

The College of Wooster

Contemporary Autobiographical Fiction and its
Approach to the Problem of Authenticity in Literature

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Critical Introduction

Of all of the insights into art and literature contained in David Shields's manifesto for a new literary genre *Reality Hunger* there is one rather prophetic statement about the way that presidents seem to have been chosen over the past few decades, "the person who loses the presidential election is the person who seems most fictional" (Shields 86). Shields identifies that in 2008 Barack Obama seemed the candidate that "came off as completely real" especially when compared with the fossilized McCain and stilted Hillary Clinton who "campaigns with all the logic of a Successories poster" a line he gets from John Hodgman. 2016 of course saw Clinton retry this same strategy and lose to Donald Trump who was selling his particular brand of straight talking. Trump had the kind of honesty and realness that was unafraid to be ugly, that revealed in its own despicableness. Whether "real" in the context of presidential personality means dignified and caring or narcissistic and blunt is irrelevant as long as those characteristics are found by the majority of the public to be indicative of an authentic and honest person, someone who would be able to get up on the podium and say what they truly feel rather than make politically calculated comments.

This desire for a president who will "tell it how it is" is just one among many symptoms of what Shields calls "reality hunger", a cultural desire to consume something we feel to be indicative of life as it is lived, a true relation of events as they truly are. Reality television is meant to satisfy this hunger, "real" people either living their lives in a conveniently shared living space or else collectively subjected to some kind of game. Despite these reality shows being run by producers and the raw film edited down into an easily digestible and highly dramatic hour long segments for every week; the audience is

meant to take the show as an accurate portrayal of the real everyday life of the cast members. Even if we understand that there is artifice behind reality television, or believe that behind the realness of a politician is a highly cultivated public persona, it is difficult to totally give up the belief that the feeling of authenticity given off by these presentations could only be the result of an underlying real quality.

David Shields believes that as a result of this contemporary cultural situation a new form of artistic expression is emerging that will attempt to engage with a rapidly changing and problematic conception of personal identity. They are artists “who are breaking larger and larger chunks of ‘reality’ into their work” in the attempt to satisfy for themselves and for others this pervading “reality hunger” (Shields 3). For the form of the novel there are several terms to describe this shift one being “Post-Theory Theory Novels” which foregrounds how these works incorporate contemporary literary theory as a device rather than a mode of criticism (Huehls). The term that I will use to describe these novels is contemporary auto-biographical fiction as this term focuses on what I find to be the works’ central positioning in a paradox that is equally between fact and fiction which allows them to do their work in regard to exploring new conceptions of self.

“Even if the theory novel never really *does* theory very well, its awareness of theory’s key concepts compels the theory novel to self-consciously consider and reveal its own conditions of possibility. That is, theory’s most basic demand, that thought think itself—a reflexive, critical self-consciousness underpinning the project of theory as a whole—emerges in literature as a requirement that texts implicate themselves in the limits of their own language.” (Huehls 285)

Shields provides a rather scattered explanation of how we got to this cultural moment where hazy and unstable conceptions of truth and identity are foregrounding political and artistic conversations. Scattered, because he uses an incredibly unorthodox structure for his manifesto which makes use 617 short sections described collectively as a

“literary montage” (Shields 6). Much of his analysis follows the development of the novel beginning in the 19th century, “before the Industrial Revolution, culture was mostly local; niches were geographic” (Shields 11). Culture is highly tied to the developments in the transportation of people and ideas. Small isolated communities have a stronger sense of identity than large interconnected ones and this affects their interests and the breadth of point of view:

“The novel arrived to amuse mainly ladies of the middle and upper classes and provide them a sense of importance: their manners their concerns, their daily rounds, their aspirations, their dreams of romance. The novel feasted on the unimportant, mimicking reality” (Shields 12)

The audience of the early novel shaped its content just as it does today. Mid and late 19th century novels were marked by confident belief in universals where “All the technical elements of narrative... tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe” (Shields 17). These ideas about universal truth were built into the form the novel and persists in it today. Linear and sure footed narratives about a relatable and clear individual is still the norm rather than the exception especially when it comes to the form of memoir.

Things begin to change in the early 19th century with the emergence of the modernist literary figures, Flaubert, Proust, Faulkner, and finally Beckett. Brian McHale identifies the modernism of the early 20th century with Faulkner’s *Absoalom, Absalom!* which showcases many of the conventions of modernist poetics, “textual indefiniteness or incompleteness, epistemological doubt... and metalingual self-reflection” (McHale 8). McHale finds that the modernists are defined by epistemological questions while the postmodernists are defined by ontological questions. Modernists are wondering about differently structured minds working on the same knowledge and the limits of

knowledge. The postmodernists are asking questions about what kind of different worlds there are and what happens when the boundaries of those different worlds are violated. What McHale wants to show with this distinction is that epistemological when pushed far enough “tip over” into ontological questions and vice versa (McHale 11). One will always provide the background of the other.

With Beckett, Shields finds the final break from the former certainty in narrative purity, “it’s now not the anecdote that’s lacking – only its character of certainty, its tranquility, its innocence” (Shields 19). As modernism develops so too do the acceptable presentations of narrative:

“Plot is a way to stage and dramatize reality, but when the presentation is too obviously formulaic, as it so often is, the reality is perceived as false... and hyperaware of all artifices of genre and form, we nevertheless seek new means of creating the real.” (Shields 22)

Modernism and later postmodernism come to define a sort of subconscious for western culture. Careful and provocative analysis of the way in which language and images are manipulated so as to best manipulate their audience.

“What had been central was a problem to be addressed... and all the old solutions had been ruled out of bounds not because they were not nice to hang on a wall or to read, but because they had been absorbed into the game of producing new ones.” (Brown)

The techniques and devices of postmodern theory will come to be incorporated into almost all communication in the late 20th century. Television, advertising, literature, visual art, anything that is meant to communicate some sort of idea to the consumer/observer is more than likely conceptualized with the assumption that the audience is “hyperaware” of communications inherent artifice. This creates a problem for

the way that people move through their everyday lives and the younger the more significant.

“But we are still in the same boat: none of our societies know how to manage their mourning for the real, for power, for the *social itself*, which is implicated in this same breakdown. And it is by an artificial revitalization of all this that we try to escape it.” (Baudrillard 181)

Shields mentions Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X* which is “very tightly organized around the inability of any of the characters to feel, really, anything... these characters, bombarded by mall culture and mass media, feel that they have ‘McLives’ rather than lives” (Shields 24).

If the feeling of the characters portrayed in *Generation X* is a result of broadcast culture, content designed to appeal and relate to as broad an audience as possible, the apex of a trajectory starting with the industrial revolution, then what does it mean for that model of distribution to collapse?

“The opposite of broadcast: the distribution economics of the internet favor infinite niches, not one-size-fits-all... A new regime of digital technology has now disrupted all business models based on mass-produced copies, including the livelihoods of artists.” (Shields 28)

Almost 200 years of development in a culture economy that requires an appeal to the shared characteristics of the audience is steadily collapsing in the face of a new communication technology, one that creates countless small communities that are not bound by geography. The novel which once relied on the support of a well-financed publishing house is also affected by this change. You can find countless self-published novels online and while most will be underwhelming there may be one that, for you, is the best thing ever written, possible only now, the number of copies only determined by the amount of time a server is willing to host it. “Copies have been dethroned... In a

regime of superabundant free copies, copies are no longer the basis of wealth. Now relationships, links, connection, and sharing are” (Shields 29).

This new situation also poses new problems for the conception of the self that was contained in those former valuable copies, “when a self can (through language, memory, research, and invention) project itself anywhere, and can empathize with anyone or anything, what exactly is a self?” (Shields 24). So the classical conceptions of self that were contained in the memoirs of the 19th and 20th centuries have been challenged by a shift in economic mode and it will be up to a new conception, a new form, of the memoir to address this, “Our lives aren’t prepackaged along narrative lines and, therefore, by its very nature, reality-based art—underprocessed, underproduced—splinters and explodes” (Shields 27). It begins to make more sense to present the memoir as more like the modern novel, “all the way down to the presence of an unreliable narrator” (Shields 26). What had once been a rock solid part of our relationship with the external world, our identity, becomes unclear and with it a clear conception of how exactly this individual is supposed to relate to “reality”. Contemporary Autobiographical fiction should have a concept of the individual that reflects the current economic mode and internet culture.

Memory, an integral part of memoir, is also maybe the most important part of individual identity. For Shields, “remembering and fiction-making are virtually indistinguishable” (Shields 57). He cites Ulric Neisser’s, a central figure to cognitive psychology, analysis of the structure of episodic memory for his connection between the formation of memory and the creation of realist fiction. Creating a connection between the formation and recall of memory, our individual memory, and the imagining of fiction, Shield’s wants to call into question the solid basis in memory that our identities have.

Memoirs as a form then, may as well be fiction that are given credibility only by a commitment to how sure we are that the author's memoirs are true, "fiction doesn't require its readers to believe; in fact, it offers its readers the great freedom of experience without belief" (Shields 60).

After postmodernism it has become commonplace for the perception of the external world to be mediated through language which means that we can never really interact with the "real" no matter how hard we try, "The moment you start to arrange the world in words, you alter its nature" (Shields 65). Even if our memory were solid the selective nature of our attention means that even a "perfect" memory is still only a partial one in regard to the totality of a moment in our experience.

"You adulterate the truth as you write. There isn't any pretense that you try to arrive at the literal truth. And the only consolation when you confess this flaw is that you are seeking to arrive at poetic truth, which can be reached only through fabrication, imagination, stylization. What I'm striving for is authenticity; none of it is real." (Shields 66)

This understanding between the author and reader can either be addressed directly, implied, or ignored. Being an individual in the present cultural moment, presenting that individuality in art or literature, means presenting the correct aesthetic. If the audience believes that all of the presented content indicates a substantive whole then the authentic quality has been achieved.

"To be alive is to travel ceaselessly between the real and the imaginary, and mongrel form is about as exact an emblem as I can conceive for the unsolvable mystery at the center of identity" (Shields 72)

So autobiographical fiction arrives as that mongrel form. It situates the narrative in a liminal space between fact and fiction, memoir and novel, in order to explore the definitions and edges of personal identity in the present moment. Shields quotes an

interview with documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee to ask the question, “What does it mean to set another person before the camera, trying to extract something of his or her soul?” (Shields 79). The authors of contemporary autobiographical fiction ask this question of themselves and render the answer in their writing. They have a particular preoccupation with authenticity in their work and this will come to play a significant part in questioning how they should perform as themselves. What it means to be an author ends up being the same as questioning the location of personal identity because both deal with the creation of a presentable and performative narrative whole. How the authors navigate the relationship between money and art comes to have a central role as each of these *Bildungsromans* come to be the stories of how the book being read came to be created. *10:04* by Ben Lerner, *How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti, and *Erasure* by Percival Everett are three such novels that present the stories of authors from relatively diverse backgrounds. Through the analysis of these works a better understanding of the situation of contemporary individuality will be reached.

That analysis will take up the next three chapters but it is helpful to first identify how exactly contemporary autobiographical fiction stands out against the postmodern novel and the work of David Foster Wallace, a major critic of the postmodernists. In Wallace’s essay *E Unibus Pluram* an analysis is done on the cultural manifestations and effects of postmodernism and at the end he presents what he feels to be the best possible response to them. Looking at Wallace’s short fiction will provide examples of his failed response to the postmodernists and the problems with authentic artistic creations that they have created. Understanding his work helps to situate autobiographical fiction after Wallace and the postmodernists both in time and in artistic conception.

A little less than half-way through *E Unibus Pluram*, published in 1990, Wallace presents his thesis:

“My two big premises are that, on the one hand, a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction, written mostly by young Americans, has lately arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television; and that, on the other hand, televisual culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault. Television, in other words, has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism that television requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day.” (Wallace 681)

The subgenre he is referring to he calls “image-fiction” which he uses as an example to show how postmodern irony as a dominant mode of criticism fails to challenge or solve the problems with identity and authenticity that exist at the time. In the essay Wallace describes how television as the dominant source of entertainment and connection with the world causes certain problems for the individual. As postmodernism develops in art and literature after World War II its themes become present in the programming and advertisements in television. Postmodern irony, now incorporated into television and the fabric of society, destabilizes any attack against it while providing little substance of its own. Wallace tries to find his own way between postmodernism and the reverent irony of image-fiction that will lead into his own creative fiction.

