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CounterText

A Journal for the Study of the Post-Literary

Special Issue
Frame/Framing

Guest Editors:
Paweł Kaczmarek and Marta Koronkiewicz

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Editorial

It feels almost inevitable that the previous number of *CounterText*, a special issue on the theme of *Omission/s*, should be followed up with a number centred on *Frame/Framing*. What to include when *not* omitting, and how, in that act, to (re)frame criteriologies, conceptualities, ideas, practices, and more, becomes a theme that carries both consequence and continuity across the journal's pages. There is, in fact, a case that could be made for reading the two issues together, even though they are each their own individual project. Each emerges from separate *CounterText* roundtables, with the one on *Frame/Framing* taking place at the Faculty of Letters in the University of Wrocław, 24–25 January 2025 and convened by Paweł Kaczmarski and Marta Koronkiewicz, this number's guest editors (the prior issue is linked to a roundtable that took place at the University of Naples, Parthenope, in June 2024).

Beyond the salient observations made in the Guest Editors' Introduction, there are only three points we would add in this Editorial, by way of what now becomes an inevitably self-conscious act of further framing. The first relates to how inevitable—indeed, ineluctable—questions of framing are in all matters relating to literature, art, critique, philosophy, theory, and their (and other) intersections. This is an obvious enough point, but it is one that not only never loses its edge and sharpness but needs ever renewed attention, which would itself be reframed

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while reframing; hence the theme's inexhaustibility and its ripeness for reconsideration in spaces like this one. The second is the pertinence of questions on frame/framing to conceptualities around the post-literary and the countertextual, reflections on which punctuate – sometimes pointedly, sometimes obliquely – a number of the contributions to this special issue. The third relates to the specific contextual frame to some of the debates carried in this issue. It provides a welcome opportunity for a window onto thinking and critique emerging from academic and cultural contexts in Poland that are currently exhibiting a vigour and confidence that broader critical currents will want to take notice of.

That leaves only one thing to note. The interview with Kevin Hart, whose distinguished writing on literature, philosophy, and theology, not to mention his own poetic work, intercuts and undercuts all kinds of discursive frames and practices, is a cornerstone of this special issue. In appearing to sit just shy of the other contributions, emerging from a different event to the Wrocław roundtable (Kevin Hart was a guest of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Malta, whose support is acknowledged here, in the Spring of 2025), while yet directly and indirectly eloquent about discussions of framing, the interview is emblematic of how frame and its outlines will always elude neat and expedient definition. *Frame/Framing*: already, the doubled, morpheme-adding term in the title, and the solidus between the two words, symbolises just how solidity-jealous *and* solidity-averse *and* (im-)penetrability-aware any reflection or design upon frame and framing will be. No wonder, then, that the study of the countertextual and the post-literary, themselves predicated on related dispositions, would have wanted to turn, with intent, on the theme of the pages that follow.

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February 2026

Kevin Hart: The *CounterText* Interview

At the Margins of Mystery

Kevin Hart
(Duke University)

Robert Farrugia
(University of Malta)

Kevin Hart is one of the most distinguished voices working at the intersection of literature, philosophy, and theology today. A poet of international repute and a scholar of profound erudition, in his work he consistently navigates the tensions and affinities between lyric expression, metaphysical inquiry, and religious thought. His career spans an impressive range: acclaimed collections of poetry such as *Wild Track* (2015), *Barefoot* (2018), and *Carnets* (2025); critical studies including *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989), *Kingdoms of God* (2014), and *Poetry and Revelation* (2017); as well as more recent contributions such as *Lands of Likeness: For a Poetics of Contemplation* (2023) and *Contemplation: The Movements of the Soul* (2024).

Born in England and raised in Australia, Hart has lived and taught in the United States for over two decades. He is currently the Jo Rae Wright University Distinguished Professor in the School of Divinity at Duke University, where he also holds a secondary appointment in the Department of English. His poetry has won numerous awards, including the Grace Leven

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Prize and the Christopher Brennan Award, and his critical writings are widely recognised for their intellectual depth and stylistic clarity.

Throughout his work, Hart has persistently explored how poetry inhabits a ‘troubled space’ between philosophy and theology, while also carving out its own irreducible domain. His thinking draws on figures as diverse as Augustine, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Jacques Derrida, yet it remains grounded in the conviction that lyric poetry is uniquely able to conduct us into mystery, not through obscurity, but through clarity. For Hart, silence, contemplation, and the experience of the sacred mark essential dimensions of both the poetic and the human condition.

In this wide-ranging conversation for *CounterText*, Hart reflects on the quarrels and convergences between poetry, philosophy, and theology; the challenges posed by modernity, technology, and globalisation; and the ways lyric poetry continues to point us toward mystery, interiority, and the *imago dei*.

*

RF: As someone who navigates seamlessly between academic philosophy and lyric poetry, how do you perceive the evolving relationship between these two disciplines within the contemporary literary and intellectual landscape? Do you believe that the significance of literature is being diminished by the rise of image-centric cultures, digital technologies, globalisation, and advancements in technoscience? Or could it be that literature operates within an entirely separate sphere?

KH: In the *Republic*, Socrates recalls that there has been ‘from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry’, and he wonders uneasily if there should be poetry in a well-governed state. Relations between philosophy and religion have also been troubled. In that same dialogue, Socrates appears as a new sort of θεωρός. He does not need to go on religious pilgrimages (to Eleusis, for instance) to learn of the gods but rather stays where he is and seeks the truth by way of dialectic. Poetry and theology have had their ups and downs as well. Attempts to render Scripture as ‘literature’ rightly incur the incredulity and sometimes the irritation of Christians, and movements to figure poetry as covert theology rightly meet resistance as well, from poets as well as from theologians. There *are* sensible positions one can adopt: Karl Rahner points to one in his short essay ‘Poetry and the

Christian'. Since a great deal of the Bible is written in poetry, one really needs to know how to hear poetry before one can try to hear the Word of God. But quarrels are louder than moderating voices.

I have long worked in the triangle of poetry, philosophy, and theology, and so I have inhabited a very troubled space. Not all the relations between the three are always fraught, though. Without T. S. Eliot reading Husserl, we would not have the notion of the 'objective correlate'. And without T. E. Hulme reading Henri Bergson, there might not have been a school of imagism early last century; and the influence of that poetic school has been immense in poetry written in English, especially if one includes as part of its heritage the fierce contestation of it in the name of the 'deep image'. Indeed, when Robert Bly got excited about 'leaping poetry' and the need to find a more inward approach to poetry, he went directly to Jacob Boehme's *The Threefold Life of Man*. So one or more strains of modern poetry in English has seen commerce between philosophy, theology, and poetry. It's tempting to say that the visionary tradition or the contemplative tradition has been the most attractive to poets as far as religion goes. One or another *has* been at particular times: think of poets as different as William Blake and T. S. Eliot, for instance. At other times, distinct situations come into play. George Herbert does not seem to have been drawn toward vision or contemplation and the philosophy which influenced him, pro and con, was mostly distant: Epicureanism, in particular.

In some ways 'imagism' anticipated our current pre-occupation with visual images and screens, for it proposed the pictorial image to be the main vehicle of lyric poetry; and if we are to speak of globalisation, we need to remember that it was Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915), which launched an entire century of folding a certain conception of Asian poetry into English-language poetry. We can trace its influence in W. B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and, from there, everywhere, right up to Philippe Jaccottet and W. S. Merwin. As regards the advances in techno-science and digital technologies that you mention, there has been and still is a doubled response. There are those who react by saying, with Mallarmé, that one should purify the language of the tribe, and so turn away from the new developments; and there are those who seek to bring its language into poetry with a view to humanising it. If I were to think about my own practice, I would say that I feel the pull of both sides. I keep to a simple vocabulary, much like many of the medieval lyrics that I love so much,

but I have also been impressed by the experiments of OULIPO and, even before one gets to that sort of thing, following challenging set forms – the villanelle, the sestina, the pantoum, the terzanelle . . . – is clearly one way of releasing creative energies in new channels.

So I doubt that poetry can ever really work in a wholly separate sphere in society, but it can cling tenaciously to the margins of our world. When this issue comes up, I like to quote W. H. Auden's lines in his poem to Louis MacNiece, 'The Cave of Making':

[. . .] After all, it's rather a privilege
amid the affluent traffic
to serve this unpopular art which cannot be turned into
background noise for study
or hung as a status trophy by rising executives,
cannot be "done" like Venice
or abridged like Tolstoy, but stubbornly still insists upon
being read or ignored [. . .]

RF: You draw a line from 'imagism' to our current visual culture, and from Pound's *Cathay* to the globalisation of English-language poetry. Do you see any comparable movement now that might similarly shape the next century of poetry?

KH: Imagism was always keyed to the visual, and so it has a rapport with contemporary visual culture. But the literary movement attended too single-mindedly to the surfaces of the world and thereby missed much that the poetic image can do. The quest for the 'deep image' in Antonio Machado and Rainer Maria Rilke, Yves Bonnefoy, and Tomas Tranströmer, was a reaction to this; and, more than simply a reaction, it opened up a new space for poetry as meditation or contemplation. There are many ways in which poetry can show us things, and not all of them turn on the image. It may be that we are at the start of an exploration of new ways in which poetry can show the visible and the invisible.

RF: In an early publication, *The Trespass of the Sign* (1989), you contemplate the tension between language's ability to signify and its unavoidable shortcomings in fully capturing meaning. With reference to Hegel and Derrida, you write here that when demythologised, stories yield 'a plain

statement of a philosophical state of affairs'. From your perspective, is literature inherently an amalgamation of both *μῦθος* and *λόγος*, wherein symbolism and reason persistently interact and challenge each other?

KH: In *The Trespass of the Sign*, I was concerned to see how apophatic theology helps us to de-sediment cataphatic theology and how modern philosophy, beginning with Kant, puts various limits on this process. A small part of that project was distinguishing deconstruction from demythologisation. Rudolf Bultmann's program struck me then, as now, as a misdirected approach to theology, especially when it comes to how to read the New Testament. In essence, it is the stripping away of religious layers of meaning to find a philosophical meaning. For Bultmann, the meaning of the New Testament was the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit*! More than that, demythologising moves in the swift current of Enlightenment thought, which seeks to read Scripture like any other piece of writing, using an unbridled scepticism with respect to singular events in the Gospels. The Gospel writers were concerned less with the what, where, why, and whence of Jesus's life than with *how* he was to be remembered by the early Church. So I don't think there's much point in confining ourselves to the strictures of modern historiography when reading first-century gospels. More generally, Scripture gives us a *μῦθος* in the original sense of a capacious organising narrative – Creation and Fall, Redemption and Eschaton – which helps us to make sense of our lives. The *μῦθος* is not in competition with *λόγος*: we must do what we can to make better and better sense of the details in the narrative. But I wouldn't want my use of 'narrative' to lead anyone to think that I'm a narrative theologian, like certain post-liberal Barthians. I'm ultimately concerned with the truth of doctrinal statements: the 'how'-question simply helps us to see how events are given.

I don't talk very much about literature, which I take to be a modern formation – roughly, poetry, the novel and the drama, which came into effect at the end of the eighteenth century, and which has been breaking down for some time now – but I do talk about *poetry*, which is much older and which has all manner of filiations with religion. I think that poetry, at least the sort of lyric poetry which I write, is concerned with mystery. It says things, but only to get us to the point where something cannot be said but only apprehended. More generally, I'd say that we are mysterious creatures because each of us bears the *imago dei*. When I respond to you, or

anyone, I am ultimately responding to the triune God who has marked you in your deepest being. The best conductor of mystery, though, is clarity. So I distance myself from Edmund Burke and that particular tradition of thinking the sublime by way of obscurity. 'Mystery' takes us very far in one direction, but when talking about poetry we also need the word 'complexity'. I think that the best lyric poetry respects the irreducible complexity of persons, relationships, feelings, states of affairs; and it can do so by using simple language. Here Wittgenstein is of use to us: 'a first judgment is *not* the end of the matter', he says, 'for it is the field of force of a word that is decisive'. When it's of value to us, poetry is never a 'first judgment'; rather, it attends to the field of force which a word generates. A poem is an event, not a thing; we experience it as overlapping fields of force.

RF: One might assume mystery depends on obscurity or ambiguity. How do you see clarity preserving, or even intensifying, the mysterious rather than dissolving it? In your own lyric poetry, how do you balance the demand for clarity with the desire to point beyond language toward what 'cannot be said but only apprehended'?

KH: Mystery itself is always irreducible to clarity, but I think that the best *conductor* of mystery is clarity. That is, clarity leads us towards what is not clear, or not yet clear, or what will never be clear. We shall never know the mystery of the triune God; however, if we think clearly about what is revealed to us, which is the aim of theology, we have the best possible chance of probing the mystery. Good theology conducts us into the mystery of God. That mystery might never be statable in definite sentences, but it is possible to believe oneself into the mystery of God by being in a position to know what is involved in an act of faith, one that is sustained by prayer, study, and recourse to the sacraments. Both Augustine and Aquinas speak of *credere in deum*, believing oneself into God; and if one does that, then one is abiding within the divine mystery of love as *ἀγάπη*. The same sort of thing is true of poetry: the simplest words seem quite clear, but at the same time they point us into mysteries. As soon as I write 'you', I have indicated a mystery, since each 'you' bears the *imago trinitatis*. Of course, not all poets want to make anything of this mystery; it can always be glossed (as happened in modernism) as 'difficulty'.

RF: Your comprehensive analysis and deep engagement with Maurice Blanchot's work demonstrate a strong alignment with his ideas about the Outside, the neuter, and the sacred. In what ways has Blanchot influenced your understanding of the poetic subject and what you refer to as 'an impersonal twilight existence' in the 'Introduction' to *Clandestine Encounters* (2010)?

KH: I've long been attracted to Maurice Blanchot's narrative work, especially his *récits*, largely because of their dark fascination. Over the years, I've also read all his critical writing, and everything else that has appeared by him and about him. His best criticism is remarkable for drawing one deeply into a sense of the imaginary: not the image, in the pictorial sense we were discussing earlier, but the imaginary, which forever opens before us, drawing us ever deeper into the gaps in our everyday reality. I am less taken with other aspects of his thought of the Outside or the Neutral, which strikes me as an almost wilful reduction of the sacred. It seems to me that Blanchot is a clear example of a theme I have noticed in much modern – that is, post-Enlightenment – thought and writing: in rejecting as implausible that which is traditionally reckoned as above or beyond phenomena – let's say, to use a word I don't like, the 'supernatural' – Blanchot instead affirms that which the tradition has not acknowledged, namely, what is beneath or anterior to phenomena, whether it be the roots of language or something else. Blanchot's atheism consists in claiming that what is anterior to phenomena accounts for what has been taken to be above or beyond it. The ineffable, for him, consists of the Outside, not God. I see this situation, in different ways, in the work of Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida, not just Blanchot. Each of them is fascinated by apophaticism but not in the way that the Pseudo-Dionysius is, for example.

I've learned a great deal from Blanchot about what happens to the 'I' in the act of composition. As soon as one writes 'I', one loosens one's grip on one's first-person existence and is in effect writing 'he' or 'she'. The 'I' is lost – sacrificed, Blanchot says, following Hölderlin – in the act of writing. Years ago, I found that this idea was liberating: one does not have to wait for experience before writing a poem; instead, the act of writing is *itself* experience, although, to be sure, it draws on events, thoughts, feelings, that one has had long before. That is, the act of writing can take you to a limit, expose you to the peril of losing your 'self', and can surprise you by

drawing you into an experience that you've never actually lived through. Lyric poetry is seldom autobiographical. Blanchot takes this loss of the 'I' much further than I am inclined to do, since he doesn't think there is such a thing as substantial selfhood. I give more credence to the solidity of self-consciousness, although it lasts only by virtue of divine Grace, which modifies what we can possibly mean by 'self'.

All that Blanchot writes about literature as 'being without being' seems to me both true and intriguing. When I say 'Whose woods these are, I think I know . . .', the line gives me the woods but without their sensual being, the feel of their bark, the coldness of the snow on the white pines, the smell of the leaves; and yet the poet – here, Robert Frost – immediately compensates for the loss by the sensuality of the line, its rhythm, its delicate alliteration and assonance ('woods', 'know'). I think all this is in accord with what Husserl calls 'the regions of being'. Phenomena give themselves in the manners appropriate to their specific region of being: an apple gives itself to me by way of perception, a number by way of cognition, and poetry by way of being without being. Doubtless Blanchot (and Derrida) overplay their hand in figuring writing, that region of 'being without being', as the master region which determines our relations with everything in reality. But within limits, the insight is fecund.

RF: When you say lyric poetry is 'seldom autobiographical', does this mean that poetry always gestures toward an impersonal dimension? Or is there still space for a more personal voice to persist alongside that loss of the 'I'?

KH: I wonder if there is a distinct genre that we can call 'autobiography'. Would it be when we see the 'I' being used all the time? But that happens in all sorts of writing, and some 'autobiographies' adopt the third person: Louis-René Des Forêt's *Ostinato*, for example. Certainly, in lyric poetry one sees the 'I' everywhere; but the use of the first-person singular doesn't necessarily imply that the events, feelings, and thoughts being conveyed are held by the historical individual who is using that 'I'. I tend to think that when one begins to compose a lyric poem, the writing follows certain hints, openings, rhythms, and begins to explore an undefined space; of course, it draws on events in one's past, one's feelings, one's ideas, and it associates them in new ways, which sometimes surprise the author, but it does not mean that the 'I' converges exactly with the historical individual. The idiom,

even the voice, of the poem can be personal, but the reference in the lyric need not be to anything in the poet's present or past.

RF: In affirming, with Husserl, that phenomena give themselves according to their 'region of being', do you see poetry as offering a distinct mode of access to reality, one that neither philosophy nor theology can provide?

KH: Husserl gives us a capacious understanding of the 'regions of being', namely, the *ways* in which phenomena can give themselves. But he does not exhaust reality in listing those regions, since he thinks that God transcends what 'transcendence' means in phenomenology. To talk phenomenologically about the sacred or about God means that we have to engage in generative phenomenology or constructive phenomenology. Certainly, that stream of lyric poetry which explores religious themes (Jacapone da Todi, John of the Cross, George Herbert, John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, along with many others) goes beyond the 'regions of being' delineated by Husserl. That sort of poetry can give us a visceral sense of the changing relationship one might have with the divine: praise, lament, argument, acceptance That said, I don't think that 'religious poets' are privy to any particular manner of givenness. That happens only with contemplatives who have simple intuitions of the deity, and, of course, at very rare times, these are great poets as well: John of the Cross and Hafiz, for example. Through adventurous metaphors, catechreses, dislocations of meaning, arresting juxtapositions, and so on, poets like these two write a language that is irreducible to philosophy or even theology. They point us towards God, perhaps more surely than any philosopher or theologian can, perhaps because the poetry is more concerned with the 'who' of God than the 'what' of God. But whether God has told them where to point is another issue, one that we shall never be in a position to know. If we think of Jesus as a poet, he would be a limit case (with the parables and in other lyrical remarks, such as 'Consider the lily of the field . . .').

RF: Your poems also evoke a sense of mystical intimacy with silence, which you once described as 'a silence older than the sky' ('The River' in *Wild Track*, 2015). In this sense, silence is not simply the absence of sound, but a primordial and vital form of inner experience. To what extent does silence serve as a condition for interiority itself, and how might it transform our relation to selfhood and consciousness?

KH: There are different modes of silence, including ‘inter-turn’ silence in conversation, ‘pained silence’, ‘hostile silence’, ‘reflective silence’, and so on. Often in lyric poems, I have in mind a silence that is deeper than any of these. Valentinus wrote of ‘the Deep and Silence’, and in the early Church, God the Father was often referred to as ‘Silence’. It may be that the Church Fathers were thinking of Elijah hearing YHWH in the ‘still, small voice’ of silence. So, referring to God the Father as ‘Silence’ wasn’t intended to indicate the Father’s indifference to us, or his complete absence from us, but rather the manner in which He seeks to communicate with us, by way of Jesus. The Father speaks to us indirectly, in human language. We think we hear a human voice, that of a first-century rabbi, and we are actually hearing Silence. (This is an example of what Kierkegaard calls ‘spiritual acoustics’.) But we have to put ourselves in a position to hear, which is very difficult in a world of noise and constant distraction. When we court this deep silence within ourselves, we pass from ‘the world’ and begin to enter one of the many aspects of ‘the kingdom’. We become more aware of the majesty of God. We go into our deepest selves. But what do we find there? Not just consciousness or self-consciousness or even the unconscious, not just the will or the transcendental unity of apperception. We find ourselves already in relation to the *imago dei*. At the centre of the human being, there is not the human being but rather the mark of God: we are eccentric with respect to ourselves! Introspection, undertaken in faith, shows us that we are created beings.

RF: Can you elaborate more on how this eccentric vision of the self challenges modern notions of autonomy and self-possession?

KH: The history of modernity could be charted by way of finding a means of establishing human autonomy and self-possession. In the seventeenth century we find an emphasis on the *cogito*, then in the nineteenth century we find an accent on the will, and then in the twentieth century a nuanced response to these developments with Freud’s ‘trinity’ of the ego, the superego, and the id. Freud recognised that human beings can’t fully claim autonomy and self-possession: we are always haunted by the spectres produced by the superego and by the id. Psychoanalysis is an attempt to educate the ego so that it can cope with the anxiety caused by both the incessant demands of the superego and the infantile desires of the id. Yet

the Freudian ‘trinity’ is at heart no more than a distorted, psychological version of the *imago trinitatis*, indeed one which cannot liberate one in the ways that the latter can do. As Descartes saw, we are originally in dialogue with the *imago trinitatis*, and it is in terms of that dialogue – that is, the life of prayer in all its modes – that we can be most ourselves, paradoxically, by yielding any and all thought that we are wholly self-created, self-directed, self-authenticating beings. I become more ‘myself’ when in relation with God because, after all, I was created by God to be in relation with Him.

RF: Do you see lyric poetry, or literature more broadly, as helping us recover that capacity for silence?

