owe debt to Modernism in how they probe the experience of consciousness and deep perception. They emulate how Modernists utilised versatility to probe the vast intricacies of interiority, ideas around selfhood and how individuals attempt to make sense of the world they inhabit.

Although Joyce began as a relatively orthodox stylist with *Dubliners (*1914), his subsequent fictions – *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) – saw him transition into a progressively more radical

experimentalist writer, redefining literature in unprecedented ways as he went. Like Sterne before him, Joyce dismissed standard literary conventions, choosing instead to write in a style that brought the reader into the vivid cogitations of his capricious protagonists. Unrestrained by conventional vocabulary and punctuation, in *Ulysses* alone Joyce indulged in word invention, parody/satire, mimicry, and other stylistic idiosyncrasies. *Finnegans Wake* is even more markedly experimental, rendered as it is in a linguistically dextrous, dreamlike stream of consciousness so unusual in its delivery that it has been given the unfortunate description of being "impenetrable" by many who attempt to read it. In composing the text, Joyce makes use of portmanteaus, puns, words from an assortment of other languages, mythology and intertextual allusions, including, amongst others, references to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Shakespeare and the Bible. It is also the novel in which Joyce famously invented and deployed ten "thunderwords" (nine of which are one hundred letters in length; the other, one hundred and one).

While not as stylistically radical as Joyce, Virginia Woolf also engaged formal experimentation in her fiction. Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves* is her most experimental work, amalgamating poetry and prose to develop the interior monologues of six different characters, but her earlier works also bear clear evidence of formal experimentalism. As E.L. Bishop notes in "Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out", in Woolf's debut novel "language attains the concentration and suggestiveness of poetry" (343). While it is the most traditional of her novels, *The Voyage Out* was, as Bishop notes, an early showcasing of Woolf's penchant for experimentation. A brief look at Woolf's succeeding works reveals the extent to which her interest in it grew. *Jacob's Room*, published in 1922, is a polyphonic, temporally abstruse meditation on one of Woolf's abiding themes: intense interiority and the perceptions it can evoke. The short but thematically extensive *Ms. Dalloway* (1925) is similarly polyphonic and even more narratively atypical for its time; voices – distant and close – converge and shift seamlessly as the psychological experiencing

of time and the past's encroaching on the present is examined through the lives of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. With *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf further developed her consciousness-driven narrative style, substituting the artifices of plot for a more meditative, ambiguous and quiet exploration of lived experience and what it involves: perception, memory, loss. *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is a novel ahead of its time. Woolf, again merging the flexibility of poetry with elaborate prose, creates a hybrid of biography (the novel is based on the novelist and poet Vita Sackville-West, a friend and lover of Woolf's) and fiction to construct an almost pre-postmodern, genre-bending novel that examines gender-fluidity and the porousness of identity, class, the natural world and the act of writing itself. Woolf and Joyce, despite being the movement's most defining authors, were not the only experimentalists of their time. This was, after all, the era of the form-shifting poetry of figures such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and the subversive inventions of the likes of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett, Henrik Ibsen and a litany of other revolutionary literary stylists.

While Modernism gave rise to and actively encouraged the engagement of new literary styles and the consideration of complex philosophical and psychological themes, the decade in which it began to significantly wane – the 1940s – is where one needs to look to trace the growth of literary experimentation. Viewed as a movement of the 1960s, the seeds of postmodern literature were arguably planted in the 1940s with the highly innovative, pioneering works of the aforementioned Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. Published in 1944, Borges's short story collection *Fictions* meshed the linguistic dexterity of Modernism with a cerebral ingenuity (mimicry, a coalescing of so-called "high" and "low art", an ever present sense of irony, a sustained preoccupation with philosophical themes) that would become a staple of postmodern literature. What Borges's works lack in literal size they make up for in stylistic and metaphysical heft, the imprint of which played not only a key role in the emergence and evolution of postmodern literature of the '50s and '60s, but also in literary

experimentation today. As Edna Aizenberg notes in "Postmodern or Post-Auschwitz: Borges and the Limits of Representation", "[a] shaper of the contemporary imagination, Borges serves as a touchstone for concepts of literary reality and unreality, for problems of knowledge and representation, for critical and philosophical debates on totalizing systems and postmodern esthetics, for discussions on centers and peripheries, colonialism and postcolonialism" (141).

Borges's impact on the authors who followed him proved to be a profound and lasting one, paving as it did a clear path for postmodern literature – and wider experimental literature – to emerge. Postmodern works published in the late 1950s onwards reveal the frequency with which authors actively began engaging with new styles and approaches to their writing. Stylistic techniques such as metafiction (where a work draws active attention to its artificiality), intertextuality (where a text interacts with one or more other texts to shape its meaning/intent), pastiche (a mimicry of previous styles), the antithetical styles of maximalism and minimalism (where texts are rendered in either immersive language or in a succinct, pared down fashion) and fragmentation (where a text is broken into short pieces, often to intentionally disjoint its structure/time) were regularly put to use as authors increasingly devised new ways to give shape and context to an increasingly shapeless world.

While there is no need to catalogue in full postmodern literature's timeline here, some commentary on the experimentalism evident in a selection of postmodern works will be useful for the purposes of putting the evolution of experimental literature into context. *The Recognitions* (1955) by William Gaddis is a work that highlights the experimental lengths to which some postmodern authors were willing to go. Constructed in the form of a triptych over the course of 956 pages, *The Recognitions* – described by Jonathan Franzen as "the most difficult book I ever voluntarily read in its entirety" (100) – is steeped in allusions, unattributed dialogue, unexplained character motivations and shifting identities, all of which converge to form a study on the waywardness and underlying anxieties of the human

condition. An explicit nod towards and part parody of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) is a stylistically versatile novel now considered to be one of the defining works of the postmodern canon. Throughout it, Barth engages in the rewriting of history (in this case, the relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas) and creates a triple mimicry/parody – of the Bildungsroman, the Künstlerroman and, with Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) very much in mind, the Picaresque novel. Mimicry of another form is evident in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), the form and content of which is presented as an allusion-guided, four-canto 999-line poem by a fictional poet, John Shade. Accompanying the poem is a foreword, a commentary and notes from the poem's editor and, to make it appear even more authentic, an index, all of which are fictional.

Narrative playfulness directs Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Hopscotch*. Before it begins, Cortázar suggests that readers approach its 155 chapters in one of two ways – by either reading them linearly from chapters 1 to 56 (the succeeding 99 Cortázar describes as "expendables" which the reader has the choice to ignore) or, with the help of an accompanying Table of Instructions devised by the author, flitting – or "hopscotching" – between chapters. This form of non-linear, pick-as-you-choose reading is similarly encouraged in J.G. Ballard's 1970 experimental novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Composed of short chapters with titles such as "You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe" and "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan", Ballard's William Burroughs-inspired fourth novel examines psychological disorientation in a fractured, hyperreal world through fifteen standalone stories. Another self-aware, postmodern work that actively draws attention to itself is Italo Calvino's 1979 novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, the consistently interrupted plot of which centres on the reader's attempts to read Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Alternating between passages relating explicitly to the reader and passages containing the first chapters of ten disparate novels, Calvino's novel can be read as a commentary on both writing and reading and as a thinly veiled manifesto for the abundant virtues of literary experimentation.

Other postmodern works serve to highlight the considerable extent of both the movement's stylistic and thematic dexterity and, crucial to this study, the varying degrees to which they have been applied in works over the years. Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* (1979) muses on the exigencies of the creative life through a metafictional narrative about a fictitious author attempting to write a novel. Kathy Acker's 1984 novel *Blood and Guts in High School* is composed using the postmodern technique of literary collage; throughout the novel, Acker assembles pornographic sketches, letters, poetry, plagiarised material and script excerpts to formulate a surreal narrative about a woman's navigation through the mores of a highly sexualised, violent world. Intertextuality and the placing by an author of a fictional version of themselves into a work is found in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987). In the trilogy's first instalment, *City of Glass* (1985), Auster examines the fluidity of identity by appearing in his own work inhabiting different roles. It also shares an intertextual relationship with Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605). As will be discussed in detail, Don DeLillo, a fellow New Yorker and a contemporary of Auster's, has also made innovative use of pre-existing texts – and visual art – as an experimental lens through which to explore obscure identities in states of protracted flux. David Markson, also a native of New York, also engaged in such practises, albeit to more radical ends, as will be seen.

Of course, to simply *point out* that postmodern works regularly engage in experimentation does little but verify the obvious truism that their authors see considerable literary value in the practice. To what ends its specific functions, both stylistically and beyond, serve in general are less obvious and, consequently, are widely open to interpretation. It is reasonable to posit, for example, that for some authors experimentation is simply a stylistic and/or thematic decision, merely one characteristic among many of their literary practice. Related to this idea, what also should not be ruled out or dismissed is that for some authors to experiment is to just engage in amusement, to engage in experimentation for the simple pleasure of experimentation. For example, Padgett Powell's *The Interrogative Mood:*

A Novel?, the entirety of which is rendered in largely unconnected questions, falls in what we might call "playful experimentation" – or, more specifically, the type of literary experimentation in which the unorthodox is presented as both a means through which a story is told and, additionally, a source of stylistic and thematic humour.

For others, however, there is a larger purpose to their experimentation. For instance, the persistent Modernist disfluency in the prose that makes up Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing,* a novel that centres on the interiority of abuse and ill health among other subjects, was influenced by McBride's sense that the literary probing of conscious thought necessitated the eschewing of orthodox language and the linguistic rules that contain it. In an interview with the Guardian, McBride has reflected on how she is interested in "trying to dig out parts of human life that cannot be expressed in a straightforward way, that don't fit neatly into the vocabulary and grammar that are available. To do that you have to make language do something else." (McBride). For writer Ian Maleney, McBride's experimentalism tests the becoming of language itself and its development from interior thought to vocalised speech. Writing for the Irish Times, Maleney states, "The interior monologue of its unnamed narrator, a sharp and fractured set of syllables, is a primordial language, a language dramatically halted in the act of becoming sensible, becoming social" (Maleney). As will be explored, a large share of the experimentation evident in David Markson's and Don DeLillo's fictions is also concerned with the language at the cognitive level and its adequacy in fully conveying internal and external experience. The final chapter in this study will show that such similar linguistic and existential concerns are sources of rumination in the works of David Shields, Alicia Kopf and Rebecca Watson.

In addition to experimentation facilitating literature that interrogates language – and, in doing so, the very means of its own expression – it has also been used to as a device to probe themes using more freedoms than more orthodoxly constructed works allow for. To this end, it can be said that in some experimental works, including the ones that will be analysed

in this study, form and content can be considered indivisible. A contemporary example of a work where this is the case is Mark Danielewski's experimental novel *House of Leaves* (2000). Regarded as a work of "ergodic fiction", the term coined by Professor Espen J. Aarseth to describe works where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth, 1), the experimentalism in *House of Leaves* is used as means of accentuating the themes that propel its plot. Centred on a fake documentary about a house in which an infinite labyrinth appears to exist, Danielewski uses atypical formatting as a way of emphasising through form the inexplicable spatial phenomena on which the novel is focused. Additionally, footnotes accompany the sections of the novel that Danielewski presents as an academic study of the documentary, the intent of which is to mimic a real study so closely that presumably the reader might become convinced they are reading an authentic scholarly text and not a work of fiction.

There are of course earlier examples of literary experimentation being utilised to stress a work's content to the point that it can be considered inseparable from its form. Georges Perec's aforementioned lipogrammatic novel *A Void*, written without once using the letter "e" may, on the surface, read like an overly contrived work of linguistic dexterity, but some interpretations of the novel consider Perec's use of formal constraint as a significant contributor to its thematic and emotional heft. Warren Motte has noted how Perec's decision to permit himself from using the letter "e" enables him to suffuse the appropriately titled *A Void* with what becomes its dominant theme: absence. Writing about the novel in *Reading Georges Perec*, Motte notes how:

> The absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, and the absence of the E in A Void announces a broader, cannily coded discourse on loss, catastrophe, and mourning. Perec cannot say the words père ["father"], mère ["mother"], parents ["parents"], famille ["family"] in his novel, nor can he write the name Georges Perec. In short, each "void" in the novel is abundantly furnished with meaning, and each points toward the existential void that Perec grappled with throughout his youth and early adulthood (Motte, 12).

Read through this lens of absence, the constraint Perec uses to write *A Void* becomes charged with meaning; far from being a conspicuous act of literary exhibitionism, his decision to the mute the letter "e" and all words it necessitates adds further weight to the importance that the themes of absence, loss, and repression play in the novel. While not as overtly constrained as Perec's work, the novels of David Markson and Don DeLillo analysed in this study are also steered by varying degrees of experimentalism whose function is partly intended to repress aspects of human experience that contribute to the fundamental isolation of their characters.

A Void is the product of Perec's association with the aforementioned Oulipo movement. Formed by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in Paris in 1960, Oulipo brought together a collective of writers and mathematicians who were interested in creating literature through the imposing of writing constraints. Most well-known for its usage of a technique known as N+7 (whereby an already existing text's nouns are replaced by one found seven nouns after it in a standard dictionary), the collective's members produced a series of highly experimental works, the particular constraints of which were communicated or remained undisclosed according to the author's preference. Despite the complexity implied by the collective's artistic philosophy, many of the works are accessible and pose the reader few challenges. *Exercises in Style,* written by Queneau in 1947, retells the same story of a number of inconsequential moments in a man's day ninety-nine times using a different literary style for each. In *Life: A User's Manual*, published in 1978, Georges Perec creates a multi-layered work set in an apartment block in Paris through the implementation of a radically unconventional narrative system directly inspired by mathematical structures. As Dennis Duncan explains in *The Oulipo and Modern Thought*:

> Perec explained the setting for this novel: 'a building from which the façade has been removed; the building has ten floors and there are ten rooms on each floor.' Moreover, the novel would employ three mathematical structures in its composition: a Knight's tour of a 10x10 chessboard; a sestina-like device which Perec called a 'false dizine'; and a number of Graeco-Latin squares ('bi-squares') of order 10, which could be used to distribute a vast number of elements – fabrics, accessories, jewels, etc. – across the novel's chapters (129).

Perec also used this method to distribute allusions to other writers across his text. As Duncan adds, "One such set of elements involves of a table of twenty writers – among them Rabelais, Joyce, Queneau, and Borges – who must be quoted, although 'parfois légèrement modifiées' [sometimes slightly modified], in chapters determined by the bi-square" (129).

The Oulipo was not the only literary movement predicated on stylistic experimentation in France at the time. The rise of the Nouveau Roman (or the New Novel) in the mid-fifties and its evolution into the 1960s called into question and attempted to subvert traditional approaches to literature. As one of its iconic figureheads Alain Robbe-Grillet noted in his 1963 collection of literary essays *For a New Novel*:

> The art of the novel, however, has fallen into such a state of stagnation – a lassitude acknowledged and discussed by the whole of critical opinion – that it is hard to imagine such an art can survive for long without some radical change. To many, the solution seems simple enough: such a change being impossible, the art of the novel is dying. This is far from certain. History will reveal, in a few decades, whether the various fits and starts which have been recorded are the signs of a death agony or a rebirth (17).

In the new novel, ambiguity – in relation to time, characterisation and interpretation – would be favoured over clarity of message and exposition. Additionally, the new novel would resist being read as having a fixed meaning or communicating the type of didacticism projected by the fiction of preceding eras. Likewise, the depicting of the subjectively "real" would be replaced by an intentional blurring of it, a quality that would better suit the world as it was being inhabited at that time. Although not directly affiliated with the movement, it is possible to perceive in Don DeLillo's highly stylised, attentive prose reflections of the Nouveau Roman's stylistic experimentalism and its central concerns. We will see in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* that DeLillo is less directed by plot than he is by the way time plays out in the dysfunctional mind, like the writers of the Nouveau Roman. He prefers ambiguity to clarity when it comes to characterisation and conclusion. On the other hand, the formal and

stylistic experimentalism at the core of David Markson's late works is used to skewer how his characters perceive time and their own identities. His experimentalism also obscures the worlds of his works, making them consistently resistant to singular interpretations and readings that focus an author's "message."

Literary experimentalism exists on a spectrum that ranges from the subtle to the radical, and a comprehensive appreciation of experimentalism and its many functions necessitates recognition of this. Some writers may not participate in a particular experimental "movement", but nevertheless can be described in their own way as part of the general literary avant-garde. This offers a wider literary context into which the experimental works of David Markson and Don DeLillo can be placed and subsequently discussed. Those authors differ in their relationship to the literary avant-garde. Markson is justifiably regarded as a writer closely affiliated with it, whereas DeLillo has no immediately obvious association with it. However, lines can be drawn between Markson, DeLillo and the broad spectrum of experimental practices adopted by other avant-garde authors.

The singular work of British novelist B.S. Johnson's is a fine example of what might be found in the multifaceted avant-garde. His 1969 novel *The Unfortunates* contains 27 unbound and – the first and last aside – unordered sections presented in a box. Ranging in size and following no particular order, the sections mimic memoir and journalism as a sportswriter travels to Nottingham to report on a football match. Interspersed among the journalist's written match commentary are fragments of memories, most of which centre on the journalist's friend who has died from cancer. Although unconventionally presented, at the core of *The Unfortunates's* radical literary aesthetic is a reasonably straightforward idea: that the form of a text largely inspired by the random nature of thought should reflect that randomness. We will see that David Markson shares some thematic preoccupations with Johnson, but also sees the potential of form to reflect a work's predominant concerns. While not nearly as liberally innovative at the formal level as Markson or Johnson, the themes in

Don DeLillo's later work are also illuminated through unorthodox approaches to narrative and the respective ways in which those narratives are framed.

The Unfortunates was not Johnson's first foray into formal experimentation. His autobiographical debut novel, *Travelling People* (1963), amalgamates relatively conventional fiction with diary entries, real letters and, in one chapter, screenwriting. Johnson also employs a black page to indicate the death of one of the novel's characters. His second novel, *Albert Angelo* (1964), saw him become even more stylistically daring. Ostensibly the story of a struggling substitute teacher who aspires to be an architect, contained within the novel are Johnson's own explanatory comments on what he hoped to achieve with it and pages out of which literal holes are cut, the function of which is to enable the reader to read ahead. Johnson's penultimate work, *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* (1973), is also notable for the many humorous metafictional comments its characters offer throughout the novel.

The converging of different literary forms and the incorporation of real-life art play significant roles in the experimentalism found in Markson and DeLillo. Both authors use the theme of art as a means of probing wider questions related to human perception and the individual's position in the world. The similarities with Johnson's avant-garde works do not stop there. Like Johnson, Markson frequently mines from his own lived experience and threads aspects of those experiences through strands of overt fiction. While DeLillo's "identity" is absent from his work, he both references and makes significant use of real cultural figures in fictional contexts. Markson, like Johnson, also employs metafiction in his work. Narrators, cognisant that they are in the process of producing texts, regularly comment on the process, the effect of which further highlights their estranged existences and the existential functions that their writing practises serve.

Like modernist authors before them, avant-garde authors have often used literary experimentation as a way of articulating the innate and challenging volatility of interiority. The works of Ann Quin, a contemporary of B.S. Johnson, express interior thought through

language that conveys that very volatility. Quin took inspiration from the Nouveau Roman and added a British grittiness to the grainy and unsettling worlds of her fictions. Her debut novel *Berg* (1964) is delivered through a consistently flexible interior monologue, the purpose of which is to reveal the extent of its protagonist's protracted psychological derangement. Through her three succeeding three novels – *Three* (1966), *Passages* (1969) and *Tripticks* (1972) – Quin continued to engage in formal experimentation, eschewing what might be considered traditional narratives while writing in the close interior style for which she is only now becoming more widely appreciated. Additionally, assemblage, fragmentation, atypical punctuation and narrative absence are all identifiable in Quin's posthumously published collection *The Unmapped Country: Stories and Fragments* (2018).

As is the case with B.S. Johnson, there are links between Ann Quin's form of experimentalism and the forms discussed in the succeeding chapters on the experimental works of David Markson and Don DeLillo. The rendering of interiority through atypical language is evident in the works of both authors; like Quin, Markson and DeLillo use unconventional – and in some cases grammatically incorrect – sentence structures to communicate the disorderliness of interior experience and language's failure to capture it adequately. There are further similarities, too. Markson, like Quin, makes regular use of fragmentation to emphasise the nature of conscious thought and to reflect through form the fractured psychological and spatial conditions the narrators of his works inhabit.

Other stylistically unorthodox works of fiction are worth contemplating if some comprehension of experimental literature and where Markson and DeLillo are located on its broad spectrum are to be established. Renata Alder's two most celebrated works *Speedboat* (1976) and *Pitch Dark* (1983) are composed of non-linear – and, at times, unconnected – fragments that pay testament to the nature of recollection and the disorder of the social environments out of which they emerged. Originally published in Serbian in 1984, Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars* also dispenses with the idea of a conventional plot and is

presented as a trio of intertextual encyclopaedias, the contents of which purport to reveal historical insights into the Khazar Empire. The entirety of Nicholson Baker's 1988 novel *The Mezzanine* takes place over the duration of a single escalator ride and is a composed of a stream-of-consciousness that fixates on objects and the doing of everyday simple tasks. Additionally, the works of W.G. Sebald – most notably the trio of *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) and *Austerlitz* (2001) – may not appear to be experimental on the surface, but his consistent interweaving of memoir with fiction, elaborate sentences, inclusion of photographs without descriptions and his tendency to drift from conventional narrative modes mark Sebald down as a practitioner of experimentalism.

While all these works are for the most part thematically and stylistically different, both to one another and to Markson and DeLillo, the artistic approaches underlying their constructions are connected by a shared experimental spirit that enables them to create narratives in unorthodox ways. Be it at the formal/structural level or at the sentence level, many authors engaging in experimentalism do so to establish a form of literary agency that more orthodox approaches do not allow for. This brief overview of different forms of literary experimentation has examined the various ways in which a select few authors have composed their works, what functions their experimentalism serve and the links that can be drawn between them and David Markson's and Don DeLillo's experimental fictions. What is yet to be discussed is to what ends such experimentation can potentially aim and what forms of agency such experimentalism can potentially create. It is not enough after all, for this discussion at least, to conclude that experimentation is just an end in itself. To suggest so would be to imply that it amounts to little more than bare ingenuity, a virtuoso performance of ultimately little substance. Likewise, it is insufficient to state simply that experimental literature serves one or more purposes without stating what they are, or, to respect the subjectivity of literature and the myriad ways one can read and interpret it, what they *might* be. To this end, it is worth contemplating why some authors favour the risks of

experimentation over the relative safety of tradition. To return to a previously mentioned novel, why expose a reader to a novel's possible secrets through elaborately designed pages when the alternative – simply letting them find out when they have read their way to those secrets – is less likely to frustrate them and bring an end to their interest? Likewise, what purpose does constructing a plotless novel, or one steeped in ambiguities, serve beyond simply showing that one can?

While such questions have no conclusive answers, it is nonetheless important to attempt to answer them, not least because it will go some way in defending the practice against those who view literary experimentation as, among other things, self-indulgent, contrived, opaque, inaccessible and, perhaps most common of all, *pretentious*. To do this, it needs to be first recognised that no literary form – be it traditional or experimental in style – is meaningful in and of itself. It is important, for this discussion at least, to understand how experimentalism is utilised, how it in doing so produces agency and the potential ends that agency employed for. It is therefore vital to examine some of the styles used by innovative authors and the ends to which they are being directed. For instance, we have already recognised that B.S. Johnson drew on the form of metafiction in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry* to include narrative strands he evidently believed would add humour to his work. Likewise, authors associated with the Oulipo movement might argue with some justification that their distinctly unusual works would not have been produced without the – ironically liberating – implementation of a variety of writing constraints. However, these brief examples only show that experimentation *produces* literature. While this is arguably enough justification for its presence, this thesis will aim to go one further and suggest that literary experimentation, when manipulated for specific purposes, can meticulously examine and illuminate themes in new and invigorating ways. In addition to showing how literary experimentation can efficiently serve the extraction and articulation of the nuances of theme, this thesis will also highlight the vast spectrum that represents experimental literature. This

necessitates an analysis of how a particular theme is conveyed using experimental literary practises, as well as a commentary on the varying degrees to which experimentation is evident in those works.

The Experimental Works of David Markson and Don DeLillo

The topic under discussion will be that of human isolation, in both the physical and psychological sense, in the selected works of DeLillo and Markson. As will be argued throughout, the topic of isolation is a complicated one that is often difficult to define, not least because its causes, and the ways in which it can experienced, are manifold. A case will be made here that if it is to be treated with any extensive acuity in literature, acknowledging its complexities at the psychological and linguistic level, it may actually demand experimental approaches to form and style. For instance, such approaches to constructing a work may take into consideration the anomalous psychological states that protracted periods of physical and/or psychological isolation can position people in and their internal and external attempts at using language to articulate them. This may include unconventional approaches to the language of a text, whereby the author attempts to replicate the disordered nature of thought, or, at the formal level, structural anomalies, the purpose of which includes, but is often not limited to, an intent on the author's behalf for form to mirror theme. Of course, highlighting the merits of experimentation does not imply that conventionally constructed works of literature that focus on isolation or indeed any other complex themes are lacking in depth; as will be recognised, there is an abundance of works that prove that conventional approaches to craft can yield extensive insights in relation to theme. However, due to their default unorthodoxy and the expectation that they will intentionally disrupt a reader's expectations, the artistic licence of experimentally crafted works can permit them the requisite space and means to probe themes in versatile and fluid ways.

I will primarily explore the roles that fragmentation, allusion, intertextuality, repetition, mimicry of forms and the use of anomalously constructed sentences play in the experimental works of David Markson and Don DeLillo. Focusing on the theme of isolation in those works, it will be argued that the experimental usage of each of these literary features allows for nuanced and compelling examinations and articulations of that theme. It will also be argued that it is through these unorthodox literary techniques that new forms of literary agency can become manifest, resulting in new perspectives that consider with greater depth not only a text's specific content, but how it is crafted.

To add further context, a concluding chapter will discuss some of the forms of experimentalism used in contemporary literature. For the purposes of maintaining thematic relevance as well as further elucidating the range of agency of experimental writing and what it can articulate, this concluding chapter will provide a commentary on a selection of experimental writers whose novels examine human isolation and a closer examination of works by Alicia Kopf, David Shields, and Rebecca Watson. An examination of these works will reveal that there exists both clear links between them and the type of experimental methods used by Markson and DeLillo and highlight that new forms of experimentation are being established and used in invigorating ways today. While Kopf, Shields, and Watson all use experimental techniques in notably different ways, close readings of their methods will serve to further illuminate just how conducive experimentalism is to the complex literary expression of human isolation. These readings, which will focus closely on how each author approaches the theme in their work, will also stress the extent to which it can be claimed that the spectrum of literary experimentalism is significantly broader than is generally recognised.

For now, it is important to outline the ways in which Markson's and DeLillo's works will be closely analysed. A cursory glance at any of Markson's last five works reveals the extent to which he was a practitioner of experimentation. On close examination, the extent to which he was also deeply preoccupied with the theme of human isolation is revealed.

Wittgenstein's Mistress (1988), a novel about a woman whose sense of aloneness is so totalising she is convinced she has been rendered the world's sole occupant, is notable for its opaque philosophical meditations and stylistic mimicry of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Consisting entirely of the disjointed and peculiarly constructed typed-out thoughts of its only character, Kate, Markson's inaugural experimental work, rejected fifty-five times before being published by Dalkey Archive Press, was described by the late David Foster Wallace as "pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country" (218). Writing on Substack, for Dustin Illingworth *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is "the loneliest of American novels" and "presents a state of ultimate solipsism, a lean, Cartesian nightmare in which the world has fallen away into language-habits, echoes, and ghosts" (Illingworth).

Markson spent the eleven-year period between 1996 and 2007 writing a tetralogy of sparse novels peculiar in form and their abandonment of conventional plots. All centring on an aged and increasingly infirm novelist – the name of whom shifts from Reader to Writer to Author to, lastly, Novelist over the course of the four novels – the tetralogy, noteworthy for its inclusion of hundreds of quotes and fragments of cultural trivia, covers significant thematic ground. While readable as standalone works, evident in *Reader's Block* (1996), *This Is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004) and *The Last Novel* (2007) are recurring strands of interest that, when read consecutively, form a series of mediations on death, ageing, sexism, mental illness, racism and the calamitous lives of artists. When taken as a whole, Markson's abiding preoccupation becomes abundantly clear – his experimental works, from *Wittgenstein's Mistress* right through to *The Last Novel*, can be read as a sustained study of the fundamental aloneness of being and the innumerable variables that both contribute to and starkly emphasise it. It is through both formal and stylistic experimentalism that Markson identifies and makes use of those variables, the final product of which is a body of

experimental work wherein the unorthodox brings nuance and a distinct form of complex and profound realism to the surface.

In addition to closely analysing what happens (or, as is often the case, what does *not* happen) in Markson's fictions, it will also be vital to look at the various devices and styles he employs throughout them in order to ascertain the depth of his examinations and what they reveal about isolation. *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, for instance, is constructed using a narrative voice akin to a sustained interior monologue. Kate's voice is solitary, fragmented, repetitious, and wayward, and flits between distress, confusion and indifference. However, unlike more traditionally rendered interior monologues, there is, however potentially misleading, an element of control, of precision, to hers. This is because Kate's monologue is composed using a typewriter. Indeed, such is its sustained tonal and formal peculiarity, it is worth asking if Kate's account is a monologue at all. Unlike exterior and interior monologues that are typically found in literature, which are either vocalised out loud in the form of dialogue or presented as a series of the narrator's conscious thoughts, Kate's is externally expressed, but through the typed word rather than through her voice. In addition to the means through which her account is communicated, there is also its specific delivery, delivered as it is through a stream of consciousness that, because it is written down, is harnessed by both her use of grammar and syntax and an unsettlingly austere tone of voice that Markson never alters. Although it is left unbroken (*Wittgenstein's Mistress* contains no paragraph spacing, dialogue, chapters – or, indeed, any visual break from Kate's account at all), it is, however, composed of fragments, some of which are connected and others that are not, the effect of which distorts the novel's sense of time and consistently restates the perilous mental state Kate is inhabiting. Markson engaged in a more typical form of fragmentation, whereby short – and often disconnected - sections of text separated by line breaks, to compose the novels that comprise his tetralogy. Each fragment – be it a rare original comment from the work's sole character or

a piece of cultural trivia that contributes to the work's core themes – is delivered in just a sentence or two and is visually disconnected from the next.

Markson's frequent use of allusions and mimicry will also need to be analysed. Scattered throughout *Wittgenstein's Mistress* are many references to historical and cultural figures, the effect of which only further illuminates the apparent fact that Kate now exists in a world where other people exist only as points of reference. The novels that make up Markson's tetralogy are less thematically abstract, but commentary on the cultural references that make up their bulk and the way in which they are placed throughout the works reveal that they serve much the same purpose as they do in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. True, the numerous cultural figures that populate the tetralogy's books can be potentially read as pseudo-characters, but this – and the fact that the vast majority of them are dead – only affirms the protagonist's prolonged isolation. Indeed, parallels can be made between Markson's perennially alone and past obsessed narrators and Walter Benjamin's reading of Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920) in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). In Klee's work, Benjamin perceives an angel who, "face turned toward the past", (257) desires to set right what been destroyed in times gone by. However, he is forced by a storm, which Benjamin describes as "progress", that is "blowing from Paradise" (258) into a future the angel has its back to. Like Klee's angel, Markson's narrators, also burdened by and perpetually looking back at the past's harrowing accumulations, also fail to fix themselves in the present, the effect of which isolates them. It is partly through his distinctly original formal and thematic use of cultural references throughout his experimental works, and how his narrators respond to them, that Markson achieves this innovative examination of the isolation and how it is experienced.

None of the novels read very much like standard works of fiction at all; indeed, if anything, they read like unusual encyclopaedias or esoteric hybrids of personal memoir and cultural/historical biography. This formal structure Markson puts in place and the fragments

of trivia themselves will be looked at more closely and an argument will be made that the protagonist's fixations, which replace a conventional plot, accentuates the tetralogy's theme of isolation. To make this argument, it will be necessary to take account of the action that takes place within the works – or, in the case of the tetralogy's novels, the *lack* of it – and the themes that most commonly recur in the fragments of trivia Markson scatters throughout them. To this end, the theme of death and its relationship with isolation will be examined. Ultimately, these thorough analyses of Markson's five novels will reveal both the expanse of his experimental projects and, more generally, the depth to which the theme of human isolation can be examined through the use of formal experimentation.

Unlike David Markson, Don DeLillo's reputation as a novelist is not predicated on his writing of experimental novels. Indeed, some may even take issue with the suggestion that DeLillo is an experimental novelist. This, however, is more to do with how experimental literature is perceived in general and, additionally, how DeLillo's work tends to be categorised. As noted, the mere label of "experimental literature" tends to imply a radical formal and thematic complexity – or, at the very least, an inventiveness so immediately obvious to that reader that it can be immediately considered separate from conventionally crafted literature; DeLillo's work, it is true, does not fall easily into this description. However, perceptions of experimental literature need not, and should not, be limited to what which is immediately noticeable. As already suggested, subtle forms of experimentation can be said to represent what can reasonably be labelled experimental literature. Some of DeLillo's work can, and should, fall into this description. While his novels have frequently meditated on complex themes, the relative coherency, and – when weighed against the forms and styles of more overtly experimental authors – comparatively accessible nature of his writing, marks DeLillo down as perhaps something more akin to a traditional author. This perception, however, does an injustice to both DeLillo's versatility as an author and, by extension, the works of his that exhibit that versatility. While arguments can be made for a few his other

works, it is in *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010) that DeLillo's use of experimentation is at its most pronounced. Of further relevance to the specifics of this study, they are also two novels in which DeLillo's experimentation is utilised to probe the varied causes, experiences, and complex expressions of human isolation.

Evident in *The Body Artist*, the plot of which focuses on a woman's experience of raw grief following her partner's suicide, are a mimicry of styles, lines of disfluent dialogue and an abstruse character who is – it will be argued – experimental in its construction. The construction of atypical sentences, particularly in the formation of dialogue, also requires analysis. Set in two locations – New York's Museum of Modern Art and California's Anza-Borrego Desert – *Point Omega*, like *The Body Artist*, resists precise conclusions and leaves its central mystery – the disappearance of one of its characters – unexplained. Embedded in the story is a real-life work of art and a cosmological theory proposed by a real cultural figure: Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), an art installation consisting of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) slowed down so that it plays out over exactly twenty-four hours, and French Jesuit Catholic priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose Omega Point theory posits the universe is predetermined to reach an end point of total unification. Throughout the novel, DeLillo uses Gordon's work and de Chardin's theory to suggest there is a porousness to identity and, through the character of war adviser, Richard Elster, a possibility that all events are fated. DeLillo's choice of geographical locations is also interesting, simultaneously exacerbating and emphasising as they do the states of physical and psychological isolation in which the novel's characters are situated. Like the chapter on Markson's works before it, the chapter on DeLillo's two novels will reveal some of the compelling ways in which literary experimentation can articulate and examine the theme of human isolation. Additionally, it will also serve to highlight DeLillo's lesser-discussed experimentalism and, furthermore, the extent to which we can consider a work of literature experimental and how this influences our comprehension of what experimental literature is and what it can be.

Comprehending Isolation

The theme of human isolation and how it may be articulated seems an appropriate one for a study interested in the potential merits of literary experimentalism. A state of being with multiple causes and ways of being experienced, isolation is, as will be seen, a theme that is particularly well suited to being conveyed through experimental literature, the production of which, by design, implicitly recognises the limitations of language and conventional forms of storytelling. Isolation is a state of being that frequently defies the forms of description provided by standard language. To this end, in order to express with any degree of acuity in literature its innately complex reality, it can be posited that it often demands types of expression that are unorthodox in nature. As will be seen in the discussions on the works of David Markson and Don DeLillo, the ways in which isolation can be unorthodoxly expressed using experimental literary forms and styles are varied. However, they all share a recognition of isolation's fundamental incommunicability and, by extension, its impact on human behaviour and how it can be addressed.

Before any discussion about the literary expression of isolation can begin, the word's meaning requires examination. Most used to describe a significant distance separating a person, or persons, or a thing, or things, from a particular environment, its connotations – given such separations are often enforced or unchosen – are usually negative. Psychological isolation also tends to be perceived as an undesirable state to occupy. The depressed individual, for example, is considered psychologically isolated from their former sense of self, compounding the state of unwavering despondency they feel. The grief of the bereaved is generated not solely by the physical absence such a loss renders, but also a mental one; consequently, the new reality a death can transport the bereaved to is one marked by a psychological isolation. At its worst, aggravated by one's internal and/or external environments, psychological isolation can manifest as or be a dominant experience of mental

illness. All these negative experiences of isolation are present in the experimental works of David Markson and Don DeLillo and are both expressed and simultaneously examined in ways that acknowledge their causes, their complicatedness, and the immense struggle with which those who are isolated try to articulate their troubled interiorities.

Additionally, it is imperative to note that both physical and psychological isolation rarely exist independently from one another. An individual who becomes physically isolated is likely to feel mentally isolated also. Likewise, the individual who concludes that they are feeling psychologically remote are also likely to feel estranged from others, even when they are physically in their company. As Lars Svendsen describes it in *A Philosophy of Loneliness*, "You can be lonely in a crowd or at home, out in nature or in an empty church" (1). On this note, it is important to consider one of the fundamental truths of isolation – that many who experience it feel with it an accompanying loneliness, the impact of which can often be deeply troubling. However, it is also just as important to note that those who are isolated are not, by definition, lonely.

Protracted periods of uninterrupted isolation can be detrimental to one's health. For example, the neurological make up of members of society who experience prolonged social isolation has been shown to alter. A study by Matthews, et al. revealed links between isolation, activation in the brain's dorsal raphe nucleus and the generating of a social interaction impulse (617-631). Links have also been established that show the impact isolation can potentially have on blood pressure, the immune system and premature death. A 2012 paper by Valtorta and Hanratty reveals how "Lonely or isolated older adults are at greater risk for all-cause mortality: a meta-analysis encompassing 148 longitudinal studies, with 308,849 participants followed for an average of 7.5 years, has reported that individuals with strong social ties have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared with those who have poor social relationships and networks" (519). Social isolation can also contribute to memory loss. In a study by Read at al., it was found that increased isolation led to greater

memory loss in both sexes. Specifically, they discovered that "[a]mong men an initially high level of social isolation was associated with a somewhat greater decrease in memory" (367). Additionally, "[a]mong women a greater increase in social isolation predicted a greater decrease in memory and a larger change in social isolation was associated with further larger changes in isolation, although when social isolation reached a higher level it subsequently decreased" (367).

Focusing on such negative life experiences inspired by isolation is likely to yield benefits. Examining them can lead to the discovery of knowledge – specifically about individuals and how they exist in and experience the world – that can potentially be put to use to ease the anxieties that isolation can inflict. As Thomas L. Dumm notes in *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (2008), "In the state of crisis induced by the pain of being alone, it is more likely that we will clearly see the motives and ends of the lonely self, even when that self moves from despair to happier ways of being" (22). Isolation, as Dumm suggests, is a complex and not always undesirable state. To fully comprehend its meaning and what it may involve, in both reality and fiction, it is necessary to examine the word beyond its traditional negative connotations. To do so, it is worth asking a series of questions. For example, are there situations in which a state of isolation – be it physical or psychological or a combination of both – is more desirable than its opposite? What are the positive and/or meaningful human experiences that can only come about while isolated? Pertinent to this study, it might also be worth asking in what ways literature – specifically experimental literature in this case – can illuminate the theme of isolation and ascribe a value to it that one can apply to their real world understanding of its complexities.

Given both the general and specific interests of this study, the isolation of the artist – and in particular the necessary isolation of the writer – will also require commentary. The working environment of the artist is fundamentally isolated, after all. Painters, for instance, tend to paint in rooms on their own. Likewise, a completed piece of music may often be a

collaborative effort, but the writing and learning of it will usually be done by individuals in isolation. In DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, the protagonist, Lauren Hartke, is a performance artist whose intense, individual rehearsals and performances are used partly as a means of examining selfhood and the isolated nature of being. In *Point Omega,* meanwhile, the relationship between art and isolation is illuminated through the experimental incorporation of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* and the documentary assignment that motivates Jim Finley to seek out Richard Elster in the American desert.

Writers are perhaps the most isolated artists of all. An act that involves long periods of contemplation, research, writing and editing, the writer, as Markson's experimental works emphatically suggest, spends large periods of their days both mentally isolated, adrift in imagined worlds, and physically, at their desk. As Caleb Powell notes in a conversation with David Shields in *I Think You're Totally Wrong*, "I get the feeling that David Markson spends fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, reading and writing" (191). For Tyler Malone, writing in "A Heavily Populated Solitude", "[w]riting is inherently a solitary act" and "[i]n Markson's books, the true North that the compass always points to is that underlying conundrum—that solitude simultaneously breeds creation and destruction, knowledge and madness, love and hate, empathy and sociopathy" (9).

Since the dawn of the novel and the short story, many writers have been preoccupied with the theme. Considered by some critics to be the first novel written in English, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) catalogues the 28 years its eponymous hero spends stranded on an island almost 700kms west of Chile. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) may be known for its lasting contribution to the genres of gothic and horror fiction, but it is also an acutely layered psychological work that meditates on social marginalisation and the damaging impact of sustained isolation. Many other authors have fixated on the theme, too – particularly the isolation of solitude. "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself", Charlotte Brontë writes in *Jane Eyre* (1847)

(270). *In Letters to a Young Poet* (1929), Rilke implores Franz Xaver Kappus to "love your solitude and try to sing out with the pain it causes you" (27). For Thomas Mann, writing in *Death in Venice* (1912), the isolation of solitude could inspire good and bad. "Solitude gives birth to the original in us", Mann writes, "to beauty unfamiliar and perilous—to poetry. But also, it gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd" (43). Innumerable other writers – from Jean Paul Sartre to Jean Rhys to Carson McCullers – have also used literature as an inspiration and as a lens through which to study and make sense of the human condition, the default state of which is, in the end, isolated. Markson does simply examine isolation through the art of literature. In addition to being invested in the wider theme and it how it imposes itself on existence, his experimental works are also specifically preoccupied with the fundamental isolation of the artist in general and, even more explicitly, the isolation of the writer and how it impacts upon the worlds and delivery of their work.

All of this is to say that isolation, a traditionally loaded word that has come to signify an undesirable state or states, is one that needs to be fully understood, particularly if the ways in which it can be portrayed through literature are to be examined. With this in mind, this thesis will look at isolation as a generally negative state that can greatly hinder one's ability to articulate its harrowing complexities. A state that can be both physical and psychological – and indeed is often simultaneously both – the lens through which isolation will be discussed here will focus predominantly on how the isolated individual struggles to express through language the mental processes imposed on them by sustained isolation. In order to highlight the psychological complications associated with those processes, it will also be important to consider, where appropriate, the recurring themes the isolated individual tends to ruminate on, and the impact isolation has on cognitive functioning, determining how it is both experienced and expressed.

To begin with, however, one must consider the range of ways in which people can become isolated and the ways they can behave when they are. Although their answers may

not always be forthcoming, certain questions will need to be asked of the texts that are being analysed in this study. The conditions of a specific text's world will need to be identified and contextualised. It is only through doing this that the position of a novel's character – or characters – can be properly ascertained. That specific position, or positions, will then need to be examined, in both a physical and a psychological context. In order to satisfy these demands, a set of questions will need to be considered. What literal geographical space, for instance, does the text's character – or characters – inhabit? What can be identified in terms of their physical and psychological relationship with it? And how, over the course of the text, does that relationship alter? All of this will be analysed by looking at the ways that Markson and DeLillo utilise literary experimentation throughout their works. More specifically, the experimental ways in which, to varying degrees, Markson and DeLillo render physical space as both a cause and an aggravator of physical and psychological isolation will require significant consideration, not least because in all of the texts physical space – both vast and confined – plays a predominant role in each one.

Once these narrative threads have been established, it will be necessary to look closely at how the text's characters think, communicate and move through their respective worlds and how Markson and DeLillo use experimental means to highlight the difficulties of comprehending and communicating isolation and how it imposes itself on the individual and their experience of inhabiting the world. The extent of a character's isolation, the available variables that have contributed to it and their conscious awareness of how it affects them will need to be recognised and contextualised, specifically in the context of literary experimentation. To this end, more questions will need to be asked. Is a text's character – or characters – isolated because events in their life have rendered them alone? Might their isolation be the result of where they are physically situated? Or is it because they are fundamentally obstructed from a sense of closeness to others because of underlying, innate issues? Finally, and most crucially for the purpose of this thesis, the expression of these states

of isolation will be looked at closely to determine the ways in which formal experimentalism can be utilised to portray them.