Postmodern irony is for Wallace an overuse of irony on the part of the Postmodernists to such a pervasive degree that it begins to lose any of its bite or power to expose hypocrisy, “The assumptions behind this early postmodern irony, on the other hand, were still frankly idealistic: that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom” (Wallace 695). Irony has traditionally been a tool used against the establishment by those outside. As postmodernism comes to

dominate the media landscape of the late 20th century irony becomes the center around which that media communicates to its audience, rather than attack hypocrisy it comforts hypocrisy, especially in advertisement:

“The commercials for Alf’s Boston debut in syndicated package feature the fat, cynical, gloriously decadent puppet (so much like Snoopy, like Garfield, like Bart) advising me to “Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV!” His pitch is an ironic permission slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position; a pose of passive reception to escape, comfort, reassurance. The cycle is self-nourishing.” (Wallace 674).

The first section of *E Unibus Pluram* is titled “act natural”. Here Wallace wants to describe the particular effects of mass televised culture on fiction writers. There is a set of consequences for the average viewer, a more passive consumer, and a set for the writer who watches, voyeuristically, in order to better understand the characters of the real world, “television does a lot of our predatory human research for us” (Wallace 657). If a fiction writer is going to write something that communicates to the reader it helps to have a good sense of what their audience is like. Television is “an incredible gauge of the generic... for television’s whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It’s a mirror” (Wallace 657). TV is helpful by reflecting the homogenous parts of American culture but it never satisfies the writers desire to observe people who are truly unwatched rather than actors who are very good at seeming unwatched. Wallace describes the “Emersonian holiday” present in the eyes of TV actors, “the promise of a vacation from human self-consciousness” (Wallace 660). The six hours a day spent by most Americans watching television at the time of his writing is spent in the gaze of this holiday. “This self-conscious appearance of unself-consciousness is the real door to TV’s whole mirror-hall of illusions, and for us, the Audience, it is both medicine and poison” (Wallace 660).

Both medicine and poison because the fact that television is illusion becomes lost in the massive amount of consumption that it engenders. Large amounts of time spent watching TV make it take up a significant enough portion of our lives until our interaction with the actors become the rule rather than the exception, “we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but *rooted in* the phenomenon of watching” (Wallace 661). It is medicine because it is the best and easiest source of this new conception of human identity. Of course not everybody in 1990 spent several hours a day glued to the TV but if you wanted an easy source of news or entertainment chances are you turned on the old boob tube. It’s also what your friends probably spent most of their time doing and if you wanted to make sure you had a topic of conversation the next time you met them watching the same shows was a good way to do that.

“How human beings who absorb such high doses understand themselves will naturally change, become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of ‘watching’ is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. Pretty soon we start to ‘feel’ ourselves feeling, yearn to experience ‘experiences.’” (Wallace 667)

This “metawatching” for Wallace is heavily influenced by metafiction, especially postmodernism, “if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching” (Wallace 668). Self-conscious irony comes to be the defining attribute of both postmodernism and television programming. Irony then becomes the dominate attitude across media and in the way individuals express themselves. This causes some problems,

“I’m convinced that television today lies, with a potency somewhere between symptom and synecdoche, behind a genuine crisis for U.S. culture and literature...” (Wallace 670).

It is a crisis of isolation and loss of identity. A breakdown of the desire and ability to express outside of irony:

“If it’s true that any Americans are lonely, and if it’s true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and it’s true that lonely people find in television’s 2-D images relief from their stressful reluctance to be around real human beings, then it’s also obvious that the more time spent at home alone watching TV, the less time spent in the world of real human beings, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel inadequate to the tasks involved in being a part of the world, thus fundamentally apart from it, alienated from it, solipsistic, lonely.” (Wallace 671)

Wallace goes into a criticism of postmodernism with particular attention to its use of irony. Describing where he thinks postmodernism came from in art and culture and what it changes fundamentally about perception. After the second World War there is a blurring of the distinction of high and low culture caused not by new facts about art but by the emerging importance of “mass commercial culture” (Wallace 675). What appeals to the many and what appeals to a finer taste is drawn closer together by the possibility of broadcasting images. Everyone with a TV is given access to theater, music, and art in a way that proved to be lucrative. Mass appeal became the new measure of quality, “Americans seemed no longer united so much by common beliefs as by common images: what binds us became what we stand witness to” (Wallace 675). A switch from shared values to shared observance with a heavy emphasis on passivity. The difference in perception is generational as well. Wallace describes an older professor who believes that “serious fiction must be Timeless”, existing in a “Platonic Always” and a class full of students trying to understand how exactly a work of fiction was supposed to extricate itself from the “frivolous Now” without losing all sense of relatability (Wallace 676).

At his point in the argument Wallace presents his thesis and a description of what he means by “image-fiction” follows, “the new Fiction of Image uses the transient received myths of popular culture as a *world* in which to imagine fictions about ‘real,’ albeit pop-mediated, characters” (Wallace 681). Using the likenesses of television personalities as fictional characters and placing them in the separate world of pop culture myth. Image-fiction does the opposite of Realism by making the familiar strange:

“In so doing, in demanding fictional access behind lenses and screens and headlines and reimagining what human life might truly be like over there across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago, and appearance, Image-Fiction is paradoxically trying to restore what’s taken for ‘real’ to three whole dimensions, to reconstruct a univocally round world out of disparate streams of flat sights.” (Wallace 683)

The problem is that they would be making use of the same instrument of postmodern irony that television has already taken into itself. Trying to imagine a complete world on the other side is already incorporated into television’s presentation. Images of images only leads further into the metafictional hole.

Totally concerned with image and identity the art and television of the time heavily influences the way in which individuals see themselves and others, “when everybody we seek to identify with for six hours a day is pretty, it naturally becomes more important to us to be pretty, to be viewed as pretty” (Wallace 684). Presentation has become everything for art and the individual, for the surface to be a reflection of what’s inside. Aesthetic concerns take precedence, “a transition from art’s being a creative instantiation of real values to art’s being a creative rejection of bogus values” (Wallace 689).

Creating art turns from communicating something to deconstruction. It loses any of its generative ends in favor of making sure the audience understands that the subject

has been appropriately picked apart. Pointing out what is wrong with something, a process of mere observation, rather than changing it, a process of creation. Wallace provides the example of an Isuzu car commercial to show how this artistic mode manifests:

“They invited viewers to congratulate Isuzu’s ads for being ironic, to congratulate themselves for getting the joke, and to congratulate Isuzu Inc. for being ‘fearless’ and ‘irreverent’ enough to acknowledge that car ads are ridiculous and that Audience is too dumb to believe them. The ads invite the lone viewer to drive an Isuzu as some sort of anti-advertising statement.” (Wallace 690)

The self-conscious irony of the advertisement is meant to disarm the viewer, make them feel intelligent, and then have them confirm their intelligence by doing the very thing they are supposed to be too intelligent for. Self-reflexive parody covers up the fact that you have been sucked into giving the ad your attention, comforting you for having done so. By institutionalizing irony television leads its audience into a cynical state of passive observation, “can we deny connections between an unprecedentedly powerful consensual medium that suggests no real difference between image and substance, on one hand, and stuff like the rise of Teflon presidencies, the establishment of nationwide tanning and liposuction industries..?” (Wallace 693).

Irony which is the best tool for pointing out hypocrisy has become in its pervasiveness a kind of tyranny. The early postmodern ironists “assumed that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward a cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom” (Wallace 695). Wallace describes the committed ironist as someone whose ideas are impossible to pin down. Everything they say is tinged with a lack of clarity that actively avoids answers to the questions it raises, “and herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the *question*

without attending to its *subject* is, when exercised, tyranny. It is the new junta, using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself” (Wallace 696). In attempting to fight against “the banal, the naïve, the sentimental and simplistic and conservative” represented in early U.S. television the postmodernists created a whole new set of problems for truth and identity, “the more connections, the more chaos, and the harder it is to cull any meaning from the seas of signal” (Wallace 701).

Wallace tries to posit a solution for his current state of affairs. One is to resolve the ironic televisual “aura” by celebrating it, by being “*reverently ironic*” (Wallace 703). This leaves art to only be judged by how much it can “*wow*” its audience, “by (1) flattering the reader with appeals to his erudite postmodern weltanschmerz and (2) relentlessly reminding the reader that the author is smart and funny” (Wallace 705). A rather vapid solution that relies totally on appearance for appearance's sake and sinking even deeper into postmodern irony. Wallace's other solution is for the emergence of “anti-rebels”, artists who would be too sincere; risking “accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness” (Wallace 707). This second solution leads to the artistic movement of New-Sincerity made up of what Lee Konstantinou calls “a newly earnest countercultural figure” that follows after Wallace's artistic project. They employ a single-entendre sincerity in their art that can be seen as a total rejection of any sort of postmodern irony, “What remains possible, in Wallace's fiction, is the reconstruction of new forms of sincerity, with the artwork as a model of interpersonal connection” (Kelly).

What will be important either way is trying to resist this postmodern televisual aura that welcomes all attacks against it. In his own fiction David Foster Wallace will

attempt to resolve and come to terms with this “aura”, the cloud of irony that surrounds every human interaction and especially communication. “Octet” from the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and “Good Old Neon” in *Oblivion* (2004) are two stories that will serve as demonstrations of how Wallace explores the “aura” problem creatively.

“Octet” begins as what seems to be a series of story pop quizzes that terminate in a question meant to provoke critical or thoughtful engagement with the story. By the end of the second pop quiz story this form has already broken down for the author, “In fact the whole *mise en scène* here seems too shot through with ambiguity to make a very good Pop Quiz, it turns out” (Wallace 134). The first few pop quizzes of “Octet” feature self-conscious characters attempting to navigate between their inner feelings and the desire to maintain appearances. “Pop Quiz 9” departs from the previous material into the territory of metafiction, “you are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” (Wallace 145). At this point Wallace makes the usual metafictional moves of describing the problems with the creation of “Octet” but with his signature self-conscious concern with the reader’s reception of the work, “in which the writer congratulates himself for not manipulating his audience, but by doing so achieves precisely the opposite” (Kelly 143).

Wallace is worried not just about how the previous sections of the story will be taken but the current metafiction direction as well. The “fictional” fiction writer is worried that all of this expressed concern over the reader’s reception will come off as forced:

“But that he’s at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the facts that he’s back there pulling the strings, an ‘honesty’ which personally you’ve always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that’s designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e., of the

‘meta’-type writer) and feel flattered that he apparently thinks you’re enough of a grownup to handle being reminded that what you’re in the middle of is artificial...” (Wallace 147)

The metawatching in *E Unibus Pluram* can be seen here as the writer begins to interrogate even his own appeals to direct communication with the reader. Nothing is above self-conscious analysis and no move towards sincerity or clarity left unchallenged. The elaboration of the fiction writers concerns turns into a bit of a nesting doll compounded by the use of extensive footnotes. He returns to the concern with communicating clearly to the reader, making a point of how impossible it is to convey honesty, “The trick to this solution is that you’d have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked—more like unarmed. Defenseless” (Wallace 154). Trying to appeal directly to the reader in this way comes off as too sincere, too naïve. It is off-putting or at least problematic for the reader in a way that is less entertaining and more cloying. There can be no communication without artifice.

Near the end of “Octet” Wallace introduces the idea that the whole process of metafictional self-consciousness he has gone through is an attempt at communicating directly with the reader, “to induce any kind of revelation of urgent sameness that’ll then somehow resonate back through the cycle’s pieces and make her see them in a different light” (Wallace 159). By being too sincere the fiction writer is trying to proceed down through all of the metafictional layers of artifice to reach some sort of raw and honest communication. By trying to reach this moment he has lost all control on the prearranged world of the story cycle and now feels himself to be “fundamentally lost and confused and frightened and unsure about whether to trust even your most fundamental intuitions about urgency and sameness and whether other people deep inside experience things in

anything like the same way you do” (Wallace 160). Using metafictional interrogation fails to provide anything resembling a real way out of its swirling miasma of artifice. Communication without artifice proves impossible and in pursuit of that goal things are left even more uncomfortable and unclear than where they had started.