KH: Some modern literature, especially the novel, has been energised by the notion of *tout dire*, of saying everything, whether in order to combat bourgeois sensibilities or to seek a fresh way of elaborating ‘literature’. Back in the eighteenth century, we can see *tout dire* in the service of bourgeois morality (Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, for example) and we can see it in the contestations of that morality (Sade’s *Juliette* and *Justine*, but also Rousseau’s *Confessions*). Yet we can also see the same impulse at work in modern novels such as Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Hermann Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*, which try to say everything about several characters or even one character over a limited time. Blanchot thematises this artistic tendency in what he calls the narrative voice, and he finds it in Samuel Beckett’s trilogy, in which we hear an endless murmuring that goes on and on without any coercive reason to end. So we might think of the modern novel, at least in some of its reaches, as resistant to silence.

Yet the impulse *tout dire* can also be found in poetry. Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* is an early example. In more recent times, think of Raymond Roussel’s *La vue* or the longer poems of John Ashbery, such as *Flowchart*. These are works which seek to exhaust a subject by speaking endlessly about it. On the other hand, there are poets who seek to say everything by writing as little as possible. Many of Paul Celan’s poems seem to say nothing much but, when read closely, they unfurl meaning after meaning and we can find in them long sequences of a philosophical and theological kind that are tightly embedded in lines and figures. Something similar happens in lyrics by Geoffrey Hill (‘September Song’ and ‘Annunciations’ would

be two examples). There is a silence in these poems which can be made to speak by reading the poems in a particular manner. With Hill, we find contrary movements about a situation that are made to speak so that, in the end, the speaker and the reader are paralysed: we see a ‘thornful ambiguity’, as I call it, which hurts us whichever way we jump, and we cannot simplify what we are reading without reducing it and thereby mistreating it.

These days I am more drawn to lyric poems which do not ask to be translated into contrary theses which cannot be resolved but which conduct a mystery: Basho’s haiku, Mallarmé’s ‘Sainte’, Gary Snyder’s ‘Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout’, the lyrics in Philippe Jaccottet’s *Airs*, and so on. These are poems which point us into reflective silence, and it is there where we might hear the most important things. I’m increasingly drawn to poems which point us somewhere, inside or outside, and don’t demand endless exegesis. My most recent book, *Carnets*, consists of six hundred one-line poems. Some of them do nothing but point, sometimes to the visible and sometimes to the invisible.

RF: In light of your recent publications, *Lands of Likeness: For a Poetics of Contemplation* (2023) and *Contemplation: The Movements of the Soul* (2024), how does the act of contemplation transform the reader’s engagement with a text? Does it necessitate an increased attentiveness to what remains unspoken, ignored, or even vehemently expressed within literary works?

KH: Especially in *Lands of Likeness*, I challenge the dominant hermeneutic in the university world, namely, the hermeneutic of suspicion, which has been thematised in that way, since Paul Ricœur’s *Freud and Philosophy* (1965). Of course, Ricœur looks back to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, so one or another version of this hermeneutic has been around for a very long time. I have learned a great deal from it, but it has limitations, some of which I outline in *Lands of Likeness*. I propose there that a hermeneutic of contemplation exceeds the hermeneutic of suspicion. I find its lineaments in Coleridge, Schopenhauer, and Husserl. Drawing those threads together, I argue (following Richard of Saint Victor) that anything at all can be contemplated, and that when contemplating something we look *at* it, not *through* it. When we do that, we find ourselves passing from one attitude to another, from the natural attitude to the aesthetic attitude or the theoretical attitude or the phenomenological attitude or even to one of a range of

attitudes which I think need to be identified (the basilaic attitude, the eschatological attitude, the eucharistic attitude). The possibilities are very extensive. In *Lands of Likeness* I'm concerned with reading poems, and there, it seems to me, we look to find relations of parts and whole, we engage in anticipations of meanings and recollection of them even as we read, and we ponder the relations of history and fiction. At times we are concerned to uncover conventions and traditions, gaps in what is being said; and these things rightly induce suspicion from time to time: no one likes to be mystified, and certainly not anyone who is open to mystery. But suspicion is not the whole story. At times the hermeneutic of contemplation leads us to a deeper understanding of a poem, even *dilatio mentis*, the expansion of the mind. At other times, though, we are simply led into a mystery which does not result in any sudden moment of understanding. It may take months or years before we grasp what is in play. I've lived inside Yves Bonnefoy's *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve* for decades but its mystery has yet to be distilled into moments of concrete understanding. I still cannot bring all its parts into a whole, although I sense the possibility of a whole there when I read it. Perhaps if I wrote on it, I would go deeper into the poem, although I doubt that I would exhaust its mystery.

In more recent work, *Phenomenology of the Christ*, I challenge another dominant hermeneutic, the historical criticism. Again, I've learned many things from this approach over the years, although I have no sympathy for the global scepticism of some historical critics. The historical criticism is concerned with the what, where, why, and whence of Jesus. If the question 'how?' is ever asked, it is usually framed as 'how come?' One of the things I dislike about the historical criticism is its highly restrictive (and sometimes patronising) sense of people in the past: it's as though they had no imagination, could not coin words, were hugely restricted by what had gone before, and that there could be no singular events or characters to which they could respond. There's also a double standard: events in the world of Greece and Rome, in particular, are relied on more than events in the Holy Land. Phenomenological criticism, on the other hand, is oriented to the 'how'-question: how does the early Church seek to recall Jesus? How do we gain access to Jesus as the Christ and thereby to the One he calls Father? These questions strike me as more important, more spiritually significant, than those asked by the historical critics, although, of course, one needs to be sure-footed when dealing with the Gospels. No one wants to stake

one's life and death on a legend. In discussing pericopes in the Gospels, I pay attention to those which strike me as having a greater historical claim on us than others. But historicity is only a starting point. It's the profiles of Jesus we see which are interesting, and, ultimately, it is Jesus's own phenomenology which is compelling, the ways in which he points us from 'world' to 'kingdom'.

RF: Throughout our conversation, questions recur about what can be said and what resists saying, what can be brought into clarity and what remains irreducibly mysterious. In light of this, how do you understand the role of framing, and its limits, in relation to poetry, contemplation, and theological thought? Is there something essential that can only appear when a frame is approached, loosened, or even relinquished altogether?

KH: Anything that is said is said within at least one context, but no context is ever sufficient by itself. Most of the time, the immediate contexts of composition and reception are more or less clear, although we can be surprised. At times one or the other isn't so evident, though. A case in point is my recent book *Carnets*, which consists of six hundred one-line poems (or aphorisms or fragments). It took some fifty years to write, and now that it's published readers tell me that they like it very much but also that they find it hard to discuss. It's as though the collection evades the usual genres, and people don't quite know what to make of a book that has lyrical, religious, and philosophical lines. One reviewer has said that the only proper response to it is to begin a carnet of one's own! I tend to think of the book as participating in the tradition of 'spiritual exercises': each numbered line (sometimes a statement, sometimes a question) prompts contemplation. But if one doesn't know of that context, it might be hard to know what to make of the book. One might have to make up quite another context. One person has said that it could be a list of ideal tweets. Another has said that it could be a list of things to have tattooed on one's body. I hadn't thought of either of those frames!

Guest Editors' Introduction: Frame/Framing

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The pieces in this issue of *CounterText* are centred around questions posed by *the frame*, in its various understandings as a technical aspect of the work of art, a theoretical problem of limits and boundaries of meaning, or a practical problem of interpretation and individual experience. They mostly emerge from a Roundtable event held at the University of Wrocław, Faculty of Letters, on 24–25 January 2025. They include an interview, articles, a creative-critical piece (or theory-fiction), as well as two essays framing two separate sets of photographs. Together, they cover a wide range of themes and showing that framing remains one of the overarching issues within contemporary criticism, overlapping with and sometimes encompassing many other questions and topics.

There might have been a time when the notion of the frame did not pose an immediate problem, or a tangible material challenge to artists and critics: at least not in explicitly and sustainedly formalised terms. We could perhaps speculate that in deep pre-modern times, frames were at some point seen as something given, natural, almost transparent – an unproblematic, technical

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part of an artistic process that found its stakes and challenges elsewhere. We, however, do not live in such times. In fact, one could perhaps argue that one lasting legacy of modernism is the recasting of the frame as a universal problem, rooted in the very nature or logic of art, beliefs, and our very being in the world: one of the ultimate lessons of modernity being that everything is always framed in *some* way, and no meaningful artistic act can claim simple, seamless harmony with the material world it is immersed in. Interpretation assumes and implies a frame; every frame is a call for interpretation. One seemingly cannot exist without the other.

And of course, there is hardly any consensus on the precise aesthetic and philosophical benefits of framing. In fact, a profound disagreement on the value and importance of a frame could be seen as underlying many of the crucial debates in modern and contemporary criticism. Famously, when Tony Smith laid the theoretical groundwork for the Minimalist movement by referencing his experience of a nighttime ride on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike, he all but explicitly tied the emerging postmodern paradigm to a rejection of frame:

It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. . . . The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. . . . The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. (Wagstaff Jr. 1966: 19)

When critics such as Michael Fried in turn criticised this new approach to art, it was in defence of the aesthetic—and even moral—necessity of a frame, of that elusive *something* that bounds every work into a meaningful and interpretable totality. In its absence, what one ends up with is a series of mere *situations* that exist differently for all those experiencing them—and the institution of *art*, as something that confronts us on its own terms, is effectively abolished:

On the one hand, the turnpike, airstrips and drill ground belong to no one; on the other, the situation established by Smith's presence is in each case felt by him to be his. Moreover, in each case being able to go on and on

indefinitely is of the essence. What replaces the object . . . is above all the endlessness, or objectlessness, of the approach or onrush or perspective. . . . Smith's account of his experience on the turnpike bears witness to theater's profound hostility to the arts, and discloses, precisely in the absence of the object and in what takes its place, what might be called the theatricality of objecthood. (Fried 1967: 19–20)

Of course, Fried's 'theatricality' is famously not synonymous with theatre as such – rather, it signals the prioritisation of individual experience over form, the privatisation of the aesthetic, the ultimate dead end for art and criticism.

Elsewhere, Fried provides compelling concrete examples of how modernist art – in this instance, painting – reasserts its formal interests and capabilities around the frame as *a problem*, that is, something non-transparent, not given, to be actively taken up by the artist. In *Three American Painters*, for instance, the work of Barnett Newman and Kenneth Noland (and, to a lesser extent, Frank Stella) is read as emblematic of the 'deductive' approach to frame and its contents:

[T]he thin vertical 'zips' in Newman's paintings have several functions which ought to be considered [They] provide a crucial element of pictorial structure, by means of what I want to term their 'deductive' relation to the framing-edge. That is, the bands amount to echoes within the painting of the two side framing-edges; they relate primarily to these edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing-edge – as having been 'deduced' from it – though their exact placement within the colored field has been determined by the painter, with regard to coloristic effect rather than to relations that could be termed geometrical. (Fried 1998 [1965]: 233)

Although obviously medium-specific, this technique espouses a more general kind of sensibility: where the frame, far from being either natural or unnecessary (or perhaps even harmful), appears as a result of a conscious decision, a *formal principle* of the work, with its own impact and implications. From such a standpoint, the frame becomes a challenge – but a *productive* one, an engine for innovation, inquiry, and criticism.

Without going into further detail, it is thus safe to say that for a long time now the frame itself has been an important theoretical and aesthetic battleground. Whatever one's view on its inevitability in literature and art – there is certainly no consensus on that point even among the authors

in this issue of *CounterText* – we can perhaps more modestly agree that what *is* inevitable is the regular reappearance of the *notion* of the frame as a challenge, and a point of potential disagreement. In other words, frame as a recurring *force* – to use Edgar Allan Poe’s formulation¹ – or a *power*, to quote the narrator of Garth Greenwell’s *Small Rain*, whose views seem to resonate with many of the pieces in this issue:

[T]hat’s the power of a frame, I would tell [my students], to take a bit of the world, a person or a sparrow, to make a boundary within which we can establish that relation that is the only acceptable relation, in which we can see all that there is to see and feel all that there is to feel, which is what makes me think that the disciplined attention of art is a moral discipline, even when the content of that morality isn’t obvious, in the way Cézanne paints an apple, say, or the bowl that gathers the apples, the hundreds of strokes he makes, each an act of seeing, a judgment, each an attempt to activate in us that awareness we nearly always shut down. (Greenwell 2024: 184–5)

In this sense, the frame in and of itself implies a degree of struggle: a certain limitation, selection, boundedness; possibly exclusion. Of course, this is very much a dialectical tension: frames exclude only inasmuch as they include, they limit and bound in order to establish the kind of freedom that is only accessible through form. But there’s no denying there is something forceful, or perhaps even violent, about frames and framing: an establishment of hierarchies, a compelling of convictions, and a call for judgement. Or perhaps simply an implied *indifference* of sorts, one that can in itself be seen as antagonistic and antagonising: the way the framed work resists our gaze and reasserts its right to exist in the world on its own terms. In either case, it is intuitively clear why Greenwell’s narrator considers the frame a *moral* issue: inevitably, it entails a degree of choice, and a degree of confrontation.

And indeed, the role of a frame as core to modernism and what comes after is often examined throughout this issue of *CounterText* on *Frame / Framing*.² In his piece on Anselm Kiefer’s artistic reading of Joyce and Rimbaud, Roderrick Mengham shows framing and reframing as the fabric of both certain literary traditions and interpretation as such. On his account, the central themes in Kiefer’s work are most clear and compelling when it emerges how ‘both framing and framed by’ another author such as Joyce. Meanwhile, two pieces on photography included in the cluster – by Dragana Rankovic

and Mateusz Żaboklicki, who both draw extensively on their own work and experience as photographers – highlight the antagonism inherent to framing as a fundamental problem of modern form. In her experimental project, touching on the life of coastal communities in Malta, Rankovic emphasises the difference between intentional and unintended framing, whereas Żaboklicki offers a critical analysis of the underlying theoretical assumptions of contemporary photojournalism, revealing its reliance on arbitrary assumptions as to what lies within and without the picture's frame. And although the two authors may be said to reach different conclusions – with Żaboklicki reaffirming, in both his theory and practice, the importance of intentional framing, and Rankovic inclined more towards the accidental, in her reflection here and her aesthetic and practice – they share a fundamental interest in the relationship between the author, the frame, and the public (in more than one sense of this last term). As such, they convincingly show the problem of framing as bridging the aesthetic and the social.

Indeed, a discussion of the political implications of the notion of a frame seems all but inevitable, but also fraught with the danger of oversimplification. It is tempting to see the frame as a simple proxy for more explicitly political notions – such as *borders*, for instance, or *laws* – which would encourage us to draw parallels between certain approaches to frame and framing on the one hand, and certain types of political or geopolitical projects on the other. And of course, such connections *do* exist, and they certainly call for various critical analyses – a rejection of the frame has its politics, and so does its embrace (as Greenwell points out, in a provocatively old-fashioned tone, it is at its core a *moral* issue). Still, it would surely be misguided to try and simply transpose one's attitude to frames and framing onto one's general political sensitivity. The framing practices inherent to art are quite different from the ones used in the day-to-day politics, and one's views on the role of borders in pictures or novels doesn't necessarily translate, say, to one's attitude towards the borders of a country. It is hard to imagine someone pledging their allegiance to the frame as a metaphor, or as some generalised abstraction. Which, again, is not to say that frames do not carry political implications; rather, insofar as they shape our politics in any particular way, their influence just has to be seen as more complex – not less prominent, necessarily, but perhaps not as immediate.

For a good example of such mediation, we can look to critics such as Walter Benn Michaels or Nicholas Brown, who show that in contemporary societies one's attitude towards the frame may often correlate with, or become a proxy for, one's general relationship not just with the viewer or the reader, but with the concept of identity as such, or even with the market itself (see Michaels 2014; Brown 2019). Frame would thus be a stand-in not simply for everything we see as 'closed off', exclusionary, or hierarchical, but for all those structures in the world that, in order to change, require concrete action rather than just a shift in perspective. 'The frame, by contrast, makes everything outside the work and in particular our response to the work irrelevant. . . . [E]very time you experience your own irrelevance to the determination of what is and is not part of the work, you are offered the opportunity to understand what it means for it to be autonomous and for you to belong to a society structured by class.' (Michaels 2014)

Several contributors to the cluster touch on this complex political dimension of framing. In his creative-critical piece, extracted here from a forthcoming longer work, Ansgar Allen highlights the notion of frame and framing as central to a certain type of academic discourse and the institutional order associated with it. By putting in play various heterodox conceptions of the frame, the protagonist—marked by idiosyncrasy of thought and action—manages to disrupt the normal flow of university politics. Meanwhile, Zuzanna Sala and Łukasz Żurek touch on the politics of framing from the standpoint of literary criticism, commenting on recent developments in autofiction. They argue that modern autofiction writing escapes easy categories and, beyond posing risks to literature's autonomy, it also offers a way of reinventing it: by intentionally including in the frame precisely that which the audience expects to remain firmly outside of it.

Insofar as the question of the frame is always a question about the possibility of framing, of beginnings and ends, of boundaries and interpretability and indifference, it remains necessarily intertwined with many of the other crucial notions around contemporary literature, criticism, and humanities in general. It remains inherently linked to fundamental problems of intent, authorship, and autonomy, as well as experience, affect, and readerly agency (or a lack thereof). It connects to the idea of immersion, as well as any discussion on the possibility of 'generating' art and literature (through means such as artificial intelligence,

and others). Frames are also necessarily in play every time we describe literature or its interpretation in specifically temporal rather than spatial categories; any accounts of text as play, or performance, or event, seemingly give even more urgency to our attempts at defining the relationship between *meaning* and *boundaries*. More broadly, the notion of a frame overlaps to an extent with that of a totality – it is here that the practical problems of formal coherence blend with the more fundamental, ontological questions about the status of structures, objects, and actions. In this sense, we could perhaps say that the frame is the fundamental means by which a work of art, or literature, both resists and embraces its place in history.

This conceptual link between framing and virtually *everything* is thematised and put forward in Ivan Callus's essay. Here, a series of provocations – can one frame 'everything' as an object of analysis? what would 'Everything Studies' look like? – leads to a call to action: 'If literature is a discourse in which it is possible to say everything then we are going to need a literary theory of everything.' Whatever the practical difficulties – acknowledged in the tonal framing of the piece – Callus invites us to lean into this idea as a 'serious proposition', a sort of analytic necessity implied by the very concept of 'the countertext'. Meanwhile, Adam Partyka focuses on how the problem of the frame is historically and philosophically tied specifically to the immensely influential notion of text-as-organism. His discussion of 'organicism', central to both the pragmatist philosophy of Dewey, Rorty, and Shusterman, as well as the contemporary work of the Polish poet Kacper Bartczak, shows how the question of the frame, the inside and the outside of the poem, remains central to literature's autonomy, or the workings of its inner metabolism.

Thus at least as a point of interest, the frame seems inevitable. Indeed, one could go as far as to suggest that the question of 'countertext' could in itself be – at a certain level, in a certain context – reframed as a question of frame and framing. If what is implied by 'countertext' as a problematic is not that literature is dead but that, to quote one of the journal's early editorials, 'today the literary may simply be elsewhere' (Callus and Corby 2015: v) – if, in other words, it is not literature that fails, but we who fail to recognise the new and surprising forms it takes on – then to search for various instances of 'countertext' would be to look for new emerging ways of framing and reframing reality, for the new beginnings and unexpected endings – as well as new ways of rethinking the idea of aesthetic boundary, or the act of framing itself. This is not to say that countertexts necessarily

entail any particular position on any of these issues—rather, we could perhaps suggest that whatever the countertextual is, it certainly requires us to confront the frame as the challenge that it is.

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Notes

1. ‘The next point to be considered was the mode of bringing together the lover and the Raven – and the first branch of this consideration was the *locale*. For this the most natural suggestion might seem to be a forest, or the fields – but it has always appeared to me that a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place’ (Poe 1846: 166).
2. We follow, below, a different sequence of reference to the contributions in this issue to the one suggested by the sequence in the Contents page.

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This is going to be about everything or, Framing the Limits of the Post-Literary

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Abstract:

What might emerge from taking *everything* as an object of study? What is to be read into the increasing incidence of texts (of all kinds) that have the word *everything* in their title, especially at a time when talk – academic and not – about a ‘theory of everything’ is ‘a thing’? How is the inevitability of the question of framing, there, to be itself framed – and pitched? How, indeed, should an investigation into *everything* and its semantics and connotative potentials proceed? What levels of seriousness, and what measure, tone, form, style, approach, could it wear? The text that follows offers preliminary thoughts on putting *everything* – the word; its shifting literal, rhetorical, specialist senses; ‘everything’ as concept and idea – in the frame. It finds that to look squarely upon everything with an academic gaze in an academic space (for instance, in a journal), occasions, perhaps compels, some unorthodoxy. It suggests some implications that follow for the conception and articulation of the post-literary and the countertextual, in the framing context of which this questioning of everything is being broached in the first place. Or, at least, it would bear those implications if one *were* to take seriously the possibility of putting everything in-frame – and/or (this supplement-and-alternative are unavoidable) beyond frame. In consequence, whether and how to take everything seriously, and why, matters. Seriousness, then, is in play: with everything – including the framing conventions at work in this abstract.

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This is going to be about everything. Everything is in the frame. The question that arises is whether framing and everything can each contain the other. Does everything comprehend all that might conceivably apprehend it, whereby the two would then be inter-penetrable? (The easy retorts – ‘It *would* have to, would it not? They *would* have to be, would they not?’ – are, as will be seen but is already all too well known, less than quick.) Or is the frame, in whichever way it is to be conceived, possibly even revered, so other to and larger than everything that is known or discoverable that it unfathomably exceeds it?