Given the distinct peculiarity and unreliability of Kate's narrative in *Wittgenstein's Mistres*s, it is impossible to deduce if the isolation she inhabits is externally or internally manufactured. The only certainty is that she is preternaturally isolated. As Dustin Illingworth, taking note of its experimentalism and its impact on both the novel itself and Markson's struggle to have it published, describes it, "[i]t is lonely in its premise (the last woman on earth meditates on language, history, and culture), lonely in its publication journey (Markson's manuscript was famously rejected fifty-four times), lonely in its execution (a monologue of obsessive consciousness), and lonely-making in its ultimate effect upon the reader" (Illingworth). For Marija Cetinić, meanwhile, Markson's use of literary experimentation in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* results in it amounting to a "post-apocalyptic non-narrative" in which "Markson's narrator engages in a practice of unworking, a literal dismantling of anything that might fix memory into a static figure" (82-83).

To adequately examine the way in which Kate is isolated, rather than how she became that way, and the impact it is having on her, it will therefore be imperative to analyse what she expresses and, just as crucially, *how* she expresses herself. By examining Kate's esoteric account and the peculiar literary styles Markson deploys in order to powerfully render it, it will be possible to make links between the psychological and physical environments she is inhabiting and impact it has on the way in which she communicates, her propensity for misremembering key events of her life, the obsessive recalling with which she regularly engages and her habit for dwelling on linguistics and how it contributes to the deconstructive lens through which she perceives her external world. This will be achieved by referring to contextually relevant studies that have analysed the connections between sustained isolation and cognitive change. Ultimately, the analysis of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* will argue that the

stylistic experimentation that Markson implements throughout the novel accommodates a challenging but surprisingly realistic portrayal of the psychological effects of isolation.

The roots of the isolation experienced by the protagonist of Markson's tetralogy are easier to trace. The protagonist is an ageing writer unable – or perhaps unwilling – to write traditional character-/plot-driven novels, who comes to be known more through his absence and through the themes upon which he fixates when he is present than through any sense of narrative action. In this sense, the protagonist's isolation can only be truly comprehended by examining the ways in which the tetralogy's novels are constructed, not least because his overt presence in them gradually decreases over the course of the four novels. A close stylistic and thematic analysis will reveal that the depth of the tetralogy's meditation on isolation is the result of how it is crafted. Its fragmentary style, coupled with an absence of elaborate plots and the inclusion of hundreds of pieces of trivia, yields opportunities to examine the enlightening ways isolation can be conveyed using formal experimentation. As Tyler Malone notes in "David Markson Ports of Entry", the four novels comprising Markson's tetralogy "circle many themes, but hone in on two important ideas with relation to "the artist": 1) that artists are more prone to madness, depression, addiction, and other forms of mental illness, and 2) that artists so rarely get the appreciation they deserve while they are alive, for usually they are shunned, or banned, or executed, or they die penniless and unknown" (11). For Stephen Burn, the tetralogy "seems to absorb the crepuscular backdrop of the millennium's end and lets that larger cultural sense of proximate endtimes diffuse into the melancholy air of a self-reflexive work whose reflexivity insistently points to the author's own bodily decline" (32). Both these readings of the tetralogy restate the necessity of pattern-seeking in the four novels and, additionally, viewing their distinct composition as further commentaries on their thematic preoccupations. With this in mind, the analysis of Markson's tetralogy – which will also incorporate studies in the fields of psychology and neuroscience to illuminate experimental literature's suitability for conveying psychological and linguistic complexities –

will argue that the experimental narratives that compose it can make us consider in new ways the effects on socialisation and cognition that sustained isolation can bring about.

The characters in DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* are all isolated to varying degrees. In the former, the isolation Rey Robles is experiencing is implied through his suicide. Lauren is both physically isolated in the rural house she must now live in alone and psychologically because of the grief she is forced to live with. Lauren's new life without Rey is eerie and out of kilter to the point where her perception of the world has been fundamentally altered. Lauren's grief is visceral, bringing to mind Will Buckingham's description in *Hello Stranger* (2021) that "Loss tears a hole in the world. It exposes us, leaves open a rent, a gap" (3). For Lauren that hole is not so much later filled but rather acts as something out of which more grief inexplicably materialises. The ghostly, malformed individual who Lauren comes to name Mr. Tuttle is also isolated, mentally and physically. For Mark Osteen, it is a "decidedly quiet, introverted tale of bereavement and spectral visitation, it seemed a radical and rather slight experiment for this acclaimed novelist" (64). Osteen's use of "slight" to describe the experimentalism of *The Body Artist* is interesting and brings into focus again the experimental literature spectrum, on which, as mentioned, it might be said that DeLillo exists on the lower end. Osteen's assertion also rings especially true when one considers that *The Body Artist* was preceded by *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo's sprawling magnum-opus. At 128 pages, *The Body Artist* is 699 pages shorter than its predecessor, but arguably no less ambitious. With all this in mind, it can be said that in a relatively short space, the novel – the construction of which incorporates atypical dialogue, straight narrative, and media mimicry in the forms of reportage and feature writing – meditates on a variety of ways that isolation affects individuals. It explores how it can alter language, future human connections, sensory perceptions and – as evidenced by its elusive conclusion – one's sense of their core self. All these strands will be examined to ascertain the particular ways DeLillo constructs the complexities of isolation throughout the novel.

A study of *Point Omega*'s characters also promotes the idea that experimental literature is particularly well suited to portraying isolation and its effects. Furthermore, looking closely at the novel's construction and how it expresses its dominant theme will add further merit to the idea that for some authors isolation is manifest in style. The unnamed figure spending his days watching *24 Hour Psycho* in New York's Museum of Modern Art craves isolation. The novel's two most present characters, filmmaker Jim Finley and scholar and war-adviser to the government Richard Elster, are isolated in different ways. For Finley, a trip to the desert to see Elster is initially related to work. Soon, however, the landscape's appeal becomes personal to him. Elster, on the other hand, is following Fernando Pessoa's suggestion that "Freedom is the possibility of isolation" (283). For him, the desert offers a freedom to think and escape, from woes both personal and professional. The isolation in which Elster's daughter, Jessie, finds herself is multifaceted. Jessie joins her father and Finley in the desert to temporarily escape a city where trouble, not least in the form of a controlling man with whom she has become acquainted, looms. Soon, Jessie becomes literally isolated when she vanishes without explanation, an event that not only alters how her father and Finley perceive the desolate landscape around them but also hastens their departure from it. Like *The Body Artist* before it, *Point Omega* illuminates the ways in which isolation impacts upon thought and behaviour, both subtly in the alteration of perception and the language employed to capture it, and radically, in the form of a disappearance and, it is implied, potential murder. As David Cowart argues, "DeLillo seeks in this novel to represent the anguish of one whose error—ethical, epistemological, linguistic—takes on a moral gravity that verges on the tragic" (42). DeLillo achieves this through not only the novel's plot, but also how that plot is delivered. From the use of intertextuality to its chronology and structure, DeLillo engages in subtle forms of experimentalism and places emphasis on physical spaces to examine the existential anxieties wrought by isolation. Consequently, the study of how he achieves this will consider all of these vital strands.

Contemporary Experimental Literature and Close Readings

Any study of the ways in which theme is experimentally crafted requires a framework based on close readings. If, as this study proposes, experimental literature is well positioned to articulate the multiple forms and complexities of human isolation, it will be vital to consider precisely how the works analysed in this study are constructed. Attention will need to be paid to a work's features, among them its structure, the nuances of its language, the formatting of its text and its incorporation of other texts and mixed media. The presence of atypical characterisation, the constructing of psychological time, and the way characters communicate will also be subject to close reading and analysis. Additionally, how each author portrays the complications of memory and perception and the role both play in the experience of isolation will also be examined. Approaching the selected texts in this way will necessitate a form of close reading that both considers the text's respective and specific experimental features and, in order to track what those features give rise to, the various ways in which each text communicates the theme of isolation. Consequently, the close readings of each text will take on a twofold approach. On the one hand, the readings will focus on particularly crucial sections of the texts to highlight their formal and stylistic features and how theme is expressed though them. Secondly, for the purpose of tracing the way in which theme is sustained throughout each of them, the readings will also consider the larger narrative of all the texts. Doing this will reveal not only the consistency of Markson's and DeLillo's experimentalism, but also the dominant role isolation plays in their works.

Due to their respective formal features and how they are employed to examine human isolation, each novel's particular experiments will dictate the terms by which they will be closely read and analysed. For instance, to ascertain the extent to which David Markson's experiments with form reveal new insights into the literary exploration of isolation, the approaches to closely reading *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and his fragmented tetralogy will have

to take in different considerations. In the case of the former, the text's format – delivered as a typed out, unbroken monologue – will provide the starting point for a closer reading of its preoccupation with isolation. Following this, the particularities of Markson's idiosyncratic use of language and how he manipulates it to convey psychological disturbance will be looked at. Composed of short fragments, the vast majority of which are pieces of trivia (on the surface, at least) about hundreds of artists and cultural figures, a close reading of the novels that comprise Markson's tetralogy will necessitate a commentary on the aesthetics of its layout and its suitability for highlighting just how isolated the tetralogy's sole character becomes. In addition to the tetralogy's visuals, its structure, the foundations of which are put in place by Markson's inclusion of the fragments of thematically relevant trivia, will also require consideration.

Unlike Markson, whose experimentalism is immediately obvious in both the aesthetics and in the content of his works, DeLillo's is more subtle. It is for this reason – coupled with the fact that, compared to the more linguistically and thematically abstruse works of more radical experimental authors, his works can be reasonably described as being more "approachable" – that we can place DeLillo on the lower end of the experimental spectrum. However, it would do a disservice to his formal ingenuity and the frequently esoteric concerns embedded in his fictional worlds to underplay the experimentalism evident in his work. DeLillo's preoccupation with and ways of examining language, coupled with his interest in anomalous psychological states and the behaviour they can inspire, make for compelling reading. Furthermore, his distinct use of structure and characterisation, as well as his incorporation of intertextuality, do much in the way of scrutinising human isolation. With this study in mind, it will therefore be important to read closely and comment on the various stylistic choices DeLillo makes in the works under analysis and how those choices benefit our comprehension of how the complexities of human isolation can be rendered in literature.

To further show how conducive literary experimentalism can be to the articulation of human isolation's complexities, it will be important to shift the focus away from Markson and DeLillo to the more recently published works of contemporary authors. Firstly, it will serve to underline the recurring nature of isolation as a theme to which authors of experimental literature are drawn (and simultaneously highlight that Markson and DeLillo's experimental works centred on isolation do not exist in a vacuum). Secondly, it will consider that while isolation has been a state which people have always been susceptible to existing in, it is also one that has increasingly new causes and ways of being experienced. The dominant role that technology and the devices we all use play in this is particularly significant, as will be later discussed. Choosing which texts to include is no easy task. Indeed, there any number of contemporary experimental works that could potentially be addressed through the lens of isolation in this study. The three that are included have been chosen for a few factors. To begin with, though this is not a comparative study, there are formal and thematic links between them and the works of Markson and DeLillo that will enable the necessary continuation of discussions that take place in the chapters dedicated to them. The three contemporary texts all show an awareness of recently emerged causes of isolation and how that isolation is experienced in a modern context, but also engage with the longstanding factors that contribute to and cause it, among them familial grief, violence, death, sickness, and, above all, the fundamental aloneness of being.

Alicia Kopf's *Brother in Ice* is a contemporary novel that meets these criteria. An experimental text that bears stylistic and thematic echoes of Markson's and DeLillo's works, the close reading of it will necessitate a commentary on her usage of fragmentation, research notes and visual media. It will also be important to read Kopf's novel through the lens of John Cleves Symmes Jr.'s variant of the Hollow Earth Theory, a proposal about the geological structures of the Earth that Kopf expresses narrative interest in at the beginning of *Brother in Ice*.

Similar in its form and use of thematically relevant secondary material, a close analysis of David Shields's *The Trouble with Men* (2019) will require the same approach as the analyses of Markson's novels. Comprised of fragmented insights into his struggles with human connection and selfhood, in *The Trouble with Men* Shields assembles a work inspired by his "impulse to read form as content; style as meaning" (196). With this and the clear similarities with Markson in mind, it will be necessary to pay close attention to and comment on the thematic relevance of the sourced material Shields includes. For this study, it will also be imperative to speculate on both their aesthetic and formal functions, not least because Shields's use of fragmentation contributes significantly to his work's preoccupation with isolation.

Rebecca Watson's *little scratch* (2020) is a formally versatile and unwieldy novel. Bearing traces of modernist and postmodernist literature, the text on the pages of Watson's novel is atypically formatted to imitate the erratic nature of trauma-driven conscious thought over the course of a day. A text that bears some similarities with *Wittgenstein's Mistress*'s relentless interiority and *The Body Artist's preoccupation with the relationship between perception and language*, a close reading of *little scratch* will require commentaries on the ways in which both the protagonist's internal and external worlds are experienced and how they converge. Watson's sentence structures and unconventional formatting will also form a significant part of the discussion about her work, both of which significantly contribute to its consistent psychological realism.

Ultimately, any study attempting to comprehend the versatility of form and the potential ends it can achieve necessitates close readings that pay detailed attention to the very ways in which a text is constructed, at both the structural and stylistic level, and what it amounts to at the narrative level. In order to adequately do this, it will be appropriate to treat form and content not as separate components of a work, but, conversely, to be so inextricably bound up as to be regarded as indivisible. This approach of seeing form as being something

more than just the arbitrary shape an author lends their work also seems particularly appropriate for any study focused on experimental literature; after all, embedded in all experimental literature is a subtextual commentary that recognises the wider potential of form and its relationship to that which it gives shape. In tandem with considering existing literature on and studies about human isolation, the application of this this approach to the close readings of the texts that make up this study will, it is hoped, highlight the wider value of experimental literature's versatility and its suitability for communicating themes that are often deeply complex.

Chapter 1. The Crafting of Isolation in David Markson's Experimental Works

From the immersive, tangled web of solipsism found in *Wittgenstein*'s *Mistress* to the minimal, anecdote-driven late tetralogy, David Markson's later novels are radically experimental. Far from being ostentatious examples of literary technique, however, they reveal the versatility and galvanising potential of a type of fiction that side-steps conventions and challenges preconceptions about literary forms. Deeply layered and open to multiple ways of interpretation, there are significant truths about the labyrinthine nature of isolation are found throughout Markson's experimental works, each of which, in Tyler Malone's words, "is a lonely narrative of a solitary figure wrestling with the entire history of the Western world" (9).

Wittgenstein's Mistress's sole character, Kate, exists in an inexplicably depopulated world. The reader's only access to, and way of comprehending it, is through what her mind conjures in words from one moment to the next. Beyond the existential quandaries Kate is attempting to navigate, it is a novel that can otherwise be described as plotless. With Kate, as Dustin Illingworth describes it, "we are placed at the end of history and the end of memory, experiencing the state of absolute loneliness: there are no other characters here, nor is there a narrative which could organize the events of the plot" (Illingworth). It is a novel of unreliable rumination, told by a woman whose relationship with reality has become obfuscated, and is unusual for its total absence of direction. Kate is traversing no clear path. The past is a source of agitation; she fixates on it even as and struggles against it. It is subjected to doubt and undergoes regular revision. The present unfolds in a series of moments that bring with them even more insurmountable concerns. She merely exists, imprisoned in a limbo between what her memory might have retained and what her mind has become obsessed with deconstructing.

The text itself reads as a succession of Kate's typed-out thoughts, the continuum of which is interrupted only by her absence from her typewriter. Markson's employed style emulates this relentless flow of thought, emphasising both Kate's increasing psychological distress and the totality of the isolation she is situated in. Other voices are absent. Françoise Palleau-Papin describes it as a novel that demands you "Listen to her silences. Experience her madness. Find yourself in her shoes" (11). Doing so is an uneasy task for the reader, for two reasons. There is, firstly, the problem of flow and even overflow. The prose Markson employs for Kate's thoughts is both precise and erratic; the language itself is direct, but the thoughts they express are frequently disconnected. This appears unusual on the page, but what Markson is engaging in is something of a radical form of realism, manifesting thoughts as they occur. The second reason is linked precisely with the issues Kate is attempting to navigate. Derailed by her protracted inability to make sense of the world around her, her thoughts are not easily consumed or processed.

Wittgenstein's Mistress is not a conventional novel. It resists passive- or speed-reading and is both thematically and stylistically disconcerting. Yet for all its unconventionality, it is a text that encourages the reader into its capsized world rather than distance them from it. Beginning with the enigmatic opening sentence, "In the beginning, sometimes I left messages on the street" (1), Markson's novel immediately prompts a series of questions. Who is this "I"? What did these messages express? How are they being expressed? To whom are they being addressed? On which street were they left? As Kate's monologue proceeds uninterrupted, more questions follow. Is the narrator suffering from some form of mental disorder – possibly triggered by the death of her young son – that has had the effect of literally modifying the world around her? Is she the sole survivor of an unexplained global catastrophe? No explanation is given – nor, for this discussion, is one required. Markson's novel is interested in the *how*, not the why. To show the reader *how*, he employs a style that closely brings them into Kate's way of perceiving the world. If reading, in the words of

Schopenhauer, is "merely a surrogate for thinking for yourself; it means letting someone else direct your thoughts" (261), *Wittgenstein's Mistress* puts us in the position of someone who has seemingly unravelled.

As Kate's disorientation is accounted for, the novel's dominant themes – isolation, death, language's limitations – intensify. She misremembers her deceased son's name, calling him both Adam and Simon. She is not entirely sure which art galleries she has lived in. She goes through a cycle of wondering if a human figure is represented in the window of a painting, before reducing the painting down to its bare elements. Staring at a beach-house she has apparently burned down, she attempts to determine when a house perishes to the point where it can no longer be defined as a house. If Kate's literal isolation is the result of an absence of other people, it is intensified even further by her struggles to vocalise and describe what she has been left with. The material world and Kate's mind have been remodelled by a lack of both people and of a means of comprehension. With its subverting of reality, its opaque philosophical ruminations and its lack of a conclusion, Markson's novel very much adheres to Julie Armstrong's description of the mission of experimental literature. Writing in the introduction to *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers* (2014), she argues that experimental fiction, by its very nature, attempts to:

- Destabilize the real world
- Subvert a sense of the normal
- Introduce debates about the status of the text and the act of writing
- Present different world views
- Have free playing voices, none of which is privileged
- Engage with the moving play of signifiers to construct endless cycles of meaning
- Employ intrusion into the text by the narrator and/or author
- Experiment with form and typography
- Develop new ways of seeing
- Apply multiple discourses
- Mix and/or subvert genres
- Provoke the reader to consider ideas and concepts
- Imagine alternative realities
- Use metaphoric qualities
- Engage the reader on an intellectual/philosophical level
- Deny closure (4)

Although some of these outcomes are not applicable to certain works of experimental literature (including Markson's tetralogy, as will be discussed), most, if not all, are evident in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. It is also an example of a work that is best approached with the idea that its form and content are inextricably bound together.

If Markson's meanings in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* are multiple and open to interpretation, this is because of its unique and idiosyncratic design. The same can be said for Markson's subsequent works. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* laid the early groundwork for the tetralogy Markson wrote between 1996 and 2007, the last of which, the appropriately named *The Last Novel*, was published three years before his death at 82. Although stylistically dissimilar to *Wittgenstein's Mistress,* his preoccupation with its defining themes continued. In comparison to it, Tyler Malone contended that the four novels are "an even more distilled, more oppressive, more intoxicating experience" (11). For Joseph Bates, the tetralogy is notable for how throughout each work "Markson frees the novel of its conventions by freeing the novel of its conventions" (Bates). Laura Sims argues that Markson is less radical in his experimentation and that more traditional literary methods "collaborate with the more easily discernible experimental aspects of his novels to make his work a remarkable hybrid: fiction that is emotionally satisfying, intellectually rewarding, formally distinctive, and compulsively readable all at once" (59).

With the 1996 release of *Reader's Block*, Markson revealed what was to become a radically new direction for his final works. Stripped down, minimalistic, light on plotting and loaded with a plethora of anecdotes about artists, it is a novel more noteworthy for what it leaves out than what it includes. For Jaimie Johansson, it is a work that resembles Walter Benjamin's unfinished final work *The Arcades Project* (1982) in that it "collects the "rags, the refuse" of Western civilization" (12). At its edges resides what can loosely be labelled a protagonist, referred to only as Reader. While Reader attempts to craft a novel, he considers

hundreds of pieces of trivia relating to cultural and historical figures. Reader, for his part, barely features in the work. His absence, however, becomes the whole point. Growing old and infirm, Reader is fixed in a state of isolation, much like Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Although they appear on the surface as randomly sorted and unconnected, the fragments of trivia are in fact thematically linked. As with *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, isolation and death are *Reader's Block*'s two recurring themes, drawing disparate phenomena together. The themes of mental illness and female (mis)representation are present too. Unlike the loss-scarred landscape Kate inhabits, however, Reader's world is that of the real, and his contemplations are driven by his growing awareness of his looming death.

Reader's Block was followed by three more novels in a similar style. *This is Not a Novel*, which within its text refers to itself at various times as "A novel", "An epic poem", "A mural or sorts" and "A kind of a verbal fugue" (18, 21, 36, 170), contains a protagonist named only as Writer. Markson again presents a text comprised almost entirely of an amalgamation of trivia pieces and quotations. Isolation and death, by now Markson's two artistic obsessions, again play a significant role in *This is Not a Novel*. His penultimate book, *Vanishing Point*, retained the strange literary form he had by now made his own. This time, the narrator was named Author. Like Reader and Writer before him, Author is experiencing both a psychological and creative stasis. Confined to his home, Author, attempting to put together a novel, sifts through shoeboxes filled with notecards describing personal calamities that have befallen public figures throughout history.

With all this in mind, it would be easy to ridicule Markson for what may look like artistic laziness or stylistic and thematic stubbornness. However, his final book, *The Last Novel*, proves there are notable differences between each text, which gives each a different agency. For a start, with each book the presence of the sole protagonist gradually decreases. There are also issues of emphasis and obsession. If *Reader's Block* displays an initial interest in certain themes, *The Last Novel* shows a stable infatuation with them. Novelist, *The Last*

Novel's barely present protagonist, seems acutely aware of his own decline and impending absence. Assailed by health concerns, his retreating into *The Last Novel*'s shadows reads like something of an oblique goodbye. Posterity affords us the knowledge that this was indeed Markson's farewell, The Last Novel being his final published work.

What, then, is to be made of Markson's experimentalism? Do these books, with their anomalous approaches and abiding concerns, articulate the nature of isolation in ways that more conventionally crafted novels possibly cannot? The first section in this analysis will begin by looking at the unorthodox forms and tropes he uses in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the novels of the tetralogy. This section will focus on Markson's use of language, repetition, trivia, immersion, fragmentation, and mimicry. The second section will chart the significant role death plays in each work and will argue that both the idea of it amplifies the theme of isolation in all five novels. To examine the psychological realism apparent in each work, analysis of the fictions will be framed by references to psychological studies that have focused on isolation, ageing and social exclusion, the purpose of which will be to determine the extent to which Markson's experimentalism lends itself to examining isolation.

Style and Structure in David Markson's Experimental Works

To comprehend the scope of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, it is vital to look at its construction. With its typed-out style, unbroken, disjointed narrative and its declarative statements that mimic Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, it demands slow consumption. Unrelenting in pace from its beginning, its style is characterised by markedly unorthodox characteristics. For Dustin Illingworth, "the unspooling of her collected facts – both personal and historical, aesthetic and philosophical, banal and profound – become both more and less than what they are, or, indeed, were intended to be (that is, words encoded with particular discursive meanings); rather, they become something of an environment, a last stand on a dead earth and an echo chamber of Kate's own increasingly desperate making" (Illingworth,

86). This “desperate making” takes the form of repetition and accumulated information. These tropes communicate Kate’s isolation, even as they might appear to shore her against it.

Although they can be viewed as standalone works, Markson’s final four novels take on the pattern of a tetralogy. Here the four novels will be examined individually but also be referred to collectively as a tetralogy. To further emphasise how Markson’s formal and stylistic inventiveness lend his works an agency equipped to articulate the nuances of isolation, consideration will also need to be paid to his use of minimalism and the litany of cultural anecdotes and quotes he uses to innovatively emphasise theme.

In this section, it will be argued that Markson’s experimental works provide proof of experimental literature’s suitability for examining the theme of human isolation. It will begin by analysing the stylistic choices Markson makes in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. Following that, the experimentalism at the core of Markson’s tetralogy will be analysed. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which Markson gradually withdraws his protagonist from each novel while tracking the distinct similarities and subtle disparities between each text. Further consideration will also be given to the presence of the cultural anecdotes and quotations widely distributed across the four novels and it will be argued that they have not only a thematic function – as noted in the previous chapter – but a stylistic one also.

Experimentalism in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*

Any discussion about a novel’s construction should begin with what stylistic features are immediately noticeable. To begin with, there is the issue of flow – a lack of it in this case. This is caused by the way in which Kate narrates her story. Her monologue is, it becomes clear, unconventional; rather than a spoken narrative, Kate’s is typed, presented in short paragraphs comprised of declarative statements markedly stilted in their delivery. As Markson’s editor, Steven Moore, describes it: “The language is simple, almost minimalist, yet keeps slipping away into philosophical complications and whimsy” (97). For Palleau-Papin,

meanwhile, Kate's "reasoning breaks down into short paragraphs, and her separation from the world manifests in her style" (180). Additionally, "She gives us a hard time, forcing us to try and follow her erratic logic and changes of subject, but at the same time, she tries, paradoxically, to clear her expression of any ambiguous meaning" (208).

It is natural to wonder why Markson would choose to deliver *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in this way. The answer lies partly in the identity of the figure to whom the book's title refers. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher whose only full-length published work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, informs Markson's novel, both thematically and stylistically. Wittgenstein's text is comprised of seven main propositions, all of which are broken down into 526 numbered, short declarative statements. Opaque in its delivery and, by extension, its vision, Wittgenstein's brief summary of the *Tractatus's* core thesis, stated as "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak therefore one must stay silent" (23), works as a succinct guiding point for its influence on Markson's novel, and how it navigates its core theme of existential and physical isolation. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is, after all, a novel about language and the profound role it plays in lived experience. In a world bereft of other people, language is ultimately all that Kate is left with, as is evidenced by her attempts to use it to harness the astonishment of her abnormal position in the world. Although she says a lot (the whole novel is in her voice and hers only), that which she cannot speak of – such as how she came to occupy such a preternatural position and what events may have inspired it – remains present as unsolved enigmas. As noted, it is not only the *Tractatus's* premise that loosely informs Markson's novel – its style does too. While Kate's statements are not numbered like Wittgenstein's, they are similarly declarative. Like Wittgenstein's statements, Kate's often ruminate on the abstract. While such a style is not out of the ordinary for a philosopher, it is for a woman attempting to catalogue the contents of her mind and the world around her. Kate's life, however, is out of the ordinary. Consequently, her account of it is aberrant because she views the world she inhabits as aberrant. Markson emphasises Kate's

disorientation by having her regularly repeat statements, double back on her fixations and fail to adequately describe her perceptions. Her struggles are as much to do with language itself as they are with the depopulated world around her. This is Wittgenstein's preoccupation in the *Tractatus*: what language can and possibly cannot do. As David Foster Wallace notes in his essay "The Empty Plenum", the question of "What if somebody had to live in a Tractatusized world?" (219) is the question that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* both poses and is haunted by. It is not only asked through its depopulated world; it is also asked, as Foster Wallace implies, through the language that attempts to capture it.

Kate's language, relentlessly austere in its delivery, frequently attempts to establish order through facts. In the *Tractatus*, of course, one of Wittgenstein's prepositions is that "The world is the totality of facts, not of things" (25). While Kate's motives for ruminating on facts are indubitably linked to her want for explanation and stabilisation, the world as a series of facts, as a place shrunken down to cold logic, only contributes to her isolation. What is left of Kate's world is frequently reduced to its bare, factual components. When considered deeply, a painting is no longer an image of a house with someone lurking in its window, but mere shapes created by "burnt sienna pigment" and "yellow ochre" (54-55). Kate's isolation is both physical and intellectual: her body is separate from all others, and her mind cannot resist the habit of deconstructing what she has been left with. Wittgenstein himself, meanwhile, is referred to by Kate forty-five times. As Foster Wallace notes, Kate "gets a lot of her master's remarks wrong, too – the philosopher's better-known words and ideas are sprayed, skewed, all over the book, from its epigraph about sand to Tractatus' 'The world is everything that is the case' to Investigationary speculations on adhesive vs. magnetic 'tape' that unequivocally summon the later Wittgenstein's concerns over words' 'family resemblances' to one another" (219). Kate's many errors are not, as Foster Wallace notes, offered up as "funny propaganda" but are "both original art and original interpretation" (220). This is not the only thing they do. They also serve to further expose both the dysfunction of

her memory and her fixation with language's limitations. While these limitations can be exposed in standard conversations between two or more people, they are brought to light more emphatically when an individual has no other party to converse with, as is the case with Kate. In this way, the real Wittgenstein looms over Markson's novel even more. The conceptualiser of the language-game, Wittgenstein posited that language's meaning is dependent on the rules put in place by the specifics of a conversation. With this in mind, the term "language-game" is, as Wittgenstein's wrote in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), "meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (15). While the conditions of the game may seem credible in the social contexts of conventional lived experience, for Kate, perpetually alone, language is a game she plays on her own, the solitary nature of which results in a constant struggle to extract meaning from words and the sentences they form. In much the same way that she tries and fails to play a game of tennis on her own, the absence of a fellow participant in the game of language also serves to highlight her radical aloneness and the distance that exists between her and her ability to make verbal sense of that aloneness.

Worsening Kate's ordeal is that while she is aware she is physically lost, she is not fully cognisant of the fact that she is psychologically lost also. She admits she was previously "quite out of my mind" and "there was little question about that madness" (7), but her use of past tense implies that she is now better. It soon becomes clear that this too is a delusion, as evidenced by her wayward perceptions and how she catalogues them. Consider, for instance, that despite being preoccupied with the figure of Wittgenstein and what he may or may not have said, Kate does not seem to realise that she is stylistically imitating him. We might conclude from this that Markson is severing another reference point for her and providing the reader with further proof of her dislocation and failing memory. However, no real answer is given; nor, it can be argued, is one needed. Indeed, it can be said that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is not a novel of answers so much as one of unresolved questions. As a result, we are left with

what we began with – ambiguity. Markson brings about this ambiguity through the novel's experimentalism, the function of which brings to mind Kathy Acker's suggestion that

> The desire to play, to make literary structures that play into and in unknown or unknowable realms, those of chance and death and the lack of language, is the desire to live in a world that is open and dangerous, that is limitless. To play, then, both in structure and content, is to desire to live in wonder (Acker, 17-18).

Wittgenstein's Mistress is very much a novel suspended in the extremities of wonder and is concerned with the mysterious realms of existence that Acker refers to, the fundamental astonishment of being and the psychological trapdoors that life's events can open up for the vulnerable to fall through.

With all this in mind, questions need to be asked of Markson's approach. For instance, would his examination of Kate's loneliness be as jarring if her writing style did not echo that of the philosopher to whom she regularly refers? Would the novel's depopulated world be as striking if we did not have some suspicion that it really is a "Tractatusized" world and that Kate's isolation is caused not by some global catastrophe but by her own mind? By extension, what role, in Wittgenstein's terms, do language games play in the text and how does Markson's specific allocation of language and its expression to Kate determine how those games are played (or, in this case, not played)? And what of the literary anecdotes upon which Kate excessively dwells? Do they not act as relics and reminders of a world that is now totally lost to Kate? If Markson is at pains to make the novel ambiguous, frustrating, and at times overwhelming and difficult to trace, it is because isolation itself is by its very nature all of those things. Additionally, Kate's character bears all too recognisable reflections. She is, as Dustin Illingworth suggests, "in some sense, every one of us. If her situation is perhaps more dire than our own, her struggles to think, compose, share, communicate, reach across the haunted borderlands of her own consciousness are nothing if not utterly familiar to any reader, to any writer" (87).

Lastly, it is necessary to look closer at Kate's delivery. Kate's habits are revealed not only by her stated actions and thoughts, but also by the very nature of how they are referred to. Foster Wallace notes that "Devices like repetition, obsessive return, free-/unfree association swirl in an uneasy suspension throughout. Yet they communicate" (222). Kate's account is full of all of these devices, and highlights the extent to which experimentalism, when manipulated to suit particular ends, takes on a notable agency. In this case, it dictates the clear – and stark – manipulation of language and its association with perception to highlight the fragility and vulnerability of the isolated mind.

> This studied indirection, a sustained error that practically impels misprision, is how Kate convinces us that, if she is forcene, so must we be: the subtextual emotive agenda under the freewheeling disorder of short isolated paragraphs, under the flit of thought, under the continual struggle against the slipping sand of English & the drowning pool of self-consciousness – a seductive order not only in but via chaos – compels complete & uneasy acquiescence, here (222).

Unreliable by default, Kate's narrative is nevertheless convincing in its honesty if not its factual recall; the very delivery of her account displays a type of control that both expresses and simultaneously harnesses the random nature of thought. Indeed, the indirection – and, by extension, the relentless cataloguing of thought – *is* so sustained that the reader, if they choose to persist with Kate's account, has no choice but to permit "uneasy acquiescence", as Foster Wallace argues, that renders the reading experience as discomforting as it is confounding. All of this is achieved through the careful set of experimental formal and stylistic choices Markson makes to ensure that Kate's account is both disorientating and yet surprisingly trackable at the same time. Markson guarantees this by utilising otherwise accessible language to pose complex philosophical and linguistic questions. Consider one of a few instances where Kate poses a question about language. Recalling a time when she apparently lived in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, she refers to how an instruction pamphlet for new speakers informed her to "make certain that the two speakers were equidistant from each other" (101-102). As with others she reflects on, the memory causes her to dwell on language, as she asks:

"No matter where one situated them how could there be any way in which two objects could be any distance from each other except equidistant?" She later indulges in the repetition and obsessive return Foster Wallace mentions, when the linguistic conundrum the word "equidistant" poses drifts back into her thoughts. In fact, it comes up another fifteen times, revealing itself as one of many of Kate's obsessions. On a wider level, it also reveals the extent to which Markson's textual experimentation contributes to the accentuation of Kate's isolation. By steeping the text in repetition and using it as not only a medium through which language is communicated but also contested, Markson shows how at the core of literary experimentation is a subtextual impulse that challenges the efficiency of language and illuminates how perception and identity can be distorted by its limitations.

Additionally, Markson's decision to have Kate fixate on language's limitations forces us to consider if her ramblings are intellectually credible or merely symptomatic of a mind in disarray. Kate's account actively encourages the reader to focus on language, to wonder if it truly can adequately describe discernible reality. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* leads us to conclude that perhaps occasionally it does not. This stylistic feature of Markson's, this toying with words and what they can and cannot do, further emphasises the extent to which the novel's form and its content are indivisible. Implying the cure and the cause are one and the same, through her typed-out monologue, Markson has Kate ruminate on the logic and potential limits of language by testing both with logic and language. It not only implicates the reader in the novel's world, but also indicates, in a sort of subtle whisper, that we may be susceptible to plunging into it ourselves. This is, once again, an indication not just of how the actual Wittgenstein and his theories on language and reality haunt Markson's novel, but also how, when manipulated, the agency of experimentalism can implicate the reader in a work's world and have them engage with it in ways that force them to consider their own realities and how they inhabit them.

There is also another feature of the narrative that doesn't become clear until it is referred to after forty-six pages: that Kate is sitting at a typewriter and is literally writing her narrative – or, as Foster Wallace puts it, "is shouting into her typing paper's blankness" (220). This style of narrative poses its own series of questions. In a world where she is the only living being left, to whom can she possibly be writing to or for? Are her words being directed to a potential future reader? If so, does this reveal that, despite the fact her global search proved fruitless, she still harbours hope that she will one day be reunited with humanity? Or, conversely, is it possible she sees her finished manuscript as something that will only be read posthumously – or worse, never read, becoming the last thing to ever be written? On a deeper existential level, it is possible that for Kate to continue writing is, in the end, to continue existing; that the act of writing is, in the depopulated world she inhabits, the ultimate act of agency: staying alive.

It could be that Kate sees her account as all of these at different times – or none of them, ever. What we do know from her account is that she has used the written word to try to communicate in the past. As mentioned, she begins her narrative by revealing her attempts to reach out to others by writing messages in the street. "Somebody is living in the Louvre, certain of the messages would say" (7), she writes. "Or in the National Gallery." She stopped, she admits, after three or four messages, because "Nobody came, of course." This was at a time when she was, by her own admission, "quite out of my mind for a certain period too, back then." Whether or not she sees her typed account as a more practical means of pursuing the same goal is not revealed, but the act itself is revealing enough. It disrupts our preconceptions about the form of the novel itself, forcing us to reconsider our idea of it as a sustained monologue. Monologues are, of course, usually "vocal." Kate's method is not. At the sentence level there is a peculiar stiltedness, an austere attempt to impose control over the disorder of thought. Yet the concision of her sentences, often displaying a painstaking want for clarity, is juxtaposed with the erraticism of the narrative itself. If it can be categorised as

anything, it might be best to consider her account a thought-journal, one in which all thoughts, or at least all the thoughts that come to Kate when she sits at her typewriter, are documented. As a result, it is perhaps wisest to resist seeking out final meaning in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, and instead to see it as a novel of experience rather than a work from which a final narrative truth can be extracted. After all, Kate's authorly intent, if indeed there is one, remains elusive at the novel's conclusion. She uses the last words of her account to again attempt to register her own presence. "There is someone living on this beach" (240), she notes, a sentence she has previously suggested she would write in the sand using a stick to "tell the truth" (57). The truth rendered here, however, is no grand reveal offering clarity; instead, it is the simple truth of a fact which, profound though it is, serves to offer little in terms of psychological relief or wider explanation of her surreal living environment. Instead, it condenses, as in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the world down into facts. It also reaffirms the idea that rather than project meaning, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is, in the end, a documentation of experience, the experimentally crafted extremities of which are provided by a form inseparable from its content.

Wittgenstein's Mistress is, by any standards, a frustrating novel. This is integral to its achievement, not least because psychic pain at its worst denies the sufferer of comprehension of that pain, of meaning, of a sense of selfhood and their place in the world. As Colin Marshall describes it, "Kate's 240-page communiqué to nobody uncannily emulates the way our thoughts wander from subject to subject, from concrete personal experience to distant historical fact, making associations that seem at once preposterous and immediate, looping, crossing, and doubling back on themselves" (Marshall). Without experimentalism, how else could Markson have delved so unremittingly deep into Kate's defective psyche? How can language's relationship with reality, what we believe to be reality, be fully explored, fully tested, without fully exploring and testing it? Likewise, Markson's use of Wittgenstein's style and philosophical concepts enable the construction of a world both unreal and hauntingly

familiar that tests the very limits of literature and existence itself. Also crucial to the novel's atmosphere is the presence of so many cultural anecdotes and quotes, some of which are misworded or misattributed. The inclusion of these references serves to expose Kate's deficient memory and bring into focus a sense of artistic community that she reaches out for but is unable to access. It can be concluded then that *Wittgenstein's Mistress* works so well as a study of isolation precisely because of the way in which it approaches it. The unorthodoxy of Kate's account forces us, through its delivery, to think and perceive its world as unorthodox. As a result, the reader must by necessity inhabit and experience Kate's total and unexplained isolation, the potential causes and final meanings of which we can only guess at.

Experimentalism in Markson's Tetralogy

Accounted for in previous studies of his tetralogy, and evident in Laura Sims's publication of his letters in *Fare Forward: Letters from David Markson* (2014), the tetralogy appears to be based on Markson's own struggles as an ageing author. While this may be of intrigue to scholarship and offer a lens through which to analyse his works, this study will not focus on the autobiographical dimensions of the tetralogy. To begin with, this study is preoccupied with the extent to which literary experimentation can convey the complexities of various forms of human isolation. To that end, it is concerned with the works themselves and the links that can be drawn between them and research in the fields of experimental literature and human isolation. This study will work off the premise that a work should be judged on its individual merits, not least because it is an investigation of style, rather than autobiographical reality and its influence on content. While applying such a position to contemporary works of experimental literature that are overtly autofictional is not always so easy, as will be later discussed, it can be reasonably applied to Markson's tetralogy, not least because the works have never been presented as overt works of autofiction. The second reason is due to the unavailability of wider information cataloguing the details of Markson's autobiography. The

Sims correspondence, and a few interviews with acquaintances aside, very little is known about Markson's life. There are, at present, no biographies or other studies about his life.

Before looking at what the works of his tetralogy contain, it is perhaps best to first account for what is noticeably absent. The works that make up Markson's tetralogy discard with much of what we expect from a book when we open one. Like *Wittgenstein's Mistress* before them, each novel contains just one active character, an ageing author. In each work, he is attempting to write a book. No other characters are present beyond being considered in memory or invention. There is nothing in the way of drama or significant revelation. There is also a notable absence of paragraphs and chapters; instead, the novels are written in fragments – single sentences, for the most part, separated from one another by blocks of white space, which again recall the fragments that make up Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. As Matt Bucher has noted, the publication of *Reader's Block* signalled the time when Markson "worked to abandon the first person 'I' narrators, and plot structure altogether" (107). To the unfamiliar eye, a quick glance at any of them may suggest that they are lengthy prose poems. While they are clearly not poems (though notably stylised in their delivery, Markson's fragments do not tend to contain any intentional poetic characteristics), it is also not easy to say with any real certainty what they are. There are two reasons why this is the case. There are two reasons why this is the case. Firstly, each novel in the tetralogy takes inspiration from *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in that they are overwhelmingly loaded with cultural trivia – attributed and unattributed quotes, facts and anecdotes, the vast majority of which centre on artists and the themes of death, sickness and injustice. While other authors have used slightly similar approaches in their writing – including Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (1982) and, more recently, Kenneth Goldsmith and David Shields in their work – Markson's extreme use of secondary material is interesting in that it works both as thematic influence and, in the case of the tetralogy, as something of a replacement for the original input of its incrementally vanishing narrator.

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, such citations appeared as Kate's thoughts and exposed her yearnings; in a complementary way, the cultural trivia deployed in the tetralogy appear like compass-needles directing the themes of the novels. Additionally, our attempts to define the tetralogy's works become further muddled by the fact that in each of the novels themselves the narrator takes to speculating on how they may be classified. While at the subtextual level, it is natural to conclude that Markson is playing with ideas around the originality (or perhaps unoriginality) of art, the way in which these considerations are communicated reinforces the depth of the isolation that the tetralogy's protagonist is experiencing.

In *Reader's Block*, Reader asks a question that sums up entirely the one Markson's experimental oeuvre repeats: "What is a novel in any case?" (13). It is also a question that proves that literary experimentation becomes, by default, literary content. Reader's question is a rhetorical one, and is largely unanswerable. Or at least Markson intends proving this to be the case. Reader, lost in the throes of creative indecision, begins to wonder how much of his own life he will end up including in his work-in-progress. Is he writing a novel, or "is he in some peculiar way thinking of an autobiography after all?" (13). Whatever the genre, he is also trying to figure out his book's structure, asking "Nonlinear? Discontinuous? Collage-like? An assemblage?" (14). Twenty-seven pages pass before Reader returns to the topic, asking once more "Or perhaps not a novel? Is he in some peculiar way thinking of an autobiography?" (41). A further twenty go by before Reader, nearly half of his book now written, asks if what he is composing may be "A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel?" before adding "Also in part a commonplace book? Also in part a cento, as Burton would surely have had it?" (61). Markson has Reader repeat the very same lines again when, later, he appears to be still trying to define what he is writing. Some degree of choice appears to be made soon after when Reader states "Non-linear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage", before adding "Of no discernible genre? A

seminonfictional semifiction? Cubist? Obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax in any case. And as incidental personal challenge, letting none of its intellectual mishegaas be material Reader has ever used anywhere else" (140-141). As the novel edges towards its end, Reader throws another self-defining curveball, asking "Or does the absence of narrative progression plus that cross-circuited schematism possibly render it even a poem of sorts? Not to add avec 333 interspersed unattributed quotations awaiting annotation?" (166). Reader once more ponders on the possibility of his work being an autobiography before relaying once again his description of its structure. His last sentence, a mere one word in length, perhaps sums up what he thinks of the book he has now completed: "Wastebasket" (193). Away from this darkly amusing conclusion and indeed the specifics of his texts and their core themes, Markson's fixation with repeatedly querying his process provides a commentary of sorts on the extensive potential of experimental literature and its innate resistance towards simple literary classification. Additionally, it is possible to recognise Markson's rhetorical questioning of his work as an abiding trope that underpins not only the theme of language's imprecision that runs through all his experimental works, but also the sense that form and content are always to be considered as intertwined.

In *This is Not a Novel*, Markson continues his project of crafting works that query standard literary conventions by creating once more a largely absent protagonist who is also confused about what he is in the process of creating. More than any of the tetralogy's other works, it is a work that, as Young Hee Kim describes it, "directly denies its identity as a novel and challenges the general sense of the term" (28). On this occasion, the work's sole character refers to himself only as Writer. He is "pretty much tempted to quit writing" and is "weary unto death of making up stories" and "equally tired of inventing characters" (1). In fact, the book he wishes to write will have "no intimation of story whatsoever", no characters or plot, no action, setting, central motivations, social themes or politics. Nonetheless, it will hold the reader's attention and be considered "Ultimately, a work of art without even a subject" (2-8).