“So decide” are the last words of “Octet”. A call for the reader to decide for themselves whether to believe in the total sincerity of the author or to find in the writing nothing more than postmodern literary tricks. This decision involves critical thinking about the reception of outwards behavior as it is deeply informed by postmodernist logic:

“Wallace’s fiction, in contrast, asks what happens when the anticipation of others’ reception of one’s outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic. Former divisions between self and other morph into conflicts with the self, and a recursive and paranoid cycle of endless anticipation begins, putting in doubt the very referents of terms like ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘inner’ and ‘outer.’ Wallace’s artistic method for dealing with this infinite cycle—this mirror or blind or aporia—involves a complex, contemporary logic” (Kelley, 136)

Adam Kelley finds that Wallace’s solution to this endless anticipation and the thing that characterizes New Sincerity is the call for a two-way conversation between reader and writer, “that both reader and writer can be challenged by the dialogic dimension of the reading experience” (Kelley 145). Acknowledging the whole complicated relation that has built up in writing between the two parties and asking for a partial return to a more direct way of communicating.

Good Old Neon deals with the same problems of irony and sincerity but rather than ending on a call to action for the reader it finds that in endless irony the only solution is suicide. The main character of the story who cannot seem to really do anything with a feeling of sincerity to kill himself in a car accident at which point the author

interjects to question how someone who seemed so outwardly put together could be so internally tortured. The author tells himself;

“Also fully aware that the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere... the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, ‘Not another word’ (Wallace 451)

This work is in *Oblivion* published in 2004, five years after *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. It presents a different and later way that he attempts to resolve the problem of sincerity in his fiction.

Wallace’s problem between total sincerity and total irony is the product of his particular moment in the culture of artistic reception. *E Unibus Pluram* provides a history for his moment in the interaction between mass television culture and postmodern irony. New Sincerity is a movement that arose out of that moment and Wallace’s artistic solution. His essay was published in 1990 and in the next year the World Wide Web went live but would take at least another decade, during which Wallace was most prolific in his fiction writing, to really begin taking television place as the dominant source of media. This change in media consumption, both in accessibility and the kind of choice it provides, has changed the culture of artistic reception just as significantly as television or radio. The way in which artists portray life and culture must change with it.

This is where contemporary autobiographical fiction comes in, as a genre that is informed by contemporary problems for artistic expression: that must solve in its own way the question of how to communicate without artifice. A moment in literary history that does come after modernism, after postmodernism, and after New Sincerity in a way

that is not just cosmetic. New problems for the formation and expression of identity in a culture where Facebook and texting, fake news and all the information the internet can hold, define everyday experience. Irony and sincerity take on new uses and new problems and so the solution must change.

Autobiographical fiction goes right along with Shields' reality hunger, in portraying it, in satiating it. Autofiction imbeds questions of irony and sincerity at the level of style and form whereas for the postmodernists those were the terms of the debate. A genre that moves between the two options rather than trying to find out how one ends the other, a flickering between the two.

Presenting the Author as Authentic

As a moment in American culture, the “uncurtaining” of the Wizard of Oz in the 1939 movie is certainly a very powerful one. The audience, most of which will not have read the book (I certainly haven’t), are shown the little old man who works the pulleys and levers that run the kingdom. It works so well because up until this moment neither the audience nor the characters had any reason to believe that in this world of witches and flying monkeys there could be a person lying about their magical powers. He says to Dorothy, “No my dear I’m a very good man I’m just, a very bad wizard”. This is rather humble as he goes on to perform what I find to be magic with words; telling the scarecrow that he doesn’t need a brain to get an honorary diploma, convincing the lion that he has only made the mistake of confusing cowardice with wisdom, to the tin man “a heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others.”

The author of the novel is certainly someone behind a curtain. A presence behind the text, behind the narrator, the real person behind the first order implied authorial presence. Novels taken to be autobiographical fiction play the game that moves between these different presences. The autobiographical portion is often a “negative,” or some say realistic, depiction of the writer; an impression that leads the reader into sympathizing with this self-admitted “bad wizard.” After the questions of authenticity made by David Foster Wallace the pretense of genuine sharing of private details is no longer enough to convince the trained reader that the narrator/author is being authentic.

When the author begins to acknowledge or imply their presence as something other than the narrator in a story a distinct narrative line is being crossed. The reader is taken from involvement with just the narrative to involvement with the process and

problems of creating that narrative. In *If on a Winters Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino, there is a moment in which the second person character begins to worry about maintaining their innocent relationship with the books they read. Wishing to remain capable of enjoying a story for its own sake, “as something finished and definitive, to which there is nothing to be added, from which there is nothing to be removed” to remain uncorrupted by the questions that overfamiliarity with the process of a text's creation can bring (Calvino, 115). Autobiographical fiction often destroys the innocent relationship that a reader might have with the text. When the authors involve themselves as characters, describe the events and changes that led to the creation of what is being read, and prefaces it all by calling it “fiction” in a way that mocks the idea of a “true” memoir there is little but questions for the reader. The usual autobiographical relationship between the reader and the author/narrator is subverted not to deconstruct but to show why this subversion is necessary and meaningful.

Through artistic rendering of the non-fictional every day autobiographical fiction draws our attention to the artifice involved in that rendering. Auto-fiction has the writer question his or her own authenticity until the idea seems to have lost its meaning and therefore applicability. Lerner, Heti, and Everett consider the way a relentlessly postmodern way of thinking affects our relationships with others and with ourselves. By complicating the relationship the reader has with the text—as something whole, something to be easily taken in by, as an authentic depiction of the author or events—the authors can at start getting themselves and their audience to consider very closely the notion of an authentic person or story of a person. The “single entendre” sincerity of Wallace will always break in the face of postmodern irony and so auto fiction provides a

middle path alternative. The authors acknowledge the construction of authenticity but do not want to exist in the constant belittlement of postmodern irony. In *10:04* Ben Lerner says that in writing the novel he will try and “work [his] way from irony to sincerity” (Lerner 4). The writer will be working towards artistic authenticity through the irony rather than ending in it or rejecting it entirely.

The subject of an autobiography, the author, is obscured by the claim of fiction and so by putting the words autobiography and fiction together a statement is being made about the fiction that is the author. Publishing a novel that is taken by the public to be autobiographical fiction is a metafictional move that places a great deal of emphasis on not just the author in the story but on the “actual” author of the story. *Erasure* and *Leaving the Atocha Station* do not call themselves autobiographical fiction, their main characters do not share the names of the authors among other details, but they still spend a lot of time on the relationship between the writer themselves and the “voice” that comes out of what they write. Most autobiographical fictions are *Kunstlerroman* stories and the novels chosen for this thesis are not just stories of how the artist came to be but how the text itself came to be, or in *Erasure*, how “My Pafology”, came to be. Fictional stories about the creation of the very real text we hold in our hands.

In autobiography the reader must feel a connection with the narrator who is also the author, they must feel that they are being given access to the most private events and thoughts of the narrator. In “conventional” autobiography the truth of what is being shared is taken as a pre-condition, embellishing details or dramatizing otherwise inconsequential events but publishing those as non-fiction seems to break some kind of rule about personal writing.

In an autobiographical fiction the reader has to believe that what is written will still have at least some situation within our real world; that the meaning or lessons they find while reading will have the same applicability and weight as if they were coming from a “true story.” A literary paradox of fact and fiction. On opening the book the author and the reader agree that what is being read is the construction of a life as a story, as art. The notion of authenticity explodes because of its reliance on a notion of truth that is no longer applicable to the way individuals understand themselves.

Sheila Heti’s “How Should a Person Be?” asks its question in several ways and provides the answer in the obscure way that only art can. One of the directions that the question takes is the same that Wallace’s did: how can the artist be authentic in a culture where trying to be too much so can appear inauthentic? How does the writer obtain authenticity when avoiding the subject is naïve and making any obvious attempt towards establishing themselves as authentic would fail by merely being noticed? David Foster Wallace in his short stories takes the self-referential approach. In “Octet” or “Good Old Neon” he leads the reader into his own convoluted anxiety about the presence of the author in the text and shares with them the desires and hang-ups that he as a writer has about their final perception of what he has written. Some readers find this engaging while others find it off-putting because the approach over-involves Wallace in the story and pushes the reader out. By addressing directly to the reader the complicated relationship he has with how authentic he wants to be in the work, Wallace begins the vicious circle of the unanswerable question on where his real intention begins and the artifice ends.

The writer of autobiographical fiction only needs to establish the connection and investment that the reader expects and then leave the question of what is truly authentic,

really real, to the frame that the genre provides. It remains distinct from being just autobiography under another banner because the reader will now demand constantly that all the events, actions, and thought in the novel be believable. If something incredible or “unbelievable” happens in a standard autobiographical novel the reader will just trust that the publishing company has done some work to corroborate the details. If the writer of autofiction included something fantastic or unprecedented the reader might lose that thin trust, if they have decided to have any, in the authenticity of the author and their story.

Making herself a real and believable character Sheila Heti has to do and think the things that we expect her to (from the very first word) while also remaining interesting enough to keep the reader reading. On page one, “I was always listening to their answers so if I liked them I could make them my answers too” (Heti 1). This is a statement that is both relatable (to most people) and also very revealing of the author in that personal way that we do not usually get from strangers. Most people do not want to admit that 90% of the jokes they tell their friends are stolen because from a very young age we want to be liked which is the kind of thing that, for most of us, involves pretending we are like the people that other people seem to like.

She goes on two pages later, “They like me for who I am, and I would rather be liked for who I appear to be, and for who I appear to be, to be who I am” (Heti 3). This sentence may well be the epitome of the contemporary American thought and the cause of the authenticity problem for Wallace. External appearance is of primary concern to the degree that what is internal seems irrelevant. What is inside of the person seems less important than their physical appearance and the statements made on their behalf. A rejection of the notion that a book’s cover should not matter. But rather than placing this

thought at a distance Sheila Heti takes it on herself and admits that for better or worse this is just how she feels. It is a depressing thought that someone would not want to be themselves, but it also brings up another idea that most people will connect with, that we wish we could just be our best face. People in general but artists in particular tend to be their own worst critics. We spend hours in the mirror picking at tiny flaws that others will probably never see, sitting in the dark thinking depraved thoughts that occasionally haunt us the next day and are never to be shared. The people that are closest to us, like Sheila's husband to her, spend enough time learning the things that go past our usual appearance, both good and bad. But would it not be better to just *be* our best appearance? To just be how we ourselves think we should be? Heti shows that she can no longer just *be*; that the categories that make up her identity are so complicated and slippery based on context that who she is will be continually changing. There is no singular person that Sheila Heti could be. No authentic self to present. Rejecting the sincerity of Wallace but also giving something more than postmodern deconstruction of identity. There is an acceptance that in contemporary American culture the questions of good and bad, authentic or inauthentic, have been replaced by an aesthetic question; am I beautiful or ugly? Not just in physical appearance but character as well. Like a novel or painting should we be able to change ourselves based on what we think is beautiful and what does beautiful mean in that context?

The reader is not beaten over the head with a sob story but is instead presented with the sorts of negative thoughts that help explain, or at least foreshadow, Sheila's unhappiness with the situation of her marriage. "I had spent so much time trying to make the play I was writing – and my life, and my self – into an object of beauty. It was

exhausting and all that I knew” (Heti 13). She is trying her best to make her life as it is work but that doesn’t take care of the discomfort. The portrait of the artist given is not a beautiful one and that lets the reader put their guard down if they had any reason to fear that this was going to be two hundred pages of some brilliant writer didactically telling them how to be.

Heti reveals herself and wants to prove she is a good person with the notion that good people make mistakes and think crappy things. Like Wallace in “Octet” she also has to establish that she is a “bad wizard” so that the audience is not too concerned with the artifice of writing. She wants to write her commissioned feminist play but is so caught up in whether she is really a good feminist or even a feminist at all, that the project falls apart.