What has been broached could seem whimsical. Yet it could also get predictable, not least because it is comprehensively well rehearsed in theology, physics, philosophy, and beyond. Hence, and in order to get some preliminaries out of the way: why is there something rather than nothing? How, once there is something, does the thought of everything follow, even if it falls short of frames – theoretical, philosophical, scientific, religious, ideological, and more – that cut its dimension(s) down to size, scale, proportion, idea, creed, inevitably physics again: rendering it, always, a disappointment? Why is everything so very much less than it could be? Is the disappointment with everything that ‘all’ has come to the outcome, in effect, of framing always having its way with things? How, incidentally, does ‘nothing’ – around whose very nature the pointlessness and vacuity of and within frame might be presumed – end up with a more resonant press than everything? And why does every next Greatly Disruptive event in history or every paradigm shift in science *not* overturn everything, or not quite? ‘This changes everything,’ one keeps hearing of, for instance, the various suspects in the permacritical present, or of the irruptive becomings of Artificial Intelligence. Yet in that hyperbole lies the underlying belief that ‘Some things [or, *something*] *will* last.’ Whereupon it becomes apparent that a reasoning prepared to take everything seriously *must* insist on the distinction between *every thing* and *everything*. That preliminary procedure on the argument is itself consequent on clarifying, if there is the need, that *everything* will in what follows be variously used to point to the word as word (in which case, italics will indicate the usage) and in shifting reference to the literal, rhetorical, specialist senses of everything, to ‘everything’ as

idea, concept, abstraction, proposition (in which case, there will be no distinguishing marks or gambits, and context must yield the cues to the meaning or, indeed, the ambiguity to be inferred). There also lies there the intimation that everything's extendibility to more, much more, than *every thing* is itself still only ever going to be thinkable within a more contained frame than would be needed for radical, absolute totality – or transformation – to be conceivable. This may or may not prove providential.

The more containing frame that will settle on this text must emerge gradually. Meanwhile: everything is all that we could ever know, even though we cannot know everything (it is never redundant to spell out the self-evident, where everything is concerned). Both points are good reasons for not wanting everything to change either in the reality or the conception, which would be too much, far too much, again. Nor will we want to ask, 'What is a thing, anyway, what is and is not thingness?' Or, for that matter and to go with the immemorial questions, is love, or friendship, or beauty, or art, or God a thing? It would not do, here – this is neither the space nor the academic mode for it – to open onto the epistemological tradition(s) primed for answers that would be conceptually, formally, discursively proper. That move would only serve to peg response to taming, recuperative frame(s). A different dynamic pegged instead to this context (and to what this text is becoming) might instead ask – possibly disbelievingly and by way of an example drawing attention to the frame of *this* journal, which is the space where such questions are arising in the first place – 'Is the post-literary a thing now? Is countertextuality a thing? *Really?* And if they are, does that change anything, let alone everything? Are you telling us that they are now a thing because something, because everything – in literature, the world, and the frames of their (im)possibilities – has changed?'

The post-literary stakes are anticipated below. Meanwhile the questions multiply. One of the reasons they do so is that *everything* is being concurrently taken literally and rhetorically, as well as in designation of a sustained, if disparate, trend to headline it in academic and (non)fictional space and in poetry (reference to the examples of the trend, as well as to lexicon-derived insights, will follow too). Such things can happen when taking everything seriously. What *does* it mean to have every thing, *all* things, *allness* itself in *the* frame, if that were possible (whatever investments come with the '*the*'), such that we see everything strain a limit, anthropogenic or otherwise, that might impose measure: even as and necessarily, if it really

comprehends everything, that frame must then be measureless? Is it possible to think this question outside Russell's Paradox ('the set of all sets is a member of itself . . .'), which is not one of the intertextual coordinates for a frame that this discussion would want to orient itself within and around? Not when instead the idea of the (post-)literary and the countertextual might reveal itself to be thinkable in relation to a frame that the ever-increasing prominence of everything as conceit *and* object of study, as a concern of ever resonant note that is now quite broadly audible, sets.

Precisely on that note, and deferring for just one moment longer the examples that must serve as evidence for the increased plausibility of everything as an object of study, the following question might be asked. Why, when there are studies on everything these days, do we not have a subject called 'Everything Studies'? As it happens, Everything Studies does score some hits on Google, which like some AI platforms will insist on returning results on everything (including on 'The Everything University', which links to webpages celebrating catholicity within certain institutions' 'academic offer', as the phrase goes, but also to some rather original College branding and merchandising). And while Everything Studies might seem a stretch, it is striking to observe critique of what might loom as 'The Curriculum of Everything'. The phrase is José A. Pacheco's, in response to how 'The Internet—and the Internet of Things or the Metaverse Internet (*of everything*)—as a source of information and knowledge is intensely variegated and is now profoundly changing the canonical question of the curriculum' (2023: 15; emphasis added). The irony is that the Everything Curriculum would run counter to more searching contemplation of everything. Pacheco quotes Heidegger's 'Discourse on Thinking' to that effect: 'Calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not meditative thinking, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns *in everything that is*' (Heidegger 2003: 89; Pacheco 2023: 44; emphasis added).

Contemplation of everything, though not of the kind that Heidegger might have had in mind, appears to be ongoing, at least to some degree, if one were to take on trust contemporary cultural production's committing of everything to *titles*' framing, in a manner sometimes upheld by the content and sometimes not. The instances where this occurs not as rhetorical flourish or as part of bookselling tradecraft or calculative thinking, but rather as the brandishing of engagement with everything

as idea and concept, will be particularly significant. Those cases make it possible to start figuring it, everything, as *Everything* (a usage that is not adopted in this text): that is, with an upper-case *E* and, thereby, what is *re-framed* by that upper-case *E* in play, including the propensity to absolutise everything but also the contrary and entirely reasonable disposition to suspect that move. This is, indeed, a time of books like Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2025 [2003]; a work that has just had its second edition, which is fitting: everything needs updating), or David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2020). (Both titles performatively suggest that modesty-of-measure and modesty-in-claim are sometimes a breach and sometimes an upholding of decorum, where everything is concerned, which is a rhetorical move played to good effect also in Cary Doctorow's *Enshittification: Why Everything Suddenly Got Worse and What to Do About It* (2025)). It is a time also of award-winning films like James Marsh's *The Theory of Everything* (2014) or Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022); of works of critique like Mark McGurl's *Everything and Less* (2021) that takes its cue from consideration of the cultural politics of Amazon, the so-called 'Everything Store' (see Stone 2013); of poetry like Kae Tempest's *Everything Speaks in Its Own Way* (2012); of DJs with names like 'Eats Everything', of a novel and an adapting film and a band called *Everything Everything* (see Yoon 2015). 'Everything everything': a double measure, if that were possible, of everything: what an idea that is. And once such thoughts spring to mind, it is possible to discern unlikely point and heft in the most casual phrases. By way of non-exhaustive example: 'I like everything.' 'She has everything.' 'This means everything to me.' 'A place for everything and everything in its place.' 'Everything must go.' 'Tell me everything.' 'He lied about everything.' 'Everything happens for a reason.' 'There's an app for everything these days.' 'Everything's been reduced to an algorithm.' 'The price of everything and the value of nothing.' And, already referred to above: 'This changes [or risks] everything,' or, 'This is the end of everything as we know it.' Or indeed, 'Everything you always wanted to know about *x* but were too afraid to ask,' which in the frame of what is being discussed here would then be configurable as, 'Everything you always wanted to know about framing—or about everything—but were always afraid to ask [or too canny, or too savvy, or too academically well brought up to ask]—and certainly not in the manner in which everything in *this* text [what *kind* of

text is this?] is proceeding so far.' Following all of which it will remain true, and perhaps providential again, that 'You can't have everything.'

The preliminaries are not done. It is as well to look, in the oldest of gambits, at definitions. Before doing so, however, a stray thought. What nobody would ever remember is their first encounter with the word *everything*, in whichever language that occurs. (The slippage in some languages of the sense of 'everything' beneath a word that could also mean 'all', or beneath a phrase that in translation would be more or less equivalent to *every thing*, neither of which is quite the same 'thing' as 'everything', would be something to address in a longer space.) Why *should*—how *could*—anyone remember their first encounter with the word *everything*, even with the idea of everything? This connects with experience of the thought expressed, with disarming simplicity for its sophistication (simplicity being the very point at its core), by W. V. O. Quine:

The curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: "What is there?" It can be answered, moreover, in a word—"Everything"—and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is. There remains room for disagreement over cases; and so, the issue has stayed alive down the centuries.

The thought, in quotation, provides the more-than-epigraphic frame to Vanessa de Harven's absorbing volume, *The Unity of Stoic Metaphysics: Everything is Something* (2025: 1). (The book's chapter titles—'Something'; 'Bodies'; 'Incorporeals'; Neither Corporeals Nor Incorporeals'; 'Everything'—read like a string tracing the developmental trajectory of the understanding of thereness; that something there is; that, to adapt Gertrude Stein, there is there there). If it becomes a consequential thought within this versioning of that frame, it is because the first memory of the dawning awareness of their mind at work is something that some people say they recall. Even if the recall is imprecise, or reconstructive, in the frame here is that sudden burst of everything coming to consciousness; the first stirring of self-aware proprioception, perception, apperception; the awakening experience to all matter and the possibility of having 'idea', at all, on anything. In other words, this is that thing that could induce psychology and phenomenology to insist, as well they might, on their relevance to the matters at hand and to their framing, in consideration

of the infant's wondrously unframed excitement that there *is* something rather than nothing and that an 'I', newly apprehended, can have mind and relation. Those who remember the first memory of anything may also remember, just, that first wonder(ing).

To double down not on psychology or phenomenology, but rather on the whimsy that was admitted, above, to be integral to any inquiry into everything: consider, hypothetically, the example of the child who is gifted a book called something like *My First Big Book of Everything* (such books are legion, as the quickest browse of an online bookstore or the catalogues of libraries of deposit – those institutions that hold everything – will show). And consider also the possibility that that child, with precocious fantasy but also with petulant precision, is both absorbed by what a Big Book can encompass and querulous about what it cannot comprehend. Here is a homespun allegory for everything and its challenges. The child grows up but does not grow out of that absorption with what everything could open onto; nor, possibly, does the child get over the failed promise of that reach. To take things to the extreme: the recovered memory of the disappointment will have involved everything, no less. Traumatised by everything: an exaggeration indeed, but let it stand. The child, grown troubled adult, makes everything personal, takes everything personally. It all comes down to a solipsistic framing of everything. Here, to continue with the extravagance of this naïf/naïve allegory, is a primal and hyperbolised scene about knowing and its frustrations. But there is a more sanguine outlook. What occurs there with the big book is the early reassurance, rather than the later dismay, that everything can after all have some accounting frame around it. Something to explain everything. It would then be possible to trust that 'I' can only see and reach so much, even as 'I' grow: 'I' *shall* be bound, defined, by everything that might ever come to set frame.

Which is why this is a good moment to bring in definition and its boundaries. Not, to start with and in the familiar framing move, from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), but, wanting to keep explanation and indeed framing itself a little random (at least initially), from the first desk dictionary that comes to hand. It has *everything* down as follows:

everything . . . *pron.* 1. the entirety of a specified or implied class: *she lost everything in the War.* 2. a great deal, esp. of something very important: *she means everything to me.* (Collins, s.v. 'everything')

There, tidily fitted into three lines, is everything. By definition pronominal, not even nominal, everything is never, rhetorically or otherwise, ‘Everything’ or *every thing*. It is only everything in a more manageable and managed way, in relation to a specified or implied category: to a frame, in other words. Everything is framed by definition; everything is defined in a frame; frame defines everything. Always, already, ever, again. Everything, by such handily accessible and *sensible* definition, is never everything conceivable: knowable or unglimped, fathomable or otherwise. Because there *is* frame, everything is, rather, always on this side of knowledge, even when it stretches itself to comprehend expanding universes and multiverses, to become a theory of all there ever is, was, or could be. This is especially so since the first thing that a theory of everything does is to contract (in all senses of the word) what it could extend to, even if and as it talks of everything’s capacities to expand away from all we know (see Hawking 2006; Harman 2017).

For anything about an everything that might affirm these intuitions this would be the moment to go to the *OED*. In adherence to framing propriety it would, however, be polite to consult also Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* and its window onto everything. But *everything* is, in fact, not a headword in Johnson’s lexicon. There is no definition for it there. There *is* a definition for *every*, rendered as ‘each one of all’ in the midst of the clarification—a richly teasing one—that *every*, for all its openness, ‘has therefore no plural signification’. The only concession to a more capacious understanding of everything is in fact a sundering one, occurring in quotation from [Archbishop John] ‘Tillotson’ to say that ‘Aristotle has long since observed, how unreasonable it is to expect the same kind of proof for every thing, which we have for some thing.’ Every thing its own thing, in other words. But there *is*, in contrast, a definition for *nothing*, and a lengthy one at that. Here is just one point within that definition to pause on. The *Dictionary* has ‘nothing’ down as ‘opposed to something’ (not, interestingly, as ‘opposed to everything’). In the definition of *nothing*, therefore, everything is out of frame, which would be unerring enough.

Meanwhile, or later, the *OED* cannot, like Johnson, pass over *everything*. The definition of *everything* in the *OED* positions it as pronoun, noun, but also adjective, the latter to mark its use in exemplifying phrases like ‘everything good’, ‘everything new’, ‘everything bad in politics’. It cannot do without a first move to have everything down as ‘all’, ‘all

things', but the *framing* follows immediately: 'all *necessary or relevant things*' (emphasis added), thereby making it explicit that everything is contextual. Context is all, context is everything. In this respect, another striking feature of the *OED*'s definition is the recognition of everything 'in predicative use' in the 'colloquial' sense, to indicate—in what is another framing limit—'the entirety of what matters' (among the examples given is Mark Twain's 'Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond,' from *Pudd'nhead Wilson*). *Everything* is also framebound when it refers to 'an entire stock of belongings, faculties, attributes', these not being unlimited; but it is also effect-intent when denoting 'things of every kind' in 'humorous' manner, as in Charles Dickens's sentence in *Our Mutual Friend*, 'But to be sure there were rum everythings,' or in a cutting line of John Ruskin's in a piece in the *Pall Mall Gazette*: 'Patent everythings going of themselves everywhere.' In 'rare[r]' use, the *OED* indicates, is the adjectival practice of *everything* to indicate 'Having every good quality', one example for which is given from George Graham's 1923 novel, *Carstone Rectory*: 'Mr Mordaunt is very good, and very clever, and very everything, is he not?' The *OED*, it turns out, is, as ever, itself very mordant, and very everything—including on everything.

A less full move might involve the thesaurus. Yet thesauruses can themselves be a little unsettling about everything. One thesaurus has *everything*, first and ambitiously, as 'all', which despite the sanction seen above from the *OED* could serve as a parable on the inadequacy of synonymy in aiding conceptualisation. It also has *everything* as

... lock stock and barrel, the aggregate, the entirety, the lot, the sum, the total, the whole caboodle, [interestingly, not 'the whole', though we have just had 'the total' and have, next] the whole lot, the whole shoot, the whole shooting-match'. (*Chambers Paperback Thesaurus*, s.v. 'everything')

'All' is in the space of the ellipsis. But—and the question is not unserious—why must everything then end with a shoot-out? Why must everything become a Western? By way of following an association: is everything, in a different sense, a Western idea, a Western imposition? How long was it going to be before that question was asked? (Not long: it is there, constitutively, in *The Dawn of Everything*; see Graeber and Wengrow, *passim*.)

That question burns, but in a context involving *CounterText*'s concerns and the question of frame, and after all the framing up to this point, it is time to ask the following. Where, in all this, does the literary, the

post-literary, textuality, countertextuality figure? Literature—its writers, its scholars—cannot but work with texts, which is why any response to the question must keep that in view, and not only because ‘*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]’ (Derrida 1997: 159; emphasis in the original), or because it has become a thing to say (sometimes complain) that ‘everything is a text now’. True: it might be asseverated that texts, all texts in their totality, contain everything if anything does; or, that there might be one text that has the framing ultimacy. The religions of the Book, the religions which each have their own first and last Big Book of Everything, are sustained by the apotheosis of this idea, a milder version of which is detectable also in the fact that those who have written about everything have been known to be drawn to ideas about what might be ‘ultimate’, as David Graeber’s posthumously published *On the Ultimate Hidden Truth of the World* (2024) or Graham Harman’s recent *Waves and Stones: On the Ultimate Nature of Reality* (2025) suggest. So is the conception of Jorge Luis Borges’s total library, though not perhaps, his Aleph, in which everything is brought together not in a Book (Borges 1998a, 1998b), but in and on itself to one impenetrable point in space and time, in a late modernist take on William Blake’s envisioning in ‘Auguries of Innocence’ of ‘the world in a grain of Sand’, ‘infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour’ (Blake 2002: 88). Clearly, everything could draw some mysticism. Derrida’s ‘*Tout autre est tout autre*’ ((1995 [1992]): 82ff) is evidence enough of that, especially if it is understood in the key of everything rather than that of the ethico-political. Mysticism is not necessarily the stock-in-trade, however, of (post-)literary theorists. And so, instead, prosaically and schematically, here are seven points that will provide a preliminary path to thinking the relation between everything, the (post-)literary, and the (counter)textual. (*Seven*: the point about mysticism notwithstanding, it is somehow fitting, when discussing everything, to go with the number of completion.) The points are given here as an underlying frame to the more articulated and extended inquiry into everything that they might possibly (pre)figure.

(1) To start with questions of motivation and seriousness: this text is one for which the title and the abstract could have been exactly the same, with each potentially doubling up for the other. ‘This is going to be about everything’ could have served not only as the title, which it does, but also as the abstract. It was tempting to go for that arrangement, though in the

event the outcome shrinks from the attempt and does something more familiar, even if the abstract is pitched to be a touch more-than-frame. In the same vein, the keywords below the abstract could have included only one word: *everything*. Nothing more need have been appended. By the logic in play, any addition would have been superfluous. And then, by that same logic, the biographical note could have stretched to just half a line: ‘Has written about everything.’ All very neat, though not more apt than pat. Independently of whether this conceit would have been received as being serious or unserious, which would depend on readerly disposition but also end up dictated by expectations conditioned by what occurs around the framing processes in academic publishing that hinge on metadata being *very* square, it is not entirely without point here. That it was not taken up and that a subtitle was added to nuance things and connect too with what is broached across the six points below says much about holding one’s nerve (or not); about the academic instincts of framing things – even everything – ‘properly’ (or just about); about what can be countenanced in an academic investigation into everything (than which nothing can be more serious) that proceeds, justifiably or otherwise, other than conventionally. Pitch, voice, style, tone: they, too, would need to receive quite particular recalibrations in any more extended investigation into everything. What, indeed, would seriousness – *decorum* – mean, in setting that frame?¹ And that is without getting into matters of content and approach, and such methodological conundrums as, for instance, deciding whether going with any case-studies (what *could* they be?) when studying everything adds up. What could stand in, synecdochally, for everything?

(2) There is no framing without omission. (The previous number of *CounterText* was, at it happens, on *Omission/s*.) It is pertinent to recall here a comment from the two-day roundtable discussion on *Frame/Framing* at the University of Wrocław, in January 2025, from which this number of *CounterText* springs: ‘If you encompass everything, there would be no project.’² This presentation exemplifies that reality. There is much that could and should have been mentioned that, deliberately, has not been acknowledged or properly addressed. Traditions of idealism, or the work of Leibniz or Spinoza, or Frege’s or Russell’s or Quine’s, or object-oriented ontology: all are pertinent to everything. The feeble excuse for the omissions would be, ‘I can’t do everything.’ The truth, however, is that an extended version of this project would in any case prefer to go with

reflections stemming, among other texts, from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (2019 [1871]) and, in that novel, from Edward Casaubon's abortive *Key to All Mythologies*; from Umberto Eco's book *The Infinity of Lists* (2009); from consideration of the tradition of miscellanies as a genre, indeed of the genres and practices that could have designs on the compendious, the encyclopedic, if not on everything as such: in other words, the list, the catalogue, the inventory, the database, the encyclopedia itself, and on attempts to bring literariness to each of these. It navigates not towards, say, the Derrida of *The Truth in Painting* (1987 [1978]) and what he says there about *ergon* and *parergon*, but to some of his shorter interventions. Among them, *Artaud the Moma*, which among other concerns carries Derrida's reflections on how in 1996, for reasons of caution, the MOMA did not allow him to use the title—the one just cited, which in French has risqué associations—for his talk at the Museum on how, in effect, Antonin Artaud's works on paper resist any framing. Another tack would be towards Derrida's essay 'Advances' (2017 [1995]), which considers Plato's *Timaeus* (another first and last *Big Book of Everything*; 'one of humanity's oldest books', as Derrida has it) in relation to what Derrida calls 'the absolute *antecedent*', ahead and progenitive of all humanly apprehensible frames (2017: 3, 4; emphasis in the original).³ It would, inevitably of course, refer to interventions like his essay 'Demeure', which pointedly positions literature as a discourse in which it is possible to say/suffer everything (2000: 28 and *passim*). All of that is rich enough, though the omissions and suppressions in the intertext—current and projected—around everything remain regrettable. Hopefully, the point of what is broached instead is clear and the need, or at least the option, to proceed differently can be seen to be viable.

(3) Such viability risks an added vulnerability. If literature is a discourse in which it is possible to say everything then we *are* going to need—it appears to follow—a *literary* theory of everything. An earlier version of this text carried a close reading of some framing statements that Stephen Hawking provided to his thoughts on the possibility of 'the' theory of everything (see Hawking 2005). *He* can afford and offer the definite article and the singular. It is debatable whether literary studies can—and thereby hangs a long (inter)disciplinary tale on the (dis)content of faculties (about which, the first chapter of Harman's *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2017) is revealing in its consideration in this respect of differences across, more specifically, physics and philosophy). That exercise

in close reading is discarded here, to retain only its suggestion that a literary theory of everything (framed in awareness of its own inevitable and admitted limitations, as is – of course! – only ‘proper’) need not find itself, necessarily and daftly, out-Casauboning Casaubon in its embracing of futility. For reasons that have to do also with considerations raised in the sixth point below, the idea, if not the practice, of a literary theory of everything must, even if only as a thought-experiment and/or in (dis)proof-of-concept, take the possibility of that undertaking seriously, at least in its frame. Because, if literature and literary theory cannot give themselves to everything, what are we then saying?

(4) The project of a literary theory of everything is not helped by literature not having extended itself to everything it could conceivably extend to. Literature’s somethings are considerable, but the anythings that have not come within its frames and representations can concentrate minds, as can the question that goes, ‘What is literature *not* about?’ (in all the conceivable senses of that question).