And to the emboldened Writer, it can be both a novel and whatever else he wishes it to be also. Consider the multiple ways he defines his work-in-progress throughout the novel:

> • This is a novel if Writer or Robert Rauschenberg says so (16).
> • This is an epic poem, if writer says so (18).
> • Also, even a sequence of cantos awaiting numbering, if Writer wants it (20).
> • This is even a mural of sorts, if Writer says so (33).
> • This is even an autobiography, if Writer says so (47).
> • This is also a continued heap of riddles, if Writer says so (61)
> • Or even a polyphonic opera of a kind, if Writer says that too (64).
> • This is even a disquisition on the maladies of the life of art, if Writer says so (75).
> • Or an ersatz prose alternative to *The Waste Land*, if Writer so suggests (88).
> • Or a treatise on the nature of man, If Writer so labels it (98).
> • Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage. Self-evident enough to scarcely need Writer's say-so (112).
> • *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. From papyri and pyramid inscriptions dated as early as 1580 B.C. Or a contemporary variant on the latter, if Writer says so (128)
> • This is also a kind of verbal fugue, if Writer say so. If still less than self-evident to the less attentive (149).
> • Nonetheless, this is also in many ways even a classic tragedy, if Writer says so (150).
> • Or on the other end of the scale even a volume entitled *Writer's Block* – which Writer is willing to wager some petulant soul will have it (152).
> • Or sometimes of course even a comedy of a sort, if Writer says so (162).
> • Or even his synthetic personal *Finnegans Wake*, if Writer so decides (163).
> • Or was it possibly nothing more than a fundamentally recognizable genre all the while, no matter what Writer averted? (167).
> • Nothing more or less than a read (167).
> • Simply an unconventional, generally melancholy though sometimes even playful now-ending read? (167).

As was the case with Reader's wondering about the possibilities of what *Reader's Block* could ultimately be perceived as, Markson uses Writer here to restate again the difficulty of defining with any precision a single category in which *This Is Not a Novel* can be placed. Indeed, given the extent to which Writer's comments speak not just about the specific work they are considering, but also of the broader capacities of experimental literature in general, it is worth briefly returning to some of the characteristics of the form identified by Julie Armstrong to see how they align with what is evident in Markson's process. As noted, among the other characterises she outlines in *Experimental Fiction*, Armstrong states that those who engage in experimental literary techniques "Subvert a sense of the normal", "Introduce debates about the status of the text and the act of writing", "Engage with the moving play of

signifiers to construct endless cycles of meaning" and "Employ intrusion into the text by the narrator and/or author" (4). Furthermore, she notes how the experimental writer sets out to "Experiment with form and typography", "Mix and/or subvert genres" and "provoke the reader to consider ideas and concepts." They also aim to "Engage the reader on an intellectual/philosophical level" and, in the end, "Deny closure." It is not difficult to see how Markson's experimental works emphatically meet these criteria. As is obvious, his subversion of the normal is reflected both in the radical interruption of standard literary conventions and his overt repetitiousness, both of which encourage the reader to reconsider what can constitute a literary text and the role that practice plays in channelling themes and wider meanings. The narrative open-endedness of Markson's experimental works and how they are constructed facilitate the potential of reading them through the lens of a multitude of different meanings. Additionally, the recurring roles that the writer and act of writing play in each work also align with Armstrong's identification of authorly intrusion as a staple of literary experimentalism. Furthermore, Markson's use of fragmentation and stylistic mimicry, his enmeshing of fiction and non-fiction, and his resistance towards conventional conclusions have the potential to engender further debates about not only what literature can and cannot be, but also wider art's potential in general and how experimentalism can inform it.

As is the case in *Reader's Block*, in *This Is Not a Novel* Markson further promotes his experimental vision. In the tetralogy's second work, Markson appears to want the reader to, in Palleau-Papin's words, "read between the lines, in the typographic blanks, in the careful organization of reprises and echoes" (246). Doing so reveals that he is using Writer's indecisiveness and contrariness to reveal his isolation, both as a writer and as ageing man. If it is autobiography, as he suggests it could be, then its content reveals it to be one about an old novelist who no longer has anyone to call upon and who no longer has the energy or will to write conventionally crafted novels. If it is a mural, it is one dedicated to the dead, the insane, the largely forgotten, and if it is a polyphonic opera, it is one in which the participants play

out their roles in isolation. Whatever it is, Writer realises his project – playfully ostentatious though may it be – is a bleak one at core. He likens it to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (88) and suggests that it may well be viewed as something of an encyclopaedia documenting the tragedies of artists, bringing to mind Steven Moore's suggestion that Markson's tetralogy is directly inspired by Schopenhauer's desire for a writer to compile a "tragic history of literature" (Moore, 9). Of course, Writer's struggles to settle on an exact description of what the work amounts to is repeated by the reader who encounters the work, highlighting once more the tendency of experimental works to remain resistant towards being read as having singular meanings. Indeed, in addition to this resistance, Markson also obscures not just the work's narrative, but also its very form – a blurring of lines playfully implied in the title of the work itself.

While the subverting of genre compels us to consider experimental literature in general, the rhetorical questioning through which it is communicated also, at the narrative level, implies a sense of confusion and, by extension, isolation on Writer's behalf. Author in *Vanishing Point* and Novelist in *The Last Novel* similarly ruminate on the creative work they are engaging in, but they do so to a lesser degree. Author is more concerned with the act of writing rather than wondering how it can be defined. It will, however, be stylistically similar to *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel* in that it will be "Nonlinear. Discontinuous. Collage-like. An assemblage. As is already more than self-evident" and "A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel. This presumably by now self-evident also" (12-13). Later, he describes what he is working on as "A seminonfictional semifiction", which is "Obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax" (93). This latter description is a repetition from *Reader's Block* and is referred to again later in the tetralogy. Whether Writer is aware that it is remains unclear. However, given repetition is a clear trope of Markson's, it can be reasonably deduced that this is another symptom of perceived creative stagnation. His experiment, which he presumes will

be obvious to the "attentive reader", is to "see how little of his own presence he can get away with throughout" (93). He seems unable or unwilling to identify the reasons why he wishes to craft his work in this way. However, it becomes clear that Markson is hiding Author in the novel's shadows, presumably to further emphasise his isolation; that is, rather than simply express Author's isolation through ruminations and actions, Markson isolates him from the text itself, leaving the reader only with the pieces of trivia with which he is composing his work.

Novelist in *The Last Novel* is less concerned with the particulars of what he is composing. Aware it is his last book, he has decided that it gives him "carte blanche to do anything here he damned well pleases. Which is to say, writing in his own personal genre, as it were" (4.). Like its three predecessors, it will be "A novel of intellectual reference and allusion, so to speak minus much of the novel." Novelist does not intend to play an active part in his book and "will say more about himself only when he finds no way to evade doing so, but rarely otherwise" (12). The theme of genre-invention returns later when he states "Novelist's personal genre. For all its seeming fragmentation, nonetheless obstinately cross-referential and of cryptic interconnective syntax" (51). While *The Last Novel* is, like the three works before it, thematically rife with death and other negative themes, the comedy in Markson's experimentalism, the sustained commitment to literary high jinks, also needs to be recognised, not least because it says something wider about experimentalism in general. Markson's use of Novelist to continue his wider interrogation into the classification of literature into different genres is, as the tetralogy proves, sustained, but the extent to which Markson applies a seriousness to the "discussion" is difficult to decipher. On the one hand, as with all experimental literature, there is a mischievousness – as best evidenced perhaps by his transition from naming the second work in the tetralogy *This Is Not a Novel* to the naming the final one *The Last Novel*. On the other, however, Markson's use of his narrators to query the lines that demarcate one form of literature from another speaks of something more personal –

that is, the distance felt by the outsider artist in a world weighed in favour towards tradition. From one of Novelist's comments, for instance, we learn that the previous books have been published and negatively critiqued. "Reviewers", he writes, "who have accused Novelist of inventing some of his anecdotes and/or quotations – without the elemental responsibility to do the checking that would verify every one of them" (69). Irked, he presses on, describing his work again as a "seminonfictional semifiction" with "its interspersed unattributed quotations at roughest count adding up to a hundred or more" (83). Soon after, he returns to the prospect of his book being misread, stating "Reviewers who protest that Novelist has lately appeared to be writing the same book over and over. Like their grandly perspicacious uncles – who groused that Monet had done those damnable water lilies nine dozen times already also" (Markson, 104). The same issue is revisited later, when, having suggested just four pages before that he has thrown his cat out the window for no reason, he writes:

> Novelist does not own a cat, and thus most certainly could have not thrown one out a window. Nonetheless he would lay odds that more than one hopscotching reviewer will be reading carelessly enough here to never notice these two sentences and announce that he did so (135).

Again, as shown here, Markson's regular use of black humour casts light both on the nature of experimentalism and, at an individual level, the isolation of the outsider artist. Atypically constructed works, Markson's narrator is evidently implying, do not command the attention they deserve and thus are misread – and, by extension, misunderstood – by "hopscotching" critics. They also go unappreciated by the wider public, a point that Novelist conveys through the unattributed remarks: "You don't have a computer? So how do you write your books? You don't still use a typing machine" and "Listen, I bought your latest book. But I quit after about six pages. That's all there is, those little things?" (145-155). It is a theme that tellingly continues to dominate Novelist's mind as he edges closer to completing his work, the effect of which, presumably, isolates him further. Referring to his three previous works, he finds himself "Wondering if there is any viable way to convince critics never to use the word

tetralogy without also adding that each volume can be readily read by itself?" (161). And with that, his commentary on his work ceases.

It might be natural to wonder what the commentaries in all four of the novels say about isolation. Is Markson not merely being playful? Are the protagonist's attempts at self-defining his work not just attempts by Markson to playfully criticise those who try to shackle a work of art to a particular category or genre? As noted, it seems unlikely that Markson is simply using humour for humour's sake. Beneath the comedy, there are deeper discussions at play. To further this point, it is worth considering the positions the tetralogy's narrator is working from. We know, for instance, he is elderly, lethargic, becoming increasingly unwell, lacking financial security and lonely. His estrangement from others is restated throughout all the novels. Beneath the narrative playfulness, there is clearly a desire to be noticed, as the concluding commentaries on style in *The Last Novel* reveal. In each of the novels, indecision and the imagination are sources of distress. At a stage in life where tiredness and isolation are inevitable, he no longer seems willing or able to write like before. While this is liberating to one degree – he invents a new form of writing and gets four novels out of it – it is also disabling. The act of writing, isolating in itself, becomes another source of torment; experimentation may well offer a creative release for him, but it is also symptomatic of the isolation he inhabits. It is, after all, easier to not care about how others will perceive what you are doing when the number of others interested in what you are doing are so few. Yet, jokes and ridicule at play or not, there is a want for validation. Those who he appears to be dismissing or scorning – reviewers and, possibly, academics and everyday readers too – are also those from whom he seeks understanding. That his novels are unlikely to yield any sort of significant critical response does not seem to be something he is willing to consider. He is man divided, caught between a punkish attitude towards conformity and acceptance and a writer's inherent want to be read, accepted and celebrated.

The experimentation at play in Markson's tetralogy is not just evident in its narrator's personal musings. There is also the matter of the inclusion of hundreds of trivia fragments and quotes that in each of the novels he is either considering in isolation or actively making use of. While the sourcing and interpretation of each individual reference is not required for this study, their dominant themes demand contemplation. As will be discussed at length in the concluding section of this chapter, their predominant theme is that of death. But there are others which provide insight into the narrator's obsessions and help direct the reading of the novels too. On the opening page of *Reader's Block*, for instance, there are anecdotes about the horrors of war ("Church bells were already ringing, to announce the Armistice in November 1918, when word reached Wilfred Owen's family that he had been killed in battle one week before"), the neuroses of artists ("Picasso made Gertrude Stein sit more than eighty times for her portrait. And then painted out the head and redid it three months later without having seen her again") and repetition ("Pablo Casals began each day for more than seventy years by playing Bach") (9). Madness and its accompanying isolation, a key theme in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, is also evident in *Reader's Block*. In its opening pages, Reader considers Emily Dickinson's latter-life reclusiveness (10), Balzac's suggestion, near death, that only Branchon, a fictional doctor in his novel *Le Pere Goriot*, could save him (11) and the fact that moments before her suicide Sylvia Plath left food out for her children in their room while they slept (13). They are themes that continue throughout *Reader's Block* and the tetralogy's subsequent three works, providing insight into where Markson's protagonist is, psychologically speaking, and what he may be fearing for – and already seeing – in himself.

Racism and sexism, both predicated on the ostracising of a perceived inferior, are two more themes that recur in the anecdotes scattered throughout the tetralogy. Cultural figures who harboured anti-Semitic views are listed, among them Martin Luther (30), Thomas Aquinas (10), George Bernard Shaw (15), W.B. Yeats (18) and Immanuel Kant (22). Neglected and/or mistreated female cultural figures and the wives of male cultural figures are

accounted for too. In *Reader's Block*, we learn that "Fighting with his wife, drunk, Paul Verlaine once threw their three-month-old son against a wall" (10). "The likelihood that Anne Hathaway could not read" (8), is presented as something to ponder in *This is Not a Novel*. Geoffrey Chaucer's pay-off of a woman who had accused him of rape is bluntly stated in *Vanishing Point* (20). The issue of misogyny is also raised in *The Last Novel*, with Novelist considering the anecdote that "Sigmund Freud ran his household in such a rigidly patriarchal manner that his wife was literally expected to have spread the toothpaste on his brush each morning" (3). In addition to highlighting the prejudices harboured by these cultural figures, the impact of which would of course have isolated its victims, Markson also appears to be attempting to destabilise the general notion of the role and figure of the cultural figure as sanctified. This aligns with Markson's experimentalism in general – an accompanying interrogation of that which is standardly received/accepted with the intention of revealing nuance and wider comprehension, both about individuals themselves and, more broadly, the culture at large they inhabit.

The anecdotes are not just revealing in what they say – there is also the matter of their aesthetic function. The tetralogy's anecdotes are not just as a means of contributing to the work's themes, but, through their composition and the blocks of white space that separates them, a way of informing them too. They act as literary props, diversions that both steer the reader away from the "story" taking place while simultaneously informing them about what is actually going on. The anecdotes reveal the nature of the narrator's fixations and demand the reader to consider the specifics of what they say and why they are being considered. All the while, the isolated narrator, whose presence gradually decreases from novel to novel, is isolated not just from the "real" world he is situated in, but also from the autobiographical works he is writing. What the tetralogy amounts to is something of an incremental, oblique vanishing act, in which an aged, isolated and lonely writer drifts into the obscurity his obsessions have constructed around him. Initially perceived as odd interruptions, the

anecdotes end up not only guiding us but implicating us too, turning the works themselves into sort of literary games reliant on inference and thematic pattern seeking. What are we to make of an individual so fixated with bleak and absurd trivia? What is it telling us about him? In his inclusion of the anecdotes, we might see that Markson is echoing Don DeLillo, who in his 1988 novel *Libra* describes facts as "lonely things" (294). The individual present in the tetralogy's novels certainly seems to look at them in that way. In their unchanging rigidness and cold isolation, it appears he sees something of his own life in them, as if they are not only snippets of information but psychological beacons that he both directly communicates with and, in the works he is both creating and is part of, hides his explicit presence between.

While Markson's works are not quite, as is often said about them, "about nothing" (even so called "Anti-novels" are still, in the end, novels), the plurality of the ways in which they can be read and how he achieves this given how narratively bare they are highlights the flexibility of experimental literature. This is particularly evident when it involves the coalescing of the fictional and the real and an approach towards form that is so committed to tracking, over substantial periods of time, human consciousness. As Colin Marshall notes:

> What's not so up for dispute is that Markson accomplished what, by all rights, should be a literary impossibility. Novels not "about" anything precisely definable. Novels without more than one consciousness inhabiting them, if that. Novels without narrative. Novels built of seemingly unrelated snippets of information about coincidence, connection, poverty, probability, ignominy, ignorance, excretion, expiration. Novels that, over a four-decade career, approach nothing less than the purest time spent in the brain of another found on any page (Marshall).

Marshall's assertion that Markson's tetralogy amounts to what should be a "literary impossibility" may exaggerate its accomplishment, but his wider point highlights once more that far from being a mere act of simple ostentatiousness, the experimental impulse can be – and often is – orientated towards the progress of human understanding. In Markson's experimental approach to craft and his dismissal of literary conventions, there is, as Marshall

suggests, an enduringly human desire to use innovative ways to unpack and cast in new light that which makes us who we are.

In Summary: Markson's Styles and Structures

In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Markson uses an unbroken monologue, delivered in typed form, to emphasise the extent of Kate's absolute aloneness and to bring the reader close into a mind failing to give shape to and free itself from its own unravelling. Delivered in declarative statements stylistically and thematically inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Markson disorientates Kate's account of her unique position in the world by having her engage in regular memory loss, repetition, a fixation with language and its limits in capturing reality, and anecdotes about cultural figures that may or may not be true.

In his tetralogy, Markson's use of formal experimentation is also significant. Using hundreds of trivia fragments to directly inform the works (as well as a means of limiting their protagonists' explicit presence), the tetralogy can be seen as something of a sustained experiment in narrative minimalism and, ultimately, a harrowing commentary on the isolation caused by ageing and loneliness. Additionally, given the great – and telling – emphasis Markson places throughout the tetralogy on commenting on literary practice and dissolving the boundaries placed between different forms of literature, the tetralogy can be seen as a meta-discourse on the innate perils and lack of public recognition the experimental artist may have to contend with.

Consequently, content and form in Markson's experimental oeuvre should not be considered divisible. Specifically, from a perspective of looking at those works through the lens of human isolation, it can be said that *how* Markson writes is just as significant as *what* he writes – to the point where, from a critical point of view, it is valuable to perceive both as being inextricably bound up and an example of the potential of literary experimentalism and how its versatility can be utilised to examine particular themes.

Death in Markson's Experimental Works

Much like Samuel Beckett, to whom he is clearly stylistically and thematically indebted, the most defining preoccupation in Markson's experimental works is the theme of death. Writing about the ubiquity of the subject in Beckett's work in *Beckett's Dying Words*, Christopher Ricks has noted that "while it makes sense to read Beckett, as many do, as a writer who oddly criss-crossed, a writer who manages to be excruciatingly funny despite his possessing a deeply dispiriting apprehension of life, the opposite makes sense too: the conviction that Beckett's apprehension of death is not dispiriting, but is wise and fortifying, and therefore is unsurprisingly the lens of his translucent comedy" (20). While it is perhaps not as overtly and intentionally as humorous as Beckett's, Ricks's reading could also be applied to Markson's death-haunted works, all of which are at least absurdly humorous, if not "excruciatingly funny." Their comedic potential aside, and contrary to how we might naturally respond to works so fixated on so many levels with the theme of death, Markson's works are also – as Ricks describes Beckett's – "wise and fortifying", as evidenced by the layers of meaning that can be extrapolated from close readings of the role death plays in Markson's work and how it is experimentally channelled.

The echo of death reverberates through *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Markson's tetralogy. It was, after all, potentially the most aggravating factor in the onset of Kate's apparent madness in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. It is also a theme to which she regularly turns her attention, not least because her son – and, metaphorically at the very least, the entire world's population – has passed away. Death's presence is even more unignorably significant in the tetralogy, although it plays a more varied role. The tetralogy's protagonist is as concerned by what is to come as by what is irreversibly gone. Be it an exercise in comfort-seeking or merely a morbid inclination of the aged and regressive mind, his thoughts invariably drift deathward, fixating as they do on the deaths, and their causes, of an abundance of writers, artists, philosophers and other cultural figures.

A close reading of the novels through this lens of death and how it is presented using a variety of experimental techniques yields intriguing results. Namely, that through experimentalism, Markson displays a remarkable acuity when it comes to understanding the nature of isolation and the propagating forces that cause it in some instances and arise out of it in others.

Literal and Metaphorical Death in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*

The first indication of the potential cause of Kate's disorientation arrives three and a half pages into her monologue, when, abruptly, she vaguely recalls a time when she drove to Mexico to visit her young son Adam's grave. Such an admission is in and of itself largely unremarkable. That, however, soon changes, when she soon asks "Why have I written that his name was Adam?" before adding that her son was actually named Simon (9). In a novel that seeks to challenge its reader, this is a defining moment; it offers the first window into an obvious source of trauma and reveals that Kate is engaging in the act of literally documenting her thoughts as they come into her mind. This, after two and a half pages, provides the first glimmer of narrative context, and highlights, at the textual level, the slightly peculiar medium through which her account will be communicated. Acknowledging the medium again is important, particularly when addressing the role that death and its accompanying grief play in Kate's account. Because Markson has her deliver it in real-time, it shows the extent to which Kate's mind drifts towards her losses and the evident absence and isolation they have engendered. After a wayward introduction, then, two apparent certainties are communicated: Firstly, the narrator (whose name is not revealed until page thirty-three) is in a state of grief. Secondly, the waywardness of her narrative is a result not only of the way in which her mind is operating but also because she is cataloguing each of her thoughts as they come to her.

The next reference to Simon is a significant one, arriving as it does when she is referring to how she has "burned two houses to the ground, over the years" (14). The second

of the fires was accidental. The first, however, tells us something about the impact Simon's death appears to have had on her mental health. Recalling the morning after she visited his grave in Mexico, Kate describes how she proceeded to set fire to the family home, before driving away from it.

> Why I burned the first one I would rather not go too deeply into. I did that quite deliberately, however. That was in Mexico, on the morning after I had visited poor Simon's grave. Well, it was the house we had all lived in. I honestly believed I had planned to stay on, for a time. What I did was spill gasoline all over Simon's old room. Much of the morning I could still see the smoke rise and rise, in my rearview mirror (14).

The scene is a pivotal one, as it offers insights into both Kate's dysfunctional mind and Markson's ability to convey bereavement's complex extremities. Although the language Kate uses to convey the memory is conventional on the surface, its subtext (repression) and austere delivery, when considered against the astonishing isolation she is convinced she is experiencing, appear distinctly unusual. In short, the situation she is in renders the ordinariness of her language extraordinary, which, away from the novel itself, shows once more the value in broadening, at every level of a text, what can be considered experimental. The act itself, meanwhile, which we can reasonably read as a drastic attempt to repress the reality of her son's death, further isolates Kate from the physical world she appears to have once known. If the fire was inspired by a desire to forget, to push past that which is psychologically crippling her, its intended outcome has evidently failed. In order to contextualise what Kate is potentially going through, it might be wise here to turn to the field of psychology. The purpose of doing so, it should be noted, is not to critically evaluate the grief dimension of the text and how it contributes to its overall worth, per se, but rather to attempt to frame Kate's grief and better understand how it contributes to her isolated state. Try as she might, Kate is never far from death's shadow. Coupled with her perception that she is that last living person on Earth, the complex nature of her grief might suggest that she is suffering from a particularly intense form of what in psychiatry is termed "complicated grief."

As outlined in M. Katherine Shear in “Grief and Mourning Gone Awry” the bereaved afflicted with the condition are “are caught up in rumination about the circumstances of the death, worry about its consequences, or excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss” (119). Although the true nature of Kate’s grief is neither accessible nor, given her unusual living situation, grounded in a relatable reality, she is clearly in the throes of a protracted grief so dominating that it has at the very least profoundly altered her at the cognitive level. Given the reader can only access Kate’s world through her disjointed thoughts, the extent of that alteration is, like all other aspects of Kate’s life, impossible to quantify with any degree of certainty. However, through her misremembering of past events, and the sheer unlikelihood of some of her claims, it is reasonable to infer that she has been profoundly psychologically impacted by the grief which implicitly and explicitly informs her account.

Simon, we are informed, “had been seven, by the way” (14). Additionally, while she was in Mexico, “Looking for anybody, anywhere at all”, it was not he who she was looking for, as she knew “all too well that Simon was in that grave” (17). While Kate’s search for another living being appears to be global in scale, her admission that it continued during her visit to Simon’s grave is telling. Reduced to its literal image, the visual is an arresting one: a mother travelling around the country in which her son is buried looking for someone to contradict her belief that she has been rendered the world’s sole occupant. While the literal truth of that belief is, as has been noted, open to interpretation, that it never falters, and never appears intentionally suspicious, lends it a sincerity that can reasonably be taken at face value. That she has not yet found another person does not inhibit her need to reflect on her searching. Before the thought of Simon re-enters her mind, her memory drifts once more to her travels, her searching in New York and Madrid, and to her painting, before solving for the curious reader the earlier puzzle of who Adam, the name by which she first refers to Simon, might actually be.

> Months, I suspect, I gazed at that canvas. Possibly I even foolishly squeezed out some pigments onto my pallet. As a matter of fact I believe it was when I went back to Mexico, that I did that. In the house where I once lived with Simon, and with Adam. I am basically positive that my husband was named Adam (24).

This sequence of thoughts is telling, as it not only potentially clears up the confusion surrounding her earlier error but reveals also through her use of past tense that her husband has also, in her mind at least, ceased to be. If she believes her husband to be dead, she does not outright say so. In fact, although she is aware that the world she inhabits is entirely depopulated, she resists any urge to describe it as so. The passage also reflects again how underlying Markson's experimentalism is his extraordinary use of distinctly ordinary language. In ensuring there is no respite from the waywardness of Kate's account, the reader is presented with Kate's thoughts only, reduced to bare language. Delivered in this uninterrupted manner, the novel necessitates a consideration of language's currency and how simplicity often implies difficulty. Kate's obvious confusion about what constitutes the past is evidenced in her use of "suspect", "possibly", "I believe" and "basically positive." These qualifiers, upon which she relies heavily, are a distinct characteristic of her account, and can be considered as verbal signposts that convey not only the trouble mind of a consistently uncertain and lost individual but also the more general difficultly of converting feeling into language. This latter point – the struggle of harnessing language to convey reality – is, of course, not only one of the main influences of Markson's experimentalism, but also one of the core ideas in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

Even when Kate is cataloguing her past and present existence or cryptically dwelling on the lives of a plethora of historical and public figures, Simon's absence persists. We learn that, "Simon had a cat, once" (37). She refers to him again when she once more raises the subject of her husband and her earlier difficulty in recalling his name. "There is", she writes, "no longer any problem in regard to my husband's name, by the way. Even if I never saw him again, once we separated after Simon died" (52). These reflections not only emphasise the

clear significance she places on naming – and thus making real – those who are longer around, but also another form of distance that has been a part of her past. However, Kate's use of "separated" in this instance is ambiguous. Was there a time, perhaps, after Simon's death when the world largely remained as it once was, and she and her husband separated? Or is the "separated" here speaking of the larger separation that has removed Kate from not only her husband but everyone else also? The answer remains unknown. Here again is a situation where profound ambiguity influences comprehension. In a fictional world that is not apparently depopulated, the word "separated" in relation to a relationship would signify the cessation of that relationship. In Kate's surreal environment, the word "separated" can arguably be interpreted as something vaster. Markson, naturally, lets the ambiguity persist, but the position of isolation remains. However, such moments of apparent mental clarity – where Kate appears to remember a significant event from her past – are telling in what they emphasise. As Palleau-Papin argues, in moments like this "a relative form of lucidity gives her uneasy moments when she realizes that her solitary world is full of empty relationships" (179). Incomprehensible in her ruminations or, in rare moments, convincingly coherent, Kate's isolation remains unchanged.

She again ruminates on Simon's passing when she hints at her urge to repress while reflecting on her failure to paint his portrait when he was alive. "There are times when I regretted that I had never done a portrait of Simon, however", she admits, before adding, "Other times I did not believe I would have wished to possess such a reminder" (68). Soon after, repression is hinted at again, this time when she is attending to the subjects of photographs and memories.

> Leonardo was left-handed. And a vegetarian. And illegitimate. Presumably old slides of Simon still exist, too. I suspect there is something ironical in my knowing so many things about Leonardo and yet not knowing if the slides that I took of my mother and father, or any of my little boy, still exist. Or if they exist, where. Time out of mind. I have snapshots, of course. For some time one of them was in a frame on the table beside my bed. But quite suddenly I do not feel like typing any more of this, for now (69).

The contemplation of Simon's literal image brings her to the point where she momentarily can no longer write. She becomes briefly isolated from her work as a result, returning later to state, in a rare moment where present time is chronicled, "I have not been typing, for perhaps three hours" (70). Intriguingly, this marks a spell in which Simon goes unmentioned for forty-four pages. His prolonged absence from her account could be the product of repression. Or it could just be that she is distracted by other matters. As the sole – and mentally erratic – chronicler of her days, the reader is denied total truth and, by extension, explanation. As Palleau-Papin notes, "She becomes a female Don Quixote, a Dōna Quixote who lives in her own mental world" (179). That, unlike Don Quixote, she exists in "her own mental world", and an unreliable one at that, is precisely the reason why truth and explanation are denied in the novel. An unreliable narrator even to herself, Kate's account is, in essence, one of struggle – between memory and language, reality and fantasy, hope and abject despair, repression and (futile) confrontation.

In addition to the total isolation she is experiencing, her biggest struggle – and perhaps the cause of that isolation - appears to be her grief and how it remains unprocessed. Simon is finally restored to the page while Kate, as is her habit, is contemplating facts about well-known figures, among them Picasso's birthday: "October twenty-fifth, Picasso's birthday was. Even if I have no way telling when it is ever October twenty-fifth. Or any other date. Simon's was July thirteenth" (112-113). Why contemplating Picasso's birthday leads her to declare Simon's is unclear. It could be that the process of dating events – a trope of Markson's he uses to excess in his tetralogy – is an attempt to reorient her mind to a recognisable past where her old life, and that of her son's, can be accessed. The memory of his birthday, however, offers little in way of psychological benefit. As with earlier mentions, this reference to him is preceded by a window into the isolated limbo in which Kate is detained, as she recalls how she underlined in Pascal's *Pensées* the French writer's assertion

that “men are so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness” (111). The proximity of these thoughts is not, it can be reasonably assumed, coincidental. Markson’s style is designed to allow for this – the articulation of thoughts that, in their fragmentary form, may seem random in isolation but, when considered as a whole, cast light on the nature of free-flowing thought and the patterns that emerge from obsessive rumination. Rather than explicitly connect those threads of thought, Markson lets them float loose, in the way that thoughts do, all the while implicating the reader in the meaning-making process. It is his use of experimentalism that allows Markson to make his work take on an agency that utilises ambiguity to ensure that this process of meaning-making remains active. Consequently, unlike conventionally constructed works that are more inclined to pivot towards clear interpretation, in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* there is no moment of enlightenment, no clarity in among all the confusion, which advocates for absolute comprehension.

Simon next appears when Kate engages with two traits that underlie her isolation: repetition and a tendency to forget what is real and what is not. “Possibly”, she states, “I will think up a name for the cat outside my broken window too. Then again, I should also perhaps indicate that there is no connection between any of these cats and the cat which Simon once had, in Cuernavaca, and which we never could seem to decide on a name for at all” (134). We know that the cat does not, in fact, appear to exist; Kate simply imagined it into being after noting that the sound of a piece of tape scratching at her window sounded like the clawing of a cat. It has previously been stated that Simon once owned and was unable to name a real cat. We may learn little new in this instance, but her repeated allusion to the cat here is a defining one, as it marks the last time that Simon is framed as her son.

Her final mention of Simon is a troubling one and serves to reinforce the perpetual state of disorientation she is locked within. As with the first reference she makes to him in her monologue, there is, with the last, confusion over who, precisely, Simon is. Thirteen pages from her final catalogued thought, Kate, describing how she had been lying in bed thinking

about cats, offers a brief but significant commentary on the way in which she approaches, or tries to approach, her past.

> Although to tell the truth I do not very frequently allow such things to happen. What I am talking about is thinking about things from as long ago as before I was alone, obviously. Even if one can hardly control one's thinking in such a way as not to allow anything that happened more than ten years ago to come into it. Certainly I have thought about Lucien before, for instance. Or about certain of my lovers, like Simon or Vincent or Ludwig of Terry (227).

Even with all the abstruse statements that Kate has made up until this point, this turn is particularly disconcerting, both in what it says about her relationship with Simon specifically and what it reveals about her disconnection with reality in general. Kate, it seems, has once more become unsure about Simon's true identity and her link to him. That Kate presents Simon as one of her past lovers is peculiar in itself; that she also names Ludwig and Vincent – who, given her previous allusions to them, we can reasonably assume are Ludwig Wittgenstein and Vincent Van Gogh – only further highlights how delusional she has become.

While Simon's death is evidently a defining one, it is not the only one haunting Kate. Both of her parents are dead and that her mother's absence in particular continues to trouble her. In the mirror, she sees in her reflection "an image of my mother" (67). She has felt, she has previously admitted, "a great sadness, over much of the life that my mother had lived", but refuses to go any further into the details about the type of life she lived" (49). When attempting to figure out her own age, she tries, with difficulty, to recall if her mother had false teeth or not. She remembers her mother, dying in bed, stating "You will never know how much it has meant to me that you are an artist, Kate" (33). Towards the end of the novel, she repeats the same memory, only this time she remembers being addressed as "Helen" (228). It remains unclear if Kate's mother truly did call her Helen or if, as is more likely, she is merely misremembering her mother's words or, indeed, her own name. It is also not beyond the realms of possibility that the Helen she is referring to here is Helen of Troy, who, it should be remembered, Kate refers to in the opening pages of her account. Absence of clarity aside,

what is interesting is that her memories of her mother centre on memories in which she, Kate, plays an active role. While this is perhaps natural when someone is recalling a deceased other, in this instance – with the absence of any memories that do not relate to her – it only reaffirms the solipsistic frame of mind that Kate is relentlessly viewing life through. This lens of self that all of her lived experience is now filtered through is made even more traceable by the nature of her account, tracking, as it does, her mind's natural tendency to keep doubling back on her position in the world, both in the past and now. Of her father, dead too, she recalls less – perhaps because she does not feature as much in the memories she has of him. She refers to his portrait she once painted and his deceased sister, Esther. She wonders what may have run through his mind when looking at old photographs and into the mirror that had once been beside her mother's bed. She remembers how he "watched games endlessly" (119) during her mother's terminal illness and how during that time he removed her mirror as he "no longer wished her to perceive that distance" (226).

Lastly, it is not just personal death that Kate has on her mind and is isolated by. After all, the word "died" appears frequently in the novel – forty-two times, to be precise. While this may seem excessive by normal standards, experimental literature, as discussed, sets out to subvert conventions. Markson's use of repetition allows for Kate's account to emphatically ruminate and double back on what is, evidently, haunting her. Death, inextricably linked to the isolation she is enduring, is one of those things. In addition to having her repeat the word, Markson also employs another of his tropes – the incorporation of cultural trivia – to ensure that the theme of death echoes through the novel. In a monologue that often considers moments in history that preceded but nonetheless have had some sort of impact on its narrator, the deaths of many renowned figures are mentioned, among them: John Keats, Kathleen Ferrier, Rupert Brooke, Modigliani, Albrecht Dürer, Vivaldi, Bach, Andrea del Sarto, Jackson Pollock, Paolo Uccello, Carel Fabitrius, Vermeer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Helen of Troy, Schubert and Juana Inés de la Cruz. The reason, if any, she is so preoccupied with

them, why her mind drifts so easily to their deaths, is never explained. What is notable, however, is how many of those mentioned were famed for their work as artists. Given she too is a painter, it is quite possible that Kate sees herself as in some way affiliated with those who have come and gone before her. Yet, as is the case with Simon and her parents, they too remain irreversibly out of reach, permanently suspended in the past. It may not be too unreasonable to posit that she, too, perceives herself as suspended in a similar state of fundamental non-existence. She is certainly aware that whatever life is now, it is not what it used to be. Markson, for his part, leaves us with little hope that Kate's search for another will prove fruitful. She is destined, it seems, to remain stranded – physically in a depopulated world that resembles an unsolvable personal hell, and psychologically in a ghost-haunted mind. At the core of that ghost-haunted mind is the natural human instinct to attempt to give shape to reality by converting lived experience into language in the hope that it will result in meaning. Kate's preternatural reality, however, defies vocabulary. Additionally, whatever has placed her into the isolation she is having to endure, has evidently resulted in memory loss, depression, and an accompanying propensity for deconstructing reality through applying a language to it that fails to capture its surrealism.

Drifting Deathward in *Reader's Block*

In simple terms, at the core of *Reader's Block* is a writer who ambiguously identifies himself in the third person as Reader. Reader is trying to write his next work. This novel will contain a central character named Protagonist. The novel Reader is contemplating writing will centre on one of two locations – a beach-house or a derelict building in the grounds of an old cemetery. As Reader mulls over which location is most suitable, he wonders if what he is writing is in fact fiction. While thinking about the nature of novels early on, Reader asks "Or is he in some peculiar way thinking of an autobiography after all?" (13). It is a question which he repeats verbatim four more times by *Reader's Block*'s end, reinforcing not only the extent

to which Reader's real life informs Protagonist's "fictional" one but also the noticeably repetitive nature of Reader's mind. It is through both these aspects of *Reader's Block* that we regularly encounter isolation and death, its two prevailing themes.

As Reader lets details of his own life seep into Protagonist's, strands of his life are revealed – the erraticism of his ageing mind, mobility issues, the isolation in which he lives and the magnitude of the loneliness it burdens him with. Regardless of the place he will position Protagonist in, Reader appears certain of one thing: he will resemble him, and large portions of his days will be spent pondering his aloneness. That Reader has the beach-house and the cemetery in mind as his two possible locations is intriguing. Those who have read *Wittgenstein's Mistress* may see the possible choice of beach-house as location as a thematically relevant nod to the by Markson to his first experimental work. Similarly, it is hard to not view Reader's other possible location, the derelict building in the grounds of a cemetery, as symbolic. A novel that carries the suggestion of death on each of its pages, *Reader's Block*, with its many references to dead cultural figures and their causes of death, can be viewed as a sort of cemetery in book form. Reader, as we discover from the anecdotes on which he ponders at length and his comments on his own personal decline and isolation, is fixated with isolation and death and presses these fixations on Protagonist. "Early on", Reader notes, "Protagonist will naturally become familiar with most of the gravestones", before adding that at this stage in Protagonist's life there is "Nothing now, but Protagonist's books. Those, and the graves of strangers" (20). It is an eerie sentiment and reemphasises how aware Reader, and thus Protagonist, are of the natural links between isolation in old age and the frequent imagining of forthcoming death.

There is also the issue of the presence of another in the form of the potential inclusion of a woman in the book he is trying to write. In the beach-house version, there is the possibility that a woman will live on the floor above the one Protagonist occupies. The same woman may also walk the beach at the same time as Protagonist. Despite this potential

opportunity to connect with another, it seems unlikely that Protagonist's isolation will recede, as Reader wonders "Does it go without saying that that this upstairs presence would accentuate Protagonist's sense of his aloneness?" (26). Reader similarly deliberates on putting a woman, potentially the same woman from the beach-house, into the cemetery version of the book. A regular mourner at a graveside there, it seems that she too would be destined to remain out of reach.

The cemetery offers up several other startling potential scenes. In a particularly harrowing one, Reader considers "Protagonist having come upon his own name on one of the graves, though with meaningless remote dates?" (141). As he wonders if it has crossed his mind to "let someone Protagonist had known be buried at the cemetery?" (139) he asks "At Protagonist's age, how long before one realises that more of the people one had ever known anywhere are in fact dead than alive?" (143). Death presents itself in other ways in *Reader's Block* too. On Reader's desk is a human skull, given to him by an archaeologist who in Mexico had "come upon several during a dig" (55). Reinforcing the potential novel's autobiographical influence, the origin of the skull, he decides, should be "more intriguing if Reader gives it to Protagonist" (112). Later, in the cemetery version of Reader's novel, the skull will possibly serve as a memento mori for Protagonist, as he simultaneously looks at it and the cemetery itself through his window.

Away from Reader's struggles with writing the novel, there are other sources of discontent worth acknowledging. Early in the novel, he states a Prufrockian lament, solemnly declaring "I am growing older. I have been in hospitals" (11). In a later line that echoes Estragon's lament "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" in Samuel Beckett's 1952 play *Waiting for Godot* (62), Reader states: "Nobody comes. Nobody calls" (19). Struggling with the isolation he finds himself in, he wonders if he is completely alone and proceeds to ask the same question in a variety of slightly different ways later in the novel.

Reader's growing disinterest in his work-in-progress is revealed when he asks "Is it evident to Reader that he has lost interest in the idea of doing anything with the women upstairs?" (172) and, highlighting his struggle with isolation, refers to the "anticipation of the emptiness of the day to come" (176) and the possibility that he may never know what book and piece of music will be the last he has ever read and heard. Drawing to an ambiguous end, he hints at growing medical and financial issues, later explored in the remainder of the tetralogy, and appears to suggest that suicide may one day present itself as an option to him.

Lastly, it is worth looking at the anecdotes and quotes of which most of *Reader's Block* is comprised. Although they appear random in nature at first and not explicitly connected to Reader's planning of his novel, a pattern – dictated, presumably, by Reader's psychological state – soon emerges. As in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Markson's use of these anecdotes and quotes can be perceived as an attempt to ground reality only in that which can be regarded as factual or true. While not at a surreal a loss as Kate, Reader is, it is clear, struggling. By isolating them in standalone fragments, the vast majority of which are unaccompanied by further comment from Reader, Markson implies that the anecdotes and quotes are sufficiently powerful enough to exist on their own. Existing on their own in this way, the reader, as they were with *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, again implicated in the pattern-seeking and meaning-making process. This process, which is two-pronged, necessitates not only the consideration of the recurring themes that Markson's fragments ruminate on, but also the literal form that the text takes, the delivery of which implies, in the work itself, either a distaste for conventionally constructed literature or perhaps simply an inability to be able to create it in old age.

An analysis of the anecdotes themselves reveals the frequency with which the theme of death crops up. The word *"*death*",* for instance, is used fifty-two times throughout *Reader's Block*. "Dead" appears thirty-three times, while "killed" is used twenty-five times. Startlingly for a work of just 193 pages, the word "died" appears on 126 separate occasions

while “suicide” is used eleven times. Other words related to death noticeably recur too, including: “Grave” (40 times); “Buried; (20 times); “Funeral” (5 times), and “Cemetery” (22 times). While some of these appear in Reader’s open narrative, the vast majority are to be found in the anecdotes and quotes fixed throughout the novel itself, with the isolated Reader accumulating sourced material that further tellingly highlight where, at this stage in his life and art, his obsessions lie.

The Death Obsession in *This Is Not a Novel*

Although stylistically and thematically similar to *Reader’s Block*, *This Is Not a Novel* is more than the repetition of an old trick. It is, in fact, an even deeper examination of isolation and how it is exacerbated by thoughts related to death.

In *This Is Not a Novel*, Writer has decided that rather than try to will his imagination into creating a story, the very process of writing will be the story. As he is “weary unto death of making up stories”, Writer would like to create a “novel with no intimation of story whatsoever” (1-2). Even so, Writer envisions a novel that will be “getting somewhere in spite of this” (3). In this sense, *This Is Not a Novel* differs from *Reader’s Block* in that the reader encounters just Writer and his process and is not obliged to try to discern how much of the narrator’s life is influencing the – apparently – fictitious character he is inventing.

Writer’s initial thoughts are entirely dominated by the process he is engaging in. It is quite some time before we learn that “Writer does have headaches” and “For that matter Writer also has backaches” (14, 23). Rather than refer at length to his own thought process, Writer, unlike the more present and talkative Reader in *Reader’s Block*, lets his musings trickle out. He admits a tendency to forget that there were “two other Brontë sisters, scarcely older, who died when Charlotte and Emily and Anne were eight and six and four” (43). Later, it is revealed that “Writer sometimes also talks to himself” and that it is “no more than renewed verification that he exists” (71).

A significant amount of time passes before Writer's explicit personal input, replaced once more by the presence of hundreds of trivia fragments he is putting together to form what *This Is Not a Novel* will ultimately amount to, returns. Death, suicide to be exact, is again on his mind, as he laments the fact that he never knew what the black liquid is that Emma Bovary ingests in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Given the suggestion of suicide at the end of *Reader's Block*, this can be read in two ways. Is Writer merely innocently reflecting on a lack of literary knowledge or, perhaps, is something more sinister potentially at play here? Does the reflection perhaps imply that the idea of bringing about his own death is something that remains on his mind? Again, rather than explicitly signpost the wider relevance of the musing, Markson once more implicates the reader by merely planting the seed of suggestion in their mind. As pages filled with more anecdotes and quotations pass, and Writer's absence becomes more pronounced, questions inevitably present themselves. Is he simply toying with our preconceptions about what a novel should be, or is Writer's lack of personal input intended to emphasise Writer's isolation through his prolonged absence from the work itself? It seems likely he is doing both. In addition to these plot-level speculations, the wider question of the intention of experimentalism and the agency it gives rise to also requires further acknowledgement. In steeping his work in experimentally crafted ambiguities that focus both explicitly and implicitly on craft, Markson interrogates our relationship with literature in general and what we expect from it. Should works of literature intend to both provoke and satisfy curiosity? Should they bring clarity to complexity? Does a so-called "successful" work of literature make us forget that we are reading is not, in fact, true? Are we to presume and seek out singular meanings from works of literature? Markson's use of experimentalism both creates literature and makes us reconsider its purposes. That, in essence, is where the agency of his experimentalism lies – by the very ways in which it is manipulated, it acts, in the end, as both producer (of the works) and interrogator of that which it produces (literature in general).