“Instead of sitting down and writing my play with my words—using my imagination, pulling up the words from the solitude and privacy of my soul—I had used her words, stolen what was hers... unwilling to be naked, I had made her naked instead. I had cheated.” (Heti 180)

How could someone who struggles so much to write an original play, who wants so much to be what they are not, write something that could pull the reader into a world of total artifice yet make it feel real? The Sheila Heti at the beginning of the novel would naturally try and write a play in this way so all of those feelings expressed there at the beginning are, at least in retrospect, coherent despite the involvement of the very different Sheila Heti that the novel ends with. When we continue to believe in the “bad wizard” who proceeds to effortlessly practice his magic right in front of us some very good magic has occurred.

Expressing these self-deprecating ideas at the very beginning not only introduces the ideas about what it means for Heti to be authentic to the reader but presents them in a

way that is provocative and relatable. It will not be until much later in the novel that the conflation of her authenticity and the text itself happens. By that point her concern with authenticity has become tied with the creation of her art in a way that, regardless of its implications for the text we are reading, is very driven by the characters and plot. Here is where the authentic artistic project can begin to take shape.

Ruminating on the failed creation of her play Sheila Heti ties closely the changes in herself and the way that effects the changing project that started as a play and becomes the book being read. She does this without becoming bogged down by having to explain or justify how it is that all of those earlier thoughts and experiences foreshadowed and transitioned so smoothly into such a major epiphany about herself and her work. The compelling narrative progression remains free from any concerns about a particular detail's peculiar convenience. Any parataxis can retain its innocence and allows what happens in the novel to remain believable even as the self-referential stakes rise. In thinking about both recreating herself and the re-creation of her play she begins to make connections between the way we treat objects and the way we treat ourselves,

“When we try to turn ourselves into a beautiful object, it is because we mistakenly consider ourselves to be an object, when a human being is really the other two: a gesture, and a reproduction of the human type... we are gestures, but we less resemble an original painting than one unit of a hundred thousand copies of a book being sold.” (Heti 184).

Being totally unique or original may be a fanciful idea for someone to have about themselves but even that thought is one that many people share. An object, however beautiful, still obtains no meaning in itself, other than maybe being pleasing to observe an object provokes no consideration or interest unless we can attach something of ourselves to it. People can be like gestures, to be interpreted based on their many movements and

contexts, a physical language, and like language they are bound to share a great many things. People are also like books, reproductions of a copy, their shared characteristics inconsequential and their differences mistakes. Authenticity is a fiction under this view; being yourself means always means being like someone else. A critical reader here could either take these ideas and reapply them to the novel itself or take them at face value. They could also not become over concerned about the implications a passage like this would have on that earlier bit taking this new idea in at the same time Sheila does in her narrative.

Interpreting ourselves and the things or people around us involves making connections and the much harder work of considering the possibility that they can contain something new or interesting. Asking questions and making connections is something humans are well suited to do and like doing least. It is easier to hold ideas about what we already know and then allow everything else to follow that. In the short “Intermission” chapter Heti is meeting her ex-husband to see a play and over drinks asks him why he thinks people tell themselves stories about their lives,

“Why did we pick certain dots and connect them and not others’ ... ‘Perhaps it’s evolutionary,’ he said. ‘If we saw ourselves in realistic proportions – how tiny we are, and how little ability we have to avoid the suffering that’s an inevitable part of life – maybe we would be too discouraged to survive.’
 ‘Or maybe,’ I said, ‘The truth is so diffuse that our minds cannot even hold on to it’ (Heti 279)

In the creation of stories, that process by which we make sensible all the chaotic bits of our experience, there is always the elimination of superfluous details and the simplification of anything we find too complicated to relate fully, even to ourselves. The confusion between truth and fiction that results is a problem but one that comes out of necessity. If we were to fully understand “ourselves in realistic proportions” we would

become nihilists. In this passage fiction is seen to be both obscuring truth and pulling us closer to it in regard to ourselves and what is around us, “That for all our fears and all our certainty, the bonds that unite us will remain a secret from us, always” (Heti 281).

Creating and maintaining authorial authenticity is so important to autobiographical fiction because it is what holds up the narrative frame. By letting the reader believe, in part, that the facts of the story that appear at the beginning or middle are untainted by the author that exists at the end gives the novel the usual sense of growth or progression that most readers expect. Conventional narrative progression is maintained so that the novel can be read as a linear progression of events and characters by the reader who understands this kind of progression. This “unreal realism” makes the work more compelling to the reader, a suspension of disbelief that was put there by the word *fiction*, “the unreal world that the novel depicts is to be understood as real in some way” (Huehls 307). If the reader was innocent of the involvement and importance of literary theory to the story they remain so, with maybe just a few more novel ideas picked up along the way. For the critic, a place of clarity established from which they may dive into the implications of the text as realistically autobiographical, or as fiction, or as something that moves between the two as the author believes best. Talking to Sheila about her anxiety over creating an ugly painting, Margaux says,

“I’m interested in *meaning*, not paintings. Paintings can be pretty meaningless, you know. Like, it’s insane! I want to create complete meaning in art that’s even better than political meaning! And Sholem wants to make the most flawless paintings in the world. And you—you want to be the human ideal! We’re crazy. We all want such big things!”
(Heti 171)

While it is not Sheila who says this, its inclusion in the novel as a passage about the relationship between art and meaning can still be attributed to her. Getting wrapped up in

the artifice or technical side of writing is kind of like making a painting without any meaning. Sheila thinks to herself after Margaux says this, “What was so crazy about wanting to be the human ideal? That upset me” (Heti 172). It upsets Sheila because she really believes that she can obtain this desire. Margaux on the other hand seems to understand that wanting something so incredible and hard to pull off is both necessary and crazy. Being upset and confused at this moment in time in the narrative is appropriate to that Sheila Heti but is included by the author Sheila Heti because this moment works into the theme of the novel.

There is a chapter near the end of *How Should a Person Be?* called “The Gravedigger”. It is a parable that, like the rest of the novel, is a meditation on the creation of art, of self, of a story. The old gravedigger knows that “There were advantages and disadvantages. Who could say which plot was best—this one or that one or a third.” (Heti 302). The young ditchdigger doesn’t understand, like Sheila Heti earlier in the novel he thinks he would just keep switching around unable to decide on the best plot. The story ends with the old gravedigger talking to himself as the ditchdigger runs off into the distance,

“I met a man once. He dug ditches. He wanted to see a grave. He was impressed when he saw me digging this way, how straight and deep it was. I told him: *It has to be. A human body is going in this grave.*” (Heti 303)

Take the plots as different forms of writing, different genres, and the grave itself as the text, the gravedigger our author. In this simile the human body maybe only changes to the image of a human, a depiction of their life embodied in words. Sheila Heti finds a plot, this auto-fiction form, and proceeds not to just dig her own grave but to dig it just like the gravedigger, carefully, straight and deep. Auto-fiction provides the appropriate space

between nominal facts and artistic rendering for Heti to describe her life in the way she finds appropriate. The writer is not held back by the corroboration of facts and events that the conventional autobiography would be which allows them to describe their own experience in a way that uses the artistic and impressionistic side of human experience without having to worry about legal recourse. The “plot” of auto-fiction allows Heti the room she needs to appropriately portray herself and her experience.

In *Erasure* Percival Everett’s character Thelonious Ellison has a few run-ins with a rather hot-headed postmodern author named Davis Gimbel. After giving a talk Ellison is confronted by the drunken intellectual in a hotel parking lot where they have a bit of a scuffle. It ends with Gimbel saying to Ellison:

“I have unsettled readers. I have made them uncomfortable. I have unsettled their historical, cultural and psychological assumptions by disrupting their comfortable relationship between words and things. I have brought to a head the battle between language and reality. But even as my art dies, I create it without trying.” (Everett 37)

During the confrontation several other identifiably postmodern statements are made by Gimbel all of which Ellison appropriately responds to with confusion. Whether or not Percival Everett has ever been physically assaulted by an academic spewing Pynchon quotes is less significant than the positioning this accomplishes for the character of Thelonious Ellison. Often in the discourse of high literary theory it becomes difficult to distinguish certain movements since the nuance of intent and style covers up real differences. Ellison has presented a short paper modeled after Roald Barthes’ *S/Z* in which he examines the way that narratives are treated, “Sarrasine, not being chosen as a model at all, but accepted as one treated in a way which in turn is a model for the treatment of other texts, as is this text” (Everett 17). A paper about the way critics treat

texts that are about the way critics treat texts. The angry reaction that Gimbel has to Ellison's paper helps to place the narrator apart from him. That even literary academics can have the kind of significant disagreements that lead to the shallow attempt of a fight in a hotel parking lot. Ellison and Everett are not postmodernists and they certainly don't agree with the postmodernist idea of art of which Gimbel presents a simple version. The author and his narrator are interested in the disruption of the world for a positive benefit rather than disruption for its own sake.

Erasure also has a character that could be a stand-in for David Foster Wallace like Gimbel is for postmodernists:

“Linda Mallory was the postmodern fuck. She was self-conscious to the point of distraction, counted her orgasms and felt none of them. She worried about how she looked while making love, about how her expression changed when she started to come, whether she was too tight, too loose, too dry, too wet, too loud, too quiet and she found the need to express these concerns during the course of the event.” (Everett 230)

Keeping in mind that David Foster Wallace can still be considered a part of postmodernism even as he is being critical of its effects. This female Wallace is more like a character from one of his short stories, the kind of person who is so self-consciously pre-occupied with appearance and reception that those concerns take up all of the space. The constant checking to make sure that she is doing everything to make Ellison comfortable to the point where it makes him uncomfortable.

Linda Mallory and Davis Gimbel give Everett some room to criticize the forms of the past and to set himself apart from them in a way that helps to drive *Erasure* towards its conclusion. The characters provide a loose personification of at least the negative attributes of postmodernism and new sincerity with which the character of Thelonious Ellison can engage. Between Ellison's engagements with these characters and his dislike

for the lucrative memoirs that depict the “real” Black American experience his own project emerges. Not the novel that is *My Pafology* but the short memories that make up *Erasure*. Ellison/Everett does not want to be associated with any of these genres and dislikes the selling out that is involved with *My Pafology*. He has a problem with the repetitive deconstruction and self-conscious sincerity and the popular portrayal of blackness that all exist in contemporary literature. None of these work for Ellison/Everett if he is going to write an autobiography that will communicate his experience. Using the gravedigger parable again Ellison finds that there isn't a particular plot that really suits the kind of experience he has had. How does he fit himself into writing in a way that is not caricature nor senseless abstraction?

Erasure as a text provides the answer to this question. The problems encountered by Ellison are resolved by Everett. The actual author in describing the journey of a black literary professor through the publishing industry which imposes very specific criteria for what makes a “successful” black novel reveals the problems of that industry. Everett brings more light to the facts of his experience through the fiction by showing Ellison's navigation of the demands made by his blackness and the publishing industry. Percival Everett's sincerity is routed through the irony of Thelonious Ellison's memoir.

10:04 includes a chapter that is totally separate from the rest of the novel and was originally written for the *New Yorker*. After this standalone chapter based loosely on events and friends Ben Lerner must suffer some of the consequences that come with displaying the people you are close to in writing. When having a conversation with his female friend Alex about having a baby she brings up things that the narrator of the story had said. She says to him, “I don't want what we're doing to just end up as notes for a

novel,” a very odd thing for a character in a novel to say (Lerner 137). It is a moment that is undeniably metafictional, doubly so, but also totally sensible within the logic of the novel. The narrator is a writer who is willing to move quickly between fiction and reality in his writing, to portray his life in an artistic way that will lead to publication. If they have a kid together Alex is worried that both she and the child will only be some sort of artistic project for him.

Breaking pieces of reality into art has an ethical implication that comes out of how much the artist or author really should be revealing. Making the distinction between reality and fiction is one thing but also to be considered are the real world relationships that are supposed to end up in something like autobiographical fiction. The people around Lerner become concerned that their interactions with him will not just be distorted but capitalized. How does the author or narrator confirm authenticity in words and actions to these people? Who is responsible when the characters in the writing prove unflattering? Part of the answer is trust; Lerner ends the scene with Alex by saying that she tells him a deeply personal story that he must never reproduce. The other part is tone, the feeling that when the author talks they are speaking not out of artifice but genuine artistic expression.