(5) Literary theory has always been a miscellany of disciplines (see Culler 1997; 2007). It is a discourse that could seem to be almost about everything because it is so interdisciplinary in its bearings. There is a risk – and wager – in this character of literary theory. The risk lies in the appearance of discourse envy and in perceived superficiality in deploying borrowed conceptualities, insights, approaches (in a manner that cannot kept at bay by the objection that goes, ‘But literary criticism has always drawn on other discourses!’). The wager is that it can, thereby and in effect, take on everything. A longer version of this text would, by way of example (here *would* be one case-study), want to present posthumanism as a manifestation of that wager. In its distinctness of discourse, field, and outlook and in its much more-than-literary affinities – even though it arguably is, genealogically and in significant part, literary – posthumanism is viewable as a move on that undertaking and its desires. Posthumanism, in other words, has serious claim on being an everything paradigm. Perhaps this is a consequence of literary theory’s practice of the full leap to being a literary theory of everything always needing a different kind of becoming.

(6) In the time of the post-literary, literature is elsewhere; that elsewhere might just be the countertextual. This is the rationale behind *CounterText* (see Callus and Corby 2015) that in the pages of the journal is most regularly invoked, recast, worried at, reaffirmed, deconstructed – or quietly passed

over. If that is the case, then not only is the frame of the literary displaced, but the reframing is going to require a theory and a practice and a poetics to establish that if literature can now be, just to exaggerate, everything everywhere all at once, then how and why this holds—and more so in a certain kind of potentiation, and with certain others not at all or not quite (case-studies in everything *were* always going to have a space)—is going to have to be explained. Dialling up the stakes before dialling them down, ‘properly’, would be everything here.

(7) As ever in literary studies, cognition must (*pace* distant reading) take the route of close reading.⁴ Case-studies in everything, then, *must* be positioned. The problem is that everything is not something that can be close-read. Infinity not being available, it is not possible to close-read everything. But it is possible to do some next best things. *Hyperobject* is the term Timothy Morton reserves for objects that are ‘massively distributed in space and time relative to humans’ (2013: 1). There is no more *hyper* hyperobject than everything. Even ‘the end of the world’, which is a frame to Morton’s study that is flagged in his subtitle, does not compare: everything is much bigger than the end of the world. It is not possible to read everything, but it is not possible either to read those hyperobjects that, despite what was said earlier, do have it in them to change everything: world wars, for instance, or pandemics, or climate change, or AI. But it *is* possible to read (into) the recent tendency for everything, as idea and conceit, to feature more and more in popular discourse and in the cultural and academic imaginaries. The way to do so is to work through, for instance, some of the previously mentioned titles by Bryson, McGurl, Tempest, and Graeber and Wengrow; through Wittgenstein’s ‘Big Book’ thought-experiment in the 1929 Lecture on Ethics (Wittgenstein 2014); through Hawking’s or Harman’s disclaimers about a theory of everything (Hawking 2005; Harman 2017); through how Husserl’s ‘theory of manifolds is a theory of everything’, and how such a ‘theory of everything is intrinsically connected with the theory of theories’ (see Miklov 2005); *and* through post-literary affinities around all of that. (Suddenly, before the theory of theories, a literary theory of everything does not seem so outré.) To do that carefully and to good effect with *those* case-studies should be feasible and revealing enough. This *can* be a serious undertaking. Whereupon it is also incumbent upon the *CounterText* project, if it is to be serious about that elsewhere thing, to be ever assiduous in finding the literary and the countertextual

demonstrably present in planes and reaches where one might not be primed to look for them. This has the odd consequence of reframing anything and everything and everywhere and anywhere as potentially countertextual, a prospect and a project that hardly seems likely but whose implications are far-reaching: one that could only be contemplated on the other side of propriety, perhaps; or, actually, one that is, suddenly, seriously urgent and timely.

And so, if this frame on everything breaks off here, it is because a conclusion feels opportune and, perhaps, merciful. The overriding problem must be acknowledged, and it is probably a little improper to have kept it for the end frame. There could be said to be something misguided in this text and what its framing takes on, and identifying it is straightforward enough. Quite simply, everything. Everything is wrong with this text. Just everything. There should at least have been an added framing move in the abstract or the first lines, in forewarning and attempted mitigation. The move could have used the title of Akwaeke Emezi's 2022 poetry collection. *Content Warning: Everything*. Even then, as with Emezi's collection, one was always going to read on—and be unsettled. Cracking everything is the atavistic human wish, and cracking on with everything is the human trouble. Literature has portrayed that wish and that trouble often enough. The thought arises that, with everything, (post-)literary limit is (post)human(ist) limit. The potential congruences there would need longer and different scrutiny than is feasible here. All that is left, then, is to connect up the framing moves. This was always going to be, will have been, can only ever be about how to place critical frame on (post-)literary (non-)representation of everything and its lures.

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Notes

1. It is worth noting that David Graeber and David Wengrow place the question of seriousness in their frame right away. The opening lines in the 'Foreword and Dedication' to *The Dawn of Everything* note that the book 'began as a diversion from our more 'serious' academic duties: an experiment, a game almost, in which an anthropologist and an archaeologist tried to reconstruct the sort of grand dialogue about human history that was once quite common in our fields, but this time with modern evidence' (emphasis

added). Sadly, the lines are written by Wengrow alone: ‘David Rolfe Graeber died aged fifty-nine on 2 September 2020, just over three weeks after we finished writing this book . . .’.

2. I am grateful to Dragana Rankovic for the comment and the reflections prompted.
3. I have discussed ‘Advances’ in Callus 2025, in ways that necessarily, and courtesy of Derrida, are related to reflections on everything.
4. I am grateful to Nigel Wood for the prompting thought on this point.

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This is going to be about everything

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Organic Unity in the Age of the Free Market: The Pragmatist Tradition and the Question of Frame

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Abstract:

The article explores the evolution of the concept of organic unity – itself a species of organic metaphor consisting in drawing a parallel between a work of art and a living being – within the tradition of pragmatism, as exemplified in the writings of perhaps its most eminent proponent in the twentieth century, John Dewey. The overview is designed to provide a useful background for reading literary criticism by Kacper Bartczak, a Polish poet, essayist, and translator, who employs the concept of a ‘poem as an organism’ in the contemporary context of rising scepticism towards the idea of the autonomy of art that accompanies the decline of the modernist paradigm. It is suggested that the rupture in Bartczak’s pragmatist outlook – and the necessity, that he at a certain point acknowledges, of reconsidering the question of the frame – is associated with the pressure, only recently recognised, that the domination of the free market as a form of social metabolism exerts on the form of a poem, and, furthermore, that his later criticism can therefore be helpfully viewed in the light of Nicholas Brown’s remarks on the relationship between an artwork’s autonomy and the logic of the free market, and of Stanley Cavell’s notions of fraudulence and anthropomorphism.

Keywords: pragmatism, naturalism, organic unity, literary criticism, Kacper Bartczak, John Dewey, Stanley Cavell, Nicholas Brown

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The focus of this article is on the problem of frame as it emerges at the intersection of two salient aesthetic traditions—pragmatism and organicism—and on an interesting figure who attempts to bring together and reconcile the two within contemporary Polish criticism: namely, Kacper Bartczak, a poet, critic, translator, and researcher born in 1972. Just a few remarks on the concepts in play are in order. Organicism, as I define it, is an amalgam of theoretical, critical, and artistic discourses that share a foundational analogy between a work of art and a living creature. In the case of some authors, this analogy—or an organic metaphor as we might call it—is more explicitly articulated, whereas in others it remains implicit and visible only in the usage of certain theoretically loaded terms; however, what it always does is force certain questions. One such question concerns the problem of delimitation. In a canonical form, characteristic of both modern and postmodern aesthetics, it consists in an inquiry into the work of art's frame or boundary: where does it end? what counts as part of it? what is the relationship between the interior and the exterior? can there be any movement or exchange between the two?—and related issues. When an attempt to answer such questions of delimitation is made from a position that is conceptually indebted to organicist discourse, it will usually involve projecting the problem onto the structure of the organic metaphor and trying to determine the boundary of an imaginary organism that one takes an artwork to be similar to.¹ Analysing the implications of the various uses of the organic metaphor within the pragmatist tradition is the aim of this article, and the way these implications manifest themselves in the writing of Bartczak will serve as a starting point for my argument, as well as its end goal.

In his criticism, Bartczak focuses primarily on American poetry—Romanticism, Modernism, and the avant-garde being the sites of particular interest for him. He has authored a monograph on John Ashbery, published in English (Bartczak 2006), but none of his other critical volumes have yet been translated in full into another language. Throughout his work, he acknowledges his indebtedness to the pragmatic tradition, suggesting various lines of continuity between his own critical attitude and those of John Dewey, Richard Shusterman, and Richard Rorty, among others. His self-proclaimed commitment to pursuing pragmatic aesthetics will be here treated as justifying a reference to these thinkers as located within a tradition of pragmatism, it being of course a working identification, elaboration on

which would perhaps require another study. But if there is something that is readily associated with Bartczak in the Polish context – apart from an expertise in American literature – it is the idea of the poem as a kind of organism. He first introduced it as a conceptual matrix in his book of essays *Świat nie scalony: Estetyka, poetyka, pragmatyka* [*The Unmerged World: Aesthetics, Poetics, Pragmatics*] in 2009, and has since employed it in his poetry too, most notably in *Wiersze organiczne* [*Organic Poems*] (Bartczak 2015). The reason Bartczak's organicism seems worth noting is that while the organic metaphor happens to be employed casually by different writers today, it is only he – in Poland as well as abroad, as far as I can tell – who has, on one hand, articulated it explicitly and systematically, and, on the other, appealed to a certain historical context that, as the article hopes to show, could arguably be thought of as part of organicist tradition. In the face of the fact that organicism, which still served as a legitimate supply of aesthetic vocabulary as late as in the 1940s, when formalists employed it extensively, left almost no trace on the debates of the last several decades, prompting Charles Armstrong to exclaim, 'What on earth has happened to organicism?' (Armstrong 2003: 1), an attempt to bring it up here deserves attention.

The idea of the poem as an organism is articulated in various ways in Bartczak's criticism, but it always gives rise to similar intuitions, which are perhaps best illustrated by Bartczak referring to 'poems that behave' (Bartczak 2009).² What is worth noting here is that the very word 'behave' in Polish can be transitive – when it means just that, namely, to conduct oneself well – and intransitive, when it means to 'keep' or 'maintain'. Hence the poems of which we say that they, literally, 'behave themselves' ('zachowują się'), are the ones which manifest certain behaviours, and at the same time those that keep their shape, hold together, or maintain integrity. In this vein Bartczak writes:

[A poem is] a set of formal, prosodic, lexical and versificational decisions; a construction, an arrangement, which are, in themselves, a recognition of certain problems and an attempt at solving them. A poem copes in a very rich environment which is made of an awareness of other pieces, aesthetic strivings and stylistic preferences of the author, the idea, more or less present during writing, of a reader and the publishing market. The poem copes (or not), so it behaves like a living organism. And so its artificial, stylistically

elaborate language, the distribution of its tones, accents, breaks, is, for me, a trace of particular behaviours. A poem, like a person, wants something, strives for something, has its own needs. It is a record of a human stance in a situation that has happened, or could happen. (Bartczak 2009: 182)

The passage is loaded with suggestive, but at the same time somewhat controversial, imagery, and there are in it many things that seem to demand further scrutiny. But the first observation to be made regards the dualistic ontology of the poem it introduces – which is not that far from what we could identify as a broadly Romantic account of a work of art. On one hand, the passage makes it clear that the poem is made by someone, and for a certain purpose – it is a ‘set of . . . decisions’, a ‘construction’ that attempts to solve ‘problems’. On the other hand, though, it seems that a poem simultaneously exhibits a self-sufficiency and self-reliance that endow it with something akin to personhood. It has an ‘awareness’ of the author’s ‘strivings’ (about what is the role of these strivings is, though – whether they contribute to the poem’s meaning, and in what way exactly – we are not informed), while also ‘striving’ for something itself. Its ‘artificial, stylistically elaborate language’ is a ‘trace’ or a ‘record’ of someone’s behaviour, and yet it also has a ‘behaviour’ of its own, just like a living being. This calls to mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ideas on organic form, which he had inherited from the German idealists, most notably August Wilhelm von Schlegel, and subsequently developed to make it one of the hallmarks of his own aesthetics. According to this idea, the work of art is supposed to develop ‘from within’, so as to instantiate a form that is ‘innate’ (Coleridge 1960: 198), but at the same time it never ceases to be an achievement of a ‘man of genius’ – unconscious in his activity as he is, at least to an extent, but nonetheless poised to be judged in terms of success or failure in the task of ‘reconciliation of the external with the internal’ (Coleridge 1854: 258), a process in which different obstacles are ‘subordinated and conquered’ (Coleridge 1907b: 262–3).

There is, however, one point where Bartczak’s line of thinking departs significantly from the Romantic account, and it is arguably in his thorough and uncompromising naturalism. Bartczak’s main point of reference in this regard is John Dewey. Throughout Bartczak’s essays, Dewey plays the role of a guide to the naturalist tradition while also being a chief source of organicist inspirations. Dewey, himself heavily influenced by the Romantic

heritage, makes numerous appearances in Bartczak's writing and he always serves as a kind of a reminder of the biological foundation of all aesthetic phenomena. The reason why Bartczak considers Dewey important for criticism today is the excessive influence of the textualist paradigm on the humanities, combined with the limitations of a text-centered mode of reflection. Bartczak here echoes Richard Shusterman, who in *Pragmatic Aesthetics* claims that 'most current interpretive theory' is dominated by 'hermeneutic universalism', a position bound to the belief that 'simply to perceive, read, understand, or behave at all intelligently is already, and must always be, to interpret', and that 'whenever we experience anything with meaning, such meaningful experience must always be a case and product of interpretation' (Shusterman 2000: 115). As both Shusterman and Bartczak see it, reclaiming the pragmatist tradition that the works of Dewey offer can act as a countermeasure to this predicament by bringing into focus the domains marginalised by it – namely, the 'body-mind, understood physiologically and holistically' (Bartczak 2009: 182). Dewey's naturalist stance thus provides Bartczak with a physiological and holistic perspective that is required to shift the attention to the somatic substratum of both artistic and everyday activity; but it also points to the fact that the relationship goes the other way as well. On Bartczak's account, Dewey foregrounds the intuition that the character of the most rudimentary life-sustaining actions – what we would like to call 'natural' activities – is essentially artificial, that is, aesthetic.

We could say that Dewey performs the impossible synthesis of Nietzsche and Darwin: an organism survives by virtue of strategies, which are an aesthetic creation, that is, a series of operations that can be viewed aesthetically. Just as truth for Nietzsche is a sequence of metaphorical, and therefore figurative-poetic, layers, so the vital actions of the organism have the quality of an aesthetic game. For what else is it that the organism employs while penetrating its environment, if not a series of hypotheses (confirmed or not), that is, analogies, transitions, movements, compositions, choices, dramas, culminations, rearrangements of forces, well or poorly made comparisons, recognitions? There is nothing 'natural' about survival in nature – it is a creation, or composition. (2009: 182)

Such a rendering of Dewey's naturalism poses a symmetry between the organic and the aesthetic: art has its origin in biological functions of the

organism, insofar as these functions can be themselves thought of in quasi-artistic terms.

There are indeed moments in Dewey that would suggest such pan-aesthetic symmetry. Take for example this one:

Art is . . . prefigured in the very processes of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfying culmination. We may hesitate to apply the word “art,” since we doubt the presence of directive intent. But all deliberation, all conscious intent, grows out of things once performed organically through the interplay of natural energies . . . Through consciousness, [man] converts the relations of cause and effect that are found in nature into relations of means and consequence. . . . What was mere shock becomes an invitation; resistance becomes something to be used in changing existing arrangements of matter; smooth facilities become agencies for executing an idea. In these operations, an organic stimulation becomes the bearer of meanings, and motor responses are changed into instruments of expression and communication; no longer are they mere means of locomotion and direct reaction. Meanwhile, the organic substratum remains as the quickening and deep foundation. (Dewey 1980 [1934]: 24–5)

Here, just as in Bartczak, the prehistory of the ‘directive intent’ seamlessly grows out of the ‘organic’, making it difficult to point to the exact place where nature ends and ‘art’ (as it is hereby perceived) begins—to set the boundary between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic—hence the hesitation. Of course, the intuition behind this evolutionary view of aesthetic activity is strictly Romantic, and amongst the ideas that it most clearly echoes is Coleridge’s understanding of life (and beauty; see Coleridge 1907b: 257) as a continuum of forms that manifest different degrees of the same essential characteristics. Having defined life as ‘*the principle of individuation*’, that is, ‘the power which unites a given *all* into a *whole* that is presupposed by all its parts’—the reciprocal dependency of the whole upon the parts being the cornerstone of his organic theory of art—Coleridge adds that the dialectic of part and whole should be more properly understood as the ‘*tendency to individuation*’, by which he means to stress the gradual process of life coming to take on its most complete manifestations, so that

from its utmost latency, in which life is one with the elementary powers of mechanism, that is, with the powers of mechanism considered as qualitative and actually synthetic, to its highest manifestation (in which, as the *vis vitæ vivida*, or life *as* life, it subordinates and modifies these powers, becoming contra-distinguished from mechanism, *ab extra*, under the form of organization), there is an ascending series of intermediate classes, and of analogous gradations in each class. (Coleridge 1854: 387; all emphases in the original)

But, as with Coleridge, Dewey's evolutionary perspective does not entail the dissolution of the boundary between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. And what is central to Dewey's view of the process of ascendance from the natural to the aesthetic – of the 'organic stimulation' becoming 'the bearer of meanings' – is not so much the role of 'consciousness', and humanity's purported superiority in this regard (as the passage cited above might suggest), but rather the notions of 'fulfillment' and 'culmination'. If Coleridge saw the task of the artist as rendering the artwork alive, that is, endowing it with the highest degree of unity – beauty being for him 'the union of the shapely (*formosum*) with the vital' (Coleridge, 1907b: 257) – Dewey, similarly, stresses the unitary character as a prerequisite of considering anything in aesthetic terms. Consider his remarks on the nature of the aesthetic experience, the definition and delimitation of which lie at the heart of the endeavours that make up *Art as Experience*:

Oftentimes . . . the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. . . .

In contrast with such experience, we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience. (Dewey 1980 [1934]: 35)

Another way to describe the experience proper—‘an experience’, in Dewey’s vocabulary—is to say that it possesses what he calls ‘esthetic quality’: that is, something that ‘rounds out an experience into completeness and unity’ (1980: 41). According to Dewey, then, we can have aesthetic experiences of everyday activities, but only when these activities yield certain structures and forms. By the same token some of the structures and forms in nature can provoke an urge to ‘apply the word “art”’ to them, especially when they involve similar completeness (the dam and the nest are Dewey’s chosen examples). But it is also clear that the aesthetic quality is by no means present in every experience we have, nor is it distributed evenly throughout nature:

For in much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after. There is no interest that controls attentive rejection or selection of what shall be organized into the developing experience. Things happen, but they are neither definitely included nor decisively excluded; we drift. We yield according to external pressure, or evade and compromise. There are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and conclodings. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not an experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic. (40)

Dewey was very much aware of the fact that his gradational or evolutionary perspective provokes questions about the exact place where we should draw the line—about the ‘relation of the aesthetic or fine art to other modes of production also called art’ (80), where by the latter he means all kinds of craftsmanship, as well as everyday creative endeavours. And he was truly committed to expanding the aesthetic domain. But the problem, as he saw it, is not of making a necessary shift in the definition, so that more things could count as aesthetic (or that the aesthetic could reach further into nature or into the organic history of art); rather, it is a strictly social and political enterprise.

The problem of conferring esthetic quality upon all modes of production is a serious problem. But it is a human problem for human solution; not a problem incapable of solution because it is set by some unpassable gulf in human nature or in the nature of things. In an imperfect society—and no society will ever be perfect—fine art will be to some extent an escape from,

or an adventitious decoration of, the main activities of living. But in a better-ordered society than that in which we live, an infinitely greater happiness than is now the case would attend all modes of production. . . . Works of art that are not remote from common life, that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. (80–1)

The job of the pragmatist, for Dewey, was to identify those forms of life and social organisation that foster more holistic and rewarding experiences—this is why he advocated better education and more democratic participation of various classes in culture.

Dewey's naturalism and organicism—his claim that in art 'man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature'—were in this sense part of his emancipatory politics; they served as proofs that life-enhancing capability is contained in the very constitution of man as a biological being, and that man can use 'the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life' while remaining 'in accord with the structure of his organism' (25). But they were never employed as arguments for the view that various life-sustaining strategies organisms engage in are, as Bartczak writes, 'an aesthetic creation'. The tension implicated in Dewey's outlook was resolved in favour of the characteristically modernist claim that there exists a distinct quality—he took it to be unity—that allows for sharp demarcation of the aesthetic domain. Bartczak, though, is not so unequivocal, and the tension is therefore more acutely felt in his case. On one hand he claims that poems can be regarded as organisms—both composed and self-reliant, exhibiting behaviour and being a record of it, a bit like Coleridge suggested. Such a perspective would suggest both that each poem is endowed with a level of autonomy, and that there are no outright difficulties with determining a poem's boundary—its frame. On the other hand, he extrapolates from Dewey's evolutionary scheme—unjustifiably, I believe—to arrive at a conclusion that all living creatures, including us, on this account behave aesthetically, and all behaviour is aesthetic. In such a case the task of delimitation becomes not so much difficult, as pointless—viewed as strictly part of everyday life, indistinguishable from it, art can neither aspire for nor simply claim autonomy, and the need for establishing a frame disappears.

I think there is at least one answer as to the source of this inconsistency. Bartczak, at the point of writing his first book of essays in 2009, might not have experienced it as a rupture in his conception or as a tension that had to be resolved. The question of frame was not pressing enough for him to recognise his pan-aesthetic rendering of Dewey's naturalism as potentially problematic, because he was interested mainly in romantic and modernist writers (Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, among others) who did not yet perceive the frame as something that is itself endangered or precarious. This is the reason Bartczak could embark on Dewey's project of enhancing humanity's spiritual wealth and expanding the domain of the aesthetic by, in a way, accepting the very dubious claim that the attempt had already been successful. And because Bartczak's imagination was captured by an essentially modernist paradigm, he might have viewed an attempt at collapsing the distinction between art and life as an answer to Dewey's concern about making art a part of life for all.