When Writer resurfaces, he admits, twice, that he has been talking to himself again, before conceding "All of this preoccupation implying little more, presumably, than that Writer is turning older" (129). As the novel's abrupt end looms closer, he reveals further details about his increasing ill health. He has tendonitis, the announcement of which, he admits, is "Likewise again merely serving to ratify his existence" (158). This desultory pronouncement, a resigned acknowledgment of the unkind hand old age deals to all, has, like so much of Markson's work, Beckettian echoes and brings to mind Malone's admission in *Malone Dies* that "I have lived in a kind of coma. The loss of consciousness for me was never any great loss" (6). While Writer may not be quite as existentially adrift as Beckett's Malone, his psychology is profoundly impacted by state of his poor health, the details of which are, tellingly, coldly declared without further elaboration. In addition to his already listed ailments, he has a pinched nerve and sciatica, has suffered a "silent heart-attack" and has resected ribs following a lobectomy (160,164-165). Writer withholds the worst of his condition until the novel's concluding page, when he bluntly states "Writer's cancer" before signing off with an ominously final "Farewell and be kind" (167). Why Markson chooses to wait until then for Writer to deliver such a profound bit of autobiographical information is worth considering. The announcement of a cancer diagnosis so late in a text could, in isolation, be read cynically, as the author attempting to shock the reader or creating a cliff-hanger in order to encourage readers to read their next work. Given the experimental nature of his works and how little critical and commercial acclaim they garnered in his lifetime, it seems more likely that he is again using his experimental style to subtly say something about repression here (as he did at various times in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*). In a longitudinal study exploring the presence of denial in lung cancer patients by Martina S. Vos et al., it was found that from a batch of 195 patients recently diagnosed with lung cancer that "Most patients (86.6%) displayed a low or moderate level of denial at baseline. A small number (3%) showed a high level of denial" (237-243). The study also found that "Male lung cancer patients exhibited more denial than

did female ones, and younger patients showed less denial than did the elderly." The tetralogy's narrator is, as noted, an ageing male; we also find out in *The Last Novel* that he has undergone lung surgery, suggesting his cancer is located there. It is therefore not a leap to suggest that the blunt announcement of his diagnosis on *This Is Not a Novel's* last page implies that up until that point he had been denying the stark reality of his ailing health. Whatever the reading of Writer's blunt statement (and, as always with Markson's works, there remains enough room for multiple interpretations), it shows again the natural tendency of experimental literature to resist clear comprehension. Left as a coldly stated announcement free of further comment, standing alone as it does as a single sentence fragment preceded and succeeded by white space on the page, it is left to the reader to interpret the message and the nature of its delivery as they so wish.

This last revelation may go some way in explaining Writer's general absence from the work's pages. Markson's withdrawal of him has the effect of accentuating his isolation by literally removing his explicit thoughts, and thus presence, from the work. Consider the fact that in *Reader's Block*, a more noticeably narrative-driven novel, Reader refers to himself in third-person a total of 124 times, whereas in *This Is Not a Novel* Writer refers to himself on only seventy occasions. To understand why this may be, it is crucial to turn once more to the anecdotes and quotes that form the bulk of *This Is Not a Novel*. While their themes, like those in *Reader's Block* before them, easily stand out, it is worth looking at precisely how often they appear. Death, as an analysis reveals, is once more the most recurring obsession. In the space of 167 pages, the word "dead" appears thirty times and "died" is employed a staggering 504 times. "Suicide" is referred to on seven occasions, "Buried" twenty-two times, "Killed" eighteen times and "funeral" eleven times. These numbers alone do little, however, to provide the context needed to ascertain what Markson is setting out to do in *This Is Not a Novel*. With that in mind, it is important to look at the contexts in which the words are used. For instance, "died" is most frequently used to bluntly state a cultural figure's year, or cause, of death, as

was also the case in *Reader's Block*. Likewise, many of the mentioned dead cultural figures are, like Writer, renowned writers themselves, including Stephen Crane, Bertolt Brecht, André Gide, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, John Milton, Thomas Mann, Maxim Gorky, William Butler Yeats and Joseph Conrad, to name a very select few.

Writer, for the most part, merely considers the reality of their deaths rather than speculate on the reason why they are on his mind. As a result, the reader is left to interpret the why of his obsession. He is, as Laura Sims writes in "David Markson and the Problem of the Novel", "obsessed with death" (61). There are several ways we can read into this obsession, but perhaps the most likely reason is that, wearied and isolated by his elderliness and declining physical and mental health, he is forced to confront his own mortality. In doing so, he vanishes further into himself, and, for large spells, his personal input disappears from his novel's pages. Like its predecessor *Reader's Block*, *This Is Not a Novel* can be viewed then as a meditation on many things: the creative process, ageing, memory, art itself. It is also a journey into solitariness and death, and how contemplating one often leads to the troubling contemplation of the other.

Moving Closer to Death in *Vanishing Point*

After *Vanishing Point* was published in 2004, Markson's modus operandi was firmly established. In *Vanishing Point*, the narrator is named Author. In a slight deviation from Reader and Writer, Author immediately acknowledges the plethora of anecdotes and quotations that will soon full up his novel's pages, stating from the off that, "Author has finally started to put his notes into manuscript form", before adding, "They now come close to filling two shoebox tops taped together end to end" (1). Like Writer in *This Is Not a Novel,* Author's early thoughts are fixed on the assembling of the novel he intends to write. It is stated that the process itself has been delayed due to Author's procrastinating and that "One reason for Author's procrastination is that he seems not to have had much energy lately, to tell

the truth. For work, or for much of anything else" (4). Soon after, he states "Author assumes that much of his lack of energy is simply a matter of age", before adding "But it's been excessive, most recently" (6).

Much like Reader and Writer before him, Author prefers to remain absent for large portions of the novel and states, during a rare appearance, that clear by now "should be Author's experiment to see how little of his own presence he can get away with throughout" (93). Why this is, even he seems to not know, asking, "Author is experimenting with keeping himself out of here as much as possible because? Can he really say?" (96).

Short of a brief allusion to its style, noticeable at this late juncture is Author's refusal to speak more about his novel. He admits that that he is "not particularly gladdened by the several times in recent weeks that he has tripped at the curb. Or at the outside steps of his apartment building" (149). He is also experiencing light-headedness and states that of late thoughts '"have almost sneakily floated off someplace just out of reach, flickering there – even taunting him'" (180). He expands further on his motor issues when he confesses that troubling him more than his enduring exhaustion is his tendency to scuff his feet as he walks and "the small unexpected missteps" (which may hint at Parkinson's Disease) he now takes "As if his Adidas have whims of their own" (189).

His excessive ruminating and low moods are not surprising. In a psychological study on the subject, Jay K. Brinker assessed the relationship between rumination, reminiscence, mood, and psychosocial development in 150 "community dwelling older adults" and found that "increased rumination was related to increased depressed mood" and "The interaction between rumination and reminiscing significantly predicted future depressed mood" (223). Author certainly falls into this bracket if the extent of his ruminating, the recurring subjects of it and the moods he inhabits are anything to go on.

As the work reaches its end, he hints that death, his lingering obsession, is summoning him. Issuing his final statements, lucidity appears to be abandoning him. He observes the

emergence of confusing bright light before providing several unattributed quotations, presumably from one or both of his children, which express a concern about his unresponsiveness (191). Interestingly, he signs off with "Selah", a word with no fixed meaning that appears seventy-four times in the Hebrew Bible. While a variety of interpretations have been offered up as to what the word might mean, ranging from the signal of a musical interlude to the notification of a paragraphs of a quotation, the interpretation of Markson's use of it need not rely on defining it. Indeed, the word's enduring mystique lends it its meaning in this context. Encouraging readers unaware of the word to seek out what its translation, Markson again implicates the reader in the meaning-making process, creating a verbal game that, in this case, remains unresolved. Additionally, the fact that Markson's uses "Selah" as the final word in *Vanishing Point* is interesting given its literal placement in the Hebrew Bible. Coming, at different times, at the end of psalms and the end of verses, it would appear to highlight the need for pause. For Author, of course, who uses the word to conclude the work, the pause is a considerable one. With "Selah" he mutes himself, offering with it no discernible resolutions or guarantees that he will ever return.

Although little progression is made in terms of story from *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*, there are noticeable changes in what Markson does in *Vanishing Point*. While he is, in a sense, writing a novel, Author soon loses interest in commenting on the process, and lets the anecdotes and quotations dominate even more. He also loses interest in talking about his life, as evidenced by the fact he refers to himself a mere fifty-one times in the whole work. Author is weary, resigned, frustrated, and, as the novel's closing pages suggest, all too aware that he is edging closer to death. As his choice of anecdotes and quotations show, his fixation with death is unceasing. Unsurprisingly, words associated with it are once more used with an alarming frequency: "Death" sixty-seven times, "Died" ninety-seven times, "Killed" fourteen, "Dying" five times, "Buried" twenty times and "Funeral" nineteen times. In this sense, it can be said that *Vanishing Point* teaches us nothing new. That, of course, is partly its point – in

the same way that nothing changes in the life of its narrator except for the progression of days and what they bring closer, nothing much changes in the tetralogy from work to work either. The works mirror the days of their creator: lacking in advancing drama, teeming with repetitious thought.

Final Death in *The Last Novel*

The tetralogy's concluding work, *The Last Novel,* was published in 2007. Appropriately and prophetically named, it competed a tetralogy that by general standards defied description and, three years before his own death, marked the end of Markson's writing career. In *The Last Novel*, the narrator is named Novelist. Describing himself as "Old. Tired. Sick. Alone. Broke", he is acutely aware that all of this "means that this is the last book Novelist is going to write" (3). With that in mind, he gives himself "carte blanche to do anything here he damned well pleases. Which is to say, writing in his own personal genre, as it were" (4). Novelist's personal genre is, of course, the one that has been evident in the tetralogy's three other works. Like Author in *Vanishing Point*, he proposes that he will "say more about himself only when he finds no way to evade doing so, but rarely otherwise" (12). It is a promise he keeps; even more so than Reader, Writer and Author before him, Novelist lurks for the most part in his novel's shadows, continuing the trend of Markson's central figure gradually disappearing with each new work.

Offering his own personal input on only thirty-six occasions over 190 pages, Novelist's hold over the novel is paradoxical in that his presence is intensified by his protracted spells of absence. On the rare occasions he briefly appears, he offers some insights that may shed light on his minimal presence. His isolation he describes as "ever increasing as the years pass" (28). The days on which he speaks to no one, except perhaps for "a checkout clerk, or his letter carrier, or some basically anonymous fellow tenant in the elevator", are days he is becoming more aware of. He reveals a self-consciousness related to his

impoverished state. A “bleak image” of himself is established when he considers the woman at the pharmacy observing his “conspicuously threadbare and even ragged ends of his coat sleeves” (33). His mind and movements are commented on too. His forgetfulness is becoming more common and increasingly there have been incidents where he will set out to do one thing and end up doing another. In a rare moment of recall, he does, however, recognise the Beckettian influence and repetition of his usage of “Nobody Comes. Nobody Calls” (59), signalling, perhaps, the frequency with which he thinks and feels it, as well as, on the experimental level, signalling how the works that make up the tetralogy are intertextually in communication with one another. Later, he offers the suggestion that his isolation may not in fact be as total as he has been implying. “Novelist”, he admits, “does receive some phone calls after all” (63). Whatever hope such a revelation might offer is soon extinguished, however, when he immediately adds that in recent times the calls deliver “news of someone’s death” (56). As with the tetralogy’s previous three works, these drip-fed insights, scattered amidst the abundant secondary material that dominates the work, lend it a haunting quality, conveying as they do, in harrowingly blunt terms, the cold moments in which Novelist’s thoughts drift towards the reality of his late existence and how increasingly isolated it is becoming. Again, Markson’s choice to sporadically portray the bare truth of Novelist’s limited life in standalone fragments free of exposition casts light not just on the way in which Novelist’s mind is functioning, but also encourages the reader to take an active role in piecing together – and ruminating on – the progressively fragmenting nature of his life.

His mind, as it is prone to doing, drifts towards his seniority and a consideration of his mortality. With incredulity, he notices the faces of writers he once knew on postage stamps – writers who are now dead. After another spell of absenteeism, he returns and comments on the prospect of global warming melting Kilimanjaro’s snow in his “own remaining lifetime” (123). In perhaps the most haunting moment in the entire tetralogy, one that emphasises the scale and gravity of the isolation he is fixed in, he admits that he has taken to ringing the

numbers of recently dead friends to hear their answering machines and consider their voices "one eerie final time" (139). Here, more than anywhere, isolation and death, the tetralogy's two most obvious obsessions, converge and serve to further highlight how both can play off one another in the mind. After this confession, Novelist's next thoughts tellingly drift towards his own medical woes. Alluding to the cancer he first and last mentioned in *This Is Not a Novel*, he lifts a line from his chest x-ray reports: "Multiple surgical chain staples are evident in the right lung, consistent with prior resections" (142). Soon after, he offers a line of dialogue – "You have reached Ned Klein. Please leave a message after the beep" – which can only be read as a verbatim answering machine recording of a dead friend (151). In a surprise moment of specificity towards the novel's end, Novelist reveals his general location: Washington Square, in Greenwich Village. The reason why he discloses this seems to be informed by the anecdote that directly precedes it: "Washington Square, in Greenwich Village, Edward Hopper died in" (153). Hopper, of course, was famed for his paintings depicting a distinctly American form of isolation. His works, like Markson's, often depict sombre individuals on their own, evidently lost in thought. While Markson, as is his habit, presents the reflection without further comment, refusing to elaborate on the significance of Novelist's geographical link with Hopper, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is a somewhat appropriate – and saddening – link that goes beyond coincidence.

Again, like in *This Is Not a Novel* and *Vanishing Point*, he ruminates on "the emptiness of the day to come" (172). It remains unclear, however, if another day will come. Revealing little more in the novel's concluding pages, Novelist reconfirms the crisis point he finds himself at – "Old. Tired. Sick. Alone. Broke" – before signing off with "Als ick kan", (190) which is, among other things, presumably a nod towards the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck, whose paintings were often inscribed with a pseudo-Greek version of the same phrase. Roughly translated as "As I can" or "As best I can", implied in van Eyck's phrase is a modest acknowledgment of his own abilities. Given the peculiarity of his own works and how much

they are dominated by externally sourced material, it could be that Markson is simply suggesting that what he has offered in the tetralogy is the best that his abilities could muster. Regardless of the true intention of Markson's use of the phrase, it is a fittingly enigmatic one to spell the tetralogy's end. It also, in turn, spells the end of any hope that the reader might have for having questions about the tetralogy's narrative answered. Markson was not interested in clarifying the ambiguous. Indeed, a significant part of the curious power of Markson's experimental works is their resistance to clarity. All that can be said with any certainty is that they have particular subject matters, the specifics of which encourage a diversity of interpretations. As Palleau-Papin has noted, "The surprise aroused by Markson's novels cannot be erased by explaining the details, allusions, quotations, and recurrent networks of meaning the reader discovers in them. The very profusion of details increases the number of possible readings. One fragment rather than another draws our attention, and at each new reading there is a new storyline" (301). This, in essence, is the abundant literary value of Markson's experimentalism – its considerable expanse and the multiple forms of open-ended reading it encourages. Stripped of the conventional characteristics and forms of more conventionally constructed literature though they may be, the relative minimalism of his works is deceptive. As Palleau-Papin argues, Markson's novels resist closure, as their versatility, and the multitude of meanings that its thematically far-reaching fragments can connect towards, can and do inspire diverse ways of reading.

One of the ways of reading the tetralogy is, as is abundantly evident, through the lens of death – how it is thought about, processed (and repressed), feared. As was the case with its three predecessors, the lasting function of *The Last Novel's* abundance of anecdotes is to elevate even further its preoccupations with death and, by association, isolation. Readers encounter the word "death" sixty times, "died" 105 times, "dead" on twenty-six occasions and "killed" eight times. "Dying" appears eight times, "funeral" is mentioned on five occasions and "buried" on thirteen separate occasions. The regularity with which Markson uses these

words illuminates both the deep preoccupation with death the experimental tetralogy has and, at the stylistic level, the extent to which he employs overt repetition for emphasis. Death, his works imply, is all around us, at all times. As usual, the deaths on which Novelist focuses are of cultural figures, of which many are, like him, writers. Whether it be a sign of the absence of other living people in his life or simply a case of seeking kinship in other cultural figures who created and passed before him, Novelist's obsession with dwelling on the deceased has the effect of isolating him even further. Although the tetralogy fails to reach what can be regarded as a conclusion in the literary sense of the word, among other subject matters it highlights, using experimentalism, the creative, psychological, and physical struggles of an individual who, elderly and increasingly infirm, becomes more and more prone to ruminating on mortality and the role it has played in history and the one it is now playing in his life. Both a contributor to and a product of his isolation, death's recurring presence in the mind of the tetralogy's narrator is presented by Markson in standalone fragments, the intermittent and blunt delivery of which only reinforces the stark position he inhabits in a notably confined physical and mental world.

In Conclusion

In both *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the works that make up his experimental tetralogy, Markson deploys narrators who have been so deeply affected by death that the thought of it – its event, causes and inevitability – dominates their thoughts and contributes significantly to the overwhelming isolation they find themselves in. While this is portrayed first and foremost at the plot level – through how they behave and how they express themselves – it is also communicated through Markson's experimentalism, the functions of which are so crucial to the worlds of his works and what they are preoccupied with that they should be considered indivisible from their contents. As will be discussed in the succeeding chapter, Don Delillo

has also used experimentalism to articulate and examine grief and other complex psychological states related to isolation.

Although it is never revealed, it is possible that the depopulated world Kate inhabits in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is not the product of a global catastrophe but a personal one. Beset by the prolonged grief engendered by the death of her young son, Kate is so psychologically derailed and at a remove from the old world she once inhabited that she has trouble remembering his name. This, coupled with episodes where she clearly is attempting to repress the reality of his absence, reveals the extent to which his death has come to isolate her. The aforementioned old world from which she is dislocated and all those who once populated it have, in a sense, died too, the impact of which only serves to deepen her grief and the preternatural isolation she is forced to endure.

Death haunts the life of the tetralogy's narrator, too. Situated in the "real" world though he may be, like Kate he has nobody he sees or speaks to regularly. Fixated on his deteriorating health and creative struggles, the experimental works he composes with the aid of trivia fragments reflect the extent of his existential anxieties, the dominance death has over his mind and, with his diminishing presence in them, the isolation he is living in.

A radical innovator with an enduring preoccupation with the fundamental aloneness of being, in the formal and stylistic versatility Markson exhibits in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the fragmentary novels that comprise his tetralogy we encounter a writer who evidently sees experimentalism as key to the comprehending of, in literature at least, the complexities of human isolation and how they might be best communicated through fiction. Recognising the complexities, randomness, and repetitiousness of conscious thought, as well as having an acute awareness of what those who are isolated are inclined to ruminate on, Markson's experimentalism is, at core, an acknowledgement of both the convolutions of internal experience and the difficulty of sufficiently describing it through language.

The type of isolation that runs through Markson's works and the experimentalism he utilises to examine the various ways in which it is both caused and endured are multifaceted and interconnected. In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, the isolation of grief, psychological ill-health and physical aloneness is filtered through its narrator Kate's unreliable mind and the peculiarly austere language she deploys to try to give shape to it. Markson's decision to deliver the entire novel through a sustained monologue emphasises both the nature and direction of her thoughts and, through its singular voice, the punishing extent of her complete aloneness. It is emphasised even more through the details of the monologue, which catalogues her persistent struggles with the limits of language and its ability to capture reality in full, the abstruse nature of grief influenced memory, and, in her recent recollections and perception of the world as it exists in the present, the suggestion that she may well be suffering from psychological delusions.

Throughout his fragmented tetralogy, Markson focuses on forms of isolation that are easier to trace and interpret but are no less sustained in their hold over its narrator. The tetralogy's narrator is forced to contend with the isolation of physical aloneness and the effects ageing has on his health, mental wellbeing and his capacity to create new works of literature. Interweaving his own personal voice between hundreds of trivia fragments focusing on other artists and cultural figures, his explicit personal input in his works becomes increasingly isolated as the fragments themselves – most of which focus on death, illness, injustices and isolation – actively inform the overall themes of the novel and, in doing so, emphasise the isolation the narrator finds himself in, in "real" life and from the works themselves. As such, the experimental techniques Markson employs in the works that make up the tetralogy can be said to work as devices through which isolation is communicated at both the plot and formal and stylistic level. In short, isolation is evident not in just *what* is communicated, but also in *how* it is communicated.

In order to add some context to these examinations of Markson's experimental works, references have been made to a number of studies that have focused on experimental literature. The intention of these references has been to provide contextual reminders of the ways in which experimental literature has been characterised by some critics and how those characteristics might apply to Markson. There have also been psychological studies that focus on areas of experience that can be found in Markson's novels. These references have been used to contribute to a more informed comprehension of the true nature of some aspects of human isolation, for this discussion at least, and a new lens through which it is possible to further appreciate how conducive literary experimentalism can be for the treatment of isolation in literature.

The close readings of Markson's novels have been thorough and by design have necessitated the acknowledgment of what happens in each one. However, the readings of each work have not been particularly focused on plot, but rather on what plot, in tandem with experimental forms and styles, reveals about isolation. So crucial to what they are concerned with, the experimental techniques Markson uses in his works both deliver and reflect content so emphatically that it is more appropriate to consider his experimentalism as a vital part of that content rather than a mere vehicle through which it is communicated. Furthermore, such is the sustained nature and broad versatility of Markson's experimentalism, it can be said that in addition to producing specific works with which to engage readers, the agency that very sustainment and versatility gives rise to encourages readers to actively participate in a process of meaning-making that renders Markson's works as both fluid and open to an extensive range of diverse interpretations. One of those interpretations is to see his works as psychologically astute and appropriately open-ended portrayals of the struggles of the self when isolated and the particular behaviours and ruminations isolation can inspire over long periods of time. This interpretation, which necessitates an awareness of and engagement with Markson's recognition of languages limitations (specifically how he incorporates

Wittgenstein's language game theory) and the thematic reach provided by his inclusion of abundant secondary material, ultimately illuminates both the expansiveness of his oeuvre and how conducive experimental literature can be when it comes to the recognition, articulation and examination of human isolation.

Chapter 2. The Crafting of Isolation in Don DeLillo's Experimental Fiction

Don DeLillo is one of American literature's preeminent novelists. His oeuvre has interrogated plural concerns of the cultural moment: terrorism, communication and language, conspiracy theories, celebrity worship and the media, the impact of consumer capitalism, selfhood/identity, paranoia, representations of reality and existential dread. Martin Amis has described as "the laureate of terror, of modern or postmodern terror, and the way it hovers and shimmers in our subliminal minds" (Amis). For Anne Enright, DeLillo "is a writer who has been getting things right for ever" (Enright). Critical works on DeLillo's fictions have tended to focus on these topics and the relationship of his work to postmodern contexts. Another source of anxiety that is evident in all of DeLillo's work that has not garnered quite as much attention is that of isolation. Likewise, while there have been many studies on DeLillo's particular writing modalities and how he shapes his fictions, few have focused on his subtle but nonetheless remarkable use of literary experimentation. The aim of this chapter is to use close readings of *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010) to focus both on his use of experimentation and the role it plays in interrogating the theme of isolation. There is a marked divergence between the type of experimentalism DeLillo utilises and the more radical and overt kinds discussed in the preceding chapter on David's Markson's works, but a consideration of the relative unorthodoxy of DeLillo's craft will lend itself to more diverse interpretations of the role and expression of isolation in his work and a broadening out of what experimental literature can constitute.

Before focusing on DeLillo's experimentalism, however, it is important for the purpose of context to consider the prevalence of the theme of isolation in his work in general. Such are the complexities of the vast terrain that DeLillo has generated since his debut novel in 1971, one could be forgiven for forgetting that one of the central themes of that novel, *Americana*, is isolation. Increasingly disturbed by the vapidity and unceasing corporate grotesqueries of his working environment, *Americana*'s narrator, David Bell, leaves his role

as a television executive in New York and drives to America's mid-west. Armed with a camera, Bell intends to capture the lives there of those he believes are true representatives of the nation's interior. Fixated with his own unresolved past and how it encroaches on his present, Bell's film ultimately develops into an obscure autobiographical road-movie and the desperate – and perhaps futile – search for selfhood becomes *Americana*'s motif. By the novel's end, Bell is both psychologically and physically isolated, driving alone into America's eerily vast west, still trying to sate a litany of internal quandaries.

Bell can be viewed as something of a precursor to what would become the archetypal DeLillo protagonist – the type of uneasy and questioning individual who appears to be unendingly aggravated by the sheer fact of having to experience reality. As Louis Menard noted in a 1991 *New Yorker* review of *Mao II* (1991), DeLillo's America is permeated with angst:

> What most people worry about only at three o'clock in the morning, or after a very bad day at the races, Don DeLillo's characters worry about all the time. DeLillo invents people who don't know the luxury of having a psychology: they don't repress anything. And it's not just that they fear death, or stare hopelessly into the hollow drum of selfhood, or dread the stupefying materiality of the universe. They also never stop talking about it. They must be the most purely self-conscious characters in fiction (70).

It is worth pointing out that Menard's conclusion was presumably inspired by encountering the novelist Bill Gray, *Mao II's* reclusive and intentionally isolated protagonist, and a heroic worrier.

Gray and Bell are two in a significant line of detached characters DeLillo has deployed in his fictions. *End Zone*'s (1972) young American football-playing protagonist Gary Harkness is remarkable in his aloofness and his tendency towards nuclear anxiety. Before becoming entangled in drugs and domestic terrorism, Bucky Wunderlick, the Bob Dylan-inspired rock star protagonist of *Great Jones Street* (1973), attempts to evade the perils and vacuity of fame by simplifying his existence in the Manhattan apartment to which he has

retreated. Billy, the child prodigy of *Ratner's Star* (1976), turns increasingly inward in response to being so entrenched in the cosmological project for which he has been recruited. The isolating effects of boredom in the lives of Lyle and Pammy Wynant lead to infidelity, self-immolation and, once more, terrorism in the *Players* (1977). The distance that develops between Jack and Babette Gladney in *White Noise* (1985) is largely down to the existential remoteness each of them comes to feel after they fixate on the inevitability of death. *Libra* (1988), perhaps DeLillo's most controversial of novels, attempts to journey into the most isolated of minds – the withdrawn and disturbed assassin, ensnared in a political conspiracy. DeLillo's magnum opus, the far-reaching *Underworld* (1997), examines the theme of isolation through the haunting impact rendered by the disappearance of Nick Shay's father.

Although the length of DeLillo's works significantly decreased in the years following *Underworld*'s publication, he arguably became even more committed to probing the causes and subsequent effects of isolation. For most of *Cosmopolis* (2003), the world of the increasingly anxious Eric Packer has been shrunk down into the technology-equipped limousine in which he slowly traverses across a gridlocked Manhattan. *Falling Man* (2007) may specifically be about the devastation wrought by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but it is fundamentally a meditation on mass grief and individual withdrawal.

It is in two of the shortest of DeLillo's later works, however, where isolation is most evidently on display. Most pertinently for this study, it is also where DeLillo most overtly uses experimentalism in his craft. In *The Body Artist* (2001), he explores the theme through the lens of grief and the irreversible absence it engenders. For Mark Osteen, it is "a radical and rather slight experiment for this acclaimed novelist" (64). Philip Nel remarked that it is notable for how many of DeLillo's past thematic obsessions appeared to be absent: "Gone are many of the hallmarks of DeLillo's previous work: no characters speaking essays to one another; little explicit examination of the effects of social, political, or cultural changes; no Kennedy assassination, no cold war, no nuclear waste, no suspicious corporations" (736).

Instead, "*The Body Artist* offers a lyrical meditation on language, memory, and the modernist (and romantic) project of bridging the gap between word and world." On the surface a novel that defies easy interpretation, on closer inspection, *The Body Artist* reveals itself as an eerie and experimentally rendered study of the complexities of unresolved longing, grief, language, and the flexibility of identity.

Point Omega (2010) is similarly concerned with existential foreboding and also bears traces of literary experimentation. Focused for the most part on an ageing and reclusive war adviser who has retreated to the desert, some of the concerns examined in *Point Omega* are related to space, language, reality and identity. Notable for its incorporation of Douglas Gordon's 1993 art installation *24 Hour Psycho* and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's metaphysical Omega Point theory, it is a novel fundamentally interested in the individual in self-imposed exile and the impact it has on them.

Most academic studies of DeLillo's work have focused on the period between when *Americana* was first published in 1971 and 1997, when *Underworld* was released. Yet, there is much to be learned from his more recent works, and particularly with reference to his mining of the theme of isolation. *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* show the true extent of DeLillo's obsession with how isolation comes to be and how his subtle forms of literary experimentation examine it.

As was the case with the chapter on David Markson's works, this analysis of The *Body Artist* and *Point Omega* will discuss how DeLillo's version of experimentalism crafts the theme of isolation. Given the significant role DeLillo's distinct prose style and structures play in both works, close readings will determine the extent of DeLillo's experimentalism and how it is used to articulate isolation. The issues of interpretation and associated meanings will also need to be addressed, not least because, like many experimental works, both *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* resist singular interpretations. Additionally, the following close readings, like those of Markson's works before it, pay particular attention to the intertextual

elements of DeLillo's works, his use of subtly experimental language, and characters who are experimentally constructed. Furthermore, this chapter, like the one before it, will draw on relevant psychological studies to consider the wider contextual potential of experimental literature and how it can be utilised to express the complexities of isolation.

Reduction and Grief in *The Body Artist*

At the textual and thematic levels, *The Body Artist* is a work predicated on reduction. This reveals itself through a variety of interlinked interpretative strands throughout the novel: the unexpressed and the unclear; death and how it occurs; raw grief and how it is navigated; and a shift from the inscrutable terrain of the psychological to the fundamentally physical. It is also a novel that engages in literary experimentation to reveal the complex nuances and limits of language, the potential flexibility of identity and, through its incorporation of mimicked media reportage, the versatility of the novel form itself. To gauge the extent to which DeLillo's use of experimentalism is present in *The Body Artist* and how it is utilised to both craft and examine the theme of isolation, close readings will be used to show how its thematic and creative trajectories thoroughly coincide.

The Body Artist's opening presents a relationship where verbal communication is characterised by a mutual incoherence, as well as a disengagement that is both detached and strikingly realistic. That DeLillo should choose a conspicuously undramatic breakfast scene as the only one in which the main protagonists Lauren and Rey appear together should come as little surprise when considered with the complete novel in mind. If, as the novel's opening section declares, "The world happens, rolling into moments" (3), then the pronounced mundanity of its opening chapter is an appropriate precursor to the quiet disorder that occurs in its succeeding chapters. The message could not be clearer: existence's trajectory is perpetually unknowable. For the characters in *The Body Artist*, life brings catastrophe. For Rey, catastrophe is private, self-inflicted and, through his act of suicide, irreversible and

shockingly complete. In one brief action, revealed through the incorporation of a mimicked newspaper article, Rey reduces himself to a corpse. DeLillo's refusal to in any way suggest the possibility that this might happen may seem odd at first, but when considered at length his decision to reveal it through a newspaper article is understandable. Shifting the novel's form in this way – from a ruminative and slow domestic scene containing no hints of what is to come to a short newspaper article reporting the details of Rey's death – enables DeLillo to communicate, through an alteration in style, the unexpectedness and dire power of suicide. Rather than use his customary ruminative, psychological style to articulate the event and the extremities of the suicidal mind, DeLillo transitions to the distance of reportage. In making this switch, the brute fact of the event is revealed after it has happened, the effect of which denies comprehension and closure. Delivered this way, DeLillo maintains the fundamental mystique of suicide. More specifically, he delivers intensity through absence; short of answers, the reader is forced to contend with the mystery of what may have inspired Rey's act and to imagine how the act might have unfolded in real time. In this way, the reader is left, like many of those bereaved by acts of suicide, profoundly confused not just by the act but its inspiration also. Additionally, DeLillo's choice to present the aftermath of death rather than the live event emphasises one of the novel's core preoccupations: the process of mourning. Michael Naas argues that *The Body Artist* is "a novel about the work of mourning, the necessity and impossibility of incorporating the absent other into oneself" (95). By separating the news of Rey's suicide from the rest of the novel through a transition in form, DeLillo ensures that *The Body Artist* is oriented more towards the grief that the act engenders than the specific moment of the event itself.

For the mourning Lauren, catastrophe is unforeseen, grisly in its swiftness, widowing and – most brutal of all – *lived*. The novel's third chapter begins as an initial examination of her grief as she attempts to return to some sense of normality in what she perceives as the "first days back" (30). Trying to submit to the comfort of routine, Lauren busies herself by

restocking the pantry, cleaning and filling the bird feeders, “shaping the day around a major thing with all its wrinkles and twists, its array of swarming variations.” In isolation, Lauren’s actions seem largely void of deeper meaning and reminiscent of the sense of everyday normalcy with which the novel’s opening chapter is delivered. Examined closely, however, it is evident that her motives are less driven by distraction than they are a desire to renew, to make present. Lauren appears to be engaging in a futile struggle against the confining effects of reduction. “Whether death is unexpected or anticipated”, writes Dorothy Holinger in *The Anatomy of Grief*, “it affects the entire self of the survivor” (xxviii). The function of DeLillo’s prose – slow, meticulous, and fixed on perception and how it is profoundly impacted by experience – is to show exactly the effect Rey’s death has on Lauren’s sense of self. Her thoughts turn deathward. Emptiness and lack abound. She contemplates Rey’s unfinished manuscript, the state in which it will forever remain. While apparently “not undone by the things that people leave behind”, Lauren, perhaps in an act of repression, quickly discards “the clothes he’d left behind in the bedroom closet” (30).

Rey’s absence seems to present itself most viscerally to Lauren at the slightest of physical distances, the effects of which further exacerbate her feelings of grief and isolation. Momentarily convinced that he – or something representative of him – is standing behind her as she undresses, she turns to the bed, presumably in expectation of his literal presence. When Lauren is downstairs, she feels him upstairs, where he “used to prowl these rooms talking into a tiny tape recorder, smoke in his face, reciting ideas about some weary script to a writer somewhere whose name he could never recall” (31). Now gone, Rey “was the smoke” and was “drifting into every space sooner or later, unshaped.” It is this new smoke, this lingering, ethereal sense of Rey or who Rey was or what Rey has become permanently reduced to, that she now wishes to “disappear” into and “be dead” and “be him” (32) in. Present in these small but not insignificant existential impulses is what Cornel Bonca describes as “the drama and difficulty of uncovering Being’s astonishment in death’s presence” (66). The shock of Rey’s

death is underlined most in the moments when Lauren registers a sense of her own self in the house that she now inhabits on her own. In a sense, it is not just Rey's absence that is making her feel increasingly isolated; it is also her presence, magnified – and unrecognised now she is alone – that is troubling her.

What had had previously been certain and taken for granted is rendered undone in the aftermath of Rey's unexpected death. Now, "Things she saw seemed doubtful – not doubtful but ever changing, plunged into metamorphoses, something that is something else, but what, and what" (34). While subtle, DeLillo's use of innovative sentences like this, sentences that convey through ambiguity and confusion the sense of loss the individual mind can find itself having to contend with, contribute much to *The Body Artist's* experimentalism. By conveying Lauren's sense of loss in this way, DeLillo shows how minor experiments in language can enable the articulation of interior disorientation and the isolation that accompanies it. Lauren's way of seeing becomes notably rerouted. Even the established conditions of physical space lose their sense of order; something as previously ignorable as the sky's boundaries now generate fixation and reconsideration. Rather than seem at a normal distance, "At night the sky was very near, sprawled in star smoke and gamma cataclysms, but she didn't see it the way she used to, as soul extension, dumb guttural wonder, a thing that lived outside language in the oldest part of her" (36). This insight is defining in what it signals. For Lauren, alone now and grimly fixed to her grief, isolation is caused not by a sense of a widening space that only she inhabits but by a sense that the world around her is shrinking and confining her. A feature of this confinement is, again, reduction. Once a reliable source of vague, metaphysical wonder, the natural world is now just stripped down to its barest visuals and literal components and no longer exposes the limits of vocabulary, of human expression. This alteration in perception is, of course, slightly ironic. While Lauren's grief has affected her ability to give verbal shape to her interiority, the wonders of the outside world no longer evade description. Such scenes like this add merit to Philip Nel's suggestion that *The Body*

Artist is "the most purely invested in language itself of any of DeLillo's works" (738). By incorporating a style that preoccupies itself with the minutiae of experience and how they can be converted into language, DeLillo highlights the immense difficulty of expressing lived experience in the wake of unexpected death. The experience of grief and mourning has altered Lauren's perceptions of the world and, by extension, the language she uses to measure it. Before her loss, aspects of the physical world exposed the limits of Lauren's vocabulary. In the aftermath of Rey's death, she no longer feels this – not because her vocabulary has expanded, but because the world, in which she now feels isolated, has been stripped of its indescribable wonder.

The most overt, and profound, experiment that takes place in *The Body Artist* is the figure of the individual whom Lauren comes to name Mr. Tuttle. While it is necessary to consider his significant role in the novel itself, his wider, meta-textual purpose – why DeLillo incorporates a character like him – also demands contemplation. While it is impossible to know with any degree of certainty why he constructed a character like Mr. Tuttle for the novel (DeLillo, naturally, has never revealed the answer), it is clear that *The Body Artist* discards the general conventions associated with literary realism. It can be deduced that the inclusion of Mr. Tuttle implies that the literary rendering of incomprehensible grief and isolation necessitates an experimentation that pays testament to that incomprehension.

Who, or perhaps *what*, Mr. Tuttle is depends entirely on how one chooses to interpret him. DeLillo refuses to signpost the where and what of his origins. Consequently, Mr. Tuttle can be interpreted as being anything from a withdrawn spectre that has long inhabited the house to an underdeveloped embodiment of Lauren's specific grief. Critics, for their part, have interpreted Mr. Tuttle in a variety of different ways. In his *New York Times* review of the novel, Adam Begley asks, "Is he autistic? An alien? A ghost?" Mr. Tuttle is a "pure cipher" according to Stephen Amidon in his *New Statesmen* review. For David Cowart, he is a "heteroclite muse" who vanishes after fulfilling his function as an inspiration for Lauren's

next performance (204). Alternatively, he may well be the radically obscure product of her grief. In a study into the frequency of post-bereavement hallucinatory experiences by Anna Castelnovo and colleagues, the evidence they accumulated suggested "a strikingly high prevalence of PBHEs - ranging from 30% to 60% - among widowed subjects, giving consistence and legitimacy to these phenomena" (266). It could well be that Mr. Tuttle is something of a protracted hallucination inspired by Lauren's acute grief. Of course, what he exactly is and what or where he originated from is not necessarily as important as the role he plays in the novel. As Laura Di Prete suggests, it is a narrative that "imagines trauma as necessarily bound to the emergence of a 'foreign body,' a phantom like figure in full flesh that makes the workings of traumatic memory accessible" (483). In this sense, Mr. Tuttle's anomalousness can be seen as the most emphatic presence of experimentalism in *The Body Artist*. An out-of-kilter, misshapen, potentially supernatural being whose emergence, relatively brief presence and unexplained departure radically disrupt what is otherwise realist novel, DeLillo's use Mr. Tuttle both resists singular interpretation while making the radical suggestion that that the complex nature of grief and isolation can give rise to abnormal experiences. Interior states are so profoundly altered by real events that the line demarcating the real from the imagined dissolves. This, in essence, is where the significance of DeLillo's experimentation lies – in disruption and what it unearths. In the story itself, the surreal appearance of Mr. Tuttle disrupts Lauren's isolation before accentuating it again. At the textual level, the unexplained presence of Mr. Tuttle unsettles the novel's previously pronounced realism, transmuting it to the point where one could argue that it becomes, at least for some time, a work more akin to the genres of fantasy and/or horror. By imposing a figure like Mr. Tuttle on an otherwise realist text, DeLillo ask questions about both the extent to which grief and isolation can be articulated and, by extension, how literature can accommodate profound portrayals of both. It does so, *The Body Artist* suggests, by incorporating the unexpected, in both the story itself and, crucially, how it is delivered. By

doing this, DeLillo's work, like many works of experimental literature, also resists being read through the lens of a singular meaning. If one were to merely paraphrase the novel, reducing it down to a simplified meaning, much of its power, the insights it reveals, particularly in relation to Mr. Tuttle, would be lost. In the language he uses and how he vocalises it, and in the specific ways DeLillo experimentally constructs his character, Mr. Tuttle's meaning is not easily reducible. The reader is left to speculate on what, if anything, he might represent. One thing that can be said for certain about him is that he is the novel's central ambiguity, and it is through him that Lauren's isolation is revealed to its fullest degree. This does not represent a set meaning; rather it reveals how when considering literary experimentalism, which often encourages ambiguity and discourages easy interpretation, one needs to pay as much attention to a work's construction as they do the story it gives shape to.

To Lauren, Mr. Tuttle is "smallish and fine-bodied" and "at first she thought he was a kid, sandy-haired and roused from deep sleep, or medicated maybe" (40). Revealingly, Lauren feels no fear as she observes Mr. Tuttle – in the present, an intruder – for the first time. In fact, her initial reaction in "the first seconds" is that "he was inevitable" (41). After coming to this conclusion, Lauren "felt her way back in time to the earlier indication that there was someone in the house and she arrived at this instant, unerringly, with her perceptions all sorted and endorsed." The ease with which Lauren readily accepts and falls into something of an intimate routine with Mr. Tuttle further exposes the anomalous psychological state Rey's suicide has placed her in. Even before Mr. Tuttle begins to speak in the half-sentence, verbatim mimicries of her and Rey's past conversations, Lauren gravitates towards him. Observing him whilst standing outside the house, she "found the distance interesting, the halting quality of his speech and actions, the self-taught quality, his seeming unconcern about what would happen to him now" (45). Such a scene might bring to mind Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Also bereaved, she fixates on language throughout her isolation. Lauren differs, however, in that Mr. Tuttle provides her with a possible participant

in language games, albeit obliquely and often with little success. During largely one-sided – and at times fraught – conversations, she attempts and fails to extract from him who he is, where he has come from and what he is doing in the house. With Mr. Tuttle seemingly oblivious to or just incapable of communicating his biographical details, Lauren is left to hypothesise. In a revealing thought, Lauren "amuses herself" with the fantasy that he may have originated from a landscape she had been watching on a web-stream, imagining "he'd come from cyberspace, a man who'd emerged from her computer screen in the dead of night. He was from Kotka, in Finland."

Soon after, her theories about him become more grounded in realism. She concludes that "she would have to call hospitals and clinics, psychiatric facilities, to ask about a missing patient" (46). She considers calling the real estate agent to "make a complaint about a person on the premises" (48). Lauren, however, is only playing with these ideas and it becomes clear she has no real intention of reporting Mr. Tuttle to the appropriate authorities. As long as he is there, confounding and exciting her, the grim reality she had been inhabiting before his arrival will remain at a distance. When he mutters, "I know how much this house. Alone by the sea", Lauren considers "how the word alone referred to her and to the house and how the word sea reinforced the idea of solitude but suggested a vigorous release as well, a means of escape from the book-walled limits of the self" (49). Lauren recognises that part of Tuttle's appeal lies in how he has caused the line between the accepted and the unreal to blur. DeLillo achieves this through an experimentalism that sees the unreal impose itself on the real, the broader effect of which blurs the lines between (largely) conventional literary realism and what we might call literary surrealism. However, rather than remove the work from its realist context, DeLillo's experimentalism is oriented towards probing it in depth using new and innovative perspectives.

She nevertheless persists in attempting to extract a reason from Mr. Tuttle for his presence. Although nothing explicit is ever revealed, his role is soon amplified and rendered

even more abstruse when Lauren recognises the incomplete sentences in which he is communicating. Paying attention to the specifics and intonations of his words and patterns of speech, she identifies "a peculiarity in his voice, a trait developing even as he spoke, that she was able to follow to its source" (51). The unnerving source, it becomes clear, is her own lived experience, returning fragments of a past so personal that it could only have been known to her and Rey. Lauren has to adjust to the unreal feeling of what is occurring before her: "It wasn't an outright impersonation but she heard elements of her voice, the clipped delivery, the slight buzz deep in the throat, her pitch, her sound, and how difficult at first, unearthly almost, to detect her own voice coming from someone else, from him, and then how deeply disturbing." The recognition is defining, as it emphasises how Mr. Tuttle's manifestation has had the dual effect of slightly comforting Lauren through sheer presence alone while at the same time further distancing her from the world and reality she knew before Rey's suicide. Mr. Tuttle can also be considered something of an extension of Lauren's own self in reduced physical form, an embodied echo of her past and a haunting reminder of the depth and complexity of her unprocessed loss. In Mr. Tuttle she observes a man, or something resembling a man, reduced in physical size and intellectual capacity. It is this latter absence that aggravates her the most. Not spooked enough to sever contact with Mr. Tuttle, Lauren acclimates to the surrealism of her present and interrogates him further. Notably, the tone in which she converses with Mr. Tuttle becomes increasingly agitated and despairing. When he offers an indecipherable answer to the question of whether he previously knew Rey, Lauren implores him to "Try to answer. Please. You see how important it is to me. Talk like him. Say some words" (69).