Enacting Authenticity through the Text

How the author presents themselves and what kind of persona they provide has become much more important in the past few decades. In the last chapter I discussed how the author of contemporary autobiographical fiction approaches authenticity and here I will show how that gets worked out through the text itself. There is the author's voice that has always come out of the text but now the public persona must also be managed. With photography, television, now the internet, we can learn a lot about the persons whose names go on the front covers of our books. To contrast, the character and physical attributes of a 14th century poet were only important to, at most, the court in which they participated or to their patron. While there have always been authors who hide themselves far away from their readers or behind pseudonyms the reasons for this have changed a lot in the past few decades. Writers like Thomas Pynchon or Elena Ferrante obscure themselves, going out of their way to stay out of the public eye for artistic reasons rather than political or social necessity. Publishers need their authors to be public figures, a handsome face for the back cover, a charming personality for public readings and videotaped interviews.

Authors of autobiographical fiction must present themselves in a literary moment that demands both marketability and authenticity. To be relatable enough to get published while still retaining the integrity of their artistic project. As books about the development and creation of both author and the text itself, autobiographical fictions show the earlier person that the author was and then showing the questions and events that culminate in the creation of the text itself. The readers of the genre must navigate between the possible facts and possible fiction of the narrative and take the contents of the text as a whole. The

reader gets to see the author portray themselves and the reflexive questioning of that portrayal. Autobiographical fiction does not demand the reader question the author's authenticity but shows the ways in which the authors carry out that sort of questioning in their everyday lives in regard to both social interactions and the creation of their art. What occurs by the end is a complicating social and cultural boundaries; not by argumentative deconstruction but by reaching a deeper understanding of the parts that are used to make up these categories.

Part of the performance of "authentic artist" is the acknowledgement of distorted boundaries and of how they come to affect not just the art but the artist. New sincerity sought to reclaim a place for the artist as a single entendre sincerity but this approach loses its appeal for the various minority groups that would not benefit from this kind of directness. The artists that sought to follow David Foster Wallace (Eugenides, Foer, Franzen, Saunders) in reclaiming sincerity from the postmodernists were mostly white college educated men whose personal lives experienced very little complication in the boundaries of personal and racial identity.

Erasure by Percival Everett is the story of the author Thelonious Ellison who writes the fictional autobiography of Stagg R. Leigh which quickly becomes a best seller. The conflict of the book is that Ellison is a professor of literature raised by upper middle class parents while the story of Stagg Leigh, published as a novel, is about the violent life of a young Black man in one of America's ghettos. The success of Leigh's story, first titled *My Pafology* and later *Fuck*, brings Ellison money he needs to support his mother who was recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. However Ellison feels a lot of guilt over the books success since it is essentially a lie, a fictionalized story identical with the

sorts of real ones that Black people in poverty experience. The money and the guilt force the fictional persona into a negative frame but the persona's success will force Ellison to interact with it and bring it to life.

While he is a Black man like the fictional Stagg R. Leigh, Ellison identifies himself as different based on his class, upbringing, and education. When he visits his sister at her health clinic he attempts to talk with one of the young mothers in the waiting room, he asks her if she finished college based on the conversation about books they are having and she responds that she had not even finished high school:

“I didn't know what to say to that. I scratched my head and looked at the other faces in the room. I felt an inch tall because I had expected this young woman with the blue fingernails to be a certain way, to be slow and stupid, but she was neither. I was the stupid one.” (Everett 21)

What makes this situation so revealing about Ellison is how it shows that his assumptions based on the appearance of “the young woman with curling, blue fingernails” (Everett 20) lead him to making the same sort of negative assumptions about her appearance and character that he knows are unfair. Her stylistic choice in appearance is something he passively identifies as lower class or at least uneducated and on realizing this mistake he feels really stupid about himself. Because of class he has made the same prejudiced assumptions about another person's character and intelligence that people make along cultural, racial, and sexual lines. He has the sort of moral education that one might expect out of a college professor but still suffers from the systematic categorization based on outward appearance that this morality opposes.

We get to this class consciousness after some clear statements by Ellison at the beginning of the book concerning his feelings on and relationship to race. Because of his brown skin, family history of slavery, and interactions with police in southern states, “the

society in which I live tells me I am Black; that is my race” (Everett 1). He later states that he does not believe in race. The color of skin only matters in a cultural context, it makes no indication of an individual’s character or intelligence. But he still feels so much pressure because of his Blackness:

“While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly because I felt I had to prove I was *black* enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing.” (Everett 2)

In terms of his eventual guilt over the creation and success of Stagg R. Leigh this helps to set up the societal landscape that Ellison has had to navigate his whole life. While he never really believes that having brown skin and a certain family history defines who he is the social climate demands that he act a certain way in order to be accepted. When Ellison does not act “*black* enough,” other people, Black and White, don’t see him as being authentic. If he doesn’t speak or dress a certain way he might be betraying the only in group that society tells him he has. For others denying his blackness means denying an integral part of his character even though it means nothing to himself other than the successful navigation of his society.

The successful version of the author who makes use of the collective racial identity in *Erasure* is the author of the fictional novel *We Lives In Da Ghetto*, Juanita Mae Jenkins. *We Lives In Da Ghetto* follows the same impoverished urban black American experience as *My Pafology* and is also written by someone who probably never actually lived that experience. A “*masterpiece of African American literature*” where “*one can actually hear the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America*” (Everett 39) but written by a woman from Akron, Ohio who “went to visit some relatives in Harlem for a couple of days,” and

studied at Oberlin college (Everett 53). Ellison sees Ms. Jenkins in book reviews and on daytime talk shows promoting the book. He hates *We Lives In Da Ghetto* but sees that writing novels like hers is a sure way onto the bestseller list.

Ellison's personal racial identity and the discomfort he feels in the waiting room help explain the extreme guilt he feels over the creation of Stagg Leigh. The depiction of a poor and uneducated Black man that Ellison makes might as well be a caricature for him. *My Pafology* is written as an example of what the public takes to be a "true" African American story that Ellison finds he has little if anything in common with despite him being an African American. What for the general public is a great work of true artistic expression is merely a parody of genre for Ellison. He feels he is misrepresented by these works, namely *We Lives in da Ghetto*, but recognizes that by writing one himself he will fulfill the stereotypes in a commercially successful way. Successful because it is portraying a character who has, at best, only a distant shot at being successful in life. Successful in the same sense that joining the Black Panther Party in college made other people know that Ellison was *black* enough.

Talking to an old white film producer who will pay Stagg R. Leigh three million dollars for the rights to a movie based on *My Pafology*, a scene in which Ellison is pretending to be his fictional author in order to guarantee the deal, the man says that he imagined Stagg would be different:

"I don't know, tougher or something. You know, more street. More..."

"Black?"

"Yeah, that's it. I'm glad you've said it. I've seen the people you write about, the real people, the earthy gusty people. They can't teach you to write about that in no college."

(Everett 217)

This is the first time where Ellison trades physical places with Stagg and he convincingly plays the part. It is also the moment where Ellison begins to find himself being erased by that fictional author and a significant turning point in how Ellison begins to view himself, to question his feelings about and relationship with the creation of Stagg. What had before been a distant relationship with what he had created, between a real author and a fictional novel written by its fictional author, becomes more immediate and real. By not just acting as Stagg but making the producer believe he really is Stagg, despite the inconsistencies in expectations, forces Ellison to reconsider how fictional Stagg really is.

This is where the reflexive questioning of Ellison's own depiction of himself begins. The success of Stagg R. Leigh increases his guilt while also increasing his funds. Money that he uses to support himself and his recently dependent mother. Ellison begins to think about what makes something art, he is not sure that *My Pafology* is art, that it is "well written, the way a technical manual can be well enough written" in the same vein as Tom Clancey, but marketed as being about Black people (Everett 214). After the meeting with the film producer Ellison references Duchamp;

"But even as it's thrown out of the museum, what has been called art, it is still art, discarded art, shunned art, bad art, misunderstood art, oppressed art, shock art, lost art, dead art, art before its time, artless art, but art nonetheless." (Everett 227)

What if what at first seemed to Ellison to be a parody, a mere replication of the type of story that he resented, was in fact art not because of his intent but despite it? He describes it a few pages before as "more a chair than a painting" (Everett 208). The object created for the functional purpose of securing enough money for the support of his mother has on account of its incredible stylistic qualities, the kind that a professor of literature might infuse as a second thought, elevated past Ellison's original intent. Ellison's deep

understanding of what makes the genre so repulsive to him, its stereotypical depiction of life in the ghetto, the many conventions of the genre, the language it uses, are employed by him with vicious irony but are received as the most authentic depiction of the African American experience in years.

Ellison already considers the situation with Stagg Leigh coming to life one that is out of control but he also begins to consider the art that may be inherent in what he has created. By authentically creating, out of anger towards the genre of work that *My Pafology* exists in, it may be possible that both Stagg and his story are on at least some level authentic in a way that Ellison is unaware of. In one of many asides that appear throughout the book, two characters de Kooning (a modernist abstract expressionist painter) and Raushenberg (seminal pop artist), have a conversation about the result of a picture drawn for the purpose of repaying a debt for a fixed roof,

“Rauschenberg: Nice job, eh? It was a lot of work erasing it. My wrist is still sore. I call it ‘Erased Drawing.’

de Kooning: That’s very clever.

Rauschenberg: I’ve already sold it for ten grand.

de Kooning: You sold my picture?

Rauscehnberg: No, I erased your picture, I sold my painting.” (Everett 228)

This interaction can help to explain what is happening between Ellison and Stagg. The elimination of the original picture and the way that changes the picture’s owner has play off of the relationship that exists between Ellison, Stagg, and *My Pafology*. There is confusion between who really owns the story (Ellison or Stagg?) in the same way that de Kooning is confused about “his picture” being sold. The explanation is that once Raushenberg destroyed the original, erased it, the left over totaled art object is now his because it has become something new, no longer the picture that de Kooning wanted and

was owed. Since Ellison is a “real” person and Stagg is a character this sort of play between creation and ownership becomes more complicated.

This dialogue happens outside of Ellison’s story in the book titled *Erasure* written by Percival Everett but it does raise questions for the reader about the changing relationship that Ellison has with *My Pafology*. As Stagg becomes more manifest and Ellison becomes more erased the autobiography of Stagg becomes more his own and less Ellison’s. The original picture that Ellison had drawn to pay for his mother’s care and his own sustenance, as practical as fixing a roof, has had its intent erased and is now selling for three million dollars in film rights. Ellison the author in wanting to be himself, the good son who takes care of his mother, creates an inauthentic but beautiful novel that begins to erase him.

Having an argument with his increasingly estranged brother the following comment is made by said brother:

“Go on. Go see mother without me. Time has a way of deflating purpose and becoming all those things that the center of our being would rather reject. Be that as it may though, my center is far more centered than that tainted middle of yours. I’m true to myself in spite of the detours and interruptions I have encountered beyond the shelf of what is my beach.” (Everett 214)

The italics do begin here in mid-sentence perhaps denoting that this is not what is actually said by the brother, a surgeon who lost his wife, kids, and practice after coming out as gay, but rather an embellishment made for dramatic effect, still meant to hold the same meaning. An attack here is being made by someone that Ellison has known his entire life on the trueness of his character. That Thelonious Ellison the Black literature professor is not an authentic person, he is someone whose personal identity is not just

located in the wrong place but somehow fundamentally wrong, “*tainted*”. Ellison only walks away from this.

Becoming increasingly erased by Stagg Leigh but also questioning the relationship that he has with his creation along with instability in his own identity brought on by guilt over the whole situation in tandem with this accusation by his brother put Ellison at the precipice. He can either reassert his control over the whole situation as the original creator of Stagg, going back to writing dense literary fiction that nobody reads, or he can continue fueling the truth of Stagg. The author Thelonious Ellison has to make a decision about who he will really be in the end.

The title, *Erasure*, comes from the increasing replacement of Ellison by Stagg as the fictional author makes more public appearances. First with the producer then behind a veil on live television and finally to accept a book award. The unsuccessful Black author is replaced by the popularity and success of his authorial invention. At the end, when Ellison gets up to accept his book award, the question about who he has decided to be is still up in the air. Will he say “I am Thelonious Ellison and I created Stagg R. Leigh” or will he say “I am Stagg R. Leigh”?