However, as Nicholas Brown suggests, disavowing the modernist claim to autonomy and undermining the institution of art amounts to a wholly different gesture when it is made in the context of a real or at least qualified autonomy of cultural production from the market – as still entertained by late modernists in the early decades of the twentieth century – and when such an attempt is made within the contemporary condition of culture's thorough commodification, where it 'can only tend to clear ground for the existing social basis – namely, capitalist market relations' (Brown 2019: 29–30). Modernism, insofar as it was pursued and developed within what Bourdieu calls 'the field of restricted production' (Bourdieu 1993: 52), did not have to face the demands of the market for cultural goods in any direct way. In other words, it operated under what Marx, and Brown after him, call 'formal subsumption' (Brown 2019: 16). Even if works of art eventually found their way to the market and were exchanged as commodities, artistic labour itself could continue as though they did not; 'the status of the product of labor' was 'fundamentally different' than under 'real subsumption,' characteristic of the later stage of the development of capitalism, wherein it is commonly recognised under the label of postmodernism and wherein 'the whole production process is oriented toward exchange' (15). This difference stems from the mode in which an artist deals with the form he creates and with the audience he sees the form as made for. Within

the restricted field he encounters the ‘public of equals who are also competitors’ (Bourdieu 1993: 116) and who are poised to judge the work of art in terms appropriate for the field (which often gravitate towards a set of formal concerns), while in the market he encounters the community of consumers, who are poised to either buy or refuse to buy it. As Brown notes, then, ‘[w]ith the collapse of the modernist restricted field, with the real subsumption of aesthetic labor under capital, the possibility of something bearing a family resemblance to modernism abruptly disappears’ (Brown 2019: 19). Moreover, when market logic effectively penetrates the domain of art, the relevance of an artwork’s boundary manifests itself in a new way. The frame comes to mark the area independent from the process of exchange by delimiting the artwork’s meaning, which, unlike all its other features, does not change along with its being bought and sold, or according to the different uses it is put to; the meaning remains ‘the only thing about the work of art that is not determined by its buyers, the only thing about it that belongs only to it, the only thing about it that is not reducible to the commodity it otherwise is’ (Michaels 2015: 102–3).

And this is a problem that Bartczak seems to grasp at the point of publishing his second book of criticism, *Materia i autokreacja: Dociekania w poetyce wielościowej* [*Matter and Autocreation: Investigations in the Poetics of Multitude*] in 2019. There, he proposes to abandon the notion of a poem as an organism (behaving, striving, coping, wanting) and embrace instead the idea of a poem as a ‘formal field of multitude’ (Bartczak 2019:275). His reasoning is essentially historical—it regards a radical change of the circumstances under which the poem operates:

No contemporary poem can claim the right to operate in such an uncontaminated territory as those [modernist] poets had at their disposal, at least in principle. The modernist poem, having learned its romantic lessons, proclaimed its world-creating power stemming from the transformation of the ordinary and the local, from reaching pure matter and pure interaction with ideologically uncontaminated artifacts.... This terrain has become deeply contaminated. The romantic-modernist processing powers of the poem have been intercepted by other centres of consciousness, which now exhibit their own world-creating powers: ideologies, propaganda, lies in the media, histories. One could name many more of these characteristics of contamination; one feature remains essential: not only the fact of mediation, but also its deep invasiveness and hostility towards those emancipatory

experiences that were supposed to be the share of the poem as a speaking organism. (281–2)

In the face of an assault on its environment, Bartczak writes, the contemporary poem has to intensify its formal effort. If it is to survive, it has to somehow oppose these threats, since there is no way it can ignore them. In order to conceptualise this opposition, Bartczak invokes a metabolic metaphor: the ‘organism of the poem’ – like the ‘human organism’, which, in order to live, ‘feeds on beliefs’ (285) generated by ‘discursive machines’ (284) – must similarly feed on the outside, ‘taking in’ this same toxic content and transforming it in order to ‘draw energy’ from it. The poem thus becomes ‘an empty reconfiguration space, a recultivation container, a handy sewage treatment plant, a food purifier’ (285) – itself a field through which different discursive objects pass, rather than a sealed-off whole, self-sufficient and safe from any impact.

It is difficult to clearly grasp the historical moment Bartczak speaks of. One way to see it is as taking place some time between the ‘uncontaminated’ modernist era and our contemporary condition of ‘invasiveness and hostility’ towards emancipatory endeavours. This, however, is not fully convincing, for it is not clear just in what sense the nineteenth and the early twentieth century were free from ideology (by which Bartczak seems to mean oppressive or authoritarian discourses) and why exactly it is now that we have to confront it more directly than before. Another possibility is that the perceived shift has taken place much more recently. Indeed, in 2019 Bartczak developed the concept of a poem as a formal field by reference to some of the same poets he had already commented on in his 2009 book in quite different terms (one such poet is Andrzej Sosnowski). It is therefore justified to ask whether something has changed between these dates, either in the matter of poetry itself, or the external circumstances. It is difficult to point to any specific events, to be sure, and any proposition is bound to be far from definitive, but I just want to signal here that Paweł Kaczmarski suggests paying attention to the year 2008, the year of the Great Recession and ‘the beginning of the end of neoliberalism, or at least the belief in orthodox Thatcherite-Reaganite neoliberalism as offering the possibility of global capitalist stabilization’, as a possible turning point for the political imaginary imbuing some expressions of Polish poetry. It was around this time when the ‘separation of the money-sign from the world’

(the ‘exposure of the fragility – or even illusoriness – of the connections between money and objects, financial capitalism and the sphere of material production’) would assume an ‘openly catastrophic form of sudden climax’ (Kaczmarek 2020: 102; my translation). If the experience of the economic crisis – perceived or just intuited – was indeed an impulse for a change in the poetics pursued by a number of writers in Poland, then Bartczak’s first book of criticism could be seen as written just a little bit too early to allow for recording these shifts (and the changes that might have occurred in his own political sensibility at that time would as well become visible only later, in his second collection of essays). In any case, it seems that Bartczak, when confronted with the pressing question of the frame – of the boundaries of the organism of the text, its resiliency to the external, and its ability to maintain its integrity – steps away from the optimistic outlook he initially assumed.

This constitutes a possible historical explanation for the shift in Bartczak’s writing – but there is also a theoretical argument to be made. Whatever event or process caused the ‘contamination’, the crucial implication is that after a certain point in time the border between the outside and the inside of the poem appears as no longer hermetic, and the concept of organicity cannot be applied to it any longer without reservations:

The contemporary poem must rethink its corporeality, organicity, materiality. These features do not disappear. Instead, they become more strongly connected with the formal work of the poem . . . A poem that does not give up its formal separateness must also develop in conditions of the disappearance of the boundary between the interior and the exterior. The pace of exchange between these now very conventional areas is accelerating. The game is becoming more parasitic, predatory, profitable, and exploitative than ever. (Bartczak 2019: 284)

On the face of it, acknowledging such accelerating ‘exchange’ that occurs between the poem and its environment seems to implicate a refusal of the former’s claim to a frame, or at least a different or evolved understanding of what framing might now involve. But rather than subscribe to the deconstructive scepticism towards aesthetic autonomy, Bartczak attempts – I think – to fully articulate the urgency and relevance of the question of frame in the context of ever progressing real subsumption of artistic labour under capital, a process which came to manifest itself in

Poland in a belated fashion after the advent of free market relations in 1989. For what is crucial about his remarks is not the list of the potential new ‘centres of consciousness’ – ‘ideologies, propaganda, lies in the media, histories’ or all the ‘various institutional entities’ that he will later in the text refer to as ‘churches, parties, councils, bodies, newspapers, stations, governments’ (288) – these, after all, have been there for a long time. Rather, what is more telling is the way he describes the ‘game’ that art has come to be involved in now: ‘parasitic, predatory, profitable, and exploitative’ – all expressions which suggest that it is not so much a matter of ideology, as of the capitalist drive to yield return on investment that is at play here (which would be consistent with the theory that the events crucial for shaping Bartczak’s later views took place not in the sphere of culture, but economy).

Seeing Bartczak as in fact concerned with commodification of everyday discursive space rather than with malevolent ideological agendas allows for making more sense both of his anxious distrust of the ‘environment’ the poem must function in, and of the stress he puts on the necessity to transform what comes from the outside – to ‘overwrite the output code’ – so that a ‘metamorphic’ and ‘strangely human’ (288) poem can survive:

The life of the poem thus continues in its peculiar opening, peculiar because cautious, done with distance; this opening is always already a somehow set formal absorption, acceptance through selection. These operations are the autonomy of the poem, its ‘unconquered flame’.³ It is in it that its ‘unamenability to suggestion’⁴ is contained, in its empty formal body, where conceptual shifts triggered by form occur, which are on the one hand the life of the poem, and on the other – its form of engagement with the world. (286)

What I would like to suggest, as a working hypothesis, is that Bartczak’s concern with neutralising the predatory outside may be helpfully viewed in the light of another interesting take on the problem of an artwork’s organicity – its being like an organism or like a human being – originating in the twentieth-century pragmatic tradition. When speaking about contemporary music in his book of essays *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1976), Stanley Cavell suggested that in confrontation with a work of art, a peculiar form of anthropomorphism – stemming, *pace* Bartczak and Dewey, from the

way we engage in beholding art as whole beings, not just intellectually – is justified. And this is because

objects of art [do] not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people – and with the same kind of scorn and outrage. They mean something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do. (Cavell 1976: 197–8)

In treating works of art like persons, Cavell says, we do not commit an error – at least not in one important respect. For, in asking what an artwork means, we rather have to approach the work the way we would normally approach another human being, rather than the way we would approach an object. And although an object it certainly is, we invest attention in the work ‘not merely because [it is] interesting in [itself], but because [it is] felt as made by someone – and so we use such categories as intention, personal style, feeling, dishonesty, authority, inventiveness, profundity, meretriciousness, etc., in speaking of [it]’ (198).

Another corollary of Cavell’s claims about anthropomorphism – or, better, one of the reasons and sources of their intuitively felt legitimacy – is what he calls ‘the threat of fraudulence’, which emerged sometime in the nineteenth century and can be said to be ‘endemic to modern art’: that is, a period when aesthetic value became not only a source of intense debate, but also of confusion. Before modernism, assessing an artwork’s value, if not easy in practice, was at least in principle unproblematic, which is to say that it was not seen as a problem – it is hard to imagine, Cavell says, ‘an audience of new music before Beethoven . . . as wondering, or having the occasion to wonder, whether the thing in front of them was a piece of genuine art or not’. But at some point things change, and, as a result, some of the great works of art that we now know to be masterpieces were greeted with ‘outrage and rioting’, while the ‘advanced critics of the period . . . were finding that it was precisely the work acceptable to the public which was the real source of fraudulence’. Today’s confusion – which has its roots in precisely that moment – is that we cannot tell apart the real and the fraudulent artwork; ‘that we no longer know, and cannot find or trust ourselves to find occasion to know, which is which’. It therefore seems that it is as much art, as its audience, that is ‘on trial’ today (176) – we have

to somehow decide whether ‘to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed’ (188), and in this precise sense we have to approach it like we would approach a person (who can lie or just claim, misleadingly, to have something relevant to say). ‘In emphasizing the experiences of fraudulence and trust’, Cavell writes, ‘as essential to the experience of art, I am in effect claiming that the answer to the question “What is art?” will in part be an answer which explains why it is we treat certain objects, or how we can treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved for treating persons’ (189).

For Cavell, then, the problem of fraudulence is essential to understanding of contemporary art, insofar as it is revelatory of a logic that is pertinent to all art, because it sheds light at what is at stake in the endeavour of interpretation. And an attempt at grasping some of the very same logic is available in Dewey himself, when he writes:

Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that a finely wrought object, one whose texture and proportions are highly pleasing in perception, has been believed to be a product of some primitive people. Then there is discovered evidence that proves it to be an accidental natural product. As an external thing, it is now precisely what it was before. Yet at once it ceases to be a work of art and becomes a natural ‘curiosity’. It now belongs in a museum of natural history, not in a museum of art. And the extraordinary thing is that the difference that is thus made is not one of just intellectual classification. A difference is made in appreciative perception and in a direct way. The esthetic experience – in its limited sense – is thus seen to be inherently connected with the experience of making. (Dewey 1980: 48–9)

In this imaginary situation, what changes on discovering the natural origin of an object that seemed made is not just that we react differently – that we feel curiosity in place of appreciation. More importantly, that curiosity is now accompanied by a sense that the appreciation we felt before was inadequate – what we come to understand is that there was nothing to understand in the object itself in the first place. We realise, in other words, that ‘[t]he sensory satisfaction of eye and ear, when esthetic, is so because it does not stand by itself but is linked to the activity of which it is the consequence’ (49). To experience art as art, Dewey seems to say, is to experience it as made; ‘as made by someone’, Cavell could add.

Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp famously used the same thought experiment half a century after Dewey, when they argued that on encountering words on the beach that appear as if left there by the waves, we cannot help but either bestow on the sea the intentional capacity of literary creation, or consider them ‘nonintentional effects of mechanical processes’ and therefore not words at all. In both cases we are amazed, but for two completely different reasons; what amazes us in the second case – when, in the words of Dewey, evidence says that the alleged poem is ‘an accidental natural product’ – is that ‘what [we] thought was poetry turns out not to be poetry at all. It isn’t poetry because it isn’t language; that’s what it means to call it an accident’ (Michaels and Knapp 1982: 728). Of course, the risk of pointless interpretation – of trying to understand something that is devoid of meaning – is a flipside of the risk of misunderstanding in the proper sense – of getting something wrong. Both depend in their reality on the fact that the object in question – say, a work of art – has been made to be what it is. And, arguably, both are a species of the problem of fraudulence (this is why modernism exposes not only a logic ‘endemic’ to itself, as Cavell writes, but, as a matter of fact, to all art): the possibility of getting an artwork right entails the possibility of getting it wrong, and either way what must be assumed is that there is indeed something to get – an assumption that, for Cavell, makes the intercourse with art similar to dealings with people.

The problem of fraudulence is what seems to surface in Bartczak’s later criticism, albeit in a specific form. Ever since modernism’s demise, which came to be felt in different ways by artists and theoreticians as a threat posed to the artwork’s frame – or, as an opportunity to dispose with it – what we risk when approaching contemporary art is not only that we waste our time with something that is a fraud (Cavell’s modern problem) or an accident (the Dewey–Michaels–Knapp imaginary scenario), but, even more crucially, that we take for art something that is just a commodity. And this seems central for Bartczak. After all, it is trivial to say that a poem is open to an intrusion from the ‘outside’; it is hard to imagine a work of art that would have nothing in common with what is around it (what should such a work consist of? what should serve as a basis for it if not words, sounds, paint, etc., that are, arguably, ‘taken’ from somewhere else?). What is less trivial though – and what can indeed appear worrying – is the possibility that on reading the poem we actually read something else; that in fact we are

still being fed by the ‘discursive machines’ that otherwise surround us all the time, because the poem never succeeded in subordinating what entered it to its own form, and transforming the discursive material in line with its own purpose. In other words, what should be of concern is that we might just be sold something that looks like a poem, but is not a poem, precisely because it consists solely of things made to be sold: the things whose meaning is not determined by the poem’s immanent ‘desired result’, but emerges as a result of speculation of what is it that we would like to hear; the things whose meaning is ‘decided elsewhere – namely, on the market’ (Brown 2019: 7). In such a case, just as in Cavell, we would have no way of actually finding out whether this is the case: there is no outward, immediate difference between a work of art, as we encounter it, and a commodity that just poses as a work of art, just as there is no apparent difference between a work of art and a natural entity that just happens to look exactly like it. The only difference lies in the fact that the work was made to be what it is, so it demands interpretation, while the commodity was made for sale, so there is no point in interpreting it (see Brown 2019: 4–7).

In this scenario, we are truly deceived not when we are told lies (by the media, the propagandists, and other ‘centres of consciousness’) – lies, after all, can always be exposed – but when we think we are told something when in fact we are sold something, and we cannot tell that we are. And in Bartczak this would be the case whenever the poem does not even attempt to tell us something in the first place, or perhaps fails in such attempts – when, as Dewey wrote, it ‘foregoes [its] own purpose and in the name of a meek and humble subscription to things as they “really are”’ (Dewey 1920: 115), just passively giving out whatever it took in. For in capitalism, passively transmitting things as they are entails nothing more than contributing to the circulation of commodities; the poem that does not succeed in ‘suspend[ing] its commodity character’ (Brown 2019: 8) remains just that – a commodity. The poem’s own ‘formal work’, then – its struggle to overwrite the toxic outside and purify the matter it feeds on, in order not to ‘give up its separateness’ – can be seen as a species of the ‘activity of which it is the consequence’; the ‘making’ (both Dewey’s expressions) which would constitute the difference between the poem as a work of art and a cluster of linguistic commodities that resemble a poem. In Bartczak’s case, and in line with his organicist approach, such formal work would be something a poem performs on itself. And the autonomy it allows for – the

poem's 'independent flame' and its 'resistance to persuasion' that give it a sole chance for aesthetic success – could be accordingly seen as indeed an attempt on the part of the poem to somehow exclude itself from the logic of exchange, and as such it would be a form of politics – a politics of framing.

Notes

1. I elaborate on the relevance of the organicist thinking to the debate on such notions as meaning, intention, autonomy and frame in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Partyka 2024.
2. All translations from Bartczak are my own.
3. Author's Note: This is a quotation from Peter Gizzi's 'Eye of the Poem' (Gizzi 2011: 11).
4. Author's Note: This is a quotation from Rae Armantrout's 'Integer' (Armantrout 2009: 94).

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Rimbaud Framing Kiefer Framing Joyce

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Anselm Kiefer's painting 'Le Dormeur du Val' (2010) takes its title from a sonnet written by Rimbaud in 1870, when the poet was only sixteen years old. The poem describes a young man peacefully asleep in a bucolic setting but reverses all the reader's expectations in the final line, which reveals the shocking truth that the sleeper is in fact dead—he is a young soldier, one of many killed during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Rimbaud's poem creates a beguiling illusion which is punctured quite literally by the description of two bleeding bullet holes in the soldier's side. Retrospectively, we might note that the only flowers specified in the poem are gladioli, whose name derives from *gladius*, the Latin word for sword.

The conflict of interest between form and content is augmented by the history of the sonnet form, which is traditionally associated with the arts of love. The form itself provides an inherited framework which prompts us to expect an identification of the soldier as lover or loved one, which only increases the poignancy of his loss.

Kiefer's painting does not home in on a single telling detail, as Rimbaud's poem does—rather, it pans out to provide the viewer with a panoramic sweep of an unvarying landscape of immense unbounded fields. There is no focal pivot on human relationships, as there is in the tradition of the sonnet

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form. And there isn't even a single dead soldier visible anywhere in this very large painting, which is nearly six metres long, and two metres high. Its immense landscape format enhances the monotony of the terrain, which is empty of crops but invaded by weeds and wild flowers. The unplanned growth speaks of neglect and abandonment and evokes all the other ruined fields that Kiefer has depicted throughout his career, remembering the scorched and abandoned landscapes of Germany in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

Among those wild flowers are of course poppies, the flowers that have been used for over a century to commemorate the war dead of both World Wars. We now cultivate and actually fabricate poppies in acknowledgement of this symbolism. (And gladioli, the flowers mentioned in Rimbaud's poem, are also associated with remembrance.) But Kiefer's flowers are growing wild, in competition with other species, and they are not a vivid red, which has been taken to symbolise the blood of the fallen, but are almost drained of colour, as if the symbolism has been exhausted. The growth of these plants is unplanned, sporadic, and essentially meaningless.

Where is the sleeper in Kiefer's painting, we might ask; who, or what is it that is never going to wake up again? What has changed in the 150 years since Rimbaud wrote his poem, in which sentiment is not expressed but nonetheless elicited? Poppies turn towards the sun, which sustains them, but in Kiefer's painting they turn towards the viewer. Their blooms are drained of colour, perhaps because they are starved of the kind of consideration that only the viewer can give them. The poppies are mute but the painting is not. Poppies are traditionally associated with sleep, and indeed poppy extract is an effective sedative. But Kiefer's poppies seem to stare at the viewer in expectation of a response. It is almost as if they are saying, 'Sleepers Awake!' In Bach's cantata of that name, the awakening brings hope in the midst of an epidemic in the Germany of 1731. In Kiefer's painting it is more of an anxious summons – something like a final appeal from an exhausted landscape.

Kiefer's painting is mirroring the concerns of Rimbaud's poem, and the overall framework for both of them is conflict, which creates a synaesthetic echo-effect between their different media and forms. War is their common ground, and war is what suspends the normative relationships, the customary activities, and the rituals of peacetime. War is a time of uncertainties whose own duration is uncertain. And Kiefer's

own oeuvre has shown how the psychological aftermath of conflict is yet another, prolonged version of its trauma in extended form.

In this connection, it is perhaps symptomatic – and emblematic – of this absence of closure that Kiefer's paintings are never actually framed. Their painted surfaces are bounded by lightweight, softwood stretcher bars that are visually unobtrusive. A typical exhibition of his work – consisting of several canvases in extended landscape format – will create an immersive environment in which the stretcher bars function as hinges or pivots between adjacent canvases, rather than as boundaries dividing one tableau from another.

But physical frames aside, the most consistent, obtrusive, and unignorable way in which Kiefer frames his work is through literary quotation. Titles are often lifted from European classics in which the course of history is predicted or ordained: Virgil is a favourite in this respect. The most recent exhibition in which the work of a single author determined every aspect of the show was the *Finnegans Wake* installation at White Cube Bermondsey in 2023. It was made clear that Joyce's final masterpiece has been the focus of an obsession for much of Kiefer's working life.