Perhaps what is most striking about these failed attempts at communication is not the cryptic incoherencies that Mr. Tuttle offers up, but the sense that Lauren believes they will inevitably reveal some larger truth about Rey. Attempting to bridge the psychological distance between them, Lauren engages in her first intimate act with Mr. Tuttle, bathing him

thoroughly after finding him sitting naked in the bathtub. Although the act itself does little in the way of extracting information from Mr. Tuttle, it does change something in Lauren. No longer just an inexplicable presence, she concludes Mr. Tuttle is critical to how Rey is represented in her mind. She comes to "understand that she could not miss Rey, could not consider his absence, the loss of Rey, without thinking along the margins of Mr. Tuttle" (87). It is worth considering what this might say about isolation and how Lauren is experiencing it. It appears that in order to comprehend Rey's absence and the isolation in which it has stranded her, Lauren requires presence as a point of reference to think through how the extent of her loss has changed her life. Much like Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the narrator in Markson's tetralogy, both of whom regularly draw on the physically absent to abstractly contextualise their isolated states, Lauren uses Mr. Tuttle's presence to make sense of hers.

Soon after, Lauren attempts again to connect with him through physical touch. Wondering at which moment in human history eye-contact revealed that "we are lonely in souls", she "framed his face in her hands, looking into him straight-on" (91). Not for the first time, the desired result fails to be produced, with a disconsolate Lauren asking him "Why do I think I am standing closer to you than you are to me?" It is a question that foreshadows what is about to occur. As Mr. Tuttle stands in the doorway and looks "past her or through her", he parrots back to Lauren the last words she said to Rey in the final moments they spent together, insinuating she is about to be left alone again. Intriguingly, it does not have the effect of altering her perception of what she now fully believes Mr. Tuttle is representative of. In fact, it only intensifies Lauren's feelings towards him, which serves to further highlight the state of intense isolation she is in and how intent she is to free herself from her it. After concluding that "Rey is alive now in this man's mind, in his mouth and body and cock", she envisions herself "crawling across the floor" where she "tries to pull him down to floor with her, stop him, keep him here, or crawls up onto him or into him, dissolving, or only lies prone and sobs unstoppably, being watched by herself from above" (93-94). Although this fantasy is

something Lauren cannot make real, she is able to live out some of its intended intimacy. After standing outside his room and listening to him cry, she climbs into bed with him, kisses his face and proceeds to put her hand down his shorts, reasoning all the while that "This is what you do when they are scared" (97). Such a scene, the last in which physical intimacy occurs, can be interpreted in variety of ways. It is quite possible that Lauren interprets the intent of her own act as distinctly non-sexual, the bringing about of biological relief to temporarily nullify Mr. Tuttle's impalpable distress. Alternatively, the act could really be all about her. If Mr. Tuttle does contain Rey – or some aspect of him – and Lauren senses that he too is about to depart her life, her act of intimacy can be viewed as something of a last attempt to connect, physically and psychologically, with what will soon be gone, probably forever.

Soon after, Mr. Tuttle departs, vanishing without return. Lauren feels the absoluteness of his physical absence, but "felt something in her body try to hold him here" (103). She proceeds to surrender to that impulse in a performance piece that will ask questions of her identity, of who she now is now she truly is finally alone, in the immediate aftermath of Mr. Tuttle's departure. Yet she is left in a state of hopeless wondering. She retreats, momentarily, to the thought that he was an escaped psychiatric patient now returned but concludes that "He wasn't mental" and "didn't act crazy, only impaired in matters of articulation and comprehension" (104). Unconvinced by any potential rational explanation or perhaps unwilling to consider one, it is the mystique, finally, the unknowability of her situation, which Lauren embraces. Mr. Tuttle was "a man who remembered the future", who, in the nights after he had left, she still "felt him living somewhere in the dark", a vaguely present entity who "violates the limits of the human" (107-108).

Despite his absence, the essence of Mr. Tuttle passes into Lauren, as evidenced by the novel's penultimate chapter, the form of which is rendered in the style of a journalistic feature piece. As with the novel's early shift in style, where DeLillo uses journalistic writing to deliver the news that Rey Robles had died by suicide, this late shift, in this instance to a form

of feature journalism, allows for an alteration in point-of-view and a distant perspective through which Lauren can be portrayed. DeLillo's experimenting with form also ensures that the close third-person narrative that traces Lauren's character, movements, and perceptions is rooted firmly in and never strays from the novel's central location, the isolated house in New England. Penned by her friend Mariella Chapman, the penultimate chapter reveals not only the arrangement of Lauren's new body art performance, but also how deeply influenced it is by Mr. Tuttle and her experiences with him. Lauren, Chapman notes, is "colorless, bloodless, ageless" and "raw-boned and slightly bug-eyed" (109). What Chapman discloses next reveals that Lauren is now actively attempting to isolate herself, or, perhaps more accurately, she is reducing her sense of self to a point where it is no longer there. Artistic expression though it might be, it is impossible not to read this as Lauren utilising the freedoms innate in performance to liberate herself from the trauma she has recently endured in real life. In the feature, it is revealed that her piece is entitled "Body Time" and that it involves the transformation of her body – and, by default, her personality – into those of others. (Notably, her performance also makes use of the livestream of the road in Kotka.) After beginning as an ancient Japanese woman on a bare stage, it "ends seventy-five minutes later with a naked man, emaciated and aphasic, trying desperately to tell us something" (111). This man who Lauren has metamorphosed into on stage is described as "stripped of recognizable language and culture" (113). To Chapman and to Lauren's audience, the man could be anyone. It is indisputably Mr. Tuttle she is mimicking. DeLillo leaves little trace of explanation as to why it is to Mr. Tuttle Lauren turns to conclude her performance. That his persona is introduced there, at its end, however, seems crucial. If Mr. Tuttle has left Lauren with any answers, they may well be related to the fluidity of identity and the illusion of a fixed self; everything, the individual included, is potentially reducible. Lauren's performance, predicated on metamorphosis, reads as a testament to this prospect.

Pressed to offer a comment on the influence Rey's passing had on the performance, Lauren is evasive, ambiguously stating "How simply it would be if I could say this is a piece that comes directly out of what had happened to Rey. But I can't. Be nice if I could say this is the drama of men and women versus death. I want to say that but I can't" (115). This answer, though esoteric in nature, is an understandable one. The truth, for Lauren at least, is elusive – if indeed there is one. The performance may contain elements of Rey, particularly how he is channelled through Mr. Tuttle, but at its core it is preoccupied with identity and its dissolution. It is a preoccupation that extends beyond the performance itself, revealing something further and, ultimately, lasting about who Lauren is at *The Body Artist*'s end. The first hint of this is when finishing up her interview with Chapman, Lauren begins to mimic Mr. Tuttle's voice. What may appear at first as an elaborate extension of the performance becomes edged with profundity when it is revealed that Lauren leaves her encounter with Chapman still inhabiting this other persona.

The Lauren of the novel's concluding chapter appears to have found her way into some form of internal acceptance and is less out of psychological kilter. She returns to household chores, cleaning the bathroom thoroughly, because "This is what people do, she thought, alone in their lives" (121). Later, she observes the weather and engages with the house's owner. Some of her previous habits, however, are retained and, it seems, still relied upon on. She still sits down to watch the road in Kotka and takes to ruminating once more on Mr. Tuttle, a figure who she sees in her own reflection. The finality of death is also on her mind; she considers its devastating potential, its ability to completely overturn one's existence. "Why shouldn't the death of a person you love bring you into lurid ruin?" she wonders, before telling herself "Let it bring you down. Go where it takes you" (122-123). Where she envisions it may take her remains unclear, but it seems driven by a sense of a loss of identity. "I am Lauren", she tells herself, "but less and less." She is, she realises, reduced and is continuing to lose some fundamental part of herself. It is a belief she carries with her to

the window in the novel's closing paragraph, where it is described how she throws open the window to "feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was" (132).

Alternates in *The Body Artist*

The Body Artist is also notable for its subtly experimental incorporation of alternates. While not as overtly postmodern as some of his other novels, DeLillo does nevertheless weave two of postmodernity's dominant anxieties into *The Body Artist*, circulating technology and identity. It becomes clear as the novel proceeds that DeLillo uses these themes as a means of laying bare Lauren's experience of isolation. He does this through the inclusion of alternates and what, for Lauren at least, they come to mean. At first a source of comfort, they soon become something on which she becomes intensely reliant. Alternates also play a significant part in the way in which DeLillo shapes the novel, both in its form and its characterisation. With all this in mind, the core of this discussion will focus on how DeLillo mimics alternate modes of writing, the role technology plays in offering Lauren an alternate, accessible world and the character of Mr. Tuttle who can be perceived as an experimentally crafted embodiment of an alternate.

In the first chapter, when Rey is still alive, the first indication that Lauren has a propensity for seeking herself out in places and situations outside of her own lived experience is made evident. Reading the newspaper at breakfast, she regards the cataloguing of unfolding lives in the "strange contained reality of paper":

> …when you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband's hand (17).

Later, she momentarily "had a conversation with a doctor in a news story" and "more or less saw herself talking to a doctor in the bush somewhere, with people hungry in the dust" (22).

Rather than simply read and process the news conventionally, Lauren reads the newspaper experimentally, seeing in the news items not information about distant places and people, but situations and events that, when considered from an atypical perspective, she can imagine her way into. Away from the intense isolated state that Rey's death induces in her, it is evident from these series of scenes that Lauren has regularly contended with her relation to the world, and her way of looking at the world, which we can describe as experimental, was so even before his passing.

Lauren also seeks out alternates through technology. Following Rey's suicide, her habit for seeking something of herself outside of her own lived reality takes on a new meaning. Long hours are spent staring at her computer, the screen transmitting "a live-streaming video feed of a two-lane road in a city in Finland" (37). Particularly appealing to Lauren is when the footage captures the road (in the city of Kotka) in the middle of the night, not least because it frequently transmits "just the empty road in the dead times." Despite being acutely aware of her growing addiction to the feed, she "didn't know the meaning" of it; instead, she takes it as "an act of floating poetry" and finds a solace in how the footage "emptied her mind and made her feel the deep silence of other places, the mystery of seeing over the world to a place stripped of everything but a road that approaches and recedes…" (38). It is worth considering two obvious ways of interpreting Lauren's habit for watching the livestream of the road in Kotka. It could be that Kotka, with its distinct otherness and quietude, represents to Lauren an environment wholly removed from her own. It is a place of steady banality and continuation, calming in its routine and simplicity. It is also not New England and, subsequently, exists as an area of time and space unchanged by Rey's death. An alternative reading of Lauren's fixation with the web-stream could interpret the act as a sort of psychological impulse steered by denial and futile hope. Her hope that something vivid and in motion will emerge out of the unseen can be read as being linked to the state of grief she is in. Whether located somewhere deep in the subconscious or some other unknowable elsewhere, it

could be that Lauren clings to an abstract and ultimately unrealisable hope that the darkness she is experiencing will be penetrated by the inevitable presence of something she cannot at present see. This is exactly what happens when she is joined in the house by the inexplicable arrival of the man she comes to name Mr. Tuttle.

The alternate also plays a part in how identity is portrayed in *The Body Artist*. Mr. Tuttle is an experimentally crafted alternate. With no set self and offering no hint of out of what or where he materialised, Mr. Tuttle, with all his accompanying eeriness and oddities, can be viewed as something of an alternate human. His vocabulary is little more than an undeveloped concoction of Lauren and Rey's past conversations and as a character in a novel he reads like an amorphous stand-in, a supernatural phenomenon imposed on the novel's realism not to diminish it but, conversely, to emphasise it. Mr. Tuttle's lack of accessible self and how it renders him unknowable goes beyond mere characterisation. He also holds symbolic value, acting as a totem for the anomalous, the mystifying. To Lauren he represents not only some aspect of Rey, but also a wider human truth: that at our core we are alone. Mr. Tuttle's disquieting introversion and freakishness reveal this truth. Watching him sleep, Lauren considers how "This is what you feel, looking at the hushed and vulnerable body, almost anyone's, or you lie next to your husband after you've made love and breathe the heat of his merciless dreams and wonder who he is, tenderly ponder the truth you'll never know, because this is the secret that sleep protects in its neural depths, in its stages, layer and folds" (54). It can be concluded, then, that Mr. Tuttle, an embodiment of the alternate, is also a representation of that which tends to existentially isolate us: the unknown, the impossibility of complete connection, the potential illusoriness of identity. DeLillo communicates this through experimental characterisation and what it represents – a disruption of norms, the intent of which is to probe, with greater depth and additional, versatile – perspectives that which cannot be fully acknowledged or comprehended using conventional means. In the elusive Mr. Tuttle's malformed physical make-up, in his vocabulary composed of Lauren and Rey's past

words and in his inexplicableness, there is the presence of the unknown, the incomplete, the limited and unexplained, all factors that, in one way or another, can contribute to and deeply exacerbate isolation.

The hold Mr. Tuttle has over Lauren stretches beyond the resurfacing or generation of internal anxieties concerning selfhood and fundamental aloneness. Although throughout *The Body Artist* Lauren engages in physical activity related to her role as a performance artist, the show that it ultimately leads to is overwhelmingly inspired by her experiences with Mr. Tuttle. Intriguingly Mariella Chapman's feature on Lauren and her performance reveals for the first time in the novel that "In the past she has inhabited the bodies of adolescents, pentecostal preachers, a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old woman sustained by yoghurt and, most memorably, a pregnant man" (115-116). Like her habit for projecting herself into news-stories to connect with distant others, this revelation about Lauren's past performances highlights her longstanding preoccupation with alternates. However, what separates those performances from "Body Time" is the trauma of what she has dealt with in her lived experience and how she has transferred it into performance. As her bizarre last encounter with Chapman and the novel's concluding chapter both show, Lauren has come to inhabit the essence of her performance, an essence directly linked with Mr. Tuttle and his absence of identity. She has decided to let Rey's death take her where she believes it needs to take her, into an alternate and fundamentally isolating mode of existence, where the self has possibly ceased.

Lastly, the role that the alternate plays in *The Body Artist*'s composition also demands consideration, not least because it reveals the ways in which DeLillo engages in formal experimentation in the novel. While less formally radical than Markson's novels, the case can be made that the theory holds true for *The Body Artist* as well (and, as will be argued, *Point Omega*). Comprised of seven short chapters, it deviates twice from conventional narration by incorporating fictional non-fiction in the form of reportage and feature writing. The shift in

style from the novel's opening chapter, where Lauren and Rey are having breakfast, to the second, a media report in which Rey's suicide is announced, has a dual purpose. As previously discussed, the fact that DeLillo included neither a suggestion that Rey was about to commit suicide nor the very event itself makes sense. The reader, like Lauren, identifies nothing in Rey to suggest what is about to happen, ensuring that his suicide will unfold in the novel as it often does in reality: devastatingly, and without any warning. This shift in form also isolates Lauren from the event itself. The reader is left to wonder about how she learned of Rey's death and how, upon hearing it, she reacted. Given that *The Body Artist* is fundamentally about the isolated state in which Lauren finds herself, DeLillo's decision not to include these elements of her story ensures that she is not placed in any scene where she is surrounded by people. To achieve this, he temporarily isolates her from a period in the novel's world, only returning her when she is alone and struggling to come to terms with where and who she is, physically and psychologically. Consequently, it can be argued that this temporary alteration in form is not just a formal quirk deployed by DeLillo; it is part of the novel's content, its world, its examination of both the causes and experiences of human isolation. By experimentally incorporating writing in the mode of contemporary media, DeLillo innovatively allows *The Body Artist* to accommodate distance and new perspectives, both of which enable the work to deepen its expression and examination of Lauren's grief, identity and, most of all, the isolation she is enduring.

There is another shift in the novel's penultimate chapter, another spatial experiment that allows Lauren to be seen through a more distant lens. For the second time, the intimate lens through which the reader has been tracking Lauren's movements and cogitations is removed, replaced now by the subjective observations of her friend and journalist, Mariella Chapman. Although Chapman's feature on Lauren and Body Time reveals a wealth about Lauren and the specifics of the performance itself, apart from her quoted remarks, the reader is not made aware of what Lauren went through psychologically during the performance.

There are two linked ways of interpreting how this can be read. Firstly, to deprive the reader of these insights is to maintain the sense that her internal woe is very much fixed to the rented New England house she once shared with Rey but now lives alone in. Secondly, the placement of Chapman and her observations within the novel at this point offers the reader an outside perspective of the ways in which Lauren's general behaviour and persona have altered, perhaps forever. The reader encounters proof of this as DeLillo returns Lauren to the house for *The Body Artist*'s conclusion. Her thoughts restored to the text, we observe a woman changed, submitting now to isolation in a bid to finally come to terms with all that she has lost. DeLillo achieves all this through shifts in form that both momentarily switch the perspectives of the novel while at the same time offering further insight into its dominant themes of identity, grief, and isolation.

Place and Identity in *Point Omega*

After examining the disorder wrought by unfettered technocapitalism and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2007), DeLillo opted for the quietude of America's deserted west to reanalyse isolation in his 2010 novel *Point Omega*. Split into three parts and two separate locations, *Point Omega* makes use of a dual narrative, opening with an omniscient narrator describing the actions and thoughts of an unnamed man positioned in New York's Museum of Modern Art, before switching to a first-person account by an aspiring film-maker named Jim Finley, situated in California's sprawling Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. While both individuals fulfil varied functions, along with the novel's only two other characters Richard and Jessie Elster, they each serve to reveal *Point Omega*'s fundamental concerns: our relationship with place and the complex nature of identity. Close reading of DeLillo's text highlights how his experimentation makes the experiences of isolation emphatic, inevitable and complicated, and how it does that at the sentence and formal level.

On first inspection, *Point Omega* is noticeably alike *The Body Artist* in a number of its ambitions: it considers a lingering, deep-seated human want to escape identity, it is concerned with language's relationship with how reality is perceived (a complex relationship reflected in DeLillo's distinct – and often experimental – prose style) and with the unexplained and unresolved disappearance of Jessie, refuses to fully disclose the answer to the mystery on which it concludes. Additionally, the exploration of place and the individual's relationship with and confinement to it is another characteristic the novels share. *Point Omega* takes place in two settings: an exhibition room in New York's Museum of Modern Art and a house in the desert. Although it is the sprawling and barren location in which the house is situated that serves to provide the novel's aesthetic isolation, it is from the house – from the vantage point of its deck and through its windows – that isolation is so regularly perceived, emphasised, magnified and contextualised. Furthermore, with its integration and utilisation of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, *Point Omega* is, like *The Body Artist* before it, explicitly attentive to the transformative power of art. It reveals this thematically, as it does in *The Body Artist*, through how its characters interact with their environments, and stylistically, through the way DeLillo manipulates language to render those actions, showcasing once more what Arnold Weinstein describes as DeLillo's "peculiar, always fascinating, sometimes visionary concern with language" (289). The peculiarity in *Point Omega* resides not so much in the transmuting of language, as was the case in *The Body Artist*, but rather the blurring of what precisely language is signifying and the manipulation of it to reflect deep perception and existential distress.

Unlike Lauren in *The Body Artist*, whose intense feeling of aloneness is caused by Rey's unexpected death, the three isolated characters in *Point Omega* willingly isolate themselves. The individual on whom the novel first focuses finds himself returning to a darkened museum room, drawn as much by the refuge from the outside world it offers as the experimental movie he has become unnervingly fascinated by. Notably, the man is not the

first of DeLillo's characters placed in the Museum of Modern Art. Readers of DeLillo's other works may recall that *Mao II*'s Scott Mertineau appears in it and much of DeLillo's 2002 short story "Baader-Meinhof" also takes place there.

The primary reason *Point Omega*'s first-person narrator, Jim Finley, has driven into the desert is to make a documentary about Richard Elster, a secret war adviser for America's 2003 invasion of Iraq. Finley's objective, which goes unrealised, highlights once more the extent to which the potential and meaning of art is a preoccupation in DeLillo's work. It also forms part of a larger narrativity that takes place within *Point Omega*. In addition to the slowly unfolding *24 Hour Psycho*, which becomes inextricably linked to the motives of the man who fixates on it, Finley's proposed project is the primary reason for why he finds himself in the desert with Elster. In this way, DeLillo uses story – or s*tories* in this case – to inform story. While drawn to the desert to give experimental shape to Elster's story, Finley's musings throughout the novel imply that his cravings are as much personal as they are professional. Elster's reasons for exiling himself in the solitude of Anza-Borrego are motivated by a something of a metaphysical yearning to abandon two of the most fundamental anxieties of existence: time and identity. Quite what exactly motivates this yearning remains is largely obscured. A simple reading of the novel might bring the reader to the not unreasonable conclusion that his complicity in a contentious foreign occupation has led to him to want to ostracise himself from society. But there are other potential underlying reasons for his self-exile, among them a prolonged sense of unease inspired by the hypermodern city from which he has removed himself (New York) and its myriad sources of anxiety. It is also worth noting that, as is the case with the museum as a setting, *Point Omega* is not the first instance of DeLillo using the desert as a place to which his characters are drawn. It also features in various ways in *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *Running Dog* (1978), *The Names* (1982), *Underworld* (1997) and *Falling Man* (2007).

Although both novels explore the role of place and its association with isolation, they do so in different ways. While the New England house in which *The Body Artist*'s Lauren finds herself newly alone contributes to her isolation, its defining role is that it is the place out of which Mr. Tuttle materialises and, possibly, vanishes into once more, transitioning from a reminder of absence to a place that provides presence before reverting to its original role. The pertinence of place is handled differently in *Point Omega*. The novel's two primary settings – the museum exhibition room and the house situated in the desert – are places into which people retreat and, in the case of Jessie, vanish altogether. Originally a location that provides respite from city living and an environment conducive to introspection, with Jessie's disappearance the desert brutally returns her father and Jim Finley to the type of abrupt disorder they thought it was putting them at a distance from. Another disparity that requires recognition and examination is the way in which DeLillo weaves art into both novels. As discussed in the preceding section, *The Body Artist*'s protagonist, Lauren, uses experimental body performances to mimic the identities of others. In *Point Omega*, art is either intensely observed, as is the case with the anonymous man in the museum, or, in the case of Finley's potential experimental documentary, projected. These differences aside, art's influence in both novels serves the same function; it is a means through which the individual can be transformed. Aesthetic experiments can effect psycho-social change.

A comprehension of *Point Omega'*s preoccupation with isolation requires thorough acknowledgment of the way in which DeLillo engages in subtle literary experimentalism to examine the theme through the lenses of place and identity. It is, after all, through intense engagement with anomalous places that the novel's characters undergo significant – and dramatic – interior change. In addition to subtle experiments at the sentence level, DeLillo achieves this through the experimental incorporation of intertextual material that explicitly and implicitly interacts with both place and identity. While the sizeable presence of each theme and how they related to isolation requires that they be scrutinised independently, the

following analysis will also recognise their convergence and its impact on *Point Omega*'s examination of how isolation is physically and psychologically experienced.

Place in *Point Omega*: Anonymity – September 3rd

Point Omega's opening chapter begins with an unnamed man "standing against the north wall, barely visible" (3). It is soon made clear that he is in a gallery, one where others "entered in twos and threes and they stood in the dark and looked at the screen and they left." The man's next described movement is when, "standing alone", he "moved a hand toward his face, repeating, ever so slowly, the action of a figure on the screen" (4). Although evidently concentrating hard on the exhibition's as yet undisclosed subject (Douglas Gordon's experimental film *24 Hour Psycho*, as is soon revealed), the man is distractible. The gallery's darkness is frequently penetrated by other viewers opening the door and letting in a "glancing light from the area beyond, where others were gathered, at some distance, browsing the art books and postcards" (4). DeLillo's explicit reference to distance here, coupled with the description of the fleeting presence of other visitors, requires consideration, particularly in light of the novel's succeeding events. It not only foreshadows Richard Elster and what he appears to seek in remoteness but also lays down a marker for some of the novel's central themes: the experimental blurring of the real and the artificial, identity, isolation and distance.

Regardless of the irregular distractions, it is clear that the gallery, confined and dark, enables the man to pay close attention to what is on screen. Enraptured by the symbolic possibilities of Anthony Perkins's slowly turning head, it is revealed that it is the fifth day in a row he has visited the gallery and in the present moment "He'd been standing for more than three hours, looking" (9).

When two men – the identities of whom are later revealed to be Jim Finley and Richard Elster – briefly visit the gallery, the man contemplates the observational role each person in the gallery and on the screen is fulfilling: "Everybody was watching something. He

was watching the two men, they were watching the screen, Anthony Perkins at his peephole was watching Janet Leigh undress" (10). Notably, his is the only presence that goes unacknowledged. This, we learn, is precisely what he wants – "Nobody was watching him. This was the ideal world as he might have drawn it in his mind. He had no idea what he looked like to others. He wasn't sure what he looked like to himself."

Despite sensing that he is invisible to them, he feels something resembling a kinship with the two men: "He felt they shared something, we three, that's what he felt. It was the kind of rare fellowship that singular events engender, even if the others didn't know he was here" (11). Soon after, they depart the gallery, leaving the man alone once more and the fleeting connection fractured. For an individual so desiring of detachment from others, the men's absence – men whom he neither spoke to nor was, it seems, even seen by – has a peculiar impact on him: "He didn't know how to take this. He took it personally" (12). Their departure, he concludes, was a result of their incapacity for seriousness: "They thought they were serious but weren't. And if you're not serious, you don't belong here" (13).

His own seriousness – towards the gallery and the film – is indubitable. For him, departure from the gallery is enforced by the museum's closing time, not through choice. What he really wants from the confinement it provides, he cannot have: "What he wanted was a situation in which the museum closed but the gallery did not. He wanted to see the film screened start to finish over twenty-four consecutive hours" (15). That such an experience might prove fatal seems inconsequential compared to the modified reality he might come to inhabit if it did not. Such a prolonged time spent standing in the room might profoundly change not only who he is but might also reconstruct the world around him: "Would he walk out in the street forgetting who he was and where he lived, after twenty-four hours straight? Or even under the current hours, if the run was extended and he kept coming, five, six, seven hours a day, week after week, would it be possible for him to live in the world? Did he want to? Where was it, the world?" (16).

Readers of both novels may recognise similarities between the potential of this reality and the one in which Kate remains perpetually stranded in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Additionally, readers of both *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* may recognise parallels between these visions and how Lauren comes to occupy her surroundings in the wake of Rey's death; implied is that the intensity of a singular event can transform not only an individual's identity but also the physical space they inhabit. For the man, it is, at this time, purely imaginary. For the present, "There was nowhere else he wanted to be, dark against the wall" (17). Soon after, the contentment momentarily breaks. The thought that all his waiting, alone and in the dark, has been nothing to do with the movie and everything to do with craving company comes to him: "What was it? It was something outside of conscious grasp until now. He'd been waiting for a woman to arrive, a woman alone, someone he might talk to, here at the wall, in whispers, sparingly of course, or later, somewhere, trading ideas and impressions, what they'd seen and how they felt about it" (18). This need disturbs him and he concludes that it makes him a "Jerk."

His composure returns through observing the room again and considering all that lies outside it. The door opening and what it reveals serves as a reminder of what he is sheltering himself from: "…people getting on the escalator, a clerk swiping credit cards, a clerk tossing items into large sleek museum bags. Light and sound, wordless monotone, an imitation of life-beyond, world-beyond, the strange bright fact that breathes and eats out there, the thing that's not the movies" (18-19). The outside is alive and ravenous, a terrain defined by its overabundance of stimuli. The gallery room, on the other hand, is the outside world's opposite, a quiet, dark place perfectly conducive to perception and introspection. By experimenting with the spatial environments of the novel and letting the consistency and compactness of the museum room influence the unnamed man's perceptions, DeLillo puts in place conditions that both skilfully accentuate the psychological isolation he is enduring while at same time reflecting it.

Anonymity 2 – September 4th

While DeLillo's choice to conclude his novel with a chapter that precedes the defining events captured in its middle chapters is at the subtler end of literary experimentation, it is the fact that this skip back in chronology further blurs *Point Omega*'s plot and, with the knowledge they have gained through those chapters, forces the reader to consider the man in the museum as the potential reason why Jessie has disappeared. This renders DeLillo's experimentalism especially important here. By doing so, DeLillo also recalibrates the way in which the reader first perceived, and interpreted, the man's isolation. Presented at first as a something of an aloof and obsessive introvert, he is a mysterious but ultimately benign presence in *Point Omega*'s opening chapter. By the time he appears again in its final chapter, the peculiar psychological unease and obsessiveness he had displayed can be seen as possible contributions to Jessie's disappearance and possible death. Capturing the opening section's succeeding day, DeLillo returns the novel's focus to the museum gallery and the anonymous man. Little has occurred in the real time existing between this day, September 4th and the described events of September 3rd in chapter one, but the reader's perspective has changed. At this stage in the novel Jessie Elster has inexplicably vanished, a knife has been found in the desert and her prior acquaintance with an erratic man she met in New York has been disclosed. Although the part the unnamed man did or did not play in Jessie's disappearance is never revealed, the suspicion alone demands an even closer examination of how he interacts with place in the novel's concluding chapter.

On September 4th, the man, at the wall again, "tried to contain his impatience, to direct every energy toward the screen, see what is happening now" (127). The border between the space he inhabits and the one being projected by the screen blurs; what seems like description of the gallery room – "The strip of interior light spreading across the floor as the door continues to move" – turn out, in fact, to be descriptions of what is slowly unfolding on

the screen. This is a direct consequence of the way in which DeLillo delivers this part of the novel, the delayed effect of which blurs the boundaries between the fictional world of the movie being described in the novel and the fictional world of the novel itself. In these moments, it can be said that DeLillo suspends the conventional demands of original plotting, prioritising instead the inclusion of a style in which the "reality" of the world of his text overlaps with the "fiction" of the experimental visual media it incorporates. In the same way that the unnamed man is so fixated with the film's images that he is becoming increasingly convinced he is part of the film, the novel gives the impression that it too is being isolated from itself and is being absorbed by what it is describing. Here, DeLillo is communicating a slightly coded message on the potential transformative power of art. As Graley Herren posits, *Point Omega* examines how "art can reprogram the spectator" and transform "a virtual stalker into a real one" (152). Additionally, the delivery of DeLillo's writing here necessitates a form of reading that recalls again Warren Motte's suggestion that "Experimental writing obliges us to read experimentally" (10). If, as Motte posits, the experimental text "speaks about us and about our efforts to come to terms with it", it can be said that the way in which DeLillo utilises language in *Point Omega* to blur the reader's perceptions and encourage a more careful form of reading highlights his use of experimentalism. It also supports the assertion, which this thesis supports, that in literature form and content should be considered indivisible. In DeLillo's use of slow-paced and sometimes deceptive prose, there reflects an interior disorientation that lies at the core of *Point Omega*'s story and the role isolation plays in it. Additionally, DeLillo's form – slow-paced and propelled in part by ambiguities and the unresolvable – pays homage to both the original *Psycho*, and, naturally, *24 Hour Psycho*, the speed and disarming content of which dictates his – often deceptive – prose.

The man returns to the prospect of the film being screened from beginning to end, straight through. The thought not only emphasises the peculiarity of his situation but also reveals to him, once more, how separated he is from others: "Make it a personal test of

endurance and forbearance, a kind of punishment. But punishment for what? Punishment for watching? Punishment for standing here day after day, hour after hour, in hapless anonymity? He thought of others. That's what others might say. But who were these others?" (131). Interestingly, he never shows an awareness of his increasingly troubling thought patterns or acknowledgment that he is, in all likelihood, psychologically unwell. This is not surprising. Isolation, as John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick have noted, can be near totalising in its impact on individuals. Writing in *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (2009), they note how "The discovery that feelings of social rejection (isolation) and reactions to physical pain share the same hardware begins to suggest why, once loneliness becomes chronic, you cannot escape it merely by 'coming out of your shell,' losing weight, getting a fashion makeover, or meeting Mr. or Ms. Right. The pain of loneliness is a deeply disruptive hurt" (8). To counteract that hurt, they write, "requires taking into account the full depth and complexity of the role loneliness plays in our biology and in our evolutionary history." This privilege, denied to so many, is denied to the man in the museum too. Linked to this, Cacioppo and Patrick suggest, is a deficiency in self-regulation, a consequence, they argue, of isolation. Before isolation leads to more chronic health problems, "impaired self-regulation causes lonely individuals every day, everywhere, to act in ways that, sadly, do nothing more than reinforce their loneliness" (37). This certainly seems to be the case with the man in the museum, as evidenced when he interacts with another for the first – and only – time in the novel.

When a woman – who is soon all but identified as Jessie Elster – asks him "What am I looking at?" he is momentarily bewildered (133). It is not, however, the question that bewilders him; it is the woman's presence. Panicked by her words, he considers the unfamiliar physical and mental space the question has placed him in. Her presence reminds him that "He had a good vocabulary except when he was talking to someone." After offering a timid, incomplete response, he "waited for some time, watching hand and knife in

midframe, isolated, and again it came, the voice nowhere near a whisper" (134). No longer alone, he is now able to put his sustained situation into perspective: "The interesting thing about this experience, until now, was that it was all his. No one knew he was here. He was alone and unacknowledged. There was nothing to share, nothing to take from others, nothing to give to others" (134). Despite this, the woman's presence also reveals something else – an underlying want for the presence of another, a woman specifically, as briefly pondered in the novel's opening chapter. Now engaged in a conversation, the man's connection with the gallery space alters. It is no longer a place in which he is hidden away. It is now a place out of which he will soon emerge and, as a result, be potentially exposed.

It is not only the man's relationship with the confinement and darkness of the room that changes with the woman's presence; his relationship with the film changes also. Trying to remember the exact minutiae of one of its scenes, he considers how "the situation intensified the process, being here, watching and thinking for hours, standing and watching, thinking into the film, into himself" (138), before concluding that the woman could be someone to whom he could communicate all that he had learned through his watching. Here again, DeLillo's prose style, meticulously attentive and unhurried, mirrors both the form and atmospheres of Hitchcock's original and, even more so, Gordon's appropriation of it, the radically slowed down form of which accentuates the original's peculiarities and psychological tensions. Taking heed of what Gordon's version so intensely focuses on, DeLillo uses the presence of the woman as a figure on to whom the man in the museum can project his fixations. Interestingly, the woman's appeal is predicated on the sense of anonymity she conveys. Unlike the French couple in the gallery room who were "outside him, people with lives", the woman "as he regarded her, was a shadow unfolding from the wall" (140-141). Or, put another way, something that the room, in tandem with shadows made by the screen, created. Soon, the room and her presence in it provides a dark fantasy. He imagines "turning and pinning her to the wall with the room emptied out except for the guard

who is looking straight ahead, nowhere, motionless, the film still running, the woman pinned, also motionless, watching the film over his shoulder" (142). The fantasy, however, remains just that, as the woman suddenly leaves. Perturbed by her departure, the man pursues her out of the gallery room. While the most noteworthy aspect of this action is the potential drama that his following her promises, it is defining for another reason: it is the first, and only, time in the novel that he is situated outside of the gallery room. Returned now to the world outside, free from the room's confinement and from what is unfolding on the screen, he is exposed yet surprisingly coherent. He asks the woman "What about doing this sometime at a real movie with sits to sit on and people on the screen who laugh and cry and shout?" (143). While the exchange that follows is unremarkable and soon over, the woman's revelation that she multiplied numbers in her head as a child and "read what people were saying on their lips" provides enough insight to conclude that the woman is, as suspected, Jessie Elster.

Although he receives her number, he is less overcome by excitation than the anxiety produced by being outside the room, a reaction that reaffirms the comforting confinement and psychological otherworldliness of the spatial experiment DeLillo sustains through it. The crowded lobby, which we can perceive as a distressing return to the normalcy of the outside, conventional world, is overbearing in what it offers: a bombardment of noise, unpredictability, disorder. In short, this is the antithesis of the silence and isolation that the room provides. He soon returns to it, to "bathe in the tempo", desiring "complete immersion, whatever that means" (146). The desire is one born of fear that the museum will soon close, bringing an end to the screening for good. The agitation he feels leads to a vision in which the guard shoots himself in the head, the museum closes down and he is left alone in the room with his corpse. Soon, his thoughts shift back to the movie, "mind-racing ahead to the moment when Norman Bates will carry Mother down the stairs in her white bedgown" (147). Bates's image returns him to the real, to a memory that, in the novel's closing moments, perhaps part explains his fixation with the screening, the sanctuary that the room provides and

the unease the outside world stirs in him. The image of Bates "makes him think of his own mother, how could it not, before she passed on, two of them contained in a small flat being consumed by rising towers…" (148). The thought is a defining one, for two reasons. Firstly, it brings further into focus the accumulating similarities he appears to share with the character of Bates, the extent of which are provided not only by the possibility of shared pathologies, but also by how, in the darkness of the room, his fixations are so focused and consuming that the line that demarcates the real from the fantastical – in this case the room itself and the screen on which Gordon's film is playing – begins to vanish. This is the primary reason behind DeLillo's incorporation of Gordon's film – to use its experimentalism as a prompt for further experimentation. As Graley Herren notes, "By all appearances, both are damaged sons of dead mothers; both pathologize their identification fantasies; both are voyeurs driven by strong scopophilic desire; both face irresolvable difficulties in forming and transferring libidinal attachments; and both stalk their female prey and lash out with violence, tellingly selecting phallic knives for their weapons. Well, maybe" (153). Additionally, it immediately precedes the absurd moment in which the man feels as though he is about to be subsumed into the figure of Bates. Stepping away from the wall, he "waits to dissolve into the figure of Norman Bates" (148), a transformation that will, presumably, see him inhabit, in his own mind, the world of the movie and possibly lead him to tracking down and murdering Jessie Elster.

Although DeLillo deprives the reader of the revelation they might expect, through the experimental repurposing of Douglas Gordon's repurposed version of Hitchcock's film he provides a slow moving lens through which isolation and the behaviours it can inspire can be meticulously traced. As noted, the slowness of these sections intentionally mirror the slowness of Gordon's film, as perceived and processed by its fixated watcher. As a result of this stylistic quirk, DeLillo imposes on the reader not only the slow motion specifics of the film itself but also the man's obsessive – and stalker-like – characteristics. Rather than show

us these qualities from a narrative and neutral distance, DeLillo obligates the reader to look and think in the relentless and abstract way that the man does throughout both chapters.

The gallery room, then, at *Point Omega*'s end, becomes more than just an area of dark confinement for the man, a safe space into which he can hide and isolate himself. It becomes, almost like the stage for Lauren in *The Body Artist*, an experimentally rendered location in which the self can be wholly isolated and the identity of some distant other can be inhabited. DeLillo achieves this by experimenting with physical space and its potential to influence behaviour on the one hand, and through a slow moving, richly detailed, psychological prose that reflects the form and atmospheres of *Psycho* and *24 Hour Psycho* on the other.

The Desert

With its sprawling remoteness, scarcity of people and absence of culture and capital, a desert may on the surface seem like a museum gallery's radical opposite. In *Point Omega*, however, both locations provide the same function for the individuals who seek solace in them. While there are abundant disparities between the characters of the man in the museum and Richard Elster, they unarguably share a common desire to be isolated from not only society but their respective identities also.

Elster seeks simplicity and transformation in California's Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Like the man in the museum before him, he seeks escape from the hypermodernity of city life. According to Jim Finley, a film-maker intent on shooting a documentary about Elster's life, "This is what he wanted, to feel deep heat beating into his body, feel the body itself, reclaim the body from what he called the nausea of News and Traffic" (22). There are potentially more deep-lying, largely unspoken of associations with the city that Elster wishes to evade. It is there where, presumably, his identity and his work are most fixed. Consequently, an interpretation of Elster's self-imposed exile proposed by some critics is that it in inspired, in part at least, by his complicity in the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. As

David Cowart argues, DeLillo threads through the novel "an indirect anatomy of Americans' acquiescence to the Iraq War and its spurious rationale" (46).

Whatever the reason(s), the desert "out beyond cities and scattered towns" was where Elster had temporarily relocated, to a house surrounded by "nothing but distances, not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances" (22). The house itself "was a sad hybrid", a place where Elster, an outsider by nature and profession, went to leave behind "News and Traffic. Sports and Weather" (23). For Elster, the desert brings silence, a suspension or slowing down of time (similar to, one might note, the museum man in the novel's opening and concluding chapters), a comfort away from information and traces of the war he lent his expertise to.

Although Finley appears bemused by Elster's temperament, the distant perspective such isolation can offer resonates for him also. Driving out to the "remote trailheads", he, like Elster and the man in the museum before him, finds himself dwelling on the tribulations of the existence he has temporarily left behind (41). "I thought of my apartment", he notes, "two small rooms, the rent, the bills, the unanswered calls, the wife no longer there, the separated wife, the crackhead janitor, the elderly woman who walked down the stairs backwards, slowly, eternally, four flights, backwards, and I never asked her why." The suggestion that Finley's own enduring presence in the desert may be more than just project-based is further strengthened when Elster unexpectedly announces his daughter, Jessie, will soon join them. To Finley, this unlikely interruption of his and Elster's shared isolation "was like hearing that the earth had shifted on its axis, budding night back into budding day" (46).

However, despite Jessie's appearance, the desert's psychological impact, its isolating effect, is sustained. Finley describes how "A great rain came sweeping off the mountains, too strong to think into, leaving us with nothing to say" (49). When the three do engage it is transcendental matters – the desert and its apparent transmuting of time – they reflect on. Taking in the surrounding barrenness, Elster notes the absence of "The usual terror" and "the minute-to-minute reckoning, the thing I feel in cities" (56). Though characters engaging in

conversations of a metaphysical nature are evident in all of DeLillo's novels, the metaphysical nature of the dialogue in *Point Omega* further emphasises how inextricably linked the desert and the desire for physical and psychological separation are in the novel. In much the same way as it is in the novel's opening and closing sections, DeLillo's prose in the chapters located in the desert is notably slow in its pacing, a feature perhaps best explained by the philosophical – and occasionally abstruse – conversations on time, identity, place and language between Finley and Elster and the abundance of descriptive writing DeLillo dedicates to capturing the desert and isolation that surrounds them. Here, as in the opening (and concluding) chapter, DeLillo renders the narrative in such a way as to stylistically reflect the work's atmospheres, tracing the desert and the deep ruminations it gives rise using a language notably dense in detail and dictated by the landscape's all-consuming physical features and its influence on those who are situated in it.

As the novel progresses, the desert's hold over the characters becomes more pronounced. Finley, increasingly fascinated with Jessie's aloofness, again considers city life and its myriad complexities he has indefinitely abandoned. Emphasising once more the impact of confined space on psychology, he admits to wondering "if I really wanted to go back to being the man who lives in the two rooms that are surrounded by the city that was built to measure time, in Elster's formulation, the slinking time of watches, calendars, minutes left to live" (75). Jessie, as Finley recalls, also reflects on the city's negatives: "She said something funny at dinner about her eyes being closer together in New York, caused by serial congestion in the streets. Out here the eyes move apart, the eyes adapt to conditions, like wings or beaks." Further developing this idea is how quickly the desert's empty environment becomes normalised. "Here, with them", Finley notes, "I didn't miss movies. The landscape began to seem normal, distance was normal, heat was weather and weather was heat" (81).The desert also offers itself as a place of potential permanent residence. Confessing that his purpose there was no longer linked to his proposed documentary, he states "The reason for

being here had begun to fade. I was simply here, only talking. I wanted to lose the notion of going back there, to responsibility, old woes, to the burn of beginning something that would lead to nowhere" (90).

Point Omega suggests that how one perceives and interacts with place depends on the conditions that exist when one inhabits it. After a rare trip to a distant market, Finley and Elster return to discover Jessie has disappeared. Futile searches for Jessie around the house's perimeters lead them to stand on the deck "looking intently into the stillness" (95). Here, again, DeLillo experiments with the novel's spatial properties. No longer a source of comfort and escape, in light of Jessie's disappearance the desert rapidly transforms, becoming a place where "It was hard to think clearly. The enormity of it all, all that empty country" (96). The landscape's mind-defying stillness only emphasises Jessie's absence. To Finley, "She kept appearing in some inner field of vision, indistinct, like something I'd forgotten to say or do." They were not now located in a landscape at which they could silently marvel, but in a threatening place where "They must get calls for lost hikers all the time. People missing all the time" (98).

Emphasising again how events can profoundly reshape perception, DeLillo reconfigures the familiar. Once banal, the commonplace, the domestic, become alien. Even their immediate surroundings become altered in Jessie's absence; in Finley's words, "I finished putting away the groceries. I tried to concentrate on this, where things go, but objects seemed transparent. I could see through them, think through them" (99-100). With Jessie's disappearance, there also comes need, a return of that which had been easily abandoned before she abruptly vanished. Technology is once more required, its unreliability in such remoteness a source of agitation and panic. Society returns too in the form of a potential explanation, the fact of "Jessie's friend, the man she'd been seeing" (104).