Ellison first considers tossing “a spear through the mouth of my own creation” and shortly announces that he is keeping the money made from *My Pafology*. At one point he tries to call his brother again and has this thought:

“So, I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere. I had caught myself standing naked in front of the mirror and discovered that I had nothing to hide and that lack was exactly what forced me to turn away.” (Everett 257)

The two bodies here refer to Ellison and Stagg and the two bodies of work are *My Pafology* and the journal of Ellison that *Erasure* contains. At this point the reader is also considering the work of *Erasure* itself. It is possible that we consider this autobiography of Thelonious Ellison as true in the same way that the people within *Erasure* see *My Pafology* as true. As artistic creations that so beautifully and viscerally render the experience of a of human life, of a kind that we are familiar with, that the reader cannot help but find some kind of poetic truth in it that is not compromised by the word “novel” that appears on the front cover. Ellison has changed himself and then disintegrated, leaving behind only two stories and two bodies, both of which he finds empty. If authenticity is being yourself then what is one supposed to do when there isn’t a “yourself” to be?

“No boundaries yet walls everywhere” describes how Ellison sees that he can move between the two bodies but that to move outside of them seems impossible. These two bodies have different racial and class identities. They are both middle aged black men but one is a professor of literature who felt his whole life that he had to prove his blackness and the other is an ex-convict raised in an American ghetto who spent his time in prison reading and writing. At this moment Ellison sees that regardless of his authorial intention, his intentions for how other people should perceive him, are lost in the face of societal and cultural forces. He can either be one thing, or the other, but neither will allow him to be totally himself, totally authentic.

So when he walks up to accept Stagg’s book award:

“There was a small boy, perhaps me as boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh.
 ‘Now you’re free of illusion,’ Stagg said. ‘How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?’” (Everett 264)

Illusions here might be those that Ellison has about who he is. What he thought were his character traits, not accepting race into his self-definition, identifying as 'other' in an educational and economic sense from the bulk of Black America, are just as illusory as defining himself racially or as a person who has the shared Black experience.

Importantly, being free of illusion here is also an incredibly disorienting experience.

Ellison is free of illusion while also having a hallucination of a small child holding up a mirror that contains a fictional author. The external manifestations of Leigh and the child might be another kind of reality where Ellison accepts the illusion of Stagg as real in the same way that everyone else in his world has. When one of the judges asks Ellison, standing at the podium, what he thinks he is doing, Ellison responds, "The answer is *Painful and empty*" (Everett 265).

All of this distance and mediation in Ellison's experience, the erasure of his identity by the character of Stagg Leigh, and the self-awareness of the boundaries and complications in his racial experience also belong to the author Percival Everett.

Erasure's exploration of the nuanced questions created by not just racial experience but the creation of art under that experience. Ellison in making decisions about how to take care of himself and his family must compromise his art and his identity. Being a black author is one thing but being a *successful* black author means writing the stories that the public wants to hear. Stories that reaffirm their expectations and prejudices. Part of the successful reception is the public presence of an author who "of course would have written a book like that", not some California literary professor (Ellison/Everett) but a highly educated ex-con (Stagg). The final emptiness of Ellison is a realization that he has very little control over his identity even in the highly educated circles of a literary award.

Being himself can mean whatever he wants but being successful means leaving that behind for an identity that is highly structured by audience reception. Something Ellison has done as well as any writer could wish for.

Everett however makes the entirety of *Erasure* operate on a level that elevates his own commentary,

“Everett thus deploys theory’s troubling of the word-world relation only to supersede it and imagine novels not as linguistic approximation of the world but as coextensive with it... Everett uses his idiosyncratic, post-theory thinking about post-structuralism to collapse the sense/reference distinction. And that collapse in turn allows Everett to produce a novel whose fictional surface exists as a fact in the world rather than referring realistically to it.” (Huehls 300)

Mitchum Huehls is talking about Everett’s earlier novel *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* but it is clear that the author has employed the same device in *Erasure*. Again is the idea that contemporary autobiographical fiction is breaking bigger pieces of reality into the fiction. Thelonious Ellison exists in our world in the same way that Stagg R. Leigh exists in Ellison’s world. Considering our fiction not as “linguistic approximations” of the world but as coextensive, overlapping with our own. This gives Everett authenticity as the reader is given the sense that he is a character of the novel. Someone that can only be taken as presented to be treated the same way that Ellison as a character is treated, “The point is not that meaning and subjectivity are indeterminate, but that multiplicity is still just identity” (Huehls 304).

How Should a Person Be? deals a bit with the same sort of tension between the expectations for the author and the desire to create authentic art. Sheila Heti is white but being a woman has a similar sort of external pressure to “be” a certain way. Where Thelonious Ellison writes a parodic and cynical text that hits all the boxes for what is supposed to be the black American experience Sheila Heti must write a feminist play.

This play disappears and is replaced by another project which becomes *How Should a Person Be?*. In trying to write the play she runs up again and again into the problem of making it everything she wants it to be. She uses her friend Margaux, someone who Sheila is fascinated with, as a friend and as a woman, as the main driving force behind the play.

“Instead of sitting down and writing my play with *my* words—using *my* imagination, pulling up the words from the solitude and privacy of my soul—I had used *her* words, stolen what was *hers*. I had plagiarized her being and mixed it up with the ugliness that was mine! Then she had looked into it and, like looking in a funhouse mirror, believed the decadent, narcissistic person she saw was *her*—when really it was *me*. Unwilling to be naked, I had made her naked instead.” (Heti 180)

Even though this situation is between two different “real” characters, the concern with representation and identity appears in a similar way to *Erasure*. Using the ideal of a type of person to make the art better, to get the distinction between the author and the character all muddled up. Sheila doesn’t use her own words, she uses someone else’s, but through the creative filter. Seeing Margaux as somehow ideal, putting her up on enough of a pedestal, and then wanting to be like her, Sheila blends both her own identity and her friend’s. By not writing something that is totally of herself or totally Margaux then provides something that is not only inauthentic to the author but easily projected onto by the reader.

The character that Sheila creates out of herself and Margaux is only an imaginative approximation like Stagg Leigh. It is incredible and ugly and involves some part of the author but more important is the idealized other that it is supposed to invoke. Stagg Leigh is a creation of Ellison but also of Ellison’s projection of the reader’s expectations for what a certain author or character should be like. This expectation of the

reader is that the author or character will not only be entertaining or engaging but also authentic, satisfying their expectations of how someone *should* act. The character of Sheila's play does this but in a way that exploits the image of Margaux in the same way that Ellison exploits the common image of black America. When Margaux reads Sheila's portrayal she believes that it is her, totally, even though it's really that other, more ideal image of her crossed with Sheila's very negative self-perception. Both authors fail to create what they feel to be authentic art when they bend to social and market pressure. However, through showing this failure the novels themselves achieve authenticity. Rather than trying to approach the problem of authenticity in art directly like David Foster Wallace in "Octet" contemporary autobiographical fiction routes authenticity through the failure of inauthenticity.

Ben Lerner has little of this difficulty with authorial identity though he does worry about the authenticity of his work. When talking with a co-worker at the local food co-op the subject of racial and cultural identity for the individual does arise. A girl named Noor tells him a story about her life growing up as the daughter of a Lebanese man and how that shaped her identity for most of her life only to find out recently that her real biological father is a scientist named Stephen. When her mother tells Noor this over dinner she begins to look at herself differently, her hands begin to "fade" or turn pale, a moment of internal racial identity shaping her perception. She says to Lerner:

"I still believe all the things that I believed; it hasn't changed my sense of any of the causes. But my right to care about the causes, my right to have this name and speak the language and cook the food and sing the songs and be part of the struggles or whatever... There are a lot of people I haven't been able to bring myself to tell because, even if they don't want to, they'll treat me differently—I treat me differently." (Lerner 105)

How Noor's beliefs about her blood or skin shapes her personal identity and the things she feels "qualified" to speak on because of that changes radically. She goes from thinking of herself as an American Born Arab to just another white girl that just happens to have an olive skin tone. A whole identity that she had built up over years crumbles under the revelation that it is something that does not actually belong to her. She understands that her relationships with other people white or Arab will change because even her relationship with herself has changed. When the boundaries of not just race and culture but of the personal identity that comes from that gets broken apart or erased totally how is a person supposed to take what's left and still call that their identity? What had defined Noor no longer does but with that a whole new set of problems arises about who she is supposed to be, how she is supposed to talk, how she thinks about her relationship to other people and events.

Ben Lerner has this moment with Noor in *10:04* because it is a way to put his very white and male conversation about the identity of the author into relation with race. One of the biggest accusations against David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity is that it requires a simplicity and directness of individual identity in order to work. Having that uncomplicated relationship to the audience, or to strangers in general, is often only possible for some like Wallace or Lerner, very white and male. Any sort of minority group builds up a sense of community and shared identity from that community but this also creates complications for the individuals. Percival Everett has to prove he is black enough and Sheila Heti feels she needs to be a good enough feminist but Ben Lerner doesn't have to be anything, doesn't have to conform to an idea that others will have when they meet him. Lerner won't ever have to represent some broader community and

won't ever have to reconcile the image he has of himself with an image that society gives to him.

“Lerner removes any possibility of understanding the damage to the work as damage to the reader's experience of it; unlike the pain of a bad tooth extraction, it's not about your pain or my pain—it isn't about anyone's pain. But precisely because the subsumed damage is a matter of the intended form of the work and not a matter of your experience or mine, it has become something we can look at together.” (Ashton)

Though Lerner's project is not the same as that of New Sincerity and this involvement of his co-workers story can be taken as a nod to how unlike those earlier writers Lerner wants to be. It incorporates the very real concerns of the American racial minority into a work that would otherwise only be about the experience of a successful white author. Expanding the concerns of authenticity in American culture past those of the author to the reader.

Autobiographical fiction as a genre after postmodernism incorporates the metafictional author and the self-reflexive considerations of how that incorporation affects the writer and their writing. Writing their own story then the authors must also incorporate the significant parts of their identities, the things that define them, the things that change over time, the complications these create for the ability of the writer to just be themselves with any sort of wholeness. The genre provides a space in which the cynical irony of postmodernism and the over sincerity of Wallace gets suspended so that writer can present the closest approximation of themselves and their experience that they can. Showing how the of writing that appeals to the demands of the market or culture leads to a crisis in personal identity and personal relationships shows a failure of the postmodern ironic mode which often seeks to reduce all art to that level. There is irony in that even when the author does what they are “supposed to” they fail for themselves. This conflict

gets incorporated into the narrative of contemporary autobiographical fiction so that the novel itself, that whole text, can move beyond it.

Capital and Art

A part of the accusation against an artist selling out is that they are exchanging their individual artistic expression for a deliberately wider appeal in order to drive up the monetary value of what they create. Selling out often applies to musicians who, after a moderate success and the attention that follows, change their sound so that it more resembles whatever is popular in their genre or in contemporary music as a whole. An artist selling out is supposedly one of the worst things they can do because by trading whatever qualities it was that made them unique, individual, interesting, and authentic, for the generic but profitable, what they make begins to lose that sense of art. They are no longer artists but panderers who create not for an artistic need but for profit.

Literature is of course a bit different. Imagine someone like David Foster Wallace deciding that what he really had to be doing was writing supernatural teen romance fictions in order to bring in the money, though he does say in *The Pale King* that during college he wrote many papers for other students. Melville's first novel *Typee* was a critical and commercial success and *Moby Dick* an utter failure that nearly ended his writing career. It is helpful to consider the music industry example when thinking about the relationship between the writer and why they write. If one makes art their profession, in whatever capacity, there is always the negotiation between the considerations of what the artist will make and how much they will need to make in order to continue living.

Postmodernism often used irony to embrace the commodification of the novel or to at least embrace the notion that art was always going to have its end in capital. There is no selling out since all attempts at the expression of individuality can only be appeals to a shared identity between artist and audience. Some identities just happen to be more niche

or more popular. Wallace, in attempting to establish a total sincerity, denies this position simply. For him there is a clear distinction between the creation of art for personal expression and the creation of art for capital gain. Lerner presents a third option where there is more focus on the question of “which one is it?” rather than providing a final answer. Autofiction is suited to provide Lerner with the creative space to move between the postmodernists and Wallace towards this end.