In this show, the great central corridor of White Cube Bermondsey was lined with some of the contents of Kiefer's so-called 'arsenal' – an ever-growing assortment of worn-out artefacts combined and re-combined in different ways as the artist's focus shifts from one project to another. These materials are not just means to an end but a vital constituent of Kiefer's vision, in which the condition of our time is weighed down by the clutter of forms and ideas from the past. The arsenal is a physical and conceptual storeroom in which the dismantled junk of modernity is linked to the afterlife of derelict theories and ideologies that continue to stalk us – and it serves as a holding area for Kiefer's trademark motifs and forms just as *Finnegans Wake* can be seen as an *omnigatherum* of its author's obsessions. This arsenal material also spilled over into one of the adjoining galleries (the '9×9×9' Gallery) where the giant racks reached to the ceiling, stuffed full of battered shopping trolleys, great blackened sunflowers, ghostly white shifts, piles of demolished concrete piping, a formless and filthy bulk in a metal-barred cot, a dead sapling with bits of desiccated honeycomb in its branches, a white plaster cast of a woman's dress with a blackened broom sticking out of the top, and what appeared to be a wrapped corpse, lying down but lifting its head. The sheer density of these forms and materials

was overwhelming, but the atmosphere was leavened by quotations from the *Wake*, scrawled everywhere in Kiefer's own handwriting (the latter familiar from earlier works). It is of course the language, or to be more precise the languages, of the *Wake* that a majority of its would-be readers find so off-putting. But Kiefer's soundbites were lures rather than deterrents, reflecting the subversive humour that inspires so much of Joyce's upending of familiar phrasing: 'When parties get tight for each other then they lose respect together'; 'First thou shalt not smile. Twice thou shalt not love. Lust thou shalt not commit idolatry'; 'Everyword for oneself but Code forces all' (the latter a nifty formulation of the *Wake*'s own linguistic balancing acts).

The arsenal sections of the show were cacophonous, excessive, overwhelming – they provided a visual corollary to the *Wake*'s verbal density and its obsessively ramifying associations between different languages, literatures, and mythologies (and the more stories involving forgery, deception, and sleight of hand, the better). It was in the other galleries on either side of the central corridor – in the North Gallery and in South Galleries 1 and 2 – that Kiefer's own reading of Joyce's material was worked out with a directness and clarity that was genuinely unsettling. Perhaps the greatest achievement of this show was its range of tones and moods that switched constantly between mischief, dread, and something like wonderment.

South Gallery 1 contained two monstrous works: one a painting in which an enormous dark volcanic eruption was underway before which a multitude of spectators gathered (those in the middle distance seemed stunned and isolated from one another, each lost in thought, while those in the near distance seemed to peer out at the viewer); and the other an installation consisting of a giant pile of sand into which an assortment of battered old shopping trolleys and wheelchairs had been pitched. The verbal elements extracted from the *Wake* in this installation were carefully chosen to establish a link between all this apocalyptic debris and a very financial kind of cataclysm, with a slurry of Joycean soundbites enforcing the connection: 'the dairy days of buy and buy'; 'run for his money'; 'paupering salary grab'. It is worth remembering at this point that Joyce's period as a bank clerk in Rome was spent in the insurance section, in keeping with the famous 'parsimony' of his early style. The later chapters of *Ulysses* and the whole of *Finnegans Wake* can be seen as a reversal of this policy, in their sheer verbal prodigality, the verbal equivalent of excessive overspend. Kiefer's carefully

edited soundbites from Joyce are actually much easier to cash in semantically than those of the Dublin trickster.

And Dublin is where Joyce stayed, imaginatively, for the rest of his adult life, despite living actually in Rome, Trieste, Zurich, and Paris. Kiefer acknowledged this, as well as his own roots, in the two remaining spaces of this show. South Gallery 2 provided the clearest acknowledgement of the *Wake*'s cast of characters, the family of the Dublin publican, H.C. Earwicker, although Earwicker himself was made to seem dislocated from the others. There was a haunting group portrait on one wall, to the right of the gallery entrance, consisting of three hooded and robed figures. The left-hand figure was given two heads, indicating the brothers Shem and Shaun, alongside the mother and daughter, Anna Livia Plurabelle and Issy. There was no counterpart painting to the left of the entrance, but opposite, on the far wall, there was an inscription: 'The remains must be removed before eight hours sharp with earnestly conceived hopes', the last three words including the initial letters H.C.E, only back to front. The implication was that H.C.E. had been got rid of; and in between, filling the centre of this very large gallery, was the debris of what looked like a collapsed building, surrounded with rusty barbed wire. Which might have served as a literal corollary to the fall of the house of Earwicker, except that the vast painting along one of the side walls offered a parallel to Kiefer's own heritage, with its trademark evocation of the devastated landscapes of post-war Germany: yet another ploughed field full of blackened sunflowers. This epic portrayal of destruction was nonetheless linked to the seemingly imperative slogan, 'Phall if you but will, rise you must', which mixes will with instinct, impotence with arousal, death with rebirth. The other painting in this gallery was notable for a series of oversized palettes wedged sideways into the canvas, literally breaking the surface of illusion with an insistence on the artist's replacement of a given reality with his own modes of fabricating another.

In the final space at Bermondsey, the North Gallery, Kiefer offered perhaps the ideal counterpart to Joyce's own coda, the absolutely spellbinding final monologue of Anna Livia Plurabelle, whose voice merges with the flow of the Liffey, its mingling currents giving a natural medium to the polyglot speech of the *Wake*. These twelve river paintings are quite simply Kiefer's most beautiful work, and seen together they are extraordinarily immersive and haunting. They depict the river in

half-light, the sky suffused with a tarnished gold that suggests both dawn and sunset equally. In every canvas the river is tree-lined, with branches thickly tangled, and undergrowth so overcrowded it seems almost choked by its own abundance. The ambivalent light of the sky is given a ghostly reflection in the sliding currents of the river. And on the floor of the gallery, although it was difficult to take one's eyes off the walls, were a number of Kiefer's great lead books, icons of the significance of the word in his oeuvre, even though the pages are blank. The *Wake* is a book that changes with every reading, as the reader comes back to it in the course of a life, each time with a different set of associations in mind. Kiefer's work is instantly recognisable, but equally fluid, through being framed by references to the works of others, and to itself. In the final pages of the *Wake*, two washerwomen come down to the banks of the Liffey and call to one another across the river. That call and response, between word and image, and across frontiers of space and time, is what Kiefer has always aimed for: and never more convincingly than when the work in question is both framing and framed by Joyce.

Note

This essay represents an expansion of ideas rehearsed initially in a review of the Kiefer show published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 30 June 2023.

One Moment, Two Frames: The Peripheral Coast

Dragana Rankovic

Working with two cameras at once, I make a pair of images in the same moment. I lift the rig and direct my attention through one camera. It frames what I thought I came for. Alongside it, without redirection or adjustment, another image is made.

The images come from the same position, in the same light, within the same instant. What separates them is not circumstance, but choice.

One frame is intentional. The other records what falls just outside that intention: the edge, the spill, the extra. I call this frame peripheral, not because it matters less, but because it was not actively sought.

The pairs were made along Malta's coast, where a shared but unconventional way of life persists in improvised spaces defined more by use than by permission. Clusters of boathouses built from stone, wood, and concrete line the water's edge, forming recreational shantytowns—informal, contested, and typically no longer used to house boats. I returned again and again over the course of a summer, until the coastline began to feel less like a subject and more like an ongoing relationship. I started recognising faces, tuning into familiar conversations, sensing when I was welcome and when I was in the way.

The order of the images presented here alternates. Sometimes the intentional frame appears first; sometimes the peripheral one does. One

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image may suggest a decision and an implied story. The other can widen that story or counter it, shifting how the moment reads.

This method emerged from a discomfort I could no longer ignore. Documentary and street photographs often appear settled, as though the frame makes a clear statement. In practice, the captured scene rarely feels organised or complete. People shift their bodies when they sense attention, and the scene subtly rearranges itself. What appears calm can be felt to be tense. What seems direct can be shaped by habit, distance, timing, and the simple fact that a camera is present.

I do not use the peripheral frame to claim truth. I use it to expose choice.

When the two images sit side by side, the act of framing becomes visible. The intentional image shows what I selected. The peripheral image shows what that selection required me to ignore. Between them, the moment stops being singular. It becomes provisional, open to dispute, and more honest about how photographs are made.

Each pair carries only one piece of guidance: whether the frame is intentional or peripheral. Let the first image you see set a direction. Then let the second image interrupt it.

Watch what happens when the edges speak:

what enters late, from the side
what hovers behind the subject
who watches, who waits, who passes through
where space tightens, where it opens
what looks composed in one frame, and unsettled in the other

Sometimes the peripheral image expands the scene. Sometimes it shifts the centre of gravity. Sometimes it offers very little. I kept those quieter pairs because they show the limits of attention. Not every moment produces a resolution. Not every frame can hold what it tries to hold.

The intentional frame tends to create a hierarchy. It gives one part of the scene permission to matter more than the rest. In isolation, that hierarchy can feel natural. In a pair, it becomes recognisably chosen.

Working this way unsettled my confidence in my own clarity. In the moment, I often believed I understood what I was photographing. Later, the paired images challenged me, undermining my sense of authorship. The peripheral frame could change the mood, the timeline, and the implied

relationship between people. It could make the intentional frame feel too clean, too confident, too complete.

Along the coast, boundaries are always present, even when they are not formally marked: who belongs, who visits, who works, who rests, who claims a corner of space. These boundaries rarely claim centrality. They live in the margins: in distance, posture, small refusals, barriers and signs, and the way people hold a threshold.

The pairs foreground the ethical. Not prescriptively, but as a question that returns with every edit: what did I cut away to make the image readable? The peripheral frame does not solve that question. It keeps it visible.

This text remains deliberately brief. The work is meant to be read by looking. The sequence asks you to hold two versions of the same instant and notice what changes when the second frame arrives.

One moment, two frames. Not to complete the story, but to keep it open.





Peripheral, Baħar iç-Çağhaq, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Intentional, Baħar iç-Çagħaq, 2025.



Intentional, Ġnejna, 2025.



Peripheral, Ġnejna, 2025.



Peripheral, Ġnejna, 2025.



Intentional, Ġnejna, 2025.



Peripheral, Ġnejna, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Intentional, Ġnejna, 2025.



Peripheral, Ġnejna, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Intentional, Ġnejna, 2025.



Peripheral, Valletta, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Intentional, Valletta, 2025.



Intentional, Valletta, 2025.



Peripheral, Valletta, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Peripheral, Valletta, 2025.



Intentional, Valletta, 2025.



Peripheral, Little Armier, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Intentional, Little Armier, 2025.



Intentional, St Thomas Bay, 2025.



Peripheral, St Thomas Bay, 2025.

One Moment, Two Frames



Peripheral, St Thomas Bay, 2025.



Intentional, St Thomas Bay, 2025.

Easels Warped My Flesh; or, Could Ansel Adams Win the World Press Photo of the Year?

Mateusz Żaboklicki

The following remarks depend on the claim that, today, key problems and stakes of art and meaning are more sharply visible in photography than in many other fields. One could identify the source of this singularity in photography's necessarily indexical nature. My own understanding of the matter is rooted in works by Michael Fried (2008) and Walter Benn Michaels (2004). In *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Fried quotes Michaels' belief that 'indexicality . . . is central . . . to the medium specificity of the photograph', and then goes on to comment:

Michaels means to distinguish photographs from, say, paintings precisely with respect to the indexical or causal relation that exists between a photograph's subject (or the light rays reflected from that subject) and the photograph itself (or the film inside the camera on which the light rays entering the dark chamber through the lens fall). On the one hand, this basic feature of photographs can be taken as raising fundamental doubts about their status as works of art. . . . On the other hand . . . the very fact that this is so is what gives photography the potentially decisive significance for contemporary art. (335–6)

Such a close relationship with the conditions that enable the creation of a photograph gives photography a special position in relation to its materiality, allowing it to test, strain, and complicate that connection in certain specific

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ways. The forms of that resistance that I would like to consider are all in some way linked to the movements of various elements of the set, the camera, or the darkroom. Certain techniques I will discuss embody a possibility of defying the basic expectations and assumptions about lenses, negatives, and figures. I will try to illustrate at least the general direction these actions can take with a few prints or scans of my own. Most of what I have to say will be limited to what non-collaged, single photographs have in their toolbox, leaving out, among other options, brilliant examples in some of Jeff Wall's work of confronting similar problems (explained extensively in Fried (2008) and Michaels (2004)). In other words, I will focus on photographs that openly participate in a kind of over-fixation with the camera instead of skilfully trying to dissimulate it.

In a sense, I am arguing here that photography can transcend itself, that it can take a stance toward its own frame, and that the power of this stance is particular because of a specific necessity. To get the point across more clearly, let us make an ostensibly obvious comparison: the edges of a photograph *versus* the edges of a painting. The crucial difference is that in the process of making a painting, there is no necessary causal link between the two-dimensional spatial boundary and the thing being represented, while in photography such a connection is inevitable. There must always be a spatial (and temporal) relationship between the lens, the light-sensitive material, the back of the camera, the front of the camera, etc., on the one hand, and the photographed object on the other. The easel (a painting easel, as opposed to a darkroom easel, which I will consider shortly), the canvas, the stretcher, the freshly plastered ceiling, etc., have no such obligations towards the object depicted, although at least the position of the easel usually does (but need not) influence the painting.

This medium-specific condition is the reason for the central role of the camera in certain photographic conventions, varying with respect to optimism towards the possibility of immersion and the accuracy of the depiction. On the one hand, the optimistic attitude towards the camera tends to treat it as a surrogate eye, an honest enough witness or perhaps a sufficient proof of the world, which can provide the viewer with a point of view so they can see as if they were there; let us call this the invisible camera approach. On the other hand, there is the pessimistic approach to the camera, which includes various instances of photographs that feature the reflection of the camera and the photographer (for example, a large part

of modern self-portraiture, as in, for instance, Lee Friedlander's (Fraenkel Gallery 2025), or any full darkroom print with the shadow of the sides of the large-format camera film holder or the sides of a camera film visible, such as in Richard Avedon (Amon Carter Museum of American Art n.d.)). This might be termed the conspicuous camera approach.

A prime example of the first, optimistic, approach, the invisible camera approach, is modern photojournalism, with its insistent claim to honesty and its highly normative conception of what the camera should do. For the sake of this essay, I will treat the World Press Photo of the Year competition (WPP) and its rules as the mouthpiece of the genre and briefly present two cases of entries that have been disqualified in the investigative process over the last dozen years.¹

First, the winner of the 3rd prize in the Sports Features category of the 2010 competition, Stepan Rudik, was disqualified for his entry 'Street Fighting, Kiev, Ukraine' (Gunthert 2010) because of the removal of a foot visible in the original image in one of the photographs (Dunlap 2010). This was the first year in the history of the competition when participants were obliged to share the raw image (should any doubts about the validity of the submission emerge and should an investigation be launched). The raw image shared by Rudik shows not only the missing foot, but a whole range of possible problems that the judges could take issue with.

Although such procedures as the extensive cropping, the dramatic vignetting, the added digital grain, the heavily edited colours were a common complaint among commentators, none of them caused the disqualification. It was the foot that was the issue. In other words, an element in the spatial frame, arguably a minor one, became the decisive ethical threshold. One could argue that the presence of the foot is one of the things in the frame most closely tied to the spatiotemporal relationship of the camera to the rest of the world, as it is a direct result of that relationship and therefore a less arbitrary choice of which hill to die on. But it is certainly not the only consideration of this kind; for instance, even the size and content of the raw image, arguably, are equally involved in this necessary causal relationship.

WPP is widely regarded as one of the most important photojournalism awards in the world and as such is one of the prizes which shape the standards for the genre. The suggestion that it is a constant internal struggle can be found in the WPP's rulebook:

The content of the image must not be altered. Only retouching which conforms to the currently accepted standards in the industry is allowed. (Dunlap 2010)

Since WPP largely sets and protects these standards itself, one can sense the necessary internal tension. In the words of a former World Press Photo winner, Belgian photographer Bruno Stevens:

The World Press Photo prize is a beacon, a showcase by which the standards are evaluated and re-evaluated every year. If we let that go, it's over. (Chrisafis 2015)

Stevens was here commenting on his own act of whistleblowing that led to Giovanni Troilo being stripped of the prize that he originally received for 'The Dark Heart of Europe', which presented photographic representations to evidence socioeconomic decline and crises in the Belgian city of Charleroi. The series was met with a wave of criticism (including from the mayor of Charleroi), as it was believed to present an unfair portrayal of the city. Critics tried to force the jury to strip Troilo of the prize, arguing that some of the photos were clearly and openly staged. For example, the man in the photo of a couple having sex in a parked car (PhMuseum n.d.) is the photographer's cousin, who agreed to be photographed during the act. The WPP's response to the allegations explicitly cited the rule that staging as such is *not* prohibited:

The contest requires photojournalists do not stage pictures to show something that would otherwise have not taken place. (Chrisafis 2015)

But the photograph that led the committee to disqualify Troilo's entry—which was not in itself staged, although it did show a staged situation (models preparing to pose for a painting)—crossed another specific line (PhMuseum n.d.). The scene did not take place in Charleroi but in Molenbeek, some sixty kilometres to the north; or, more precisely and more importantly, the information that the photograph was taken in Molenbeek, and not in Charleroi, was not included in the captions. Commenting on the decision, WPP director Lars Boering remarked:

We now have a clear case of misleading information and this changes the way the story is perceived. (Chrisafis 2015)

These two cases highlight the WPP's priorities, which seem to be centred around satisfying the expectations about the camera's honesty without having to engage in how the camera (or any other instruments and parts of the process) works. The kind of sincerity photojournalism ostensibly sets out to protect consists in letting the viewer know what they are looking at, and letting them look at it from the camera's point of view. But the way of determining whether the two points of view – that of the picture and that of the camera – are indeed identical is clearly a source of confusion. And that confusion seems to have a clear purpose: to pose a set of criteria as the only criteria that keep the ideal of honesty in photojournalism alive, and to grant the rest of the variables a label of neutrality. And since this guarantee of honesty seems to be a defining feature of photojournalism, controlling only selected elements of the process (to ensure this honesty) allows for the unfettered practice of photojournalism and, in effect, makes photojournalism possible.

To comment on the other approach – the pessimistic one, centred around the 'conspicuous camera' – I would like to refer to my own projects, which seek to counter photojournalistic optimism. In the summer of 2024 I was invited by the Polish reporter Piotr Jończyk to create a photographic counterpart to his reportage on the Bug River in eastern Poland, to be published in the online journal *Kultura Liberalna* (Żaboklicki & Jończyk 2024). This was part of a series of articles on major Polish rivers, focusing on ecological and socioeconomic issues. However, as the Bug River forms (partially) the border between Poland and Ukraine and between Poland and Belarus, the report also addressed issues resulting from the Russian aggression of 2022 and the escalation of the migration crisis that has been ongoing since 2021. I gladly accepted the invitation, especially because my attitude to photojournalism, as evidenced by the above, is somewhat ambivalent, and I saw this as an opportunity to challenge and unsettle convention.

I chose a 35mm SLR camera with a 24mm lens and black and white film because I wanted to evoke – for instance – William Klein's up-close, wide-angle street photography (Gallery Fifty One n.d.), or more generally a documentary approach similar to that of Walker Evans (International Center of Photography n.d.), to add a feeling of *being-there-ness* to the series. I also wanted to include in the series a promise that proves itself false in the end,

but that hopefully tells something important about the viewer's expectations instead.

In the blurred foreground of almost all the photographs in the series (Figs 1–5), one can see a shutter release cable, and sometimes a hand with a thumb on the thumbscrew as well. This introduces a tacit deal between the photographer and the audience, as I deprive the viewer of the possibility of identifying the photographs' point of view with their own, and instead offer them a deeper, more complete insight into how – and perhaps even when – the photographs were taken. But something is clearly off. The format suggests a compact rangefinder camera, or at least a handheld SLR. It is (I hope) strikingly incongruous to see a tool like a shutter release cable, which is both unnecessary and inconvenient, as a part of this setting. In the photo of the night sky over the river, the presence of a hand holding a thumbscrew must be a mere gesture, a trick, as the exposure time is clearly extremely long. The presence of the hand is loosely connected to the moment of taking the photo. The last photograph in the series strikes the final blow to the supposed deal between me and the audience. The thumb is raised, and in terms of the available information about the scene, it becomes obvious that the cable must have been irrelevant all along.

I have used a similar approach in recent attempts to address the problem of posing versus being observed (Figs 6 & 7). I tried to make the photograph appear to the viewer as an effect of looking at an instance of posing for someone else (for another lens), but to appear so only after one realises that the camera reflected in the mirror is not (and could not possibly be) the camera used to make the photograph. (The camera in the mirror is a 35mm SLR, while the frame of the photograph suggests a 67 medium format.) Only then, after realising that this 'conspicuous camera' approach was a trick, do you begin to see that the lighting, the pose, and the setting are in a way pointed in another direction, presented to some other viewer, designed to be seen from somewhere else. Only a carefully placed black polystyrene plate, leaning against the white block, squarely aligned with its own reflection in the mirror, suggests that the photograph is something other, something in its own right, something more than just an instance of an alternative view of the typical photographic situation.

My last attempt at a similar theme was a set of extremely fresh test prints showing distorted images of a dancer holding a frame (Figs 8–12). What I was trying to achieve was to make the prints look either like a

desperate, dramatic attempt to correct the shapes that were recorded on the negative or like a bold gesture of disrespect for them. The sheet of paper in a way replaces the edges of the negative in their framing function. And the human figure, whose deformity is apparent in each picture, is used here as a measure of distortion. The darkroom easel, a simple device used to hold the photographic paper steady on the enlarger's baseboard and to keep the frame of the print nice and even, is not usually a tool whose parameters we consider when thinking about the way a photograph was made. Its main purpose is to lie flat and parallel to the plane of the lens; that is what it is made for. To claim that there is a trace of an easel in the print is similar to saying that one can find in it a trace of a properly sealed darkroom, a fresh batch of developer, and the clean hands of the technician. Only a mishandled easel will leave its mark in a potentially more significant way. In my case, the mishandling of the easel (in this case, intentionally holding it or placing it not on a parallel plane) suggests a shameless attempt to distort the honesty of the negative or an attempt to correct the illusion visible on the negative. The easel in the darkroom serves here, in a sense, as a pointed counter to a tripod, the photographic equivalent of the painter's easel, as it can be seen as an attempt to reverse the implications of establishing a point of view.

However, you cannot try to expose a lie without believing that something is true; just as you cannot try to tell a lie without some account of what is true. Comparing distorted prints with their 'normal' or less counter-intuitive counterparts (Figs 13–17) is the quickest way to show that the most difficult task here is to pinpoint the lie. If the photographed object was a rectangle, it could be projected onto the negative as a non-rectangular quadrilateral, and if the photographed object was another quadrilateral, it could be projected onto the negative as a rectangle. The subsequent modification of the easel in the darkroom can either reverse the effect of the transformation that took place at the moment the photograph was taken (as a result of the position of the object relative to the lens), or cause further distortions. In both cases the mishandling of the easel results in a warping of the edges of the exposed area of the print, which again can either be left for the beholder to see, or hidden by masking the area with its new rectangular shape.