Where before the desert's rhythms encouraged metaphysical contemplation, now, transformed, they emphasised a literal event. In Finley's mind, it was also now a place where

the very worst form of internal isolation – suicidal ideation – regularly reached its dire conclusion. Whether or not Jessie committed suicide, was murdered, kidnapped or simply ran off is never disclosed. Given that there is insufficient evidence in the text itself to posit one theory over another, it might be wisest to refrain in this instance from guessing what DeLillo may or may not have intended with keeping the plot's fundamental mystery unresolved. What can be said, however, is that Jessie's inexplicable and unresolved absence is emphatically reflected in DeLillo's formal decision to leave her disappearance go unexplained. Far be it from being a vehicle through which answers must be delivered, literature, *Point Omega* suggests, should – if its worlds should dictate so – reflect in its forms and styles the ambiguities of reality, even if, as is the case with DeLillo's work, those ambiguities result in narrative dead-ends.

While DeLillo refuses to reveal what happened to Jessie, it does not stop him from further probing the desert's potential menace, emphasising, once more, how perception of place is directly informed by circumstance. A phone call from the authorities reveals that "Searchers had found a knife in a deep ravine not far from an expanse of land called the Impact Area, entry prohibited, a former bombing range littered with unexploded shells" (114). Despite the fact that the "Blade seemed free of blood", it does not discourage Finley from driving towards the area in which it was located (115). Once more, DeLillo uses distinctly psychological language to describe the way in which the exterior world is now being shaped by intense interiority. So remote that his cell phone fails to find a signal, it is a place where, similar to how Lauren describes it in grief in *The Body Artist*, the sky was "narrowed and lowered, that was the strange thing, the sky right there, scale the rocks and you can touch it" (116). Finley now sees what was previously vast as confined and claustrophobic, a sprawling landscape shrunk down by the terror of the unexplained. That DeLillo does this with *Point Omega's* geography – using psychology, that is, to innovatively experiment with its spatial properties and, by extension, the order of reality laid out within the novel – shows an

intriguing cognisance of the impact of isolation on perception. Sustained isolation, after all, has been shown to alter sensory perception, the accuracy of which is reliant on the availability and processing of ubiquitous information. In a 2014 interview with the BBC, clinical psychologist Ian Robbins noted how in isolated spaces where information is in extremely short supply, "the various nerve systems feeding in to the brain's central processor are still firing off, but in a way that doesn't make sense. So after a while the brain starts to make sense of them, to make them into a pattern" (qtd. in Bond). To put DeLillo's interest in cognitive change into more context, it is worth returning to the characteristics and functions of literary experimentalism Julie Armstrong identifies in *Experimental Fiction*. Authors engaging in experimental literature, Armstrong notes, attempt to, among other things, destabilise our sense of the real world, disrupt our sense of what constitutes "normal", introduce new ways of perceiving the world, encourage the reader to "consider ideas and concepts", and bring to their fiction alternate realities and "metaphoric qualities" (3). All of these are evident in how the characters in *Point Omega* interact with and perceive the world around them. Finley's perceptions, like the perceptions of the man in the museum before and after him, are influenced by the events taking place around him and their impact on his mind. The world is destabilised, in Finley's mind at least, to the point of being physically different to how it was before. This, in turn, runs counter to how we generally see the world as more or less fixed in what we expect of it and forces us to reconsider the nature of perception and what informs, and significantly influences, how we see and how we process what we see. The alternate realities and metaphorical qualities are evident too in the vision of a sprawling landscape transmuted by experience and how the desert, once representative of exile and escape, is now perceived as enclosing and threatening.

As Cowart notes, "Jim Finley, searching for Elster's daughter, registers only an absolute and final absence" (40). This absolute and final absence is articulated through a language that, though highly stylised, is notably apocalyptic in its expression. Indeed, so

stirring is its enormity, so otherworldly to the eye and mind, Finley finds it incomprehensible to the point of being unable to imagine it as a place where someone could die. If the desert is a place into which someone could vanish, it is also, he now realises, a place where answers can go missing also. "Could someone be there?" he finds himself wondering. "I could not imagine this. It was too vast. It was not real, the symmetry of furrows and juts, it crushed me, the heartbreaking beauty of it, the indifference of it, and the longer I stood and looked the more certain I was that we would never have an answer" (117). Apocalyptic in its vision, DeLillo's writing reflects the radical emptiness and isolation of the desert as it appears now, a terrain so absolute in its nothingness that it possibly does not even contain answers. For the searching Finley, the desert is not only obfuscating, but also, with its colossal breadth and silence, stupefying, a place where he had never felt "such enveloping nothing" (118). There is, however, now a presence, inspired by Jessie's absence, to this felt sense of nothingness. It is a sense of feeling that defeats normal perception, showing, again, DeLillo's awareness of and experimentation with the potential impact isolation can have on one's ability to access reality. Revealingly, DeLillo focuses specifically on the language of reality in this instance, the names given to things for them to be identified. Finley wonders if the silence could make him forget his own name and, when a fly buzzes around his head, briefly disturbing his sense of isolation, he states "…I had to tell myself what it was, a fly, buzzing near. I had to say the word to myself, fly" (118).

With all this in mind – the desert's enormity, its altering of the senses – he soon concludes that "It was time to tell Elster we were going home" (119). Their return to society, their encountering of the first visible signs of culture for weeks, is notable for it what it quickly produces – a phone call from an unresponsive individual ringing from a blocked number. Whether it is related to Jessie's disappearance or is simply a benign coincidence is irrelevant; the wider suggestion is that the city – "nonstop New York faces, languages, construction scaffolds everywhere, the stream of taxis at four in the afternoon, off-duty signs

lighted" (126) – was back in their lives and with it came the familiarity of reality. Such a suggestion is alluded to in Finley's closing remarks, which sees DeLillo using listing to emphasise the banality of the commonplace: "I thought of my apartment, how distant it would seem even when I walked in the door. My life at a glance, everything there, music, movies, books, the bed and desk, the seared enamel around the burners on the stove. I thought of the telephone ringing as I entered."

How, then, with all this considered, should we perceive the desert in *Point Omega*? Until Jessie vanishes, the desert is a place of sanctuary – for Elster, primarily, but also, in the end, for Finley and Jessie. It is to there that they escape from the reality of their respective city lives. For Elster the desert is a place where time is suspended and where identity comes close to dissolution. For Finley, it becomes a place that, for a period, he wishes to not leave. It is implied that Jessie's presence there is encouraged, the result of sustained pressure from a mother worried about her daughter's safety in the erratic environs of the city.

Following Jessie's disappearance, the desert's role in *Point Omega* alters. It is, DeLillo implies through his experimentation with its spatial properties, a place that, despite its immensity, is susceptible to interference. Where people go, culture and capital also go. In *Point Omega*, culture is both put at a distance and, at the same, placed under the microscope using the desert as its most natural contrast; only then, DeLillo's novel suggests, might we be able to observe it in its totality and understand why so many desperately attempt to isolate themselves and, in doing so, withdraw from its reach. The psychologically isolated characters who seek out the isolation of the desert do so at a cost, however. For Jim Finley, the desert proves fruitless – his documentary remains unmade. For Richard Elster, for whom the desert serves as an environment to escape to, exile ends in potential tragedy with the disappearance of his daughter. For Jessie, meanwhile, it is where she has vanished. How DeLillo achieves all this is as much down to his particular style in *Point Omega* as it is its plot. Through subtle experimentalism and a narrative pace slowed by the novel's philosophical and psychological

digressions, DeLillo uses the perceptions of his characters and the events they endure to alter the physical spaces they inhabit and, by extension, the language they utilise to express these changes – changes that are more psychological and isolating than they are physical. Consequently, we can conclude from this that what DeLillo is really interested in here is reality – or, more precisely, what constitutes "reality", the language through which it is articulated and processed, and how, in the eyes of the perceiver at least, it is susceptible to fundamental change. As Charles I. Glicksberg posits, "American writers of experimental fiction have gone the whole hog in their revolt against fixed standards, traditional concepts, the established method of delineating characters, the demand for a logically unified plot" (142). As has been noted, DeLillo may not be a radical experimentalist in the mould of Markson, but he uses experimentalism to communicate radical ideas about the world and how it is inhabited. To this end, *Point Omega* certainly adheres to the characteristics outlined by Glicksberg. In resisting a neat conclusion and the "traditional concepts" we might reasonably expect from a work of fiction, DeLillo places full emphasis on cognition, the isolated psychological states in which individuals can find themselves and the type of behaviours such sustained isolation can inspire.

The Dissolution of Identity in *Point Omega*

On the surface, both the unnamed man in the museum and Richard Elster appear to share the same common want – a desire to escape what essentially constitutes normal existence. This section will closely examine the role that both men play in *Point Omega*, paying particular attention to how the isolated locations they place themselves in are directly related to the identities they inhabit and are eager to free themselves from. Focusing first on Elster before moving on to the unnamed man, what will become clear is that their pursuit of physical isolation is driven by a mutual feeling of interior isolation and a craving for a dissolution of who they fundamentally are. The role that DeLillo's use of literary experimentalism plays in

portraying this– namely, his use of language and his incorporation of Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* and Teilhard du Chardin's Omega Point theory – will form a vital part of this discussion. After all, it is through distinctly stylised, psychological language and the innovative, intertextual weaving of sourced, real-world secondary material that DeLillo simultaneously articulates and interrogates the foundations of identity and its susceptibility to profound alteration. On a wider level, this experimental approach, which ultimately casts further light on the contributors to and conditions of isolation, also, by default, queries through its very presence the foundations of fiction and implies that it is perhaps through anomalous styles and forms that it can reach its fullest potential.

Richard Elster

The first thing revealed about Richard Elster is that he believes the deep layers and reality of existence are not communicable. Recalling his time spent with him, Finley – in a series of statements that reveal how DeLillo sees the articulation of experience as demanding of a temperament that thinks experimentally about existence:

> The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written, not by anyone, ever. The true life takes place when we're alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments. He said this more than once, Elster did, in more than one way. His life happened, he said, when he sat staring at a blank wall, thinking about dinner (21).

He has come to the desert "to stop talking" after "more than two years of living with the tight minds that made the war" (22-23). Now, having dealt with "the metaphysicians in the intelligence agencies, the fantasists in the Pentagon" (24) he has sought solace in isolation. The solace he seeks, however, is of no ordinary kind, as becomes clear in his abstruse interactions with Finley. Once more highlighting the links between isolation and the psychological urge to render the world through abstractions brought about through experimental thought, DeLillo has Elster perceive his exile as existentially driven. The

distinct form of solace he seeks is regressive in nature, a desired nothingness. As Finley notes, "Extinction was a current theme of his. The landscape inspired themes. Spaciousness and claustrophobia. This would become a theme" (25). In a literal sense, the *theme* is DeLillo's as well as Elster's, the innovative delivery of which pays testament to how experience exposes the flexibility of perception.

Rather than see his prolonged stay in the desert as self-imposed exile, he prefers to see it as something spiritual, an extended break from the presence of others, who he sees as sources of conflict. But it is not solely the presence of others he has left behind. There looms also the reality of the war he lent his expertise to, an experience that, it seems, left him feeling confined. Why this is precisely the case remains, for the most part, unclear. As previously implied, it could be read that he is suffering from a cognitive response known as moral injury. Characterised as "distress over having transgressed or violated core moral boundaries, accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame, self-condemnation, loss of trust, loss of meaning, and spiritual struggles", an extensive literature review of studies determining the prevalence of moral injury in war veterans by Harold G. Koenig and colleagues found that "MI in the military setting is widespread and associated with PTSD symptom severity, anxiety, depression, and risk of suicide in current or former military personnel" (Koenig, et al.) Elster may be a scholar who has advised on rather than directly participated in the war, but nevertheless there is ample evidence in his metaphysical musings about the extinction of the species, war itself, his sustained aloofness, and his need for self-exile and isolation to suggest the war has significantly impacted him. As Cowart has noted, "Whatever the degree of deception on the part of Bush and company, many a "tribal elder" must feel the retrospective guilt of self-deception" (46). While rarely explicit in what he reveals, he states that "War creates a closed world and not only for those in combat but for the plotters, the strategists" (35), a sentiment that echoes Jack Gladney's suggestion in *White Noise* that "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots" (11). It is from this – the claustrophobic and

psychologically stifling rigidness of daily life – that Elster seeks separation. At the more specific plot level, DeLillo's resistance towards revealing in explicit terms the impact Elster's role in the war has had on him can be looked at in the same way as Jessie's unexplained disappearance; the relevance of the explicit reasons behind both absences is secondary to the responses, both explicit and implicit, they elicit in those impacted by them. Additionally, by directing focus away from the potential drama that clearing up their fundamental mysteries might provoke, DeLillo is able to place full emphasis on the elements of his work that *Point Omega* is ultimately most predicated on: atmosphere, identity, place, psychology, and isolated states.

Despite that, he also wants, or possibly needs, company with whom to share his isolation. According to Jessie, "The man totally physically hates to be alone" (51). The reason for this runs deeper than the mere innate evolutionary want for presence. For Elster, Finley acts as something of a soundboard, an interested and eager party whose presence is predicated alone on documenting Elster's rarefied way of perceiving the world. In one of their conversations, Elster returns to the topic that opened the chapter that introduced him – that life is defined not by its larger events, but in the profundity of banal moments of which it is mostly composed. Haunted by a feeling of having never emerged out of the self he felt contained in through youth, Elster notes how something as simple as maintaining a habit for biting the dead skin off his right thumbnail reminds him of who he is. While it may constitute an identity crisis, his attraction to the desert is fundamentally motivated by this lingering shock of being. If not to counteract this interior sense of disturbance, Elster seeks from the desert new perspectives, a place where, among other phenomena, "there's none of the usual terror" and a sense of time that "precedes us and survives us" (56).

Further insights into Elster's esoteric nature are revealed through how he is perceived by both Finley and Jessie. To the former, it is as though "Every second's the last breath he takes" (58). When asked how Elster responded to seeing *24 Hour Psycho*, Jessie, in another

moment that sees DeLillo use Gordon's experimental work to get his characters thinking experimentally, reveals that "He told me it was like watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years" and that "He said it was like the contraction of the universe" (59). Elster, an unsurprised Finley responds, "thinks on a cosmic scale. We know this." If Elster's thoughts are cosmic in scale, they are also isolating in nature. In a response to a question from Finley about whether he had been to Iraq, Elster states "I hate violence. I fear the thought of it, won't watch violent movies, turn away from news reports on television that show dead or wounded people" (63). Implied here is that despite embedding himself in and lending his expertise to the machinations of warfare, the grim reality of it is something that he does not wish to dwell on. It is a defining revelation, another indication of how reliant he is on separating thoughts and ideas from the literal images they conjure. It is also a revelation that leads him into expressing his metaphysical thesis on consciousness and extinction, one clearly linked to his need for isolation. Responding to Finley about another of DeLillo's tropes – the looming threat of warfare and annihilation – Elster states, "Something's coming. But isn't this what we want? Isn't this the burden of consciousness? We're all played out. Matters wants to lose its self-consciousness. We're the mind and heart matter has become. Time to close it all down. This is what drives us now" (64). Here, once more, DeLillo's language is notably apocalyptic in its vision. It is not, however, simply an apocalypse of the world, a final and unstoppable global catastrophe that will render humanity extinct, that haunts the work; it is, at core, an existential apocalypse, a deep-seated death-wish lurking within all mankind. Interestingly, proof of this lies, Elster adds, in what emerges from deep within us; namely, in narrative itself, in the stories we invent and for reasons unknowable insist on returning to. "We keep inventing folk tales of the end", he notes. "Animal diseases spreading, transmittable cancers. What else?"

Despite following this up with claiming the matter is of little interest to him, that he wishes to "think beyond this", he continues along similar lines. It is at this point that DeLillo

incorporates another real-world, notably abstruse influence into the text, the function of which, like Gordon's experimental film before it, is to reveal, albeit abstractly, the complex components of character and identity's susceptibility to change. Elster reveals that as a student he studied the work of Teilhard de Chardin, a French philosopher and Jesuit priest. Chardin, Elster notes, "said that human thought is alive, it circulates. And the sphere of collective human thought, this is approaching the final term, the last flare" (65). This final term, as per de Chardin's Omega Point theory, signals the threshold that once crossed will unify of all that which the universe – consciousness included – is composed. As Patrick H. Byrne notes, in de Chardin's eyes, "The Omega Point would be the harmonious continuation of the various unifications that have occurred at every prior level of evolution" (88). DeLillo's decision to incorporate de Chardin's theory and let it profoundly influence Elster and, by extension, the novel itself is intriguing, not least because it further portrays Elster as at a distinct remove from the rest of humanity. In both how he perceives the world and gives voice to it, Elster, it is clear, is profoundly inspired by de Chardin's theory. It holds not only appeal for him but merit too, provoking in him a vision and language that, though apocalyptic, is unnervingly measured and – to Elster at least – humbling in the enlightenment it provides. It also goes some way in legitimising the solitary existence to which he has confined himself. Expanding on de Chardin's divine concept, Elster posits, in this existentially apocalyptic language, that there is a deep human want to replace the extroversion of collective expression, war included, with a supernatural introversion brought about, perhaps, through the extinction of the species in its present form. "We're a crowd, a swarm", he posits. "We think in groups, travel in armies. Armies carry the gene for self-destruction. One bomb is never enough. The blur of technology, this is where the oracles plot their wars. Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point. A leap out of our biology" (66-67). Furthering the point, he asks Finley: "Do we have to be humans forever? Consciousness is

exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field."

Whether or not Elster fully believes this, or if he is attempting to repress his own guilt by submitting to the opacity of spiritual belief, remains, as noted, unknown. What is, however, indisputable is that he perceives himself as being held in suspicion. To him, Finley's role as interviewer and documentarian is to extract something he has yet to request: a confession. While Finley contests the suggestion, Elster remains firm, stating "You want to film a man breaking down" (68). Given *Psycho* traces, amongst other things, a man's psychological unravelling, this comment creates obvious parallels with Hitchcock's film and, in particular, Gordon's experimental appropriation of it. Finley's documentary ultimately remains unmade, but through his further actions and dialogue more is revealed about Elster and his distancing of himself from the world. Returning to the theme of death, he informs Finley that "I don't have to see a bighorn sheep before I die", before stating "But I want Jessie to see one" (72). It is an insight that reveals, again, Elster's fatalistic temperament and his need to see himself as separate. This way of behaving, this need to play the role of outcast or recluse, is not new, as revealed by Finley's memories of when he first met him. He first approached Elster, he recalls, after attending a talk of his at The New School, the Manhattan research university. Elster's response to being asked to participate in Finley's documentary was, Finley recalls, to abruptly walk off; when Finley caught up with him, Elster firmly dismissed the notion. When they met again, on this occasion in New York's Museum of Modern Art, something in Elster shifted. Viewing *24 Hour Psycho* together, in Elster, Finley recalls, "Something was subverted here, his traditional language of response. Stillborn images, collapsing time, an idea so open to theory and argument that it left him no clear context to dominate, just crisp rejection" (78). This exchange is telling, for two reasons. At the plot level, it reveals a significant change in Elster's character. On a wider level, it can be reasonably construed as a subtextual commentary on the expansive potential of radical,

subversive art and its ability to broaden perspectives. As Finley reveals, Elster's encounter with Gordon's film was defining. Soon after their visit to the museum, "he telephoned and said he was in a place called Anza-Borrego, in California."

Like *The Body Artist*'s Lauren (and, indeed, *Wittgenstein's Mistress'*s Kate), Elster is almost overwhelmingly inward, not so much disillusioned but haunted – astonished, even – by the self he inhabits. However, unlike Lauren and Kate, whose isolated states are caused by events beyond their control, Elster's interior disorientation and its connection to a sense of physical and psychological nothingness appears to be somewhat willed – or, at the very least, an innate part of his character. Presumably, this is why de Chardin's Omega Point theory resonates with him and why DeLillo's repurposing of it into his text plays a vital role in its examination of isolation – it dismisses identity and implies that extinction is not only wished for, but also meaningful, the vital part of a greater unified whole. As Graley Herren argues, DeLillo's use of appropriation is inextricably linked with mortality. "Elster's appropriation of Teilhard", she writes, "Gordon's appropriation of Hitchcock, and DeLillo's appropriations of them all lead asymptotically toward death" (154). At the core of DeLillo's experimentation with intertextualities, then, is an urge to entangle and use external material to serve in innovative ways his own unique preoccupation with and examination of death and the isolation that can be inspired by being in close psychological and physical proximity to it.

It is again worth considering at this point what Elster's temperament might indicate on a wider level. Is it to be inferred that Elster's unorthodox, ethically questionable line of work has led him into this mode of thought? Does his propensity for abstract thought suggest he is attempting to repress, or perhaps justify, his contribution to large scale destruction of land and human life? Does de Chardin's theory provide a metaphysical antidote to the moral injury his complicity in the war may have inflicted on him? Alternatively, it could well be that he is, by nature, fundamentally abstruse; he did, after all, first become enamoured with de Chardin's theory when he was a student. If there is an explicit answer, DeLillo does not provide one.

Instead, the reader must mull over where Elster is now, both physically and psychologically. Increasingly interested now in further discussing de Chardin's theory, he states "There's almost some law of mathematics or physics that we haven't quite hit upon, where the mind transcends all direction inward" (91). Humanity, he adds, craves paroxysm, the manifestation of "Either a sublime transformation of mind and soul or some worldly convulsion." Emphasising the point, he says to Finley: "Think of it. We pass completely out of being. Stones. Unless stones have being. Unless there's some profoundly mystical shift that places being in a stone" (92). These series of comments from Elster are defining, in both what they again project and what, in retrospect, they come to be: his last thoughts before Jessie vanishes.

In much the same way that it has the effect of transmuting the desert's role and lasting meaning in the novel, Jessie's disappearance also signals a shift in Elster's personality. In the immediate panic produced by her absence, Finley notes how "Elster spoke, but not to me, a few puzzled mutterings about her unpredictability" and "He was in the house, on the sofa, leaning well forward and talking into the floor" (96-97). For Elster now, all thoughts – of the desert, of the mind – centre on Jessie and are propelled not by philosophical inquiry, but by raw paternal concern. There is now no inclination to imagine himself existing, somehow, beyond the limits of selfhood. Rather than aloofly play the role of the intellectual outsider, the present demands him to be what he is: an anxious father devoid of answers, rigidly and bleakly fixed to the real and the immediate.

When he at last finds himself capable of communication, his focus is exclusively on the practical. He steps outside, surrounded by a transformed desert now, and calls Jessie's mother. Finley notices how "his body sagged" and "He listened, then spoke again, every word a plea, the response of an accused man, negligent, stupid, guilty" (103). Finley's observations reveal not only a profound change in Elster's character, but also a humanity that, up to now, he had been trying to distance himself from. While he continues to remain inward, his inwardness is the result of something different now – a combination of both relentless unease

and depression. Although research into the impact felt by families of the missing is surprisingly in short supply, there have been a few limited psychological studies that give some indication into the scale of trauma a missing person's case can inflict on the individual's loved ones. For example, a qualitative study by Amila Isuru and colleagues set out to determine the levels of grief experienced by family members of individuals who had gone missing in southern Sri Lanka. A series of interviews with twenty-four families found that "Six predominant phenomenological themes were identified. Those were lack of closure, hope, guilt, helplessness, perpetual suffering, and an emotional vacuum" (Isuru, et al., 1). Although Jessie has only very recently vanished, Elster begins to soon show signs that the shock of her unexplained disappearance has profoundly changed him. Finley notes how Elster stopped shaving and made him consider the idea that he might commit suicide. No longer the commanding figure of the two, Elster is now childlike in his vulnerability. While he wishes to remain in the desert, it is driven now not by a personal mission to isolate himself and his thoughts, but out of parental obligation. The desert has become a place that takes away rather than delivers. "We can't leave", he states, before adding, "What if she comes back?" (107).

Departing the desert, Finley lists off "blank" facts – flight details, the banalities of waiting lists and arrival and departure times – and in doing so observes "a flimsy strategy for returning him to the world" (122). This last sentiment is an important one to consider as it highlights one of the fundamental themes of *Point Omega*: unwilled re-entry and, with it, an unwanted end to physical isolation. Originally, the desert was a place to which Elster could escape not only from city living but also from the fundamental sense of literally being, but it ultimately serves to reveal that escape is only ever temporary and that we cannot transcend our central condition of being alone. Additionally, Finley's description of the city as "the world" is notable, highlighting, the sense of the otherworldliness of the desert, the landscape of which has been subject in the character's perceptions to DeLillo's spatial experiments.

With potential tragedy, comes the return of the form of realism that is common in everyday thought and the end of experimental rumination. Finley considers Elster's previous metaphysical remarks and sees them now as hollow and drained of meaning. "It seemed so much dead echo now", he states. "Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funnelled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not" (124). Therein, it seems, lies Elster's future, one of confusion, dread and unshifting grief. He had gone to the desert to escape any number of sources of anxiety – culture, repressed guilt, the unknown, identity – only to find that, short of death, there is no ultimate escape from the self.

Man in the Museum of Modern Art

The need for physical retreat is not the only similarity that links *Point Omega*'s two isolated characters. They also share a desire to retreat from the identities they inhabit. While the manner in which they both attempt to do this is different, they are notably driven to do so by a number of mutual concerns: anxiety from the wider culture, a sense of unease with who they fundamentally are, and residual traumas carried over from infrequently referred to past events. Perhaps most pertinently, both of their characters are drawn to – and are gradually exposed by – the external, real-world sources that DeLillo experimentally incorporates into the novel. In short, the two most isolated characters in *Point Omega* are isolated, to varying degrees, by the work's experimental elements.

When we first encounter the anonymous man in the museum gallery room, he is fascinated with the sight of Anthony Perkins, the movements of which, it is soon revealed, have been significantly slowed down to form Douglas Gordon's experimental *24 Hour Psycho*. His concentration is so fixed that he "could count the gradations in the movement of Anthony Perkins' head" (5). When considered in retrospect, this moment, captured so soon after the novel's beginning, is eerie in its foreshadowing of what is to come in its haunting

final moments. For the time being, however, the man is merely watching *24 Hour Psycho* intently. From the intensity of his watching – an experimental watching, as Gordon's film demands – there emerge hints of interior discord. In the simple gesture of Anthony Perkins turning his head, he sees more than a literal image – it recalls "an array of ideas involving science and philosophy and nameless other things", before it is suggested that "maybe he was seeing too much" (6). This conclusion is soon cancelled out by a thought that could also be applied to the experimental arts: "The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw."

His habit for immersive perception is revealed through DeLillo's distinctly stylised, psychological language again when he considers the director's decision to mute the film's sound: "It had to engage the individual at a depth beyond the usual assumptions, the things he supposes and presumes and takes for granted" (8). So transfixed is he by the slow motion movements of Gordon's subversive work, the man does not desire to be registered as a presence in the room. It is stated that "Nobody was watching him. This was the ideal world as he might have drawn it in his mind. He had no idea what he looked like to others. He wasn't sure what he looked like to himself" (10). While what contributed to this desire to be isolated remains unclear, the things he wishes to isolate himself from are easier to identify: the outside world existing beyond the gallery room's exit, the perception of others and his core identity, the nature of which, with the aid of Gordon's film, becomes more fluid and increasingly deranged.

The immensity of the hold the film has on him is shown in how both fixated he is with its minutiae and the response this fixation inspires from him: "The film made him feel like someone watching a film. The meaning of this escaped him. He kept feeling things whose meaning escaped him" (13). At a wider level, this can be interpreted as a commentary on experimental art in general, the atypical nature of which – so often opaque – frequently provokes fascination and frustration in equal measure. At the plot level, it is an insight that

reveals something that becomes increasingly clear over the course of the two sections in *Point Omega* that focus on him – he is an individual who feels unsure of who he is supposed to be and is regularly unnerved by the direction of his own thoughts. Devoid of meaning, he is forced, much like the reader of experimental literature, to operate on theory and instinct. Through both, he is able to recognise his unusual otherness, the remove at which he exists, why the movie is having such an impact on him and why it might not intrigue others.

Whatever impact Gordon's film has had on his imagination and his perception of others, it has also led him to query his own state of being and his relationship with the world. His fixation with and reliance on the gallery room and the film itself is so complete that he wonders if he could return to the world as the person he once was if it continued. Despite seeming less sure of where these ideas are emerging from, he shares with Elster an underlying want to be free of the world existing outside of where he is presently situated. In this sense, Gordon's film engenders in him an experimental, existential thought process similar to the one the Omega Point theory engenders in Elster. Specifically, DeLillo uses experiment to create in both men a yearning for alternative – and distinctly isolated – worlds more conducive to their respective psychologies and how they situate themselves in reality. Like Elster, the man in the museum, provoked by Gordon's film, longs for isolation, confinement to a silent, remote environment conducive to interior examination and a sense of separateness. An environment, that is, that interrogates the self before enabling its dissolution.

When we encounter him again in the concluding chapter, much has changed. We know now that the two men he observed and briefly felt a union with were Jim Finley and Richard Elster. We are also aware that Jessie's disappearance could relate to a volatile man she had recently become acquainted with in New York. More clues are fed through the novel's closing chapter, some of which appear to suggest that the man in the museum and the man Jessie became acquainted with – possibly named Dennis – are one and the same. While the mystery remains unsolved, it is vital to consider the behaviour and thoughts of the man in

the novel's closing moments. In them we see a man becoming more isolated in himself and, as a result, becoming increasingly uneasy to the point where he no longer feels like he is himself.

On this day, September 4th, the film is being shown for the final time and his concentration on it is as fixed as before. By now, his continuous presence in the gallery room has had the effect of blurring time; he no longer knows how many times he has watched particular scenes or on which days he started viewing particular moments of the film. In the same way that DeLillo transmutes perceptions of space in the desert, here, as the man in the museum's anxiety levels increase, DeLillo experiments with and recalibrates the way in which time is experienced. Interestingly, this experimentation with how the man perceives time brings to mind David Markson's experimentation in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*'s, when Kate, also obsessive in her thoughts, dwells on the particulars of how her interior world converges with the depopulated exterior world she inhabits and, in doing so, loses hold of her sense of time. Becoming blurred too in *Point Omega* is the threshold separating the real from the fictive, as it does in Markson's novel. Where the man is standing and the world on the screen are not separated by the imaginary or time, but by his literal position in the room. If he didn't isolate himself at the wall he "might find himself doing what, he wasn't sure, transmigrating, passing from this body into a quivering image on the screen" (129). It is a defining sentiment, not least because it foreshadows the novel's ambiguous end. It also serves to highlight the man's crossing over into fantasy and with it a dissolution of his identity. Because of this, the film's appeal to him is only intensifying. He returns once more to the prospect of the film being uninterruptedly screened but this time develops the idea further. This amplification of experimental viewing would be a "personal test of endurance and forbearance, a kind of punishment" (131). This latter suggestion – that it might a form of obscure punishment for "standing here day after day, hour after hour, in hapless anonymity" – is something "the others" might say.

Jessie's arrival in the room briefly disrupts him from his willed aloneness. The moment is a significant one, coming as it does when, in Herren's words, "his identity is in the process of being erased and reprogrammed; he is a tabula becoming steadily reinscribed by the images on screen" (152). With Jessie's presence comes what disturbs him: being seen, expectation, responsibility, the need to communicate and the reality and recognition of the self. Like with Jessie's disappearance in the desert, here DeLillo disrupts the anomalousness of the scene by letting the outside real encroach upon the psychological abstract. The shock of interaction has, in essence, made him aware of himself again and disrupts, albeit momentarily, his fixation with Gordon's film. When he tries to regather his thoughts, to focus once more on the film and why he is in the room, his perceptions are muddled and he wonders "was the film thinking into him, spilling through him like some kind of runaway brain fluid?" (138-139). The answer to this question, for the reader at least, is soon answered through the way in which he begins to behave.

After composing himself, and after thinking about Norman Bates and his mother, the man asks, "Can you imagine yourself living another life?" (141). It is a question that reintroduces the ideas of separation and the dissolution of identity, ideas – inspired by Gordon's and, by extension, DeLillo's experimentalism – further amplified when, following Jessie's departure, he returns to the gallery room. Now, comfortable once more in isolation, he yearns for the film's experimentalism to be even more radical, and to be taken over, physically and psychologically, by its overwhelming potential. He realises "He wanted the film to move even more slowly, requiring deeper involvement of eye and mind, always that, the thing he sees tunnelling into the blood, into dense sensation, sharing consciousness with him" (146). With Jessie gone, his sense of alliance with the film, with its surreal commitment to movement and what it reveals about identity, is restored and he inhabits again a space entirely his own. He sees in Norman Bates and his actions someone with whom he can affiliate himself. More precisely, he sees *himself* in Norman Bates; the on-screen images of

Bates carrying his mother down the stairs provokes memories in the man of his own mother before she died. The realisation is a profound one. Not for the first time, the threshold between what is being projected on the screen and his own life blurs. Unlike before, however, it not only blurs but also appears, in his eyes, to fade entirely. Now, rather than stay static against the wall, he steps towards the screen, and "waits to be assimilated, pore by pore, into the figure of Norman Bates" (148).

Where this will all lead is not disclosed. There is no suggestion that he will literally vanish into the screen's image of Norman Bates. DeLillo's experimentalism is significant in *Point Omega*, but, unlike *The Body Artist* and its suggestions of fantasy, it is notably grounded in the real and directed towards probing it in new ways. What can be suggested, however, is that this moment, coming so soon after Jessie's departure from the room, is defining, not least because we know she subsequently disappears in suspicious circumstances. Further highlighting both the explicit and implicit functions of DeLillo's experimentation with intertextual, real-world material, the links with the original movie *Psycho*, in which the psychologically deranged Norman Bates assumes his mother's identity after murdering her and violently kills a number of others – most famously among them Marion Crane – are clear. For Herren, who has posited that the man in the museum and the man named Dennis who is named as a potential person of interest in Jessie's disappearance are probably the same person, "This total immersion fantasy marks a crucial turning point in Dennis's identification with Norman Bates" (155). DeLillo refuses to reveal if both men are the same. Like *The Body Artist*, *Point Omega* is not, after all, a novel of answers. Indeed, in addition to DeLillo being chiefly preoccupied with the stylistic rendering of psychological response and the articulation of interiority rather than the creation and explanation of mysteries, a significant part of *Point Omega's* stylistic modus operandi is, like that of so many novels that use experimental formal and stylistic techniques, to implicate the reader and have them fill in the novel's narrative holes. This is never clearer than when the reader is forced to wonder what became of Jessie.

After the museum closes, is it possible that the man, so deeply affected by the film, proceeds to introject Bates's ideas, his way of being, and hunt Jessie down in the desert? Such a question is dependent, ultimately, on individual interpretation. What appears indubitable, however, is that come *Point Omega*'s final moments, he is certainly seeking, like Elster (and, it is worth noting, *The Body Artist*'s Lauren), to be fundamentally free of himself. While the ageing war adviser envisions a future in which his extinction will contribute to a wider cosmic meaning, the unnamed man in the museum wishes to pass out of reality and into an impossible fictive past. Neither wish is, in the end, achievable, but both are driven by the same clear want: a desire for both exterior and interior isolation.

How DeLillo achieves all this is a result of his delivery of *Point Omega's* worlds, the philosophical and psychological concepts he incorporates into it and how those who inhabit it respond to the events that unfold in it. His experimentalism is primarily oriented towards the articulation of the deeply psychological. Of course, that articulation requires an extensive awareness of the particularities that contribute to how people perceive, think, express, and behave. Christina Milletti has noted how the aim of innovative fiction is to "make readers reinvestigate how they perceive the world around them, what relations and assumptions they draw about their role as subjects in language: the way language functions to engage, describe, and distort our understanding of each other and the world " (26). DeLillo does all this in *Point Omega*. Throughout the work, his highly stylised language, the primary function of which is to address and articulate highly complex psychological states, is fundamentally motivated by a desire to cast light on how the world, in all its layers, is both perceived by and inhabited by those who are struggling with – and are often profoundly disturbed by – their position in it. Furthermore, DeLillo's utilisation of pre-existing, real-world philosophical concepts and experimental art and his examination of the ways in which perception can profoundly alter identity and the physical world reconfigures our basic assumptions about who we are and what our place is in that world.

In Conclusion

In *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, Don DeLillo exhibits a noticeably different form of experimentalism than David Markson does in the works discussed in the previous chapter. Aesthetically and formally less radical, the ingenuity DeLillo utilises to examine isolation in his works may, by comparison, exist on the lower end of the experimental spectrum, but his innovative formal and stylistic approaches nevertheless reveal the versatility and potential of experimental literature. Preoccupied with how people perceive and communicate, DeLillo's enduring thematic obsession has always been language, how individuals verbalise – or attempt to verbalise, at least – their interior worlds and how the world, so often ambiguous, interacts with them. It is little surprise then that DeLillo's particular forms of experimentalism have generally been used to examine the relationship between perception and language. In both *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, DeLillo interrogates the functions of language and its relationship with human isolation. Throughout *The Body Artist*, he employs dialogue that is markedly disfluent, syntactically incorrect, incomplete, unreciprocated and influenced by misperception. In order to provide the necessary narrative distance, additional perspectives and more nuanced contexts, he also employs the language of journalism in two sections of the novel, a shift that also reinforces the work's central themes. In *Point Omega,* meanwhile, DeLillo employs a notably slow-paced, contemplative prose style to mirror the isolated environments its characters inhabit and the impact they have on their individual psychologies. Tracing in psychological language the deep interiority of its characters and the profound psychical change they are subject to over the course of the novel, there are times when DeLillo's style intentionally results in an eerie ambiguity over whose thoughts and actions are being articulated. Delivered as so to express the porousness of identity and the mind's capacity to be influenced, DeLillo's prose illuminates the remove at which *Point Omega's*

characters exist and the central role that language plays in an individual's perception of their own existence and its place in the world.

In addition to his use of language in both novels, DeLillo also experiments in a number of other ways. In *The Body Artist*, his mimicry of two forms of non-fiction and his introduction of an experimentally constructed, anomalous character serve to further examine isolation through narrative distancing and a figure who deepens the novel's preoccupation with ambiguity, language, memory and grief. In *Point Omega*, his drawing on two real-world sources – Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* and the metaphysical teachings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – provides an intertextual influence that significantly contributes to the novel's considerable exploration of deep interiority, identity and psychological derangement. Additionally, his distinctly immersive, experimental crafting of spatial environments cast further light on the isolated states his characters find themselves in and how their perceptions of the world and how they inhabit it are altered by the events that take place within it.

In order to ascertain the potential suitability for literary experimentalism as an effective means of examining the topic, links have been drawn between DeLillo's work and studies that have focused on the causes and experiences of the particular forms of isolation he examines in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*. Through references made to psychological insights into the impact of grief on the self, grief-induced cognitive malfunction, the impact of sustained isolation on sensory perception, the suffering of families with missing loved ones and the mental repercussions of warfare, the case has been made that in both novels DeLillo's experimentalism is particularly suitable for portraying the complexities of these forms of isolation.

This chapter has largely been the product of close readings that have looked to extract from *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* the sections that are concerned with human isolation and to add further critical comment on what might be extrapolated from them. By paying meticulous attention to these sections, it has been possible to trace, at both the formal and

stylistic level, the nature and extent of DeLillo's experimentalism and, crucially, how he utilises it to address the theme of isolation in his work. Through these readings, it has been argued that if one is to fully ascertain the role of isolation in both novels and the extent to which it is explored in each work, it is vital to consider not just their content but also their form, which is inseparable from content. Additionally, this chapter has also communicated a reluctance to critically analyse DeLillo's works through the lens of meaning or singular interpretation. This study is not, after all, focused on interpretation or drawing from texts an ultimate meaning; rather, it is concerned with craft and its relationship with theme. The references to psychological studies, meanwhile, are included to provide context for the discussion of the psychology of isolation as it is experienced in reality and to contribute to the wider discussion of this study – experimental literature and its suitability for examining the theme of isolation.

This chapter has made the same argument that was made in the chapter on Markson's works – namely, that in experimental literature, form is indivisible from content, including themes, and that any attempts to determine how a theme is examined needs to take into account not just a work's content but also its form, which, as evidenced in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, can emphasise content so profoundly that it can justifiably be regarded as inextricable from it. The examination of isolation in both DeLillo novels takes place in their storylines and in how those storylines are formed. In those forms, DeLillo's experimentalism lends itself to versatile portrayals of isolation, suggesting that the creative freedoms found in experimental literature can be particularly conducive for the exploration of complex themes, human isolation among them.

Chapter 3. The Crafting of Isolation in Contemporary Experimental Literature

In order to further acknowledge and appreciate the extent to which formal and stylistic literary experimentation can articulate, confront, examine and indeed commentate isolation, it is worth looking at other, more contemporary authors whose innovative approach to craft and thematic preoccupations share similarities with Markson and DeLillo. In addition to providing narrative consistency to this discussion, focusing on these authors will also highlight how, cognisant of both the longstanding and distinctly modern contributors of isolation and how it is experienced, they utilise experimental techniques to convey its complexities and how it profoundly affects existence today. In an email, Brian Kiteley, author of *The 3 A.M. Epiphany*, has suggested that, "[S]tylistic innovation is necessary and unavoidable if you think about the world honestly. We are always changing, and our minds are also always being altered by circumstances, history, and technology" (Kiteley). This chapter will explore how three contemporary authors use experimentalism to "think about the world honestly" and to portray modern existence in a world shaped by both the past and significant societal and technological change.

Focusing on contemporary works has a three-pronged purpose. Firstly, it will acknowledge that experimental literature's longstanding thematic interest in human isolation has not abated, despite the world being more technologically connected than it has ever been. Secondly, it will show that literary experiment can take both historically recurrent and unprecedented forms. Thirdly, by focusing on contemporary works it will be possible to identify stylistic and thematic traces that exist between them and the works of Markson and DeLillo. This last aspect will serve to highlight the trajectory of experimental literature as well as the new ways experimental literary techniques are being employed to express how isolation is experienced in modern existence.

Given the sheer abundance of books published every year and the uncertainty over what can be defined as "contemporary", the need to be selective is unavoidable. The texts examined in this chapter were chosen because of the range of their stylistic strategies and, in some cases, the types of isolation they focus on. Their usage of research notes, incorporation of material from non-literary fields of study, amalgamated modes of literature, abundant citation of secondary material, technologically determined modalities of writing, and atypical type formatting of type will all be discussed. These signal, both individually and collectively, how contemporary experimental literature is responding to isolation in the modern era by engaging with the complex forms and modalities generated by the cultural moment. For the purpose of narrative consistency and analytic depth, the degree to which the works bear formal, stylistic and thematic echoes with the experimental works of David Markson and Don DeLillo has also played a vital factor when deciding which contemporary works to discuss here. Rather than contribute to emphatically comparative analyses, however, the connections that will be made with Markson and DeLillo will primarily highlight the continuing spirit of experimentalism that runs through contemporary literature and what it serves at the narrative level. Readings will also illuminate the subtle differences in approach within the more contemporary works, showing how new forms of isolation have promoted new forms of experiment. Although the works are formally and existentially disparate, they are also connected through their experimentalism and their attempts to query the root causes of isolation and how it is experienced. Isolation here emerges out of existential ennui, artistic struggles, familial dysfunction, autism, a submissive personality type, relationship problems or trauma as a result of sexual abuse. While none of these causes of isolation are entirely new, certain aspects of contemporary living contribute to how they are perceived and endured today.

These contemporary works will not only provide a compelling account of some of the areas experimental writers are working in today, but also maintain the argument that isolation

in fiction is best approached through the versatility afforded by literary experimentalism. As with previous chapters, this chapter will incorporate contextually relevant psychological studies and thematically linked secondary material to shed further light on the complexities of human isolation.

To survey a broad a scope of recent literature as possible, it has been decided to look at a range of texts from the first twenty years of the 21st century, with most of them coming from the past decade. Following a brief but detailed discussion about a greater range of contemporary works that have approached the topic of isolation using experimentalism, works by three authors – Alicia Kopf, David Shields and Rebecca Watson – will be analysed in depth. Their unique explorations probe isolation in intriguing and radical ways.

While a concern with isolation can be traced back to the dawn of the novel itself, its ever-increasing forms and how we attempt to live through them have ensured that it remains a fixation for authors today. The extent of that fixation is evidenced in the theme's presence in novels of all genres. With this in mind, it is therefore important to refrain from suggesting that isolation is exclusively affiliated with a particular type of fiction. Yet because it is a theme that is simultaneously multifaceted and frequently confounding, perhaps the most expansive and exacting way it can be examined is through literary experimentalism. As has been discussed throughout, the versatility of experimental literature is particularly suited to literary rendering of isolation, a state of being that is complex and often difficult to communicate. Isolation can, after all, alter the way in which we perceive the world. Additionally, it demands a re-evaluation of how we experience the world – through our individual psychologies, through language and our relationships with others and through the narratives we construct around ourselves to give meaning to experience. In this sense, experimental literature, with its default versatility and its habit of reshaping of language and linear time, is a form particularly well suited to facilitate a wider comprehension of isolation through the written word.