Autobiographical fictions as *Kunstlerromans* must incorporate both the writers’ purpose for writing, whether that be for purely artistic self-expression or to honor a publisher’s advance. Money, capital, complicates the lives of the characters in the novel and so it lies as an inextricable part of how we read the novel. What is the relationship between the author, their novel, and capital, and how does that relationship complicate the authentic creation of the art-object? Auto-fiction invokes both the postmodernists and Wallace to bring this question out before the reader but its situation in the paradox of the genre seeks out a different resolution to the authenticity problem. Expressing and selling the intimate details of a life becomes an experiment for the author seeking to fully satisfy both desires. Chapter one outlined how the author seeks authenticity in the contemporary moment and chapter two showed how that authenticity gets enacted through the text. In this chapter I will describe the way that Lerner, Heti, and Everett engage directly with the complicating nature of capital in the creation of art.

10:04 begins with Ben Lerner meeting a publishing agent who believes she can get him “a ‘strong six figure’ advance” for a novel grounded by a story of his that had been published in *The New Yorker*. At this beginning point he is unsure of what that novel will be but he is told it must include that published story, which *10:04* does as its

second chapter. Much later when talking with Alex, the woman that Lerner is considering artificially inseminating, she expresses some concern over how his developing novel will involve her:

“I don’t want what we’re doing to just end up as notes for a novel.’
 ‘Nobody is going to give me strong six figures for a poem.’
 ‘Especially a novel about deception. And it sounds morbid to me. I feel like you don’t need to write about falsifying the past. You should be finding a way to inhabit the present” (Lerner 137).

After taking the advance from the publisher Lerner has to write a novel. It causes him some problems like the one with Alex especially because he is so intensely aware of the way in which his experiences are attached to their eventual inclusion in the novel that has been paid for in advance. Lerner wants to “construct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit” but every moment he experiences is now concretely connected to his book. Not writing it means paying the publisher back. Lerner wants what he writes to be art and satisfy the terms of the contract that go along with the advance. He worries that the latter concern will compromise not just how authentic the book will be as a project but how he will appear to the people close to him. The very presence of this moment in the book, especially at the beginning, places the question of capital and art immediately. This is going to be a novel about communication surrounded by capital. A book and author concerned with the large sum of money that will come after the last page is written, submitted, and approved by the publisher.

At the end of the first chapter right before the story that goes into *The New Yorker*, Lerner has a conflict with the magazine’s editors over the inclusion of a section of the story about “fabricated correspondence” which he considers central. He decides to do things their way because of a suggestion by Alex that the money for piece, in its

compromised form, would help with the insurance for the artificial insemination. So the piece gets published in the magazine, Lerner gets the money, and at the beginning of the third chapter he arrives at the hospital where he will give up some sperm. This scenario with the *The New Yorker* story seems like a microcosm of what holds back and drives Lerner for the rest of the novel. Lerner is concerned with the demands of the publisher, where he must remove something from the original story and where the novel must include that story regardless of its relevance. He is also worried about the concern that Alex has over being included as a character in both the story and the novel. The money ties all of these concerns together in a way that is unavoidable. So he works these problems out through the novel rather than hiding them behind the notion that art should be for something greater, more metaphysical, than capital. Postmodernists would say that art is nothing more than capital and Wallace would take the humanist approach saying that art has nothing to do with capital. Contemporary autobiographical fiction moves in-between those two extremes.

Turning down the demands of the publisher means not having the funds to help his friends or himself. But his current idea for the book, at least the idea he has at the beginning, involves falsification of the past, the kind of thing that would be seen negatively by Alex who he is trying to help, “he realized: I do remember the drive, the view, stroking Liza’s hair, the incommunicable beauty destined to disappear. I remember it which means it never happened” (Lerner 81). The falsified epistolary novel hinted at by the magazine story is of course not what we get. The distaste that Alex has for “a novel about deception” is a concern with the authenticity of Lerner, that writing a novel of and about artifice won’t really make something more authentic or profound. If he has to write

something to pay for insurance or to fulfill the advance why write something that, no matter how interesting, would still be held back by its commitment to the falsification of a life's story?

“*10:04*'s distance from the classic marriage plot: Lerner is not so much abandoning the novel's traditional territory as he is tacking changes in its contours. And while the postmodern play of author and narrator may have run its course, the newness of this terrain open up multiple possible future for the novelist as well as his characters.” (Hack)

Lerner thinks in a conversation with himself on a public park bench, “Art has to offer something other than stylized despair” (Lerner 93).

There is another meeting with a publishing agent where they explain to Lerner, “your book proposal might generate more excitement among the houses than the book itself” (Lerner 154). This meeting takes place at the mid-point of the novel but seems to be an earlier part of the process that leads to the six figure advance that the novel opens with. The agent explains that the prestige and “idea” of the novel to be written is worth more than whatever it is he actually writes:

“I swallowed and the majesty and murderous stupidity of it was all about me, coursing through me: the rhythm of artisanal Portuguese octopus fisheries coordinated with the rhythm of laborers' migration and the rise and fall of art commodities and tradable futures in the dark galleries outside the restraint and the mercury and radiation levels of the sashimi and the chests of the beautiful people in the restaurant—coordinated, or so it appeared, by money. One big joke cycle. One big totaled prosody.” (Lerner 156)

Seeing that what he does with the book isn't as important as merely the idea that he pitches sends Lerner into a sort of analytic spiral concerning the absurdity and complexity of the economic system. How something like octopus gets across the ocean to be served as an appetizer for people who trade stocks and blow millions on art commodities. The rhythm of the money economy is compared to the prosody of poetry.

But the importance of that money is made more immediate by the agent, they tell him to consider who he wants his audience to be, Lerner becomes even more uncomfortable, “I was crossing my art with money more explicitly than ever, trading on my future” (Lerner 156). The idea of “one big totaled prosody” is meant to evoke the confusion and destruction that happens to narrative when it attempts to incorporate all of the moving elements of even one particular thing or moment. The description of this moment is an attempt to show the complication without having it necessarily be an alienating experience. An intense and disorienting engagement with the many details of a cephalopods presence on a plate in New York is beautiful in a poetic way despite its origins in the motivations of capital.

Lerner eventually decides that fabricating his past in order to get the most out of his future isn't really the way to go. He wants to satisfy his own artistic ambition, to make something authentic that is not just “stylized despair” while also making good on the terms of the advance. Some of his friends have begun a personal art gallery that is made up of only “totaled” pieces of art. There are warehouses full of art pieces that were in some way or another damaged and then paid for by insurance on condition that they are now worthless, legally unsellable, and so his friends have worked out a way to legally obtain and show these works. He visits these friends and the “totaled” art gallery in their home filled with pieces whose market value is zero after the insurance company has paid out for what is often minor or unperceivable damage:

“Works by artists, many of them famous, that, after suffering one kind of damage or another, were formally demoted from art to mere objecthood and banned from circulation, removed from the market, relegated to this strange limbo.” (Lerner 130)

Lerner is amazed by these objects, once incredibly expensive, now totally worthless, and how his relationship with them has totally changed. He describes the broken pieces of a work by Jeff Koons, “an icon of art world commercialism and valorized stupidity shattered... to see the hollow interior of a work of willful superficiality.” (Lerner 131). The totaled art is at once both heightened and desecrated in the eyes of the beholder. When the monetary value is removed, when the object no longer takes part in the system of money that it seemed almost designed to take advantage of, it changes completely. It takes on a new sort of aura very different from the one it had before. A legal enforcement on the part of the insurance company of pure art.

A postmodern deconstruction of the author’s own purpose, and the relationship with capital that makes any attempt and sincerity so hard to achieve, is very much a defining theme of autobiographical fictions. Even with good reason, like helping a friend in need, it becomes difficult to justify the necessary edits or the superficial platitudes to a market niche. For the author finding their audience is more like deciding on the best fishing spot and less like drawing in a devoted readership based on artistic merit. Lerner’s first inclination, to write a fabricated epistolary novel, is like one of Koons’ balloon dogs, hollow and designed to reflect the desire of the audience. He wants to write something different than that. Something that inhabits the present or that at least allows him to inhabit the present, a novel that contains him rather than the reflections of the reader.

Towards the end of Lerner’s second meeting with the agent he draws the connection between money and art even closer, “Money was a kind of poetry... The ink contains a substance that dulls the sense of smell, making the octopus more difficult to track” (Lerner 158). Lerner meditates several times throughout the novel on the octopus,

a species he feels closer to as a result of his newfound Marfans disease. While the two sentences are separate their parataxis leads one to connect the ink of a bill with the obscuring ink of the octopus and possibly the ink of a page. The whole complicating situation with money in the novel and his life is one that must be considered but by its very presence also obscures. How can the author be critical in the system that seems to have designated him successful?

“*10:04*’s nervous, intense, careful, hyper-self-conscious notation of feelings, thoughts, encounters, and events is a strategy to capture the significance of human life *without* making it dependent on narrative closure or literary transformation—which is to say, on a future that inevitable *postpones* the significance of present experience.” (Vermeulen 3)

Lerner’s octopus mindset provides the perspective he needs to not just capture human experience but to make comments on it critically without that criticism needing to resolve into some kind of change in the character or world. The obscurity of the ink of money or of the written word is taken care of by the author’s very careful movement between thoughts and scenes. Rather than attempting to head towards where he thinks his narrative and criticism will end he instead rejects the conventional resolution returning significance to whatever immediate individual experience, “*10:04* neutralizes the ontology of fiction and of character; to that effect, it paradoxically presents its characters as undeniably actual, yet at the same time irreducibly potential” (Vermeulen 8).

When Lerner reads the memoir of Walt Whitman he notices small ironies with the artistic attempt of Whitman’s entire project of making himself an “irreducible individuality”. Lerner’s critique centers around how Whitman “has to be nobody in particular in order to be a democratic everyman, has to empty himself out so that his poetry can be a contextual commons for the future into which he projects himself”

(Lerner 168). In trying to be a universal individual Whitman ironically loses the very meaning of what it means to be individual, the categories are opposed, “many of his memories are general enough to be anyone’s memories” (Lerner 168). It is not a problem with Whitman’s form but with something about the content that is like the Koons balloon dog, something empty but for the audience.

At a sort of artistic retreat in Marfa, Texas, where Lerner spends the entire fourth chapter, he spends long periods of time alone marked by a single eventful night out with the other residents of the retreat. Lerner does a line of something that turns out to be Ketamine. A young intern who has a much worse drug trip than the author describes some of the experience:

“And I knew before I thought it that I was going to think: It’s like I’m dead, like I’m a ghost looking at my corpse, and I was trying not to think that because I would die if I did. But then I realized that trying not to think about something is like thinking about something, know what I mean? It has the same shape. The shape of the thought fills up with the thing if you think it, or it empties if you try not to think it... And when I thought that I just felt like there was no difference between anything.” (Lerner 190)

This moment is reminiscent of Wallace. It’s certainly filled with enough self-conscious anxiety to be one. The kinds of thoughts of the strung out intern can either be fully negative, self-conscious and reflexive, or the opposite kind but empty. He also gives it a physical depiction as his chest having “no front or back” with “No in to breath into” (Lerner 189). The intern’s bad drug trip has the same sort of problem with the space of thought that the authenticity problem does. Either be ironic and deconstructive or naïvely sincere as a rather superficial alternative. Again that shiny reflective Koons balloon dog comes to mind as being reflective and empty in that similar artistic sense. Eventually in order to calm the intern Lerner kisses him on the forehead, “Whitman would have kissed

him. Whitman would have taken the intern's fear of the loss of identity as seriously as a dying soldiers" (Lerner 190). Moving from irony to sincerity for Lerner means taking a different view on the validity of contemporary fears and pain. He lives in a very different world than Whitman, one where young kids suffer bad ketamine trips instead of bloody civil wars. Even if this kind of pain is trivial compared to that experienced in countries far away it exists in front of the narrator in that moment. So he makes the decision to care unlike the other part members who find that kind of compassion beneath them.

After this scene with the intern Lerner presents his resolution to change the direction of the book to be written:

"Say that it was standing there that I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them; I resolved to dilate my story not into a novel about literary fraudulence, about fabricating the past, but into an actual present alive with multiple futures." (Lerner 194)

It is a move of form rather than a move made by a particular movement of thought. An individual experience presented in a way that is neither ironic nor grasping for sincerity but meant to be read as the conveyance of particular details and emotions; formed in a way that is meant to point towards a utopic poetic universal rather than to try and contain it. It would accept its individual source, unlike Whitman, and speak out from there rather than be a vessel of reflection as though that were all that is needed to be meaningful.