My point is based on the idea that by default, the beholder assumes that a photograph's representational projection is adequate, the basic promise of a photograph being that the angles that appear in a certain way in the

image correspond, in principle, to the angles in the world that generated them, and that the rules that organise what we see are limited to what happens within a single projection of three-dimensional objects on a plane. In other words, the basic assumption of the viewer of a photograph is a principled and deducible correspondence between world and image. This assumption is challenged when—even having seen the photographs’ ‘normal’ counterparts, even having measured the deformity by comparison to human proportions—it is quite impossible to decide whether what appears to be a crooked rectangle was ever a rectangle in the first place.

This challenge, however, was completed in the darkroom, not between the world depicted and the light-sensitive material in the camera. One might then be tempted to say that this proves that the negative is significantly closer to the truth, and that the other parts of the process (the darkroom, the digital post-production) are less relevant, as long as they do not obscure the information of the negative. The easiest way to refute this point is to refer to large-format cameras or other formats equipped with a tilt-shift lens, which allow the photographer to move the image plane and alter shapes in a similar way.

Ansel Adams, a key figure in the history of American photography, and his book *The Camera* (2005), are cornerstones in the canon of large-format analogue photography. Some of the techniques he uses in order to manipulate the shapes and lines of the negative are similar to the ones I have just described. One of Adams’s main points—how to transgress a point of view—is of no small relevance to the issue of the optimistic/pessimistic attitude towards the camera. He illustrates his ideas with three photographs of a porch, in which I find the consequences of the tilting technique used less trivial than the usual vertical convergence correction in architectural photography. The goal here is not to correct shapes in order for them to correspond better to what beholders are used to seeing with their own eyes; rather, it is to perform a selection of the consequences of taking a photograph from a specific point in space. In the first photograph the porch is photographed head-on, Adams’s reflection is visible in the glass door, and the left window shutter is behind a post. To take the second photograph Adams moved the camera to the right and pointed the lens at the same point in space, which helped him get rid of both problems (the reflection and the hidden window shutter), but the second photograph looks as if it were taken from the side (which it was), and not head-on, like Adams wanted. When,

for the third photograph, the correction of the planes was applied, the plane of the film sheet was parallel to the porch, both problems were still gone, but the final photograph looks straight and as if it was taken head-on (which it wasn't).

The objective of photographers using similar techniques are not to deceive, not to hide the truth. Usually they are in fact quite the opposite: to help a depicted object look like it looks when it is seen with an eye. The fact that the tilting and shifting of the photographic material relative to the lens and to the object is usually used to reduce the effect of the camera's lack of a perceptual 'brain' (that is, its lack of knowledge of the shape of things) to make the photograph's perspective more human is, I would argue, incidental. The main purpose of Adams's techniques is simply to make the things in the photograph look the way the photographer wants them to look. Or, to invoke Adams's key notion of 'visualization' (Adams 2005, 1–8), to make them look the way the photographer visualises them. Visualisation, as Adams sees it, is at least partly a process of learning to see the world not through the eyes but through the possibilities provided by tools—for example, without colour. In most cases though, it will be tied to human vision. When someone wants to photograph something they see, they will usually handle the camera in a way that helps the photograph resemble what they saw when they decided to take it. Thus if a photographer decides to tilt the film holder, it is usually to make the thing appear on the photograph the way they saw it. Similar operations can of course be used to make the perspective of a photograph less human, to make the shapes on a photograph less relatable, to trade the truth for drama. However, all the imaginable goals can be brought to a common denominator: to make something look the way the photographer wants it to look.

I think focusing on the authorial intention without trying to reduce it to a particular technical criterion would make the lives of photojournalistic lawmakers easier. After the controversies surrounding the 2015 edition, the World Press Photo competition tried to make its rules clearer by referring to intentionality. Today, '[t]he first thing that counts as manipulation is intending to mislead by staging events' (World Press Photo 2026, 35). Still, 'manipulation' remains a vague term, begging for an object. Manipulation must act on something that is otherwise relatively unmanipulated. Which part of the process deserves to be called unmanipulated is—as I have tried to show—at least very hard to pin down. To mislead is surely a

punishable offence, not only in photojournalism. However, in light of what I have presented above, I am afraid that photojournalism cannot fully defend itself against that possibility with its current priorities and definitions. The optimism of photojournalism overestimates the simplicity of the relationship between the frame and the world, while overlooking the depth, nuance, and multivalence of this relationship, a very important element of which is what the photographer wanted to show. My final suggestion is that the key to a better understanding of these difficulties can lie in the very frame – or, the frame and how it is to be conceived of. The photographic frame, never completely arbitrary, always bears a trace of the photograph's material conditions and causes: it both delimits and constitutes the image, and narrows the infinite field of what could have been done into a finite, legible set of choices, thereby shaping what viewers are disposed to believe they are seeing.



*Figure 1. Mateusz Żaboklicki, Bug. Usługa fotograficzna (Bug River. A photographic service)
#1, 2024*



*Figure 2. Mateusz Żaboklicki, Bug. Usługa fotograficzna (Bug River. A photographic service)
#5, 2024*



*Figure 3. Mateusz Żaboklicki, Bug. Usługa fotograficzna (Bug River. A photographic service)
#10, 2024*



*Figure 4. Mateusz Żaboklicki, Bug. Usługa fotograficzna (Bug River. A photographic service)
#18, 2024*



Figure 5. Mateusz Żaboklicki, *Bug. Usługa fotograficzna (Bug River. A photographic service)*
#15, 2024



Figure 6. Mateusz Żaboklicki, *Untitled*, 2024



Figure 7. Mateusz Żaboklicki, Untitled, 2024



Figure 8.



Figure 11.



Figure 9.



Figure 12.



Figure 10.



Figure 13.

Easels Warped My Flesh



Figure 14.



Figure 16.



Figure 15.



Figure 17.

Note

1. This is necessarily a flawed choice, unable to provide an adequate view of the field even because of the constant debate and tension between the standards applied by the World Press Photo, the National Press Photographers Association, and the International Federation of Journalists. However, in the case of the WPP, I can at least illustrate some of the processes involved in enforcing the rules.

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Framing Yourself: Autofiction and Form

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Abstract:

This article examines contemporary autofiction through the concept of the frame, drawing on perspectives on intentionalism associable with the journal *nonsite*, as well as on a Modernist understanding of artistic autonomy. It contends that the fundamental issues raised by autofiction, such as the blurring of the boundaries between life and art, author and work, and literature and the market, are most effectively addressed by emphasising the significance of the authorially established frame as a prerequisite for artistic meaning. Based on the intentionalist assertion that meaning and intention are one and the same, the article asserts that a literary work exists only insofar as it establishes boundaries that distinguish it from unframed life and mere documentation. Through an analysis of works by Karl Ove Knausgård, Édouard Louis, and Alison Bechdel, alongside critical debates by Dorothy Gallagher, Fredric Jameson, Lee Konstantinou, Anna Kornbluh, Andrew Osborne, Agata Sikora, and Adam Wroetz, the article demonstrates how autofiction repeatedly challenges the boundaries of its own frame. While some critics interpret

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this tendency as narcissism, market capture, or ideological immediacy, the authors contend that such diagnoses are frequently oversimplified.

Keywords: autofiction, narrative frame, literary form, life-writing, *nonsite*, intentionalism

Introduction

We would like to argue that the crucial problems of contemporary autofiction writing are best understood through the lens of a conception of frame rooted in a specific understanding of Modernist autonomy (Fried 1986; Michaels 2014, 2015; Brown 2019). On this account, the frame of a work of art (works of literature included) is first and foremost something established by an author: it is they, rather than cultural conventions, institutions, or the audience, who determine the work's meaning in the first place. Such an understanding of the frame is grounded in a particular ontology of meaning, articulated in Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp's controversial essay 'Against Theory' (Mitchell 1985), as well as subsequent work by Michaels and other critics associated with the journal *nonsite.org* (Ashton 2005, 2011; Cronan 2013; Kaczmariski 2019; Siraganian 2020). In 'Against Theory', Michaels and Knapp argue that the only coherent account of meaning—an account of meaning we cannot help but accept whenever we interpret anything, whenever we perceive something as something to be interpreted—is the intentionalist one, which equates the author's intention with the meaning of a given work. 'Intention' and 'meaning' are simply different words referring to the same thing, from which it follows that:

... the relation between meaning and intention or, in slightly different terms, between language and speech acts is such that intention can neither be added nor subtracted. Intention cannot be added to or subtracted from meaning because meanings are always intentional; intention cannot be added to or subtracted from language because language consists of speech acts, which are also always intentional. (Mitchell 1985: 24)

In short: everything that appears to us as the meaning of the text is necessarily the author's intention; everything that constitutes the author's intention is the meaning of the text. Thus, what makes a work of art

possible is not any convention, but its author's intention: the fact that it was meant to be the way it is by the author. It is worth noting that this understanding of intention has nothing to do with a possible definition of intention as a mental state causally connected to the words that we say or things that we do, which still prevails in literary criticism and the humanities at large (Leys 2017, 2024). Instead, *nonsite* intentionalism (to give it this designation) relies on what could be called an immanent account of intention, as opposed to its causal model (intention as the cause of the act) or its mentalist model (intention as a state of mind accompanying the act). While commenting on Garry Winograd's photography, Michaels summarises the difference between the causal-mentalist and the immanent model of intention as follows:

... our interest in the intentional structure of this action – Winograd making a picture – can't be reducible to an interest in each of the individual physical acts or to what was going on inside his head at any particular moment. The point is rather that they belong to a single intentional structure, each element answerable to the question why, each element explicable in terms of doing what happens – i.e. making the picture. (Michaels 2016)

In this, intentionalists draw on modernist critic Stanley Cavell's reflections on the 'bad picture of intention' (Cavell 1976: 227) and a specific interpretation of Elizabeth Anscombe's philosophy of action (Anscombe 2000, Hornsby 2011). According to Anscombe, intention is that among all possible plans and motivations of an agent/author which is expressed in a specific act (work/action). Intention is *the* part of works and actions that makes them what they are:

Of course we have a special interest in human actions: but what is it that we have a special interest in here? It is not that we have a special interest in the movement of these molecules – namely, the ones in a human being; or even in the movements of certain bodies – namely human ones. The description of what we are interested in is a type of description that would not exist if our question 'Why?' did not. It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question 'Why?' So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on blackboard are subject to the question 'What does it say?' It is of a word or sentence that we ask 'What does it say?'; and the description of something as a word or a sentence at all could not occur prior to the fact that words or sentences

have meaning. . . . the description of something that goes on in the world as ‘building a house’ or ‘writing a sentence on a blackboard’ is a description employing concepts of human action. Even if writing appeared on a wall as at Belshazzar’s feast, or a house rose up not made by men, they would be identified as writing or a house because of their visible likeness to what we produce – writing and houses. (Anscombe 2000: 83–4)

And that is why, in ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, Cavell, who was familiar with Anscombe’s *Intention*, points out that ‘. . . the correct sense of the question “Why?” attributed to works of art is identical to the correct sense of the question ‘Why?’ attributed to human action in general: this question ‘directs you further *into* the work’, as opposed to the same question attributed to natural phenomena, which are perfectly explainable without any account of the subject’s intentions (Cavell 1976: 225, 276; emphasis in the original).

From such a standpoint, in order to be seen for what it is – an object of interpretation, that is, of speculation about meaning – the work of art must set boundaries between itself and the outside world (facts of life, market, readers . . .). In other words: a work of art must be given a frame. Its precise shape can be disputed, deconstructed, or criticised by the artists in their works – as it often is – but without something like a frame the work of art, while undisputably a social fact, is nothing more than any other social fact. The work of art is consequent upon an act of framing.

Meanwhile, autofiction is, arguably, a genre or convention that supposedly breaks precisely with such an understanding of framing. It combines the form of the work with the life itself: a work of fiction based on authentic material taken from the author’s personal experience, it purportedly establishes a deeper relationship between the fictional and the authentic/personal, in a way that forces the reader to constantly track both of those aspects. For example, when Édouard Louis in *Change: A Method* describes his first meeting with Didier Eribon at the university in Amiens, he mentions that he went there because it was his friend, Elena, who told him about the guest lecture Eribon would be delivering. The immediate aftermath of meeting Eribon is that Louis distances himself from Amiens and, as it turns out, ends his friendship with Elena. So, the fact that she told him about this meeting in the first place adds a sting of melancholic irony to the scene described. But in a footnote Louis adds:

In fact I didn't go to the lecture with Elena but with another friend. . . . I prefer to substitute Elena for him in this story, for the sake of coherence and above all so as not to have to retrace the whole series of events that led me to go with him and not with her. (Louis 2024)

Louis does not so much undermine what he has just described as prompt the reader to superimpose what really happened onto the fictional scene. By doing so, he implies that his book is not quite fictional in nature, but not quite non-fictional either. Precisely because contemporary autofiction writing notoriously blurs the boundaries between egodocuments and fiction, between an author's social persona and its work, between a multiplicity of day-to-day facts and representation of these facts, or between marketing and literature – in other words: because autofiction blurs the boundaries between what is outside the frame and what is framed – it presents a conundrum for literary criticism. Our goal in the following pages is, firstly, to point out specific issues discussed in select critical work concerning autofiction, and secondly, to propose an intentionalist way of approaching these issues.

To Find the Shape of Life

In literary criticism, the intentionalist account of framing forces us to ask whether every element of a work of art justifies itself in relation to the criteria set by the work as a whole; if particular elements are *there*, they have to *mean something* in relation to the work as such. For example, a shopping list in a novel presumably serves an artistic purpose; since it is formally mediated by the totality of the artistic form, it means more than what it explicitly is (even when we are told we are reading an actual shopping list, the question remains: *why* is it important that we ought to believe we're looking at an authentic slice of life?). On the other hand, a shopping list in a diary – or any other egodocument – can be interesting for sociologists precisely because it *simply is* a grocery list: a piece of information with a potential to convey many things about consumption habits or the socio-economic reality of the person who wrote it, while telling us nothing about its place in the totality of the artistic form (because the latter simply does not exist).

How does this problem play out in the critical discourse on autofiction writing? When Fredric Jameson discusses Karl Ove Knausgård's *My*

Struggle, a cornerstone of modern autofiction, he finds choosing the right approach challenging. He notes that one of Knausgård's 'obsessive ambitions' in *My Struggle* is to tell the truth about his life (Jameson 2024: 160). What seems problematic for Jameson is the fact that it is unclear what 'truth' Knausgård is telling us when a shopping list is included in the book: 'Can you tell the truth by listing what you buy in the store? (Would it be lying if you left something out?)' (160). Jameson compares Knausgård's description of shopping to a variety of different conventions 'from the history of writing': '[s]urface writing', '[t]he second-by-second account of muscular and gestural movement', '[s]tream of consciousness' etc. But after all – '[n]one of that here' (161). And the fact that throughout *My Struggle* the author variously describes his work as fiction, autobiography, and even 'sometimes calls it a novel' (157) does not help. Hence, as the title of Jameson's essay ('The Novel and the Supermarket') suggests, the real problem is whether a novel in which the description of everyday activity like shopping simply is what it is can still be called a novel in any meaningful sense.

Although at the end of his essay Jameson ultimately proposes a way out of this interpretative conundrum, his confusion regarding the genre of Knausgård's books in itself points to a more important point, as it stems from the very thing that makes autofiction so interesting today: that is, the blurring of the boundaries between what is framed and what falls outside the frame. Undoubtedly, *My Struggle* is mostly read as literature rather than a nonfictional egodocument: it has been awarded or nominated for multiple literary prizes (such as the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize [emphasis ours] or the Norwegian Critics' Prize for Literature), and reviewers have often compared it to Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Such comparisons are meant not only to highlight the compositional similarities between both works, but also to convey appreciation for the artistic value of *My Struggle*. At the same time, however, Knausgård declares that his main purpose is to reveal the truth about his life, rather than to write a beautiful and sophisticated book. As he states in the interview: 'the duty of literature is to fight fiction' (Rothman 2018). Although his use of language and compositional techniques prompts critics to comment on the literary merits of his work, he simultaneously signals in various ways that his ambitions may be non-artistic in nature.

One example of such signalling is Knausgård's description of his writing process as a flow based on making as few artistic choices as possible, based rather on reconstructing real events in the text and avoiding rewriting the manuscript. As Andrew Osborne argues, Knausgård's strategy may be intended to reduce meaningful artistic choices to a minimum in order to replicate, within the literary text, the logic of everyday life. Osborne explains that in 'real life' events like a child's laughter and a discussion about evil are 'unplanned juxtapositions' (Osborne 2022: 514). They do not necessarily carry the 'indispensable air of consequence' found in traditional fictional literature. By minimising his own intervention (artistic choice), Knausgård aims to produce a work that 'simply "is," without meaning' (518), that seeks to document life in its unfiltered, unmediated form.

Osborne further suggests—referring to the works of Michael Fried (Fried 1980)—that readerly influence does not just manifest as an external pressure; rather, it is an internalised 'interior audience' (516) that dictates the writer's choices. Influenced by this, writers seek to shape their work to elicit a specific response from the reader. In this context, Knausgård's attempts to blur the boundary between literature and life can be seen as an exercise in artistic autonomy: by relinquishing decision-making power regarding the composition of the work, he tries to liberate the writing process from constraints arising from anticipated, or projected, readerly expectations and reception dynamics.

According to Osborne, Knausgård's strategy is an 'inversion of Fried's argument in *Art and Objecthood*; that is, an inversion of the argument that form is what keeps the work from being for the audience' (Osborne 2022: 520). In 'Art and Objecthood', Fried famously pointed out what he considered a crucial problem with minimalist/literalist artists (Donald Judd, Tony Smith, or Robert Morris): by emphasising, in a specific way, the material properties of the literal support of their sculptures—by stressing the fact that any work of art simply is what it is: a physical object in space—minimalists ended up creating objects which sought to fulfil or exhaust themselves fully in the viewer's experience. Rather than seeking to suspend the objecthood of the artwork (as modernists such as Frank Stella did) and establish the work of art as a meaningful totality which could not be reduced to its material support, literalists explicitly affirmed its status as a mere object. Consequently, this approach to form relinquished meaning or conviction in favour of perceptual viewer engagement. Deprived of the

object of conviction generated by form, the work is experienced solely as an object situated within a particular context: ‘... the situation itself *belongs to* the beholder – it is *his* situation’ (Fried 1986: 154). Such an experience, according to Fried, is ‘incurably theatrical’ (Fried 1986: 157) and, as a result, undermines the very possibility of artistic autonomy.

Osborne’s inversion of Fried’s argument implies that reducing artistic choices can paradoxically be a logical way for an author to protect their *creative process* from readers’ expectations (in other words, it is a way of not thinking about it while writing). If this approach ultimately proves ineffective, it is because it only considers the creative process and not the final form of a piece: safeguarding the autonomy of the writing process does not necessarily translate to the autonomy of the work itself. A work that aspires to be as formless as life is still vulnerable to its readers’ usage and projections. Therefore, Knausgård’s case serves as a perfect example of the difficulty of doing without deliberated framing even in a literary work directly based on ‘real life’. It seems that the frame is precisely what helps to separate literature from a mere document. Life itself cannot be fully framed because it has no end (or, more precisely, its end prevents the telling of the life story by the main character).

Alison Bechdel offers an insightful exploration of this mechanism in her memoir *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012). It is the author’s second autobiographical narrative expressed in the form of a graphic novel: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, released in 2006, received widespread critical acclaim and helped to raise the mainstream popularity of graphic memoirs. It is a deeply intimate story about the author’s father, who took his own life. In her next book, Bechdel shifted her focus from the father figure to the mother and reflected on the success and reception of her previous work. In a phone call scene in the final section of *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel calls her mother to discuss her opinion on the acclaimed *Fun Home*. This meta-conversation leads to a reflection on the memoir-writing process. The lower part of one panel reads: ‘This is not the end of the story, of course.’ In the upper part of the following panel, this idea is further developed: ‘The story has no end. But now it’s five years later and I must manufacture one’ (Bechdel 2012: 282). This illustrates the fundamental difference between real life and its literary rendering: the latter must be ‘manufactured’, or artficed – that is, it must be given a compositional framework characteristic of works rather than life. Outside of literature, ‘the story has no end’ – life

continues after the author has finished writing the book. Here, Bechdel suggests that ‘manufacturing’, a form of framing, is needed so that a life story can serve a literary narrative.

In the book, this is a lesson that the protagonist’s mother must come to understand. During the phone call, she discusses her friends’ reactions to *Fun Home*—noting that they were shocked or even outraged by the publication of such a deeply personal account. Although the author’s mother appears to harbour resentment, she refrains from expressing her feelings directly. The mother’s perspective only begins to shift when she encounters a thought-provoking essay by another memoirist, Dorothy Gallagher, who asserts:

life is just one damn thing after another. *The writer’s business is to find the shape in unruly life and to serve her story. Not, you may note, to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story.* There really is no choice. A reporter of fact is in service to the facts, a eulogist to the family of the dead, but a writer serves the story without apology to competing claims.

This is an attitude that some have characterized as ruthless: that cold detachment, that remove, that allows writers to make a commodity of the lives of others. But a writer who cannot separate herself from her characters and see them within the full spectrum of their human qualities loses everything in a haze of nostalgia and sentimentality (Gallagher 2002; emphasis in original).

What is striking about this quotation is the similarity between Knausgård’s and Gallagher’s views on life. Another way of expressing the same basic truth, that ‘life is just one damn thing after another’, is to focus on ‘unplanned juxtapositions’ of a child’s laughter and a debate on evil (Osborne 2022: 514). In other words, it is about the composition of life compared to that of a work of art. However, despite their descriptions of this problem being similar, Knausgård and Gallagher reach different conclusions. The former attempts to recreate the structure of everyday life in his writing, treating all juxtapositions as ‘unplanned’, as if they were real-life events. Gallagher believes this to be impossible; thus, we can understand her essay as a repudiation of Knausgård’s position. Everything in the text must make sense as part of the text (due to a compositional necessity). ‘Find[ing] the shape’ of life in literature simply involves treating a true

experience as artistic material; ‘serv[ing] the story’ is just accepting the role of meaningful choices. Gallagher’s essay briefly addresses the central issue of autofiction and narrative framing from the author’s perspective, demonstrating that even when writing about real life, one cannot avoid making – and prioritising – artistic choices. After all, Knausgård’s decision to restrict the sphere of artistic choices by not rewriting what he already wrote is just like any other decision to do something: an action.