To further these points, it is worth briefly considering a range of novels that have attempted to do just this. Lauded since its 2014 release, Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* relates what might appear to be an old story of domestic anxieties – specifically the travails of motherhood and marriage – and revitalises that form of narrative by channelling those familiar anxieties through a style that echoes them but at the same time makes them more singular and subjectively intense. Like David Markson before her (she has cited Markson as an influence), Offill presents the wayward nature of her narrator's thoughts through short, often melancholic fragments, many of which dwell on the slippery nature of thought itself. To James Wood, who has also noted traces of Markson in Offill's style, in *Dept. of Speculation* "The waywardness and unreliability of the mind's contents compose a narrative of that mind before our eyes" (Wood). Although the novel contains other characters – namely an unnamed husband and young child – the reader is, like the reader of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, very much left alone with the internal musings of its female protagonist, who is also a woman who has experienced her own share of artistic struggles. Another similarity that exists between Offill's writing and Markson's is the presence of fragmentary references to other writers and texts. Among others, Offill's character draws on the German poet Rilke, a nineteenth-century advice guide for wives and the 121 states of consciousness posited in the Abhidharma, an ancient Buddhist text. *Dept. of Speculation* is ultimately a novel about confronting some of life's isolating conundrums, such as vanishing love (and its absence), rejection, motherhood, and internalised failure. The alienating nature of these predicaments emphasised by the compact fragments Offill uses to examine them and the disquieting white space on each page that divides them.

Fragments and quotations are also utilised in Lance Olsen's 2009 novel *Head in Flames*. Centring on three disparate but inextricably linked characters (Van Gogh, his brother's great-grandson, the film-maker Theo Van Gogh, and the man who murdered him, Mohammed Bouyeri) Olsen's polyphonic novel is notable for its focus on interiority and its

rapidly shifting perspectives, which are signified textually through the employment of different typesets. Forcing the reader to bear witness to the scattered and often disturbing cogitations of its three protagonists, Olsen, who regularly namechecks David Markson as a stylistic influence, also forces us to confront the psychological truth that we spend the majority of our time stuck in our own heads weighing up our thoughts and actions, a disquieting interior reality explored at great length in the works of Markson and DeLillo analysed in the preceding chapters. As with Markson, DeLillo and Offill, Olsen's stylistic choices for *Head in Flames* were clearly made with the novel's central theme in mind: who we are, deep inside, and how our disordered dominant self interacts with the disorder of the external world. In this case, all is tensely edging towards the most dramatic and brutal of ends. We encounter Van Gogh on the July day in 1890 when he will shoot himself and sustain a stomach wound that will kill him two days later. At the same time, Olsen transports us to Amsterdam in 2004 and brings us into the internal worlds of Theo Van Gogh and Mohammed Bouyer on the day the latter will shoot and stab the former to death. Although relatively brief and devoid of the exposition found in more traditionally composed novels, *Head in Flames* is, in the end, very much an experimentally rendered novel about isolation. By opening up and displaying the mind of each character, and by sustaining the novel's narrative through this psychological frame, Olsen conveys the extent of the remove at which people can exist from the world. Specifically, *Head in Flames* acknowledges the forms of isolation endured by each protagonist: the suicidal individual, the artist, and the increasingly insular world of the religious fanatic. In more general terms, the style of the novel restates the aforementioned truism that the other world we inhabit, that of the mind, is an isolated and often distressing environment to manoeuvre through.

Content and form are also indivisible in John Holten's 2011 metafictional *Oslo, Norway*, a versatile novel that – as with Markson and DeLillo in their works – uses outside material to inform its fiction, incorporating Nordic myths and details about the history of the

oil exploration industry. Ostensibly preoccupied with the themes of place and vulnerable love, Holten has said in an emailed interview that his decision to engage in experimental techniques came after he "began to question the form of fiction", adding that "Fiction just seemed a bit self-indulgent at the time, and yet I didn't go down the route of the personal essay" (Holten). Split into thirty-nine non-linear chapters named after streets and different locations in Oslo, the novel invites the reader to read it however they wish, much in the way that Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963) does (the style/structure of which Holten has acknowledged in interviews as an influence). According to Holten, "The structure perhaps represents that confusion of navigating new cities but still living an incredibly full life" (Holten). While its protagonist, William Day, does indeed live a life high on drama and excitation (he is an Irish economic migrant living in Oslo), he also lives a life of uncertainty, adjustment, and loss. The style and structure of *Oslo, Norway* may well ensure that it is, as Holten wished it, a novel that doesn't need to be finished "or read in any particular order", but its inventiveness does little to diminish the accessibility of its world and what is occurring – or, in some cases, not occurring – in it. The same can be said about the works that make up Markson's tetralogy; though they do, like Holten's novel, follow a narrative trajectory, the absence of traditional plot and the circularity of their thematic concerns is communicated so emphatically throughout that their linearity seems precarious and unimportant.

As with Olsen's *Head in Flames*, Holten's approach in *Oslo, Norway* has the effect of underscoring its ultimate concerns. Much like the novel's structure, William Day's life is disorderly and fraught with confusion. Isolated from friends, family and the familiarity of home, Day also experiences isolation in his on-and-off relationship with the enigmatic Sybille. Later, Holten's own presence in the novel, the arrival of which blurs the lines between the fictional and the autobiographical, reorients its focus to a mediation on the stark complexities and sorrows of love and the nature, reach and possible failures of storytelling itself. In the end, *Olso, Norway* is about the toil of individual existence and the events in life

that remind us that we are alone with our respective selves. Reflecting on the experimental impulse and how it can be employed to reflect the disorder of existence, Holten has noted in an interview with Alison Hugill that "The novel came out of being really upset with fiction and also being really upset in love, in real life. You can have a couple who, when they break up, have experienced totally different things and that is often the source of conflict" (Holten, interview). Coupled with the strangeness of adjusting to a new way of living in a new city and culture, it is this form of isolation, the unavoidable psychological lag that exists between one individual and another, that *Oslo, Norway* is primarily concerned with, both in the story it presents and the unorthodox structure that delivers it.

The fictional and the factual also converge in Gabriel Blackwell's *Madeleine E* (2016), a hybrid work that contains clear echoes of both Don DeLillo and David Markson (as well as sharing experimental affinities with the works of Alicia Kopf and David Shields discussed in this chapter). A fragmented mixture of essay, memoir and fiction, *Madeleine E* reads like something of a notebook or elaborate diary, the pages of which are filled with obsessions, brief ruminations, and the presence of quotations from other writers, most of which are presented, ala Markson's use of the same, without accompanying contextual commentary. The obsessions centre on Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*; the writer at the centre of *Madeleine E*, who may or may not be Blackwell himself, is attempting to write a critical study of the film. As DeLillo does with Hitchcock's *Psycho* in *Point Omega*, many of the fragments about *Vertigo* in *Madeleine E* describe precisely what is appearing on the screen in various scenes. Spliced between this running commentary are an abundance of other fragments, many of which echo David Markson's usage of them in his experimental tetralogy. In the opening five pages alone, quotes are taken from or references are made to Sophocles' *Antigone*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*, Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Mark Rose's *Shakespearean Design*, Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre*, Eric Steel's documentary *The Bridge* and Carl Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*.

If, in the beginning, Blackwell's approach strikes the knowing reader as eerily Markson-like in its composition, even parodistic, Blackwell's inclusion of quotes from Markson's *This Is Not a Novel* a few pages later surely reveal Markson's stylistic influence as a conscious choice on Blackwell's behalf.

Like Markson's protagonist and his use of quotations/references, their purpose in *Madeleine E* is to provide thematic direction and emphasis. *Madeleine E*'s major themes – doubleness, estrangement, failure, obsession, the disintegration of love – are channelled through the quotations and references, the writer's notes about *Vertigo* and through the autobiographical insights the book's writer offers throughout the book, many of which centre on a turbulent romantic relationship he has been involved in. As with other instances of fragmentary works that have been discussed, Blackwell's usage of them has the effect of reaffirming *Madeleine E*'s examination of isolated states inspired by obsessions, rejections, the slipperiness of selfhood, loss and confusion. As its protagonist notes towards the end, "This is a book about a man writing a book about *Vertigo*. In his book, he thinks, he will trace his thoughts about the film as they relate to the guilt he has about how he has lived his life, about the lives he hasn't led, and about the lives of others he believes he has ruined" (186).

Rather than continuing to briefly consider these fictions and their modes of approach, closer attention will now be given at how the theme of isolation is approached in the work of three authors who echo Markson and DeLillo in their engagement with contemporary concerns. The following sections will feature Alicia Kopf's *Brother in Ice*, David Shields's *The Trouble with Men* and Rebecca Watson's *little scratch*, contemporary experimental works responding to different forms of isolation and how individuals experience them. Kopf and Shields do so by relying heavily on intertextual sources to supplement their own original input as well as by removing the boundaries that have traditionally separated the real from the fictive – approaches that are akin to those used by Markson and DeLillo. Watson's novel, meanwhile, restates the indivisibility of form and content through her use of atypical

formatting and a modernist monologue that captures the deep interiority of trauma. Sharing subtle and overt similarities with the sense of absence, trauma, and pronounced interiority articulated in Markson's and DeLillo's works, Watson's novel reflects through its fragmented and disjointed style the hyperrealism of its social contexts and time. It also implies the necessity of experimentation when it comes to the expression of the inwardness of psychological toil and the distance it puts an individual at from their external worlds and those who inhabit them.

***Brother in Ice*, Alicia Kopf**

Alicia Kopf's *Brother in Ice* is a work about distances. A fragmented hybrid of essay, memoir and fiction, it actively encourages – and even steers – interpretation while simultaneously resisting easy categorisation. The distances Kopf meditates on are literal and figurative. At the core of *Brother in Ice* is a study of polar exploration and its associated history of triumphs, travails and tragedies, the dual function of which acts as both an artistic obsession and, in the narrator's own words, a "metaphor, because what interests me is the possibility of an epic, a new epic, without foes or enemies; an epic involving oneself and an idea. Like the epic that artists and writers undertake" (80).

Spliced with these essayistic musings is the story of a young Catalan artist – a version of Kopf herself – who is attempting to navigate, or at least make sense of, the distances she encounters, both in her professional life as an emerging artist and in her personal life as the daughter of separated parents and the sister of an older brother with autism. Refusing to yield to the conventions of traditional literature, experimentally crafted and notably spare on plot, *Brother in Ice*, reads as a philosophical inquiry into the fundamental isolation of being. Additionally, it serves as one of the more illuminating examples of how contemporary experimental writers preoccupied with the theme of isolation are dissolving genre boundaries by amalgamating different forms of literature, both fictional and non-fictional.

Brother in Ice begins to chart its course even before the reader encounters Kopf's own words. The ten thematically connected epigrams that precede the work's opening chapter are provided by disparate figures ranging from Glenn Gould to Jules Verne to Laurie Anderson. Unlike epigraphs found in other books – so often solitary and ambiguous – the ones Kopf includes, and to which she makes the unorthodox decision to dedicate two pages, all but explicitly set the stage for what her own work will delve into. For example, we are presented with a quote from Arctic explorer Louise Boyd where she states "I want to be there, looking out, instead of out here looking in" (I-II). Additionally, in perhaps a nod towards the experimental spirit directing the way in which Kopf will deliver her work, a quote from Gilles Deleuze – "There is no more a method for learning than a method for finding treasures" – is followed up by a quote from Seneca translated as "I shall find a way or make one." Insights that, on the surface at least, signal the work's narrative ambition and themes, it can also be said that they imply something revealing about form and its function – and, by extension, the relationship between form and content. It is, after all, a work that, in the spirit of the Boyd quote, seeks through its unorthodox structure and style a way of ameliorating distance. Additionally, as signposted by the Deleuze and Seneca quotes, it is a work that, though formally haphazard in its appearance and delivery, does ultimately find its way. To this end, it can be said that, due to their sheer number and thematic suggestiveness, the epigraphs Kopf uses to precede her own original input provide the work with added intertextual layers, all of which serve both *Brother in Ice's* themes of exploration, identity and estrangement as well the stylistic and formal versatility Kopf employs to deliver her narrative. Much like Markson and DeLillo (and, as will be discussed, David Shields), albeit to a notably lesser degree, Kopf finds narrative usefulness in the repurposing of diverse secondary material, using it to both signal her own work's preoccupations, as well as highlighting the extent to which it those very same preoccupations have been the focus of others.

Indeed, Kopf's interest in the potential of intertextualities does not stop with her choice of epigraphs. Like Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and Richard Elster in *Point Omega*, *Brother in Ice's* narrator's exploration of the complexities of selfhood and connection are also inspired by theory. John Cleves Symmes's version of the Hollow Earth Theory posited, in the narrator's words, "that the Earth had two holes – one at either end – that went right through it" providing potential access to "seven worlds that were nestled inside each other" (17). Symmes (1780-1829), an army officer and later a trader, put forward his version of the theory in 1818. His theory, as outlined by James McBride's in his 1826 work *Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres*, suggested that "the planet which has been designated the Earth, is composed of at least five hollow concentric spheres, with spaces between each, an atmosphere surrounding each; and habitable as well upon the concave as the convex surface" (51). For Kopf's unnamed narrator, Symmes's theory acts as an explicit starting point from which she writes herself – or, more accurately, her selves – into her own text, an indication that selfhood, for her at least, may not be as fixed as much as composed of a variety of different isolated selves, each determined by circumstance and the specific time in which it is situated. While Kopf's narrator's position on the underpinnings of identity differs greatly from Richard Elster's and Kate's (Elster's, we might recall, is evolutionary in its vision, while Kate's is merely implied at the subtextual level), each is informed by real world theories, the ideas of which Kopf, Markson and DeLillo intertextually weave through the core of their respective works.

Unlike the works in Markson's tetralogy and DeLillo's *Point Omega*, which are all informed to varying degrees by secondary material, *Brother in Ice*'s secondary influences demand particular special attention as, rather than solely contribute to its storyline, it also directly inspires its form (*Wittgenstein's Mistress* is also stylistically inspired by the theory that influences its content). In Kopf's work, the unique of the fictional converges with the borrowed real to formulate a versatile, multifaceted means through which the complex nature

of the self can be identified and examined. To appreciate the extent to which this is true, it is necessary to take into account the secondary material that contributes to it.

This struggle with the slippery nature of the self brings to mind *The Body Artist*'s Lauren, who, in Rey's absence, becomes increasingly distant from her former sense of self. It might also bring to mind *Point Omega*'s unnamed character who, in attempting to inhabit the fictional identity of Norman Bates, casts severe doubt on his own sense of a fixed, distinct identity. *Brother in Ice*'s narrator is attempting to locate herself from the beginning of the book. "As in Symmes's theory", she notes, "the narrative voice of this novel takes the form of seven different figures" (20). Immediately after this comment, the narrator, all the while bearing the theory in mind, offers brief snapshots of different versions of herself at different times in her life, the last of which she finds "in the snow, much further on, the smallest figurine in the set, the one that isn't solid but hollow, the matrix whose expansion had generated the rest of the figurines and situations" (28).

It would not be a stretch to posit that *Brother in Ice*'s peculiar structure, rendered as it is in short paragraphs delivered in fragments, also echoes Symmes's theory and in doing so further reveals the worth of seeing form and content as indivisible. Like its narrative, the style that delivers it implies a yearning for answers and, eventually, incremental transition. Bookended by ruminations on exploration – both historical and personal – *Brother in Ice* moves, like the Hollow Earth theory, through various narrative layers, each one a transitory environment through which the narrator journeys deeper into understanding herself and the distances that separate her from those around her. To further this point, one may view the fragmentary chapters that form the core of *Brother in Ice* as representative of the light that passes through one side of the Earth and out the other in Symmes's theory. Writing about literary fragmentation, Ysabelle Cheung suggests that "Out of a desire to resist forgetting, writers grasp a specific active moment and record it, no matter how painful or unfinished, no matter how fleeting. These fragments bring us closer to the emotion of ongoing reality"

(Cheung). The "ongoing reality" that Kopf's narrator's fragments contain catalogue not only her unerring curiosity to understand her own identity and her relationship with others, but also, by extension, the journey she undertakes to do, propelled by that very curiosity. In short, like Symmes's theory, Kopf's work, and way of working, implies that through transition comes enlightenment.

For this idea to be worth considering, the extent and particular details of the interior and, later, physical expedition that Kopf's narrator embarks upon requires analysis. As already mentioned, *Brother in Ice*'s departure from traditional narrative is evidenced in its structure and delivery; rather than follow a distinctly advancing arc, the reader encounters a composite of short research notes, autobiographical ruminations and black-and-white images of explorers and graphs, all of which thematically interact. On this topic, the narrator concedes that she has always been "irritated by systemization" but recognises now that she is "someone who scribbles, systematically" (84). With this insight in mind, it can be argued that Kopf's narrator is representative of the type of contemporary experimental writer who John Ditsky has identified as displaying "[C]oncern with the structures by which a fragmented reality is 'organized'" (312). This is very much reflected in the structure and style of *Brother in Ice*. For instance, in the early part of the book there are seven sections written in the form of research notes. In these, the narrator muses on matters such as the tendency of some penguins in the Antarctic to separate from their group and embark upon a solitary journey towards certain death to a news item about a disabled woman who starved to death following the death of her mother from natural causes. Elsewhere, in separate sections, she contemplates Frederick Cook and Robert Peary's claims to have discovered the North Pole first and the presence of human figurines contained within a snow globe she found "in the back of a drawer in an old dresser in the rented apartment" (56). Among these fragments, the narrator muses on her own life, too. As Lauren Elkin notes, "Kopf frequently juxtaposes science with the metaphysical, or with quotidian banality" (Elkin). Kopf's method is not random. The

message is clear: there are links between these stories of endurance and the material of daily existence. As Elkin adds, *Brother in Ice* communicates that "The places we start from – our selves, homes, loved ones – are as unknowable and unlocatable as the poles themselves."

In addition to being intrigued by the histories of the explorers, the narrator is even more compelled by polar exploration as a metaphor for the existential navigation of the types of distances that separate all people. Abstract and difficult to negotiate as existential distances tend to be, Kopf's text implies experimentation is a prerequisite to confronting, comprehending and reducing them. Specifically, *Brother in Ice* suggests that is through writing – formally experimental writing, that is – that the individual can acquire the agency necessary to resolve such distances. As she declares in a chapter entitled "The Icebreaker", "…I'm not interested in the polar explorers in and of themselves, but rather in the idea of investigation, of seeking out something in an unstable space" (80). This insight is particularly intriguing, signalling as it does the links between Kopf's narrator seeking out answers in the unstable space of narrative and the isolated explorer, who does the same, albeit in the unstable spaces of the literal wildernesses of the world. How each gets by, how each survives, is down to a perseverance fuelled by inquiry. Writing in *Alone* (1938) about endurance and his winter spent living in isolation at a meteorological base on the Ross Ice Shelf in the Antarctic in 1934, Admiral Richard E. Byrd wrote how "The ones who survive with a measure of happiness are those who can live profoundly off their intellectual resources, as hibernating animals live off their fat" (7). So too, it can be suggested, is the case for the searching writer who, alone by default, must rely on the strength of their emotional and intellectual curiosity to finish their work.

As the work's title and her subsequent ruminations suggest, *Brother in Ice*'s narrator is particularly interested in the symbolic potential of ice and regularly perceives it as a lens through which she can analyse failed past romances, the enclosed nature of her brother's existence, her strained relationship with her mother and her ambitions as an artist. For

instance, on the subject of unrequited love and the feeling of isolation it provokes, she notes how she nicknamed the man she was drawn to "Iceberg, believing I could only see one ninth of him" (45). When she later bumps into him at a concert, she notes how, in a conversation about the progress of their theses, hers is "frozen and on the verge of shipwreck" (113). In her autistic brother's brain, she imagines that the "fissure is an obstacle between the I and the you, between one action and the next" (68). Soon after, she mentions his stuttering, "as if there were also snow between one syllable and another." This reference to her brother is a revealing one, putting at the centre of her narrative links between a real, irreversible neurodevelopmental disorder and states of isolation rendered by familial strife and artistic and romantic failure. While on the surface potentially problematic in its comparison, the narrator does not, in fact, suggest that all forms of isolation are equal. Rather, that states of isolation exist on a spectrum and that ice, which varies in depth and penetrability, serves as an efficient metaphor for these states.

Familial woes extend beyond her brother's condition. In a section entitled "The Fault" where she ruminates on the separation of her parents, she notes how "On both sides they would tell me, both then and later on, to move on, turn the page. So here I am, writing, and turning the page" (89). This reflection highlights how the narrator's reflections serve not only to further probe the theme of isolation she is so intrigued by but also the nature of her literary exploration of it. She tellingly follows up this reference to her fractured family life and her project with an excerpt from a speech by the renowned Catalan Oceanographer Pepita Castellví in which she argues it is that which lies below the surface of the Earth that requires our attention rather than that which exists outside the planet. Earlier in the text, while contemplating the achievements of Louise Boyd, who in 1955 became the first woman to fly across the North Pole, the narrator notes how "Boyd was drawn to the conquest of the void", before adding that "This epic voyage to delimit the abyss by someone who had lost all points of reference highlights the foundational nature of house and family, as a centripetal or

centrifugal force" (75). It seems reasonable to assume that the subtext of this comment implies that she sees herself on a similar journey, the project of *Brother in Ice* ultimately amounting to an attempt to broach and overcome the distances located in her own self and between her and others. As an artist, she feels at a distance too, both in how she is perceived in the role by others and in her own apprehensions she has about being one. When a boyfriend tells her to "…stay and do your artist stuff" through "clenched teeth" she states that "Doubt and loneliness are persistent. I don't know if writing this is worth the effort, or whether I have any right" (100). Despite the clear unease this persistent feeling of psychological isolation is creating in her, she continues to delve further into her interior world.

In a section entitled "The Basement", she has a first therapy session, but, in an interesting narrative choice that implies hesitation, she includes only the therapist's dialogue. Muting and in turn briefly isolating her protagonist, Kopf, like Markson in his tetralogy, utilises the freedoms afforded by literary experimentation – in this instance, the unexpected inclusion of silence – and in doing so obligates the reader to query that silence and extract answers, or at least understanding, from it. In an indication that some of the distances she has previously feared insurmountable can be overcome, she is soon after informed that her brother has a girlfriend and has written a letter to their mother in which he writers "i love you all infinite eternity and i'll never grow tired of you" (139). Later, she finds that the more she dwells on the reality of her brother's condition, the less of a distance there may actually be. She notes how "The advantages of having a brother with a high degree of dependence is that you can't let yourself go" (144). Unlike some of her favourite artists who "ended up committing suicide or dying young", she realises that this isn't an option for her, asking "what would happen to my brother in the future if I weren't around"? In another indication that her project is yielding a deeper understanding of herself and that which haunts her, she contemplates the therapeutic potential of ice, stating that "Ice shrinks the veins and capillaries that bring blood to an injured area. As a consequence, the hematic flow – the blood – lessens.

To put it another way, the ice calms the pain of knocks" (155). What she needs, she realises, is balance. If too much ice is applied to a wound, she notes, "the result can be detrimental." With this in mind, she concludes that "I need to finish this project soon" (156).

At this point, however, the exact end-point of her journey still remains unclear – and will remain so until she makes a discovery. "There has to be a conquest", she declares, arguing that "This isn't a banal voyage, and it's no safer than the ones undertaken by explorers: I feel that my life is at stake" (172). Soon after, she returns once more to the narrative approach she has taken. She describes third-person narrations as "security fences", while omniscient narrators are "pure arrogance." She, on the other hand, barely sees herself as a writer at all, but "just an explorer of my limited textual possibilities." Narrative she sees as a "place to fictionalise memory, which is constructed, partial, voluble, and will be reinvented in the text and therefore always destroyed again in the text" (173). The narrator's awareness of her craft, this view of literature as a way of processing – by whatever stylistic way possible – and reinventing the real, may call to mind the narrator in David Markson's experimental tetralogy who, like Kopf's narrator, appears to see fiction as not just a vehicle for the imagination, but also as a means of confronting, and comprehending, reality and the fundamental aloneness of being.

Out of memories of disappointing moments from childhood, she extracts insights into the distance she puts between herself and others. Recalling how she received a toy kitchen instead of the Scalextric she had hoped for, she admits she "transformed a certain lack of attention into independence, and maybe over time it became reciprocal, until paradoxically that attitude had a certain parallel with my brother's autism" (204). During this time, she now sees "a thin layer of ice formed between me and the others; that is how the ice entered me."

As she prepares for a trip to Iceland, she becomes more clear-sighted in relation to what her project has been attempting to achieve. After initially fixating on the history of polar exploration, she knew "From here on out, the exploration had to be interior, I had to go inside

myself to find the origin of those glaciers and thick ice caps" (212-213). The narrator's final stop on her journey is an external one: Iceland, "located between two faults of the European and American continents, with constant volcanic activity, geysers, ice, lava fields: elements that I relate to some areas of my family landscape" (213). Iceland is where metaphor will converge with reality, and where, after attempting to learn a lesson from "the abyss" of the Snæfellsjökull Volcano, she hopes to find the "Stromboli sun" (214).

Later, after travelling to various parts of Iceland, she wonders about the specific intentions of her "pilgrimage", before remembering "there was not a single moment of nostalgia, there, at the end of the inhabited world" (240). We might wonder what the narrator means here when she refers to nostalgia. Given the nature of her exploration, we might posit that the nostalgia she refers to here may be for a time where the thought of the alternative – an alternative life, that is – always lingered. In a postscript directly addressing her brother, there is acceptance and comfort, a sense that she has landed on some final, fundamental truths. Her project has not been so much about the distances that exist between her and others, but the singular distance, opaque by default, which has long separated her from her own sense of a fixed self. It is this distance, ultimately, that has given rise to the others she has felt during her life. To her brother, she concludes "…this book isn't about your life, which is only yours: it is an exploration; the search for the origin of a voice and a gaze of my own, and that is why you appear in it" (246). In short, it is the writing of her work – experimentally put together – rather than the physical movement of travel and exploration that brings enlightenment. Indeed, the work itself is the real journey. Considering her near completed work, she realises that it was "by following that trail that I found the smallest of the seven set of figures who project that voice, the figurine that was not hollow but solid, the matrix that, like Symzonia, had given rise to the rest of the shapes and situations: the six-year-old girl who defended her thirteen-year-old brother in the schoolyard" (246-247).

Here, at the book's end, we might return once more to the idea of it mirroring Symmes's Hollow Earth theory. While the narrator has been working through the multiple quandaries of selfhood and all that imposes on it, the book – much like the physical and psychological journey it accounts for – also moves through a variety of forms and strands of identity, each, in the end, forming a path towards a conclusion which ultimately justifies both the intention of the journey itself and the direction it took. The inseparability of Kopf's form and the content it gives shape to, both of which are influenced by Symmes's theory, is confirmed by the transitionary nature of its narrative; as *Brother in Ice* seeks through its diverse form, its narrator moves through stages of understanding towards something resembling psychological enlightenment. It is writing – in this case, *experimental* writing – that provides both the means through which the work's narrator travels and the meaning that makes her come to terms with her own sense of self and the isolation she has long endured. This is why the nature of *Brother in Ice's* narrative – the versatility of how it is shaped – is so important; the work might be directly inspired by arctic exploration, but its ultimate meaning is provided, in the end, by the process of its innovative making.

Additionally, part of *Brother in Ice*'s emotional heft is indubitably the result of Kopf's decision to deliberately blur the lines between the imagined and the real. Kopf is, as she is in *Brother in Ice*, an artist based in Barcelona. She has a brother who has autism. In an interview with her translator, Mara Faye Lethem, she has said on the topic of her family's reaction to *Brother in Ice* that "I've always made clear to them that this book is autofiction, not an autobiography; it's a structure and I'm only talking about certain things in my life, or using them as a basis" (Kopf, interview). The extent to which it is invented is unclear. It should, however, be noted that Alicia Kopf herself is an invention. A pseudonym for Imma Ávalos Marqués, the name "Alicia Kopf" is given to the profile she inhabits as an author and conceptual artist. As Eileen Battersby notes, "Kopf is the pseudonym of Catalan artist Imma Avalos Marques; her Alicia Kopf once featured as a headless girl in one of her installations.

For ‘headless’ read an individual searching of identity” (Battersby). *Brother in Ice* is exactly that – the story of someone searching for an identity through experimental means.

As was discussed in the introduction to this chapter and will be further examined in the succeeding section on David Shields’s *The Trouble with Men*, some contemporary experimental writers amalgamate a variety of literary modes to explore isolation, the result of which is the frequent eradication of the lines that have traditionally separated the fictional from the factual. Although not an especially new form of literature, it is arguably becoming more commonplace and more explicit in displaying its factual and fictive origins. When executed convincingly, as is the case with *Brother in Ice*, it displays a formal diversity that once more reveals the versatility and potential of experimental writing and how it can be compellingly applied to an extensive meditation on the complexities of human isolation.

***The Trouble with Men*, David Shields**

In his 2010 book *Reality Hunger*, David Shields assembled a manifesto that aimed to set out his vision for a future form of literature stripped of artificiality. Assembled as a work of literary collage comprising 618 numbered passages, many of which are taken from other sources, Shields’s book argues that if contemporary existence is to be realistically conveyed through literature many of its longstanding traditions – including the separation of fiction from non-fiction and an emphasis on distinct originality – need to be discarded. “Genre”, he suggests in one of its passages, “is a minimum security prison” (88). Shields’s vision of a fragmented literature in which the lines between the imagined and actual are so blurred as to be imperceptible was not new – a historical fact he recognises in the work itself. Citing *Reality Hunger*’s relatively recent publication, Louisa Hall notes his accountability to historical antecedence:

> 2010 is a long time ago in the internet age, but the examples Shields gives of exemplary literature broken by gaps and asterisks date back very much further: the lists and accounts that were the earliest forms of writing in 3200 BCE; the Iliad and the Odyssey, 800 BCE; Sumerian anthologies of aphorism; Plutarch's essays; Anne Bradstreet's letters; Emerson's essays; Kafka's notebooks; *Speedboat* (1976) and *Sleepless Nights* (1979), both novels composed out of fragments (Hall).

Although not distinctly original in its idea (Markson's tetralogy, it is worth pointing out, preceded and indeed informed Shields's work) it was nevertheless contemporary in its vision and theoretical application. The way forward for literature is not through the novel, which he claims "goes hand in hand with a straitjacketing of the material's expressive potential", or the memoir, a genre of which he asks "How can we enjoy memoirs, believing them to be true, when nothing, as everyone knows, is so unreliable as memory?" (25). The literature of most substance or modern intrigue today, Shields argues, is the lyric essay, the writer of which "seems to enjoy all the liberties of the fiction writer, with none of a fiction writer's burden of unreality, the nasty fact that none of this ever really happened—which a fiction writer daily wakes to" (26). Of merit or not, Shields's view of literature brings to mind Samuel Delany's assessment of contemporary experimental writing when he argues "I do think new art teaches us to read new discourses—and a changing society is always presenting new discourses to its citizens in order to help them negotiate the world" (15). Shields's vision of future literature may not come to be fully realised, but it does both reflect and simultaneously say something about the world we live in today – an increasingly fragmented world in which what is real and what is invented is becoming more and more difficult to identify. Additionally, Shields's multifaceted approach towards literature incorporates a belief that form and content should not be regarded as divisible. This study, of course, posits the merits of this position. With all this in mind, a critical analysis of Shields's work necessitates not only a close reading of his own original material, but also the way in which he incorporates and uses the materials of others for his own ends. Like the formal and stylistic approaches of Markson, DeLillo and Kopf, all of whom draw steadily on the innovative and intertextual use of diverse secondary

material, the one undertaken by Shields casts further light on the substantial range of expression that literary experimentalism can accommodate for.

Since *Reality Hunger*'s publication, Shields has primarily worked within this style of piecing together fragments of original and sourced material, a form he refers to as "lyrical essay." His 2013 work *How Literature Saved My Life* blends cultural, critical and confessional writing. In 2017's *Other People*, he employs the style to examine human understanding and connectedness. 2018's *Nobody Hates Trump More than Trump* is a psychological and philosophical meditation on the former American President that also employs a lyrical essay style. March 2022 will see the release of Shields's next work, *The Very Last Interview*, a book that will consist of over 2,700 questions he has been asked over the last forty years and in which Shields's own explicit presence will be absent.

The focus of his recent works addresses and appear to be very much fixed in the real, but Shields's admission that they contain, by necessity, fictional elements presents an opportunity to analyse his work in the same way we might a work of autofiction. As he noted in a *New York Times* article "How to Write Yourself into Existence", "The personal essay isn't 'true'; it's a framing device to foreground contemplation" (Shields). This, coupled with his contention that the "David Shields" who appears in his works can be read and analysed as a "persona" rather than an autobiographical portrayal of a true self, affords us the license to analyse his written self as we normally would a character in literature – like, for instance, Alicia Kopf's unnamed narrator in *Brother in Ice* or, indeed, the autobiographically informed author figure who is the sole character in works that make up David Markson's tetralogy. To do so will again require an acknowledgement of the work's autobiographical origins and, where appropriate, reflections on how they impact the work itself. While the dismissal of an author's biographical background is not without its own merits (and has been applied in the chapter on Markson), to do so when analysing works that signal their own overt autobiographical dimensions would miss if not the whole point, then at least some of it.

Additionally, to recognise these real-life narrative strands as existing in a work is not to validate them as having innate literary worth through their sheer presence alone. Rather, as was the case with the previous section on *Brother in Ice*, acknowledging their presence may help this study ascertain, to the fullest degree possible, the links that exist between form and the theme of human isolation in these works.

Like much of Shields's work, *The Trouble with Men: Reflections on Sex, Love, Marriage, Porn, and Power* is notably personal, ruminative, and layered. Directly addressed to his unnamed wife, it aims, as Shields notes on its opening page, "to be a short, intensive immersion into the perils, limits, and possibilities of human intimacy" (3). Because of these ambitions, it is also a work that repeatedly brings to its surface questions relating to the limitations of human communication and connection, the internalised states imposed by suffering and early trauma, and the struggle of settling on a fixed idea of an identifiable self.

The Trouble with Men is also noteworthy as regards the aforementioned style with which Shields shapes it. Reminiscent of Markson's use of fragmentation and heavy inclusion of thematically linked sourced material, its form and content can be regarded as one and the same. A close reading of it reveals that in the aesthetic is mirrored the thematic. Specifically, in Shields's use of fragments, two of his enduring preoccupations – human connectedness and the innate fragilities of masculinity– are reflected. On the former point, Shields, interviewed by Guernica on the subjects addressed in the book, has emphasised the need "for men to acknowledge, first, how lost and weak and broken they are" (Shields, interview). On the latter, he has claimed that "I'm taking my perspective on sex and love and trying to 'blow it up' as a universal idea." Shields's phrasing here is interesting and presumably not coincidental; implied through the words "broken" and "blow it up" are fragments. Thus, we can read his use of them as a formal reflection of the brokenness he identifies in masculinity, including his own, and the core components of human connection – or, as we shall see, disconnection – that are exposed after he closely interrogates them.

Like Markson, whose experimental tetralogy Shields has frequently cited as an influence, the quotes Shields uses throughout his work are used to both echo and inspire his own original input, the effect of which lends the text a choral voice and emphasises the pertinence of its themes. Split into five chapters, the strand of isolation on which Shields focuses – and doubles back on throughout – is the distance that separates us from both one another and ourselves. At the core of this distance is an enduring struggle of effectively communicating that which is both complex and deeply private. Both a rumination on this topic and, by its very nature, an attempt to both define and overcome it, Shield's book also provides an unsparing insight into the protracted – and often troubling – states of interiority inspired by memories, desires, fantasies and love.

The Trouble with Men reads as an address from one individual to another (in this case, Shields to his wife), yet it can also be read as a fragmented catalogue of our fundamental individualism and the many concerns to which it inevitably gives rise. Before commentating on the ways in which Shields examines his marriage in the text, it is important to identify and examine first the frequency with which he expresses his own sense of isolation, not least because it contributes significantly to how he perceives his marriage. Contemplating his innate propensity for submissiveness early in the book, he asks "In other words – How did I end up on this shore? What wrong road took me here?" (27). This part of Shields's character – a self-recognised submissiveness and, by association, vulnerability – is worth contemplating in order to fully comprehend how he sees himself and how others might perceive him. Psychological studies have revealed links between deficits in self-compassion, a perceived sense of isolation and submissive behaviour. In a 2009 study, Ahmet Akin found that "that self-compassion has a direct impact on the submissive behaviour. People high in self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification are more likely to adopt a submissive orientation than are people high in self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness" (145). Although the character Shields presents himself as in *The Trouble with Men* certainly does not lack

"mindfulness" or "common humanity", his admissions, the extent to which he thoroughly skewers his own personality and how he navigates the world are the hallmarks of someone who is both isolated and perpetually engaged in a form of self-analysis which regularly tilts towards extreme self-deprecation. Soon after wondering how he came to inhabit such a self-defeating disposition, he refers to how he "can't understand where all this misery comes from", before admitting "I'm in thrall to a pathos that has ruled my life since I was very young" (31). Shields sees no escape from the essential self to which he is moored, stating "By all accounts, we're programmed to be who and how we are, pretty much from birth" (32). Reflecting further on his past in order to gain insight into his current state of being, which reads as an attempt by Shields to psychoanalyse himself on the page, he recalls how his mother "continually belittled me, mocked me, hit me, hated me, taught me to hate myself…" before admitting that she remains "a not insignificant part of my emotional landscape" (33). The fact that she remains so is not surprising. Numerous studies have shown how familial dysfunction in youth often materialises as psychic distress in later life. For instance, a 2012 study by Melanie H. Mallers et al. found "Adults who report having had high quality relationships with their parents during childhood have better overall mental health and are at decreased risk for mental disorders compared to those who report low parental relationship quality" (1651). While there is no suggestion that Shields is suffering from any mental disorder, it is clear that he sees clear links between how he was brought up and how he experiences the world now. In another revealing insight into his emotionally complex past, he also recalls how every morning as a child he would promise himself he would not cry, a promise that he would inevitably end up failing to keep.

While such memories are evidently stifling, Shields is not sure how to process them. Returning to the consistent feeling of being existentially wounded, he asks "How did I get wired this way? I don't get it. Do I want to get it? Do I want to get over it? (Do you want me to get over it?)" (35). He decides that part of his continuous sense of existing at a remove has

to do with reality not meeting expectation and the affect this has on him. Recalling how, as a child, he wanted anything his sister had because "it was outside my consciousness", he notes how, "The moment I held it, my mind experienced it, so I no longer wanted it" (38). This sense of experience enforcing dislocation, an abstract absence, is referred to again when he admits that the language used by his girlfriend when cataloguing their relationship in her diary was "at least as erotic to me as the events themselves, and when I was no longer reading her words, I was no longer very adamantly in love with Rebecca" (42).

Nodding towards one of the book's fundamental ambitions – a relentless take down of the self – Shields asks "Is there any writer I love – from Epictetus to Simon Gray – whose work doesn't specialise in self-demolition?" (47). Shields's attempts to self-pathologise continue. In another acknowledgement of past trauma, he notes how "My mother reviled me" and how he loves the tragedy of a message an astrologer-friend told him about how "Cancers who never had mother love are doomed" (48). An early sufferer of a stutter, his persistent feeling of internal malaise is, he speculates, potentially down to this "oversensitive antennae tuned to human miscommunication, misconnection, slight slights expressed via tone, love at first sight" (57). Like Kopf, Shields appears to see writing – *experimental* writing, at that – as not merely an engagement with art, but, more broadly, a complex, deep engagement with the intricacies of selfhood. If life is convoluted, as Shields's work suggests, then formally and structurally traditional approaches to writing about it will fail. Hence the requirement of experimentation, a form of writing that both mirrors the disorderliness of existence and enables the navigation of complexity and ambiguity. Continuing to trace his early encounters with feelings of isolation, he recalls how, in an insight that could be lifted from Kate's solipsistic world accounted for in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, "In late adolescence, I worried that there would always be a glass wall between myself and the world and wondered if this was a phenomenon unique to myself; I thought probably not. Still, I had doubts" (59). This sentiment, emphasising Shields's dislocation, is arguably the core of what drives *The Trouble*

with Men. Unable to fully figure out his own sense of self and the quandaries of identity, the concurrent and pertinent question that Shields asks his book is: how can one connect with another if they can't fully connect with themselves?

Shields runs this question through the lens of perhaps the most intense relationship of all, a marriage. Even more intensely, his own marriage. It is by doing this that Shields brings isolation to the surface again. Focused on the intimate, the personal and the shared, precisely how he examines these experiences, both stylistically in the text itself, and psychologically, is revealing. On the first point, one must ask the question why exactly Shields – or, at least, the character Shields is creating of himself – is using literature as a means of communicating intimate details and deeply personal questions to his wife. Such an endeavour, addressing someone through a medium where they cannot respond, implies not only physical and psychological distance but also an underlying expectation that the questions may remain rhetorical, unanswered, left to linger in the mind of the asker. Additionally, one might also ask why Shields delivers his work in an overtly experimental form. While his use of fragmentation and what it might be representative of has already been discussed, his engagement with experimentalism in general demands consideration, too. Writing about *Reality Hunger*, Louisa Hall draws a link between an unattributed Daniel Dennett quote from it and Shields's chosen form:

> While we tend to conceive of the operations of the mind as unified and transparent, they're actually chaotic and opaque. There's no invisible boss in the brain, no central meaner, no unitary self in command of our activities and utterances. There's no internal spectator of a Cartesian theater in our heads to applaud the march of consciousness across its stage (qtd. in Shields, 113).

Hall's link holds merit. The experimental, it is implied, is representative of realism, the nature of which is fundamentally abstruse, fractured, and messy. Shields's use of experimentalism can still be read as an attempt to accommodate the diverse complexities of selfhood and human connection through a form suited to those diverse complexities.

Although Shields does address his wife throughout *The Trouble with Men*, creating the sense that the book is primarily focused on two individuals, in truth the exercise in which he is engaging – a fragmentary meditation on how one navigates the parts of existence that are intimate by definition – is a solitary one. When asked about his wife's response to its content, Shields has noted in the interview with Guernica how "she thinks it's more about me and my damage and my wound. Far less about her and our marriage per se. Which I think is true" (Shields, interview). The work shows this to be true too. Spliced between the aforementioned – and linked – attempts to self-pathologise his own interior confusions, Shields's questions to his wife and his ruminations on their marriage are worth examining, however, both in how they are asked and what, precisely, they seek answers to.

While his wife is presented as not knowing exactly what the book will consist of, Shields reveals that she has issued with him warnings about his writing: "*Beware of what you say*, you say to me. *It has a way of getting out*", he quotes her as saying, before adding, "*If there's one word about me in the book, I'll never speak to you again*" (9). Shields follows up this last warning with: "Really – one word? Just one?" These short fragments implying considerable distance are scattered throughout the book. In a chapter where Shields interrogates the nature of his love for his wife and their marriage, he begins by contemplating the potential contributors to "Love at first sight: Only two possibilities – there is something deep within me that wants to hurt something deep within you. There is something deep within me that wants to be hurt by something deep within you" (69). Reflecting on the difference between his marriage and past relationships and what it says about both, he notes how "In previous relationships, women would look to me to take care of them. I was supposed to be the strong, silent, competent, sane one. My reaction was always, pretty much, You're not serious" (71). His ego, he states soon after, is "so much more brittle than yours."

Later Shields takes umbrage with how his wife provokes his sensitivity and insecurities, revealing, once more, the extent to which he is isolated and the emotional and

communicative distance that, despite their shared love, evidently separates them. “Why”, he asks, “do you reflexively apply the diminutive ‘little’ to everything you find endearing? Whence your need to infantilize me? Why do you take my emotional temperature only when you already know I’m in free-fall? Sometimes I wonder if you had all these skills before I entered your life, or have you had to acquire them as we went along?” (74). Unable, presumably, to voice such questions in person, he asks her “Are you indifferent to me?” Repelled by me? Repelled by your indifference?” (75). What he does know about her is that she has a “perpetual impulse to catastrophize, to disasterize”, which, he claims, he is both addicted to and confused by (78). These series of questions are telling, not only in what they communicate – i.e. psychological distress and in-person disconnectedness – but also how they are communicated and, by extension, what they reveal about literary experimentalism. In these moments, Shields uses the freedom-affording pages of his book as a sort of therapeutic blank-canvas, a public diary in which the furthest recesses of the self can be exhibited without the restrictions of conventional narrative and not be subjected, on the page at least, to scrutiny.