Autobiographical fiction, as a genre, takes its place after the postmodernists and Wallace by the incorporation of both forms, the irony and the strive for authenticity, to make something that is new because it is derivative. It creates sense of originality made out of recycled bits, of detail taken out of context and reapplied to a new context. Lerner wants to do that for his experience in the same way that the objects in the totaled art

museum are totaled; remove them from the system of money that gave them so much value based in a very specific context. That way he can write his autobiography and have it be true where he finds it useful and have it be false where he finds it useful, to make something with his individuality inside but in a flickering way, that allows the reader to engage with it however they will.

This move allows a solution to the problem with the involvement of capital in his life and in the creation of the novel by obscuring the details that may be too intimate or real behind the veil of fabrication and the details that are totally fabricated behind the idea of a poetic truth. Discovering the real difference between the two would mean knowing the facts of Lerner's life in a way that probably even he doesn't have access to. What is being exploited, the kinds of details that would make him feel like a less sincere artist, are to be redeemed by not just their inescapable inclusion but their appropriation towards the more noble goals of the project.

Lerner still wants his project, like Whitman, to be humanistic, to be reaching out to the reader. He wants to reclaim his work as something that is not the product of an economic moment but of a present that will be for multiple futures. He ends the novel with a sentence very similar to one that he mentions earlier in Whitman's memoir but adds a second "I" after the comma; "I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is" (Lerner 240). This second "I" provides a re-emphasis on his presence, as a direct influence through the page but not in a way that is supposed to be a universal everyman like Whitman. That it is not a general sense of "person" on the other side but a particular person, not a hollow reflection but a clear and unified authorial presence.

Ben Lerner presents a more detailed critique of Whitman in *The Hatred of Poetry*.

When Whitman tries to open himself up to future readers in order to reach a sense of interconnectedness and possibility with them he relies on that old concept of the universal. By emptying out the things that tie him to his present in order to reach some projected future community or person means relating to that part of them that is also supposed to be universal:

“Whitman’s program has never been realized and I don’t think it can be: Whitman comes to stand for the contradictions of a democratic personhood that cannot become actual without becoming exclusive.” (Lerner 49)

Changing notions of personhood and how that relates to a sense of community is tied to changes in economic mode and media. How Whitman understood the individual in both specific and universal terms changed how he talked to them. The same is true for David Foster Wallace. Ben Lerner in *10:04* wants to reorganize the discussion with the reader that happens through the text by contemporary terms. Which means that there has to be a discussion of the role that capital plays in the way people communicate with each other whether through conversation or through art.

In *Erasure* economic advantage comes to those who are willing to submit to a certain kind of writing or narrative. While *My Pafology* is written out of anger and parody the capital that is associated with the project makes it increasingly more real for Thelonious Ellison. He says at the beginning, “I could sell many books if I settled down and wrote the true, gritty real stories of black life” (Everett 2). While many artists benefit from the cultivation of an artistic persona there is less choice for the black Ellison in the kinds of persona that he can create if what he wants is economic “success”. Selling out for Ellison is merely following the categories and expectations that society has for black

authors. Creating authentic art for the audience in this case is actually inauthentic for the author.

Erasure complicates the kind of universal idea of personhood that Whitman wanted to appeal to. Universal humanistic appeal breaks under the external pressure of a particular cultural moment:

“It was not exactly the case that I had sold out, but I was not, apparently, going to turn away the check... In my writing my instinct was to defy form, but I very much sought in defying it to affirm it, an irony that was difficult enough to articulate, much less defend.” (Everett 139)

The connection between selling out and the affirmation of form by defiance frames the relationship between capital and art in Everett’s novel. When he writes the parody of black realist fiction that is *My Pafology*, fills the pages with all of the slang and caricatures that he would expect to fill that sort of novel, it is seen as a knockout hit. Ellison’s defiance only serves to reinforce what he had set out to critique. The irony of *My Pafology* is totally lost because the audience that receives it has its expectations of the universal idea of the real black experience met precisely. The parody then becomes the perfect example, it becomes real. The relatability of a certain kind of universality, one that is often imposed, actually serves to alienate rather than comfort.

So Everett incorporates all of the alienation that occurs when his creativity is limited by the demands of capital and culture. As a highly educated black man he feels distance from his extended family or the young woman with blue fingernails he meets in his sister’s clinic. As a black man he feel distance from his academic contemporaries. The categories that provide identity and connection within themselves also serve to limit Everett’s possibilities for artistic expression.

“The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of ‘black’ writers, I ended up on the very distant and very ‘other’ side of a line that is imaginary at best... But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression... And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be.” (Everett 212)

In releasing *My Pafology* without any of the social commentary that Ellison creates it with and applies to it throughout the book the sense of parody is lost. There was a time when he had the ability to dictate the terms of the public’s reception of the novel but every step of the way he played the part he was expected to. With the publisher, with the talk show interviews, with the film producer. The ultimate send up to the demands of capital, culture, and the publishing industry becomes the ultimate affirmation of those powers. Ellison’s use of irony, being too perfect, perpetuates the factors that started the whole story instead of challenging them. Now he is in too deep. The time to come out and change the terms of the novel’s reception has passed with the acceptance of the cash that it has rewarded. By denying his own racial difference and the racial self-expression that *My Pafology* originally contained he defaults to the conventional narrative.

Thelonious Ellison because of a refusal to assert his presence and Stagg R. Leigh the character replaces him. The cultural pressure that sets him on this path is not what forces him to stay on it. The money he accepts for *My Pafology* is what cements him into Stagg R. Leigh. Admitting that the whole thing was a joke, a parody of societies expectations, would see Ellison discredited and maybe even sued. Disgraced like Michael Frey. Putting all of this into the world of *Erasure* Percival Everett does the criticism of culture and capital that Ellison was unable to do. A book is published that provides not only an engaging story of an author but the realistic account of how the black author must

navigate his identity through the publishing industry. Everett presents his authentic author by showing how the character of that author fails to reach authenticity through ironic art.

Throughout *How Should a Person Be?* the narrator Sheila Heti has multiple sexual encounters with a man named Isreal. Often hypersexual to the point of objectification that for most of the novel she enjoys. At a certain point however she decides that she not only needs to end things with Israel but that it has to be in a way that forever end her desire to be involved with him or he with her, “I had to be so ugly that the humiliation I brought on myself would humiliate him, too” (Heti 271). She stops herself from caring about how this act will appear to the man saying “The way he saw me was not the same thing as me” (Heti 272). I will not relate what she does but it does succeed. Heti rejects the notion she held at the beginning of the book that the best thing for her to be is some kind of beautiful. That there is more to her identity than its aesthetic qualities, her capacity to please others.

So she takes this newfound sense that her identity does in fact have more to offer than beauty;

“I went straight into my studio and thought about everything I had, all the trash and the shit inside me. And I started throwing the trash and throwing the shit, and the castle began to emerge... I made what I could with what I had. And I finally became a real girl.” (Heti 277)

In the failure of her project that was the combination of her seemingly perfect friend Margaux and the slow realization of why that failure occurred Sheila arrives here. Being the perfect wife to her husband had her marriage fail just like being the perfect or most beautiful person had failed. Rejecting the notion that whatever she would become it would have to be beautiful she finds that her identity exists in the negative. Heti finds her own authenticity in the ruins of these perfect ideas of what she thought people should be

like. Departing from Wallace by rejecting the notion of a totally sincere person. In order to reach the resolution that she wants with Israel she must actively lie, do things that are insincere, in order to create the effect that she wants. No amount of direct or sincere expression was going to do that for her. Better to be ugly or do something ugly, maybe even something unclear, than attacking the problem in that unsuccessful original way.

Capital in *How Should a Person Be?* is less evident than in Lerner or Everett but it helps to consider that the attractiveness of a woman is directly tied to her success. Being pretty and sociable falls into the category of beauty that Heti wants to achieve at the beginning of the novel or in the failed feminist play. She wants to be pretty because that is what society tells her is a clear sign of success or an important factor in being successful.

“A publishing house can potentially enforce oppressive social norms, but Heti can also imagine it as concretely and materially accommodating her vision of her novel as a preparatory, living, changing work; an institution can be imagined to include faceless administrators, but it can also be imagined to include one’s friends and one’s self” (Buurma 94)

Where Everett has no choice about his blackness Heti has to make the choice to spend a lot of her time and energy on being appealing. It has great consequences for her relationships and her art. At the end of the novel she finds that part of authenticity is allowing oneself to be ugly in those ways that are individual and unique.

Capital in art has important effects on the creation of art, “The dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority, and an organ like time, which not long ago aspired to shape the national taste, now serves mainly to reflect it” (Franzen 38). A part of contemporary autobiographical fiction seems to be the incorporation of the kind of critical view that Jonathan Franzen takes in this quote and works it out in the writing. If

there is no authentic authorship then it has to be shown so that some sort of actual cultural communication or representation can be done. Ignoring the complications in the relationship between capital and art won't make good art. If there is a problem with mere reflection then the failure of mere cultural appeasement and reflection must be depicted.

“the post-theory theory novel does not refer to the world; it communicates a world”

(Huehls 307). Neither postmodernism nor Wallace provide the appropriate theoretical ground on which to approach a solution to the involvement of capital in art because of their respective absolutist beginnings and ends.

Conclusion

In this paper I look specifically at the subjects of authenticity, sincerity, capital, and the enactment of criticism within the text. As a genre after postmodernism and a response to new sincerity; contemporary autobiographical fiction is still only a simple category that I have imposed on certain texts. Talking about a contemporary “genre” is only ever going to be an attempt to pull together and categorize texts that are in many other ways very different from one another. In some sense I am attempting to predict the future by writing the history of literary studies as that history occurs. A thesis about establishing categories and criteria for a couple of books that criticize and problematize categories, “There is no longer any ground that allows us to evaluate or judge the referential truth content, the aesthetic significance, or any other form of meaning that a work of art might imply” (Huehls 206). My imposition upon the texts is more an expression of how much respect, admiration, and love I have for them. The subjects that I have gone into with respect to the texts are just a small part of what is going on within their pages.

David Shield’s idea of reality hunger is still the best description of what exactly these novels are trying to accomplish. Which is the incorporation of not the nominal information of experience but of the impressionistic information. Oprah’s audience wants stories that are not only pleasurable to read but that reflect some depiction of reality which will give them a sense of comfortable growth. The 19th century bored housewife reading *Typee* for its adventure and exploration is not so different from the 21st century bored housewife reading Frey’s *Million Little Pieces* to learn more about the life of a

drug addict in America. The difference is of course that small distinction between fiction and non-fiction which ends up totally shifting the reader's reception.

A secondary purpose of this paper is to return fiction to the place of valid cultural commentary. That if there are those who feel the need to establish non-fictional memoir as the only valid depiction of human experience from which we should learn about our own lives then there must also be those writers who challenge that notion.

“It is no longer a question of the ideology of power, but of the *scenario* of power. Ideology only corresponds to a betrayal of reality by signs; simulation corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs. It is always the aim of ideological analysis to restore the objective process; it is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum” (Baudrillard 182)

Lerner, Heti, Everett, and Shields practice some ideological analysis on their culture and specifically on the creation of art and identity in their culture. Though they aren't looking for any old notion of truth that will somehow come to light through the criticism. Not the truth of the postmodernists that is empty and toothless irony and not the humanist truth of Wallace that is a brute force sincerity.

Capital is the measure and enforcement of power in our society so understanding what it has to do with the creation of art is crucial for a genre that seeks to incorporate the reality surrounding its creation. The role that capital plays in society is often overlooked. It is really too simple to say something cliché like “it is the root of all evil”. One of the most interesting parts of researching and writing this thesis was engaging very directly with the way in which money pushes and pulls the creative tendency. Lerner, Everett, and Heti all have their narrators create something in the novel that easily bends to the demands of capital and the demands of the culture that implies. They all fail in one way

or another and from that failure we receive their very real novels. Narratives that are genuinely critical of system that made them possible without a hint of irony.

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