Schrödinger’s Writer at the Market

As we have established, even a work of art strictly inspired by personal experience is ‘manufactured’ and framed, unlike real life. This positions autofiction within literature and in opposition to non-fictional egodocuments. However, many contemporary debates on autofiction blur the distinction between these two realms, focusing on issues that are not strictly aesthetic, but related to the author as an individual external to the text itself. Yet, as Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor have pointed out, ‘a handful of studies describe autofiction as egocentric or exhibitionistic’ (2025: 141), redirecting the discussion towards the author’s personality and individual characteristics. However, just as many researchers have worked to redefine or socially contextualise this creative practice in defence against accusations of narcissism. These issues are present in both global discussions and, recurrently, in the context of contemporary Polish literary criticism, the latter in a manner that will be referred to further below in what may serve as something of a case-study in debates on autofiction and, by extension, on the framing of the (para)literary. We will now discuss select critical perspectives from both contexts, to highlight not just the similarities between them, but also some of the nuances that literary criticism brings to the table when it comes to autofiction.

In a thought-provoking essay published in one of Poland’s leading online cultural magazines, *Dwutygodnik.com*, ‘Czy bohater polskiej powieści kupił już sobie komputer?’ [‘Has the Protagonist of the Polish Novel Already Bought Himself a Computer?’], Adam Wrocz divides contemporary Polish prose into two main currents, the archaic and the private. The latter, currently at the centre of several heated debates within Polish criticism, can be linked to certain global trends in autofiction. Wrocz describes the private style of writing as ‘entirely confined to a single mind, shaped by a

specific set of experiences, buried under the weight of personal hardships, and making no effort to explore modes of existence beyond those familiar to the narrator' (Wrotz 2023).¹ While Wrotz correctly identifies the presence of this trend in contemporary fiction, his critique contributes to an oversimplifying way of thinking about autofiction – namely, the common accusation of self-centeredness.

However, from an aesthetic point of view, this issue should not be the main focus of the debate. The author's egocentrism – as a creative motivation and a driving force behind the work – can produce literature that is either compelling or mediocre; self-centredness as a problem is external to the work of art and dangerously shifts the conversation towards the question of the likeability of the author. Both advocates and opponents of autofiction often fall into this trap: they conflate the judgment about the work of art with the judgment about the author behind it.

Agata Sikora, in her essay 'Ja w pudełku' ['Me in a Box'], provides a thoughtful commentary on this issue. She argues that much of the confusion about autofiction stems from the emancipatory ambition of literature that focuses on depicting real experiences, particularly in feminist autobiographical projects. The feminist ambition to depict women's experiences in art arose from the observation that these experiences had been historically considered less significant than men's, and from the desire to challenge the *status quo*. However, this has also risked amplifying the cliché that all female literature is focused on self-expression. When the articulation of emancipatory aspirations became clichéd, it paradoxically began to reinforce misogynistic stereotypes. According to Sikora, the contemporary (and often unwarranted) association of women's literary output with self-expression pits it against the deliberate, 'serious' literature written by men (Sikora 2023). However, Sikora argues that these problems originate not in the works themselves, but in the kind of discourse centred around them.

And it could have been just another example of the mainstream media misinterpreting the feminist project, if the issue were not exacerbated by autofiction writers themselves, who tend to present criticism of their work as motivated by hate, as Sikora demonstrates with specific examples of the author's responses to reviews, particularly on social media. Sikora ironically refers to authors who employ this strategy as 'Schrödinger's writers', as they appear to shift at will between the role of an actual professional writer

and that of a '(wo)man in the street' talking about the kind of experiences that demand public expression:

This enables the author to present herself as both a spokesperson for an 'important social issue', which she has experienced first-hand, and a literary figure who enjoys the associated benefits, such as prestige, invitations to festivals and modest but noteworthy financial compensation. However, if the work is subjected to rigorous literary criticism . . . , it suddenly becomes apparent that what lies within this box is nothing more than a suffering self that has not received the expected empathy. In this sense, Schrödinger's writer is in a better position than Schrödinger's cat: when the box is opened, she can decide whether or not she is a writer, depending on the circumstances. (Sikora 2023)

Although Sikora's conclusions may sound exaggerated, they are based on meticulous analysis of real writers' and their readers' reactions to criticism. Many factors can be taken into consideration when trying to understand these situations—social media dynamics certainly play a part. However, it would be a mistake to focus solely on the specifics of Internet communication. As Sikora writes, the 'Schrödinger writer' strategy can be profitable for authors, and even if it is not used cynically, it is a way of securing a comfortable position in a discussion. As a result of applying such a strategy, the boundaries between life and art get erased. According to Sikora, when literary reviewing is expected to evaluate the experiences described in the work (and, by extension, the person who was involved in those experiences), the book itself is reduced to a 'picture from inside the head', as she writes (Sikora 2023). Equating the author's experience with the book she wrote blurs the latter's status as a consciously constructed piece of art. However, Sikora explicitly rejects this approach. She shows that, although in Polish criticism we often see authors and reviewers contribute to this oscillation between the status of text as an artwork and as an intimate voice touching on important issues, the entire mechanism is ultimately indefensible. If we accept the 'Schrödinger's writer' strategy, we will be eliminating the idea of literary criticism as we know it. This is why it is so important to insist on the dynamics of framing, in the sense conceived across this article, and consequently treat autofiction as a piece of literature, rather than a record of unmediated life.

What is noteworthy about Sikora's approach is that it does not entirely dismiss autofiction as such. While she identifies issues with its reception, she does not reduce autofiction to market-driven currents, nor does she negate the possibility of writing good autofiction. In this respect, she stands in opposition not only to Wrotz, but many other critics as well.

Another way of approaching the 'Schrödinger's writer' strategy is to point out that it is a testament to the pressure exercised on literary production by the contemporary market and thus a starting point for a different kind of critique of modern autofiction. This is an approach developed by Lee Konstantinou in his essay, 'Autofiction and Autoreification', originally presented as a contribution to a Modern Language Association 2021 roundtable. According to Konstantinou, autofiction 'is not a genre', but instead 'an aesthetic gesture or practice or mode (or whatever you want to call it) that takes place at the intersection of genre and marketing' (Konstantinou 2021). But what makes Konstantinou's remarks interesting from the standpoint of framing is his insistence on the fact that 'the distinctive feature of this aesthetic gesture [autofiction – Z.S., Ł.Ż.]' is the 'internalization of marketing into literary form' (Konstantinou 2021). As he puts it:

Contemporary autofiction is a literature that confronts the reality that under neoliberalism, the individual is increasingly charged with the job of managing his own portfolio of human capital. (Konstantinou 2021)

Here we can see that the root of the 'Schrödinger's writer' strategy is, arguably, the market itself. For authors, it is potentially profitable to adjust their relationship with customers depending on their target audience. Indeed, Konstantinou does not perceive autofiction's involvement in marketing as a problem. Far from it, he characterises contemporary autofiction as 'a way of grappling formally with a larger ongoing historical condition or crisis', as something emerging 'from the unique collision of art and commerce under neoliberalism' (Konstantinou 2021), and expresses his appreciation of the works of Tao Lin and Sheila Heti. At this point, the crucial question arises. If on Konstantinou's account, Lin's or Heti's books do not necessarily say anything about the conditions in which their work is being subjugated to the market, but merely reflect these conditions, then how are these writers supposed to grapple with them formally? The critic has little to say about Lin and Heti's specific achievements in this regard.

Konstantinou's indifference or dismissiveness towards aesthetic categories—'whatever you want to call it'—suggests a problematic understanding of the relationship between autofiction and then market. Here, internalisation of marketing by autofiction is understood as a type of subjugation. According to Konstantinou, aesthetics are cheap. It is marketing—not literature—that wins in the end by turning the literary form into use value and a tool for accumulating so-called human capital. '[Tao] Lin's efforts at self-promotion are internal to his art', writes Konstantinou, and adds: 'There would. . . not be much left of his art without this persistent foregrounding of his struggle to capitalize on his own name' (Konstantinou 2021). Thus, autofiction is treated as a quasi-literary form of marketing at the so-called 'intersection of genre and marketing', a formless, frameless experience of the author as a brand to vibe with.

Anna Kornbluh's commentary on autofiction in her book *Immediacy, Or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* confronts similar problems to those raised by Konstantinou. Kornbluh employs the term 'immediacy' to refer to a dominant cultural and economic style of the early twenty-first century, characterised by the elimination or flattening of different forms of mediation. It describes the tendency in contemporary culture, moulded by intensive circulation of capital, to bypass intermediary layers that once shaped experience, meaning, and representation (Kornbluh 2024: 1–24). On Kornbluh's account, modern autofiction is a prime example of immediacy:

Among literati, immediacy as literary style goes more readily by the name 'autofiction'. . . . The recently surging autofictions acquit as fictions that are not fictions, not made but just extant, exalting a presence preceding representation. . . . Rather than building character, they advance a protagonist who is the same as the author in name and circumstance and real friends and real family and, above all, real voice. Rather than narrativity and plot, they purvey first-person present-tense uneventful short-spans, just elliptical ruminations in real time. Redacting fictional construction, duration, and figuration, autofiction delivers identity, instantaneity, it-ness (Kornbluh 2024: 66)

The opposition between 'made' and 'extant' or 'figuration' and 'it-ness' recalls some of the issues we have discussed in the context of Knausgård, Bechdel, and Sikora. The equation of the character in the narrative with the

author, and the emphasis on presence and identity, can be easily reconciled with Konstantinou's observation about the mixing of different roles (writer, publisher, and marketer) in autofiction. Bearing these similarities in mind, it is worth emphasising that Kornbluh's conclusion is even grimmer:

[t]he circulation economy crafts this stylistic unity of annulled mediation, in conditions encompassing the expansion of university writing programs amid a university labor crisis, the dramatic downsizing in the publishing and journalism industries, and the ubiquity of freelance entrepreneurs. (Kornbluh 2024: 67)

But it is the way in which Kornbluh describes the relationship between economy and the aesthetic that shows the similarity of her and Konstantinou's views: '[t]he circulation economy' as a force crafting autofiction's styles is simply a more dramatic version of the 'unique collision of art and commerce under neoliberalism' (Konstantinou 2021). On Konstantinou's account, there is just no difference between a work of autofiction and marketing, which is a good thing, since the dissolution of this difference teaches us about 'the way we live now' (Konstantinou 2021). On Kornbluh's account, a work of autofiction simply reflects the conditions of circulation economy, which is a bad thing, since this passivity leads to 'shedding literature's potential to immanently criticize the known world' (2024: 67). But in both cases, we are confronted with a situation where an account of modern autofiction – in both, focused on the uncertain status of the frame – leads to an understanding of the relationship between literature and the market, where the former is fully incorporated into the latter. To avoid the pitfalls that both critics encounter, it is worth considering Nicholas Brown's work. Although it is not directly related to autofiction, it is important for understanding the position of contemporary literature in the marketplace and for drawing implications for the debates at hand.

In his seminal book *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*, Brown draws two conclusions from the fact that, at the current stage of capitalism, the commodity form has subjugated the entirety of human life, including art as such. First, it becomes necessary to answer the following question:

Why should the commodification of the work of art be a problem – why would it seem to matter to its very status as a work of art – while the

commodity character of a hammer or a shoe does not matter to its being as a hammer or a shoe? (Brown 2019:2)

Brown's answer – indebted to Fried's 'Art and Objecthood', Marx's *Capital*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Kant's formula for aesthetic judgment (Brown 2019: 2–9) – is that commodities lack internal, immanent meaning, which in turn is precisely what makes works of art into what they are. This is why the commodification of the work of art is a problem from the standpoint of the latter. Secondly, it is only in conditions where the field of art is (factually or ideologically) subordinated to the market that the defence of the autonomy of art (including literature) and the interpretative procedures that support it from the hegemony of commodity form takes on a radical character. Building on Brown's point of view, if autofiction really succeeds in doing what Konstantinou says it is doing, then there is absolutely no controversy, only works of art asserting their autonomy from the market. To internalise marketing into the literary form itself would be a first step in negating marketing as an external force and establishing a work of art's autonomy:

... [the] autonomy [of a work of art – Z.S., Ł.Ż.] is not a metaphysical independence from external circumstances. . . . Autonomy – 'negativity', in Hegel's idiolect – instead has to do with the fact that precisely those external circumstances are actively taken up by us in ways that are irreducibly normative. (Brown 2019: 30)

From Brown's standpoint, by establishing a definitive relationship to its own status as a cultural commodity, a specific work of autofiction establishes itself as an aesthetic object, which was meant to be understood on its own terms. On Brown's account, with respect to autofiction there is (at least a possibility of) internalisation of marketing understood in terms of sublation: works of autofiction that succeed in establishing some sort of difference between themselves (what falls within the frame) and marketing (what falls outside of the frame), by actively recognising the reality of the modern literary market as an obstacle that has to be formally overcome. In other words: autofiction's artistic success is dependent on its ability to recognise market pressure and establish boundaries between itself and marketing. Here we can see the advantages of Brown's position, in which the very

possibility of asserting a work of art's autonomy is dependent on its ability to consider its external conditions.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that autofiction is a major phenomenon in the literary market, as well as being a prominent subject of literary studies nowadays (Effe and Lawlor 2025: 135). As with any trend, it may produce mediocre pieces due to the standardisation of narrative strategies and the similarity of many works. This is where we see the origin of strong critical voices defending literature against the stream of mass-produced autofictions. Recognising this, we would argue that some of these voices tend to oversimplify the issues. In our view, the complicated relationship between autofiction and the market is, more than a threat (which it certainly also is), but also an opportunity to thematise this relationship within the form of particular works.

We would once again like to refer to Michael Fried's work. In his debate with T. J. Clark, Fried noted that his commitment to the concept of modernism, which focuses on the specific pictorial achievements of artists such as Manet, does not result in 'a view of art and society as mutually exclusive, sealed off from one another' (Fried 1982: 226). On the contrary:

... modernist painting, in its constantly renewed effort to discover what it must be, is forever driven 'outside' itself, compelled to place in jeopardy its very identity by engaging with what it is not. (Fried 1982: 226)

Fried's observation applies not only to modernism in the visual arts, but also to contemporary literature. The fact that marketing and literature (as well as life and form) are two different things does not mean they are completely separate or mutually exclusive. The challenge for literature nowadays is to establish its identity by testing its limits, 'engaging with what is not' literature.

Autofiction is a convention that can organically thematise everything 'outside' of it within its own structure. In autofiction, self-expression, the structure of everyday life, and the conditions of the market all invade literature. This confrontation cannot be avoided. It can lead to the creation of pieces that are entirely subservient to external goals, such as expressing the author's feelings or establishing a personal brand. However, it can

also lead to literature that ‘constantly renew[s] its] effort to discover what it must be’, seeking adequate frames for itself and creating its own conditions of artistic autonomy. But the success or failure of a given work of autofiction can only be discovered through interpretation. Although any interpretation ‘must begin with an account of the social machine’ (Brown 2019: 11) – market pressure, author’s media presence, marketing strategies. . . – it cannot be reduced to a description of those conditions of possibility. Autofiction and its ways with framing can therefore be regarded as one literary manifestation of the limitations of such reduction.

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Note

1. Unless otherwise indicated in the text or in the ‘References’ section, the translation is by Zuzanna Sala and Łukasz Żurek.

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Gordonalia:

An excerpt from *Situations*

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Preamble

The following extract from *Situations* returns to the figure of Gordon who first appeared in *The Sick List*, a novel published by Boiler House Press in 2021.¹ It adds further detail to the Gordonalia—the collected rumour-compendium of a life that was never envisaged as liveable. Gordon is not so much a character as a device, or principle (if such a word can be used) of a certain kind of criticism in which the position of the critic remains obscure, both in terms of their chief arguments (these will be multiple and will lack overall consistency), but so too in terms of the moral positions of the critic (they will also remain uncertain and shall invite suspicion). It notices but provides no remedy to the situation of university criticism, which operates in the context of advanced institutional decay and the familiar torpors that accompany performativity. The contemporary university is an idiot machine of sorts, a sophisticated system for embedding the vapid state at the core of what some misleadingly still call ‘academic culture’, which raises the question of how the University could have been so vulnerable to the external aggressor which goes by many names, inter alia, managerialism, anti-intellectualism, neoliberalism, and so on, and whether or not there was

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something resolutely pedestrian and so anti-intellectual already embedded in its so-called intellectual heart—these are the conditions from which Gordon emerged. Divergent writing offers little, even if this little (in such contexts) can still be a large amount, the possibility of some kind of break with established forms, a glimpse at alternative thinking practices, and perhaps too the added effect of maintaining a disposition, or an outlook, slightly out of kilter with everyday performance. This is the performance a university employee will have to perform in order to remain, not so much employed (the idiot machine will happily sack the polite and industrious), but not entirely disliked by those they work amongst.

Extract

Between Gordon's years of speaking and his eventual muteness, he spent several months, perhaps years, uttering words without sentences. Little is known of this period, although it is claimed the university lost its way at a similar time.

The indeterminate nature of even the simplest word struck Gordon as exemplary, so it has been said, given how each word can point in multiple directions and borrow multiple associations. It has been suggested that if a sentence is open for two divergent readings because of the indecision of one or two of its words, both readings will be true. But even here the words in question, including those with two allowed senses, will be subject to severe limitation. This could be why Gordon came to dislike most sentences, or the presence of a context, or contextualising detail, textual or literal, which can obliterate the potentiality of the words it houses, and why he felt that words must be returned to and we must attempt to deploy them in all senses at once, a suggestion which cannot be enacted and can never be made with due seriousness, and so it was that Gordon made it.

There is the claim that among the solutions Gordon presented for realigning, or reconstituting, the basic parameters of the organisation in which he worked, was simply this: to speak a different language, not a foreign language but a different one, and do so in the presence of the university, and cleave to that different language in that university setting as if it were nothing at all. This solution was another of his non-solutions, as indeed it had to be, given the draw of language to its parameters and the call of language to submit to the situations of dialogue and civility. This draw

back to the normative call of language would always prevent anyone who attempted to enact Gordon's recommendation, his call to speak a different language, from achieving their object.

By another account, Gordon once attended the class of an English Professor. The man was attempting to enliven his students to the richness of words and say something indeterminate—but highly apposite, he would have thought—about the nature of language. This English Professor was mediocre in all respects and would never have been appointed a decade on. But this judgement applied to most. Few if any would have reached professorial status under the subsequent regime, when what it meant to be a professor, even of the middling sort, was obliterated from memory. In this latter-day regime it was impossible to know what the act of professing had once entailed. Nobody could know anymore how to acquire the means and nobody knew what their acquisition felt like, which meant that it was impossible to grasp what intellectual failure looked like too. Intellectual failure had ceased to signify. These subsequent professors could only fail in other respects as the professorial class was eventually and finally subsumed into the institutional machinery, a fascist engine.

The English Professor had done well, under the circumstances. He was still surrounded by exemplars of professorial bearing he might borrow from freely, and in these older and softer regimes such efforts to meet the stature of his peers by simulating their bearing need not be maintained indefinitely. He had come to write almost nothing and, in his teachings, most of his key intuitions were half remembered bits of theory he had never entirely understood but considered significant at the time he first encountered them. The man would recycle his bits and pieces each year, and with every year that passed the memory of the writings that prompted him to think, grew dimmer.

Gordon arrived when the class was not yet half done and sat back at the back, the Professor said. He came in, set himself down in the very last row, and looked at me across the benches. We exchanged glances and then I merely continued with the lecture. There was no reason he should have been there, but at the time the Professor felt there was not much he could do about it, least of all draw his students' attention to the silent figure now sitting at the very rear of this large yet barely populated lecture theatre. The

theatre was so big, and the number of students taking his class was so small, that the usual lurkers who sit in the last row would not sit there – it would be unseemly even to them – and so the lurkers sat in the far left or in the far right aisle of benches, leaving the centre section for the usual suspects, those who asked questions and intruded upon his time at the beginning when he was setting up, during the break, and after the lecture when the Professor did his best to escape them.

Given Gordon's growing notoriety, he said, I have come to reflect again on that day when Gordon came and sat at the back of my lecture. On reflection, he reflected, Gordon arrived at the most auspicious moment. I was riffing (the Professor did not say *riffing* but might have done). He was certainly improvising. The topic of my talk was the concept of the *frame*. I was *expatiating* (another word he did not quite use) on the concept of the frame to demonstrate not only the richness of language but its indeterminacy too, and so the availability, within language itself, to escape fixed ways of being, and how this possibility is inherent to most words, and so, word substitution was less necessary in the creative act, than word redeployment. Even a limited vocabulary has within itself the resources to rewrite history.

The suspicion has arisen among some that these were actually Gordon's words, and Gordon's ideas, but none have put it to the Professor himself.

The Professor now thinks he should write up that segment of the lecture which he devoted to the word, frame, and its near associates, and use that lecture to frame Gordon's character. When Gordon arrived at my lecture, the Professor said, he arrived at the most pertinent point since I had just begun discoursing on a word that was highly relevant to his own self. It was hard to shake my own self from the feeling, the Professor continued, that when I stood there improvising for the benefit of my students, I was actually writing Gordon's obituary. Gordon arrived just as I was, in effect, writing him up.

Take the word *frame* and its derivatives, I told them. Do not be so sure as you might think that this is one of the concepts of imprisonment I spoke about in my last lecture. I suspect I might have over-egged the point in attempting to explain to you, how you are, each of you, imprisoned. You are not entirely imprisoned, just mostly. And you might think as you listen, the Professor said, how we might seek to avoid frameworks, or

how we might hope to evade them, or that, if frameworks are necessary, our writings should seek to make these frameworks tremble. If automatic writing, to take the notorious case, is a false dream, we might still in our near imprisonment work against the systems which also formed us, which framed us to be what we are. You might think, he went on, that the frame is the problem we set out to undermine. Yet, it would be simplistic