Sex is another lens through which Shields identifies distance between him and his wife. Recalling the time when she took delivery of a vibrator and he suggested they use it together, he notes how “You declined, saying it was only for you” (81). He observes his deep-seated insecurities and persistent want to be acknowledged through intimacy again when he later directs her to “Smoke a cigarette (your former vice) while I lick your shaved pussy; put your hand on the back of my head, talk to me, guide me, praise me” (88). This perennial need for validation reinforces the isolated position he is in. Again, it needs to be repeated that if he is speaking to anyone, it is to himself; the only dialogue we encounter from his wife are fragments from past conversations he quotes from. In a series of admissions directed explicitly to his wife that show his struggles are perhaps more fixed in the sense of who he is rather what they have together, he writes how “I need to believe you hate me and go to bed

with me only because you have to" and asks "Did I instinctively know you would turn out to be my unravelling, and protest though I might, do I not crave the disintegration?" (92). To the question "Do I love you despite or because of your nastiness toward me?" he immediately proffers his own response that it is "(Not even a question)" (93).

Shields provides further examples of distance and disconnection. In a fragment of conversation, the question of "Do you ever feel safe outside?" is met with a reply of "I don't know – do you ever feel safe inside?" (94). Shields sees that "I'm married to someone who either has nothing or wants nothing, rendering me in possession of nothing" (119). However, in an increasing turn towards some form of acceptance of his persistent and isolating anxieties, he states late in the book that "I used to think unsolvable ambivalence meant the absence or even end of love; now I think it's the essence of it" (127). What ultimately brings them together, he posits, is their mutual recognition that "Life is tragic. Everybody knows it. Especially you (which is what connects us)" (133). Contemplating the unlikelihood of their enduring commitment to one another, Shields admits that "Sometimes I wonder, rather idly, what other people think connects us" (136). Additionally, in *The Trouble with Men*'s closing sections, Shields asks his wife "Do you love this book? Do you hate it? Will it mark the end of our marriage? The beginning of it? Putative? (true?) goal for this book: a greater intimacy (at a minimum, candor?) between us" (139). In the follow up, closing sentiment that perhaps indicates the book's overall intention, Shields notes that the nicest thing his wife ever said to him, written on the inside of an anniversary card "an eternity ago", was "What you think of as your weakness I think of as your vulnerability, which I love."

It is worth reflecting here on the nature of experimental literature and the risks it takes. Putting itself at a commercial and social distance by design, experimental literature, like all forms of atypically constructed art, is risky in its construction. Shields's approach, like Kopf's, takes on an additional risk; blending the fictional with the factual to probe complex real life issues and tensions, it is a confessional form of writing that leaves the author, and

those they write about, vulnerable. In this way, the risk of the form mirrors the risk of the work's widest ambitions.

The style Shields uses to compose the book requires even further consideration, not least because, as he has argued in an emailed interview, in his view "Content tests form. Form embodies content" (Shields, interview). In a more elaborate explanation of this belief and how it influences his own approach to writing, Shields has noted how, "[M]y impulse is always to read form as content, style as meaning; to push the book toward abstraction, toward doubleness, toward seventeen types of ambiguity. The book is always, in some sense, stutteringly, about its own language. I'm always framing myself and the author as the lone founts of dark wisdom" (152). Such insights reaffirm Shields's position as seeing experimentation as required if one is to write accurately about reality and their unstable position in it. For Shields, form and style are not the mere neutral architecture that hold a work in place and deliver it as coherently as possible – they are charged with a work's preoccupations. Furthermore, rather than strive for clarity, Shields – recognising that abstraction and ambiguity underlies the greater part of existence – endeavours to emphatically reflect in the construction of his work life's erraticism and perpetually unresolved confusions.

Much like David Markson's use of it in his experimental tetralogy, the secondary material Shields employs in *The Trouble with Men* emphasises the book's thematic preoccupations, isolation among them. The voices Shields includes have the effect of both contributing to and sharing some of the weight of the book's concerns. As in Markson's novels, Shields incorporates quotes and anecdotes that feed into and contextualise his own individual anxieties. Crucially, they also highlight the fact that these concerns are, in the end, universal. For instance, in the book's opening section where Shields is wondering if his wife likes, cares about and loves him, he includes the line "What is it then between us?" (5) from Walt Whitman's poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Soon after, he offers a line from Edwin Dobb stating, "Romance holds my attention only if it promises a sizeable element of risk."

Such contextual and thematic framing continues throughout the book. Emphasising the nature of – and, perhaps, need – for existential contemplations as a means of survival, an included quote from Hilton Als asks, "Are illusions better than nothing? Can we sustain ourselves on dream crumbs? What else can we do? What else are there but dreams, phantoms, and other people?" (7).

Notably, Shields also actively engages with some of the quotes he includes. For example, in response to the jointly attributed statement from Luke Haines and John Moore that, "Life is unfair – kill yourself or get over it", Shields immediately writes "This is an attempt to get over it" (10), a response that, though melodramatic, reveals the gravity of his psychological concerns and the seriousness with which he regards literature as a means of processing and alleviating them. In attempting to "get over it", Shields enlists the words and works of many other sources, the combined effort of which can be interpreted in a number of ways. The included quotation and anecdotes do, as previously mentioned, lend the text a chorus of wide-ranging voices, all of which reinforce the universality of the concerns, anxieties and persisting psychological and physical quandaries Shields's fixates on throughout *The Trouble with Men*. Additionally, as with Markson's approach in his tetralogy, one must also consider the interruptions to and, as a result, intermittent absence of the original narrative voice the inclusion of this chorus engenders. What causes contribute to Shields's resistance to composing the book entirely in his own words? What drives the want to be infrequently absent from his own text? If, as he posits, form truly does embody content, perhaps it can be concluded that his isolating of his own original input, the absence of his individuality, is a mirroring of the isolation – from both himself and others – he projects throughout *The Trouble with Men*, in much the same way that Markson's recurring protagonist does in his tetralogy. Although it is to lesser degrees, DeLillo does this too in *The Body Artist*, briefly altering the work's style in order to put distance between it and Lauren Hartke. Similarly, Kopf's regular use of secondary material and her choice to temporarily mute her narrator's

voice emphasises her work's core theme of isolation. The construction of Shields's work both permits the absence of its protagonist while simultaneously reflecting his isolation. Despite being addressed to his wife, *The Trouble with Men* is, after all, a fundamentally solitary text. Solitary, that is, in its pursuits, its core atmosphere, its underlying message – that we are, at our core, alone, and our attempts to comprehend that fundamental aloneness must take place in isolation, be it in our own heads or in the pages of a book.

The Trouble with Men's explicit addressee may be Shields's wife, but its true addressee, its primary subject, is Shields himself. There is also a more general addressee: the individual self, the existence of which is, by design, solitary and seeking. Shields shows this, in both the explicit details of his interrogations and the way in which they are delivered. Precisely how he delivers his work demands a revaluation of how we perceive and analyse literature. Unlike overtly fictional works, analyses of literature that amalgamates the imagined with the real and actively promotes this amalgamation need to, at the very least, recognise this convergence of forms; to leave its hybridity unacknowledged is to not appreciate fully the scale of its ambitions and its potential reach, something which runs counter to adequate stylistic and thematic critical analysis. Additionally, the form of literature Shields engages in is potentially indicative of a contemporary form of experimental writing that, by design, will further grow and continue to dissolve the traditional boundaries segregating the fictional from the non-fictional. Why this may be the case is difficult to say with any certainty. The default artificiality of conventional fiction may be one of the reasons. Ronald Sukenick has argued:

> As soon as fiction gets frozen into one particular model, it loses that responsiveness to our immediate experience that is its hallmark. It becomes literary. It seems to me that this is one of the major factors contributing to the recent decline in the popularity of fiction: people no longer believe in the novel as a medium that gets at the truth of their lives (241).

Shields's approach to fiction attempts to circumvent this distance by accommodating reality and placing it alongside fiction. What it results in is a sustained meditation on the reality of

individuality and the distances, physical and psychological, that separate us from one another. In this sense, it can be said that *The Trouble with Men* can be read as both one individual's inquiry into human connection and an experimentally assembled catalogue that maps out the unanswered existential questions that echo through all of us.

***little scratch*, Rebecca Watson**

Writing in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk comments on the radical impact of trauma:

> We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think (26).

Rebecca Watson's 2021 novel *little scratch* examines precisely this – the impact trauma and its associated emotions has on the individual and how they attempt to engage with themselves, others and the world around them in the wake of a traumatising experience. Owing a clear stylistic debt to modernist literature, Watson employs a stream of consciousness narrative modernised by the extent to which it incorporates various aspects of modernity – namely, the ubiquity of technologically communicated streams of information – and an intentionally scattered form of textual formatting intended to mirror the disorderliness of conscious thought. As with *Brother in Ice* and *The Trouble with Men*, *little scratch* is very much a contemporary experimental novel where form and content need to be read as one. It is also a novel that reveals the severity of the trauma imposed on victims of sexual abuse and the sustained isolation it places them in.

As noted, *little scratch* is a stylistically inventive novel fundamentally preoccupied with the rapid and chaotic nature of trauma-influenced present thought and its fundamental

incommunicability. Unlike, for instance, Markson, Kopf and Shields, whose fragments, though reflective of the disorder of thought, are created by retrospective consideration, the emphatic fragmentation of Watson's novel is driven largely by immediacy and the unexpected of the present. As Watson has stated in an interview with Monica Heisey, "I wanted to write everything that was going on at the same time in one moment" (Watson, interview). Focusing on one day in the life of a young woman who has recently been raped by her boss, the delivery of Watson's novel is rendered in such a way as to mirror this persistently unsettled interiority while also showing how it contributes to and manifests as lived behaviour and experience. Such an approach, appearing as it does on the page as a narrative constantly adrift rather than one controlled by rigid language, questions through its very delivery literature itself and what it can and cannot do. Specifically, through its experimentalism and narrative waywardness, *little scratch* poses interesting questions of more traditionally crafted fiction's possible limits – particularly fiction delivered in the first person, as Watson's novel is. For instance, can the destabilising nature of trauma be accurately represented through controlled and carefully expressed language? Can the nature of distressed being, reduced to a series of fear-stalked fragmentary moments, be acutely captured through stories that are neatly structured and delivered with a coherency as deeply knowing and insightful as it is uninterrupted?

As has been argued, the highly stylised fictions of David Markson, Don DeLillo, Alicia Kopf and David Shields show that unorthodox narratives, when applied to the examining of isolation, can frequently yield intriguing insights into both the experience of isolation and the way in which literature can accommodate it. Watson's novel also makes the case that sometimes something radically different may be required. In this case, what that "different" constitutes is the delivery of thought as soon as it emerges. In this sense, Watson's unnamed young female protagonist bears echoes of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*'s Kate, or brings to mind, at least, the self-centric, isolated world of the individual psychologically unmoored

by recent trauma. However, whereas Kate's account of her existence is delivered through a series of typed, eerily clinical declarative statements, the testimony of *little scratch*'s protagonist mirrors the frenetic disorderliness of real-time thought; like the drifting nature of thoughts themselves, the novel's text is formatted in a way that gives the impression that the fragments of the sentences of which it is made up are floating and entirely uncontrolled. This is interesting on two counts. Firstly, it brings to light again that, in experimental literature at least, form and content should be perceived as forming a whole rather than being separate components of the same text. As Watson herself has noted in her interview with Heisey, "My protagonist's struggle is being able to match her experience and the brutality of language, and the permanence of language" (Watson, interview). Watson's approach very much calls to mind the experimental characteristics evident in literary modernism. As will be identified, there are some obvious parallels between *little scratch* and *Ulysses*. Links can also be made between Watson's writing – particularly in how it focuses on expression and the endurance of time – and Virginia Woolf's, a writer who Watson has admitted she was "obsessed with—she was the person that first ignited, for me, some kind of excitement about how to play with words and ideas of prose and where it can go." While it is clear that *little scratch* pays testament to its experimental forebears, it is not, however, straight replication; its atypically formatted stream of consciousness, for instance, stands on its own distinct stylistic footing and, with its incorporation of the specific complexities of modern living, is particularly well suited to capturing what it is like to be hyperaware and hypersensitive in today's stimuli-heavy world.

Watson's flouting of some of the rules of grammar and punctuation, opting instead for a more liberal approach to word placement on the page and a form of expression more reflective of the immediacy of conscious thought. To mimic the often frenetic speed of thought, commas are regularly dispensed with. At other times, large spaces separate words on the page, the purpose of which are to signify, at different times, confusion, hesitation, slowly

building dread. Capitals are used for emphasis or in the replication of outside text only, such as text messages, emails, website text, the effect of which reveals both the disparity between the language of the mind and the digital language of modern forms of communication and the ease with which the latter imposes itself on the former. Much like literal conscious thought, developing as it does as a monologue interrupted and influenced by outside stimuli, there are no full stops in the narrator's thoughts. Watson's choice to frequently play with the conventional rules of language is hardly original; as already mentioned, there are parallels between her unrestricted use of language and Joyce's in *Ulysses* – particularly in the final episode, "Penelope", the delivery of which is split into eight unpunctuated sentences broken only by paragraph breaks. While similar in its desire to be freed from the constraints of rules, Watson's prose differs from Joyce's in that its formatting is structured so as to reflect the complexities of cognition, in two immediately noticeable ways. In her use of white space, Watson shows how thought is prone to interruption and, at times, is momentarily not present. Additionally, Watson places fragments of text in parallel with one another to show that in the hyperaware individual's mind a number of thoughts can seem to exist at the same time. In this sense, *little scratch* calls to mind Ronald Sukenick's assertion that the novel is "both a concrete structure and an imaginative structure—pages, print, binding containing a record of the movements of the mind (205). Watson's novel perhaps fits even more neatly into this definition than most other novels might; the form and storyline contained within the "concrete structure" of the physical book reveal the persistent fluidity of the mind and how it operates after being subjected to trauma.

Watson initially tested the novel's style in a shorter piece that was shortlisted for *The White Review* Short Story Prize in 2018. As Alex Clark notes, Watson's story "was rendered in daringly disrupted form: prose that fragmented into something more like poetry; sudden shifts in the typography; staccato repetitions and bracketed text; a narrative that appeared to split, like a peloton of cyclists separating to go either side of a roundabout, before

reconfiguring, subtly altered" (Clark). Watson uses this emphatically versatile approach, as Clark notes, as a gateway into "the two different systems of being that most people experience simultaneously most of the time: the scheduled, material, almost mechanical flow of time (here, a lunch break, a conversation, minutes spent at a desk); and the private, interior anarchy of emotion, sensation and semi-articulation that unfolds in each moment." Clark's point that Watson's style resembles "something more like poetry" is an interesting one. As Brigitta Busch and Tim McNamara note in their 2020 study on language and trauma, for victims of trauma who struggle to bend "ordinary language" into a narrative about their trauma, meaning for victims "can sometimes be conveyed more easily through poetic, visual, or other semiotic resources" (331). The language Watson bends to shape the narrative of *little scratch* reads, as Clark points out, very much like a fractured form of prose poetry, both in its experimentally formatted structure, and in its loose, unconstrained prose.

At its core, Watson's novel is very much about control – of bodily autonomy, thoughts, the ability (or, perhaps, inability) to give shape to complex experiences through language and the narrative it attempts to construct. More specifically, it is a novel about what one is left with when control of these faculties has been unexpectedly violated and, as a consequence, removed. The result, Watson suggests, is interior isolation. In another echo of – or perhaps even nod towards – *Ulysses*, Watson conveys this sense of isolation by offering the reader the opportunity to inhabit, over the course of a single day, the fraught mind of *little scratch*'s protagonist. The novel begins as she wakes to the day the course of the book is set over. Stirred from a "fucking dream tricking me into fucking scratching my own skin", we learn there have been "dozens" of such mornings (1-2). The distressed and isolated state in which the protagonist exists is evidenced in the dread with which she perceives the day ahead, a living nightmare where she has "got to do this thing again, the waking up thing, the day thing, the work thing, the disentangling from my duvet thing, this is something, this is a thing

I have to do then, rolling over, sitting up, my head moving forward faster than I thought I was moving it" (3).

As the narrator's interior is further expressed, the aforementioned expression of dual thought, often differentiated by their respective opposing positions on the page, is amplified. Defecating before leaving for work (as Leopold Bloom does before embarking on his day in *Ulysses*), she appears to simultaneously consider both the "significant correlation" of "the hangover and the running late" and the "plop! plop! plop!" sounds of her faeces entering the bowl (6). Shortly after, attempting to stay rooted in the present and the motions propelling her through it, the word "walking" repeats in her head forty times, before realising that "a man is slowing slowing slowing" his car down to "BEEP" and shout "alriiiiiiiiiiiiiightt" and, when she responds with a raised middle finger, "phark awff you bitch" (12-13). Such an incident, though fleeting, encapsulates *little scratch*'s core ambition: to vividly capture the ease with which the outside creates unease in one's already fraught interior, the scale of which is made clear by not only the experiences and thought she has during the day, but, perhaps more crucially, how they are accounted for. In this sense, it can be said that the terrain of the narrator's internal state is mapped out by the atypical typography employed to capture the stream of consciousness that charts her reactions and feelings. Here, again, is another indication of the similarities and differences that exist between Watson's prose and the modernist styles of Joyce. While Joyce's Bloom is, like Watson's narrator, a relentless thinker, his thoughts are characterised by contemplativeness and, relatively speaking, calm attention to detail. Joyce's use of a stream of consciousness narrative may, by design, contain all the attentive drift expected of a style replicating the disorderliness of the mind, but it is not propelled by a torrent of anxiety; the thoughts of the young woman in *little scratch*, however, very much are. As such, it can be said that, like what Markson does with Kate's typed out, "contained" stream of consciousness in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, in *little scratch* Watson utilises the narrative form and, through an unbroken – and indeed *Beckettian* – anxiety

mirrored in its erratic formatting, adds to it to deepen its examination of isolation. What also separates Watson from modernists like Joyce and Woolf is, perhaps ironically, the modernity of her work – or, more specifically, the type of modernity it is responding to. As Genevieve Sartor has noted:

> Watson is no Eliot, Woolf, or Joyce — her debut novel offers something different in its scope. This difference reflects a cultural moment that has brought attention to what we cannot dismiss the importance of, but must learn, like the narrator, how to articulate. The force of her prose and the single-mindedness of the text creates and puts pressure on the psychological luxation caused by a 'little scratch' that cannot begin to heal or reintegrate until it is voiced. What little scratch does is begin that vocalisation through a scintillating depiction of what it is to be a stranger to oneself and those around oneself as a sustained trauma, through a literary form that is both singular and representative of our times (Sartor).

The extent to which the narrator is isolated within the confines of her own head and the overactive thought patterns that fill it plays out in an agonising encounter during a conversation about books with a work colleague. Asked what she has been reading recently, the protracted period between the time she is asked the question and when she answers "*well, I guess it's funny how you can so easily forget what you've read recently, but I've read The Second Body*?" (93) is revealing. The three and a half pages the narrator spends mutely agonising over her inability to provide an answer – which is "making me question my capacity to think at all" (90) – displays two things. Firstly, it casts light on how deeply enclosed and prone to overactive rumination she truly is. Secondly, it is an example of how Watson's experimental style suits the expression of the peculiarity of psychological time and the impact it has on the one enduring it. While at first we might naturally assume that her thoughts are occurring in real clock time, we can retrospectively assume that the period of silence as she sought a response did not last as long as her silence implies. Rather than simply have the narrator express in a sentence the longevity between the time she asks and the time she answers, Watson forces us to momentarily depart from objective time and experience what Henri Bergson termed "la durée" ("duration") – the internal and subjective experience of time. Watson's manipulation of temporality can also be read as being linked with the

traumatised mind. Writing about her childhood experience of sexual assault in *Denial: A Memoir of Terror* (2010), Jessica Stern describes how "Some people's lives seem to flow in a narrative; mine had many stops and starts. That's what trauma does. It interrupts the plot" (7). Trauma interrupts the "plot" in *little scratch* too, both in the mind of its character and, by extension, the literal plot of the book. It is Watson's formal and stylistic experimentalism that causes this type of interruption in *little scratch*. By fragmenting her narrator's thoughts and having them appear chaotically on the page, the plot – the entirety of which is expressed through her interiority – is regularly interrupted by both specific memories of the traumatic experience she endured and, more broadly, the way it has caused her to think in general. In this way, Watson's novel implies that the experience of trauma and the radical isolation to which it gives rise necessitates experimentalism.

This pattern of overthinking, of momentarily disassociating, we later learn, may be longstanding. Recalling a time when she was younger and looking in a mirror as her voice was "resounding in my head", she remembers "being confused at how still it (my face) was, how it wasn't moving when in my head things were so loud, rising furious right out and yet I did not move, did not seem to feel or wince or, look at that face! look at that frozen face (I used to think), prod at it as if it wasn't mine" (99). It is perhaps safe to assume, however, that the narrator's current habit of disassociating is linked to her trauma. As van der Kolk notes, "Dissociation is the essence of trauma. The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived" (66).

This memory of disassociating as a child comes at a vital point in *little scratch*, as it is immediately succeeded by the arrival of an email from her boss on the subject of sexual harassment in the workplace. It is through her reaction to the email that we begin to comprehend the nature of her trauma and its cause. In distress, she recalls "opening

WhatsApp to explain consent to men who I thought would get it" (102). Soon after, her words, cascading down the page, reveal she is actively trying to repress all thoughts of him by "deleting the email" and "erasing him" (103). However, she is forced to consider him again when he appears at her desk asking "did you get my email?" (109). Once more, Watson's style allows for the expression of simultaneous thought: while she is hearing him saying "*the Faulkner lunch it needs sorting*" she is at the same time thinking "get your eyes off me you cunt stop looking at my fucking face, stop drinking in a single fucking part of me you fucking cunt I will fucking kill you if you keep with your fucking eye contact" (109). Her boss's presence triggers further obsessive and distressing contemplation; she feels the urge to scratch herself, a habit ruminated on and acted out throughout the novel, and asks herself "what is the point of filling my mind with him when he's not even here, when he's not wetting his lips right in front of me" (115).

Soon after, the narrator's internal monologue strays into the metafictional – to address, perhaps, readers of the novel who might be wondering if it is autobiographical. Given its challenging subject matter and the fact that, unlike Kopf's and Shields's work, it presents itself as a work of fiction rather than a work of autofiction, it might be wise to refrain from speculating on the potential autobiographical origins of Watson's novel. If nothing else, Watson's commentary here, the playful subtext of which can quite obviously be read as being related to her decision to write a novel like *little scratch*, communicates an unease with the idea of it being read as autobiographical in its origins. Considering the "eighty messages in the group chat christ", she comments on how such an inquisition would run:

> …they're talking about an author? who has written a novel actually about herself? but pretending it isn't herself? I wonder how they know it's her, when the author hasn't told them, do they know better than her who is in the book and who isn't? that said, I already agree, before having read the book, and despite liking autofiction! liking blurred memoir! still thinking oh stop, stop with the talk about yourself, make something up, anything, anything, escape from yourself, just give me someone else's sincerity apart from your own, not your own!, trauma borrowed from yourself reads sore, feel it in me too much, no distance right now, need distance (128).

This wish for distance, for some respite from the endless dwelling on her trauma, does not come, however. Googling at her desk, she types in "STATISTICS OF RAPE IN WORKPLACE" while "drumming fingers (in the space – a glimpse! – or loading)" and learns "Half of women sexually harassed at work, says BBC" (133). Once more, she turns further inward, more isolated, more agitated and perplexed. Like Kate in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, she is also left wondering about the conditions that might turn someone mad. Although vastly different in their respective profiles and behaviour, there are also links here between Watson's narrator and the unnamed man in the Museum of Modern Art in DeLillo's *Point Omega*; both characters are inward, doubting of the core self and are persistently agitated by their own minds and the thoughts they produce. Such propensities, the excessiveness of which reveal the interiority and self-centric obsessiveness of isolation, are also evident in *The Body Artist*'s Lauren, the way in which Alicia Kopf's unnamed narrator interrogates her own sense of self in *Brother in Ice* and in the protracted self-analysis David Shields engages in throughout *The Trouble with Men*. Imagining interviewing herself, Watson's narrator meditates on the everyday common routines of humanity and asks "what if that feeling of purposelessness just kept rising, heightening, rising, getting louder, what then? what happens at the point where your head should burst? what instead? when the roar hits the ceiling of your head (your scalp I guess) where does it go next, when it's got nowhere left to go? is that when you go mad? is that the exact moment when you've lost it?" (138). Additionally, she considers the "claustrophobia inside your own head!" and the fact and feeling of the "massive, infinite sky overhead and feeling trapped! shut in! and knowing you cannot leave it, move away, step outside for a moment" (138). Aware of the burden of this perpetual psychological load and the deep interiority it confines her to, she wonders "how many times how long will I continue to think like this analysing as I go warily precariously measuring what I think" (147). There is also a fleeting moment of suicidal ideation, as the protagonist, waiting on a station platform for a train, considers how "just a little step" would bring an end to her life (158).

Even the mundanity of something as routine as brushing one's teeth is imposed upon by trauma. At a poetry reading where a poet's words have triggered in the protagonist flashbacks of being orally raped by her boss, she recalls with discomfort how "sometimes when I brush my teeth, hard not to react to gag forward my throat resisting it thinking: yes I know this pattern" (163). Patterns – of thoughts, of behaviour – evidently play a significant role in her life. One of those patterns is concealment and the struggle to break from it. Her trauma internalised, there is a persistent tension in her between the want to tell someone about what happened to her and the inability to find the will to do so. She imagines the difficulty in telling her mother and, soon after, her boyfriend, to whom in her head she starts rehearsing to say "HE RAPED ME!" (171). This latter consideration leads into one of the novel's more immersive passages; broken only by commas, she dwells on both what she in the present moment is doing (eating chips with her boyfriend) and the potential repercussions of telling him about the rape, among them the prospect of feeling guilt for remaining silent since the event. As such, there is a constant battle of selves – between the internal and the external – occurring in her mind throughout the novel. Watson shows this again when the protagonist, cycling home with her boyfriend after the poetry reading, feels as though "I could just shout right now I was raped I was raped I was raped" as she is "pedalling pedalling pedalling" (89). However, it remains just that – a feeling, an unsatisfied want – as she reflects on "how many times have I tried? I don't know." This scene reemphasises another psychological truth about the incommunicable nature of trauma. As van der Kolk notes, "Even years later traumatized people often have enormous difficulty telling other people what has happened to them. Their bodies reexperience terror, rage, and helplessness, as well as the impulse to fight or flee, but these feelings are almost impossible to articulate. Trauma by nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past" (59). Of all the strands of trauma and isolation Watson's work engages with, it is this – the hyperaware conscious mind's struggle to articulate in real time what seems to defy

description – that reveals how the versatility of experimentalism is particularly well suited to conveying the isolation of unerring psychological distress.

As *little scratch* draws towards its understated end, Watson provides yet another visceral example of the ways in which trauma imposes itself on the present. As the narrator and her boyfriend have sex, she worries about the sight of the scratches she has inflicted on her skin (a form of self-harm she attempts to fend off throughout her day) and in her head begins to "think about what I do not want to think about not now" (195). After sex, the traumatic memories begin to dominate again. She is not, however, without hope; in tomorrow she sees a day where she will "stop picking my own actual scabs" (201). Feeling that "I'm okay I'm okay" before "subsiding" and imagining, in the novel's closing thought, "lines of red", it is unclear precisely how she is or how she will be in the future. *little scratch*'s end calls to mind, again, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and its resistance towards resolution. With that in mind, it is reasonable then to suggest that, like Markson's novel, *little scratch* is a novel of and about moments. More specifically, it is about what happens inside the mind and how the mind operates when trauma has made it both isolated and overactive.

Fragmentary, cascading across and down the novel's pages, Watson's delivery allows for a close portrayal of the experience of the shifting speeds of psychological time and the default erraticism – and frequent incompleteness and incoherency – of conscious thought emerging in real-time. Consequently, *little scratch* offers a discomforting opportunity for the reader to inhabit the mind of its isolated protagonist and think in precisely the same way that she does. It also offers itself up as a novel in which form and content should be regarded as one. To ascertain as much, it has been important to attend to the novel with the type of close reading that pays attention to not only atypically constructed language and the sentences it forms, but also how that language is delivered, both stylistically and aesthetically. Indubitably indebted to literary modernism, in *little scratch* Watson takes inspiration from the movement's interest in interiority and temporal disjuncture and adds contemporary anxieties

and ways of being to it in order to convey what it is like to be alive, traumatised and isolated in today's world. As Sartor argues, "Watson depicts the experience of post-traumatic disassociation and thus, rather than bearing the characteristics of a fluid stream of consciousness style, this book stands on its feet as strikingly dissociative, jarring, self-questioning and uncanny" (Sartor). It is through a sustained engagement with experimentalism that Watson achieves this, providing further proof that perhaps the most accurate – the most challengingly realistic – portrayals of isolation in literature necessitate the subversion of traditional conventions and the embracing of unorthodox literary forms and styles.

In Conclusion

In the works of Alicia Kopf, David Shields and Rebecca Watson, isolation can take on a variety of forms and has both longstanding and newly developing ways of experiencing and communicating its complexities. Close readings of the works of those authors have highlighted the ways in which contemporary experimental authors are attempting to confront and express those complexities. The narrator in Alicia Kopf's *Brother in Ice* is a contemporary artist attempting to comprehend her own sense of isolation and the distance that separates her autistic brother from the outside world. While Kopf's novel owes much to the traditions of collage and autofiction, its contemporaneousness is reflected in its use of John Cleves Symmes Jr.'s variant of the Hollow Earth Theory and factual polar exploration accounts to scrutinise isolation as it is endured in modernity. The forms of isolation *Brother in Ice* is preoccupied with are varied, both in their longevity and in how they are processed. On the one hand, the sources of the isolation examined in *Brother in Ice* – familial dysfunction, human disconnection, the solitary interior of the artist – are nothing new. On the other hand, however, the narrator reveals how the isolated individual inhabits the world today and attempts to make sense of their place in it. Large periods of time are spent alone researching

the polar explorations on the internet. The goings-on in the lives of others – chiefly, in the lives of ex-partners – are sought out and found through accessing Facebook profiles. However, while the narrator may feel alone and worry too about her brother's isolating condition, she does not hide from it. In this sense, *Brother in Ice* is contemporary in that it refuses to stigmatise human suffering. Rather than distract herself from her own psychological pain and her brother's irreversible condition, she examines them. She sees a therapist and, through her research and the travel it demands, thinks her way through the complexities of the self to reach something of an understanding about the fundamental aloneness of being and, crucially, how to give voice to it.

David Shields's *The Trouble with Men* queries genre while also interrogating the roots of the distances that separate us from one another. Although Shields's use of literary collage is not new, he has over recent years become one of its most consistent – and interesting – practitioners. Like *Brother in Ice* before it, *The Trouble with Men* recognises both the longstanding and modern contributors to human isolation. In addition to the age-old quandaries of love, true connection, masochism and masculine fragility, Shields navigates the current zeitgeist in which the individual is immersed in information streams, pornography, and the easily accessible words of others who make up the wider culture at large. Ultimately, *The Trouble with Men* is a formally modern examination of one of the oldest of questions – how do we bridge the gaps that separate us from others? The answer, Shields suggests, lies in the asking itself. More specifically, it might lie in a form of writing that permits the blurring of literary genres and a chorus of intertextual voices to aid its thematic preoccupations.

Rebecca Watson's *little scratch* is a close examination of interiority beset by trauma lived out over the course of a day. The working and cultural environment the protagonist inhabits both exacerbates and alleviates her psychological distress at various times throughout the novel. The internet and WhatsApp are sources of unrelenting data and messages, the flow of which have the effect of grounding her in the present while at the same time making her

more distractible and uneasy. The novel also takes place in a cultural moment in which the Me Too movement, which saw sexually abused women publically give voice to their experiences, became established. The movement, which resulted in many women emerging from the isolation of private pain to reveal publically the sexual crimes committed against them, was a landmark cultural moment. Watson's novel shows us the difficulty in taking that first step by internally vocalising what, internally, defies vocabulary and thus appears beyond description.

While all three authors differ greatly from Don DeLillo and David Markson on the surface, parallels exist between their works. As previously noted, similarities can be drawn between Alicia Kopf's isolated and answer-seeking artist in *Brother in Ice*, Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist* and Kate in Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Likewise, Kopf's use of literary collage and fragmentation bear similarities with Markson's tetralogy.

The stylistic similarities between those late Markson novels and David Shields's *The Trouble with Men* are immediately obvious, filled as they are with thematically relevant fragments and quotations gleaned from other texts. However, *The Trouble with Men* also echoes with the same anxieties about communication and human connection ruminated on at length in *The Body Artist*. Links can be drawn too between Shields's vision of art as being transformative and the way in which it is implied in both The *Body Artist* and *Point Omega*.

Communication, the ability to give voice to what is initially internal, is also at the core of *little scratch*. In the narrator's fragmentary – and persistently distressed – internal monologue, there are traces of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*'s Kate, who is also prone to excessive thought, dissociation and feelings of absence and loss. Kate lives in a world where there is nobody to talk to. Watson's unnamed protagonist, meanwhile, lives in a world where she cannot talk to anyone about what is dominating her thoughts. There are also similarities between Watson's protagonist and *The Body Artist*'s Lauren, haunted as they are by trauma and fears over language's ability to capture experience in full.

It is clear that there are a number of stylistic and thematic strands linking David Markson and Don DeLillo's works with the contemporary authors who have been discussed in this chapter. On a wider note, however, what demands most consideration is the significant extent to which isolation remains a literary theme and how some contemporary authors are using experimental techniques to examine it.

CONCLUSION

This study began by discussing the difficulty in defining with any precision what constitutes experimental literature. A term that evokes a sense of the radically inventive and, by the extension, the opaque, one would be forgiven for dismissing it as a form of literature that promotes elitist indulgence and little in the form of real-world value. It is hoped that the discussions throughout this study have proved this to be a misconception.

After addressing several definitions put forward by literary theorists and authors alike, it was decided in the introduction that for this study that experimental literature would be broadly regarded as literature which "through clear deviations from traditional literary practice intentionally draws attention to its own construction and how it examines its respective thematic preoccupations." Generally speaking, loose definitions are perhaps unideal for thorough academic studies. However, they are also sometimes necessary, particularly when a study's core subject evades simple definition, as this one unquestionably does. One of the reasons why it is important to view experimental literature in broad terms is evidenced throughout this study – namely, because rather than there be a specifically locatable threshold across which a work can pass and become so categorised, experimental literature exists on a wide spectrum ranging from the subtly to the radically experimental. This should be clear from both the extensive discussion about experimental literature in the introduction to this study and, even more so, the close readings and analyses of the selected works of experimental literature that have formed the core of this study.

Of course, the primary ambition of this study has not been to attempt to demarcate the boundaries that separate an experimental work of literature from a conventional one. Rather, it has set out to analyse the different functions of formal experimentation and how potentially conducive they may be for the literary examination of the complexities of human isolation. In particular, this study has been motivated by looking at the ways in which literary experimentalism has been utilised to examine how isolation can be caused, how it can be

experienced and how those experiencing it attempt to communicate and navigate their way through it. This has been achieved through a three-pronged approach. Firstly, through extensive close readings, the chapters in this study have meticulously looked at the precise ways in which a number of experimental literary works have been crafted – formally, in the structure and specific language of a work's prose, and thematically, in the stories those forms have given shape to and emphasised. Additionally, through drawing on appropriate psychological studies, it has been suggested that through the utilisation of atypical literary styles writers may be best placed to convey, by chance or by intention, the atypical psychological states physically and mentally isolated individuals find themselves.

Experimental literature covers extensive ground, the borders of which are constantly shifting. Consequently, any study that puts it at the forefront of its focus cannot possibly consider the genre, which is loosely defined by default, in its entirety. Of course, this study is not particularly concerned with the history of experimental literature, but its functions and the potential to which its innate versatility can give rise – in this case, specifically, how its utilisation is suited to examining particular themes, human isolation among them. With this and the limitations of space in mind, it was decided that it would be most appropriate that the core of this would focus on two authors who share some thematic and biographical similarities, but who at the same time represent different positions on the aforementioned experimental spectrum.

David Markson and Don DeLillo are radically different in their delivery, but there are clear thematic crossovers in some of their works, the most obvious and interesting examples of which have been extensively analysed in this study. Preoccupied with the causes and experiences of various forms of isolation, both authors display in their works an enduring curiosity with the limits of language and the conversion of thought into speech, the impact of place on sensory perception, implacable grief and how the individual attempts to process and live with it, and perhaps most poignantly, the unavoidability of certain death. In addition to

artistic similarities, biographical affinities also connect both authors. Both were born in New York, and they are roughly of the same era (Markson was born in 1927, DeLillo in 1936). When Markson was alive, he rarely participated in public events. DeLillo, now in his 83rd year, is an intensely private individual. Additionally, they have both been regarded, to varying degrees, as authors of postmodern fiction. With all this considered, it is therefore reasonable to posit that they are suitable figures for this study – not because this study analyses their works through a biographical lens, but because their shared artistic concerns, coming from the perspective of common backgrounds, are philosophically and thematically similar enough to act as compelling reference points while simultaneously being different enough to reveal experimental literature's broad range.

To immediately emphasise the extremes to which experimental literature can go, the core of this study begins with a chapter on Markson. Comprised of an initial discussion and a series of close readings through the specific lenses of experimentalism and isolation, Markson's radical formal innovation was shown to be particularly useful for the literary examination of a variety of isolated states of being and their potential causes. In *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, it was seen that the atypical structure and prose style employed by Markson throughout the novel was consistently conducive for a convincing portrayal of the apocalyptic physical and psychological isolation Kate finds herself in. Through the novel's sustained experimentalism, Markson interrogates grief and its impact on memory, the limits of language and its impact on perception and the complex reality of apparent mental illness. Throughout his tetralogy, meanwhile, it has been shown how Markson's shift to a more fragmented, bare and trivia-driven form of narrative lent itself to a compelling and protracted meditation on the isolation of ageing, increasing ill health, physical aloneness and the lonely, death-haunted ruminations they collectively inspire. Markson's use of experimental form in the tetralogy also proceeds to act as an environment crowded by cultural figures into which its narrator's explicit presence gradually vanishes.

Don DeLillo's extensive oeuvre contains a litany of isolated characters, but, as argued, it is in two of his shorter works that the theme of human isolation is most compellingly explored. Interestingly, it is also arguably in those works where DeLillo's experimentalism, which has usually been at the less radical end of the spectrum, has been at its most overt. In *The Body Artist*, DeLillo explores the throes of grief-induced isolation through versatile literary forms and styles that in their delivery interrogate the idiosyncrasies of language, the complexities and potential fluidities of identity, the often abstruse nature of memory at the height of bereavement and the impact loss can have on perception. Additionally, he also engages in experimental characterisation, the result of which serves to further examine all the aforementioned thematic strands, which, together, form an obscure, but convincing examination of isolation and what it imposes on the individual experiencing it. In *Point Omega*, DeLillo employs intertextuality and a noticeably slow-paced, ruminative prose style to accentuate the isolation of its characters. Additionally, the ways in which he crafts place and interrogates identity in the novel reveal further insights into how the isolation experienced by those characters has a profound impact on their ability to perceive objective reality.

To further this discussion about experimental literature and how it can be utilised to examine isolation in depth, the focus was shifted from Markson and DeLillo to younger, more contemporary experimental authors who respond to modernity and how isolation is experienced in it. As has been seen in the chapter on their works, Alicia Kopf, David Shields and Rebecca Watson have all explored the theme through a range of different forms of experimentalism. In *Brother in Ice*, Kopf's atypical narrative structure and amalgamation of fictional writing with factual research and reportage are used to probe forms of longstanding causes of isolation (artistic struggles, autism, familial dysfunction, failed relationships, and deep-seated psychological unrest) through a notably modern lens of experience. In the genre-querying, fragmentary *The Trouble with Men*, meanwhile, David Shields, using his own voice and an abundance of secondary voices, also delves into enduring causes and forms of isolation

(stammering, a submissive personality, the ultimately unnavigable distances between everyone and its impact on true human connection, masculine fragility) to the background of a milieu where access to all forms of information and stimuli only enhance the individual's possibility of becoming isolated. Rebecca Watson's *little scratch* is a work of experimental fiction that also notably blends the old with the modern. Displaying clear elements of literary modernism, Watson's use of atypical formatting, the intent of which is to mirror the erratic nature of conscious thought, is used to examine the interiority of trauma in an increasingly digitalised world. Furthermore, it also takes place against the backdrop of a cultural moment where women have become increasingly encouraged to speak up about the sexual abuse they have suffered, the fact of which only serves to emphasise the isolation of *little scratch*'s protagonist who, by the novel's end, remains unable to give voice to her own trauma.

Where appropriate, references to psychological studies have been included that put some of the discussed forms of isolation into a broader, real-world context. As noted, their presence has been used as context-providing reference points, the specific intent of which has been to show that, by accident or by design, the relative unboundedness of literary experimentalism can lend itself to the versatile examination of themes that are notably layered and difficult to fully unpack using conventional means. Human isolation, this study proposes, is one of those themes. It is important to restate here that they have not been included to suggest that experimental literature can teach us about the myriad, complex psychological realities of people who are isolated in the same way that psychology can – nor, it should be added, has their inclusion been used to imply that the authors on whom this study focuses wrote their works with any definite special knowledge of psychology at hand. On the first point, it would be wholly inaccurate – and absurd – to posit that any form of fiction should be regarded as a fully legitimate source of nuanced psychological insight. On the latter point, to suggest the authors were informed by psychological studies without any sources to support such claims would be disingenuous.

In the chapter on David Markson's works, lines were drawn between his experimentalism and complicated grief, the reality of memory loss and its impact on the imagination to look into the future, the denial often evident in lung cancer patients and the depressed moods older adults prone to ruminating can find themselves in. In the chapter on DeLillo's works, links were made between his use of experimentalism and the psychological realities of post-bereavement hallucinations, trauma induced by moral injury and the distressed experiences of families whose loved ones have gone missing. In the chapter on contemporary experimental authors, meanwhile, it was suggested that experimentalism had been conducive for the portrayal of isolation and how it is linked with submissiveness, the long-term impact of familial dysfunction in childhood, the persistence, internal language and interruptive nature of trauma, and, lastly, dissociative psychological states induced by traumatic events.

In the introduction to this study, questions were asked of experimental literature. How can it be defined? What are the differences between it and conventionally constructed works of literature? What are its motives? To what potential ends can its apparent versatility be utilised? How can it be analysed? While no discussion about literature is ever complete, it is hoped that the chapters in this study, the focus on which has addressed all these questions and more, have given some answers to these questions. In addition to contemplating the functions of experimental literature, a number of questions were also posed about the theme on which this study focuses: human isolation. Namely, what does it mean to be isolated? How do individuals come to be isolated? In what ways can individuals become isolated? Is a state of isolation, by default, a negative way of being or can it give rise to positive life experiences? Like discussions about literature, conversations about specific ways of being, isolation among them, will always continue. It is hoped that this study will offer a small contribution to that discussion.

Linking both experimental literature and human isolation, the core question of this study asked how potentially adept the former is for exploring the latter. To comprehend the complex, one often needs to go about it complexly. This study has been predicated on the belief that while experimental literature is no better or worse, critically speaking, than any other form of literature, its very nature – its subverting of conventions, its embracing of the opaque, its acknowledgment of disorder, its preoccupation with layers and the potential and limits of language, and the resistance it displays towards singular interpretations and easily processed conclusions – is particularly well placed to examine a theme as multifaceted as human isolation. A form of literature that is not always by directed by plot, its malleability offers manifold means with which to explore the types of themes and ideas that are perhaps not so easily or extensively accommodated for in other forms of literature. As explored throughout this study, the diversity of experimental literature ensures that this can be achieved in a variety of different ways, ranging, as seen, from the radical to the subtle, and can either represent a particular mode of literature or, through its design, dissolve the boundaries that have traditionally separated one mode from another/others.

The close readings that comprise the core of this study have highlighted the areas of being that literary experimentalism seems particularly well suited to articulate. Concerned at core with all components of language – its development, expression, functions, and limitations – experimental literature reflects, in the end, both a perpetual concern with how people exist in and make sense of their position in the world and the efficiency of its own medium to convey that concern accurately. With this in mind, it should come as little surprise that isolation, a universal condition that every individual experiences to some degree or another, has always been and is likely to remain a thematic preoccupation of the experimental author. While newly emerging contributors to and causes of isolation will inevitably influence the ways in which we make sense of and communicate it, language will continue to be the medium through which we respond to it. Consequently, the literature that will attempt to

confront both longstanding and new forms of isolation in the future will continue to concern itself with the tensions that exist between experience and our ability to give verbal shape to it. True, while it is possible that the ways in which literature is produced could be subject to fundamental change – incorporating, for example, and indeed becoming reliant on future technologies – it seems improbable that it will stray too far away from its perpetual interest in the complexities of the human condition. In fact, as the world becomes more fraught and vulnerable, and people attempt to locate themselves in it, it seems far more likely that this core concern of literature will continue to endure. In this sense, isolation, which none of us evade, will remain a theme to which authors – and experimental authors in particular – will keep returning. Isolation is a fundamental part of who we are. Irrespective of the world we inhabit, the experiences we have and the positions we find ourselves in, we are, in the end, alone. In order to come to terms with this, we first of all need to accept it. To accept it, we need to comprehend what it means, how we came to be this way, and how we can live with that profound, often unsettling, knowledge. There are many places to where we can turn to better our understanding of this fundamental part of our being. Experimental literature is one of those places.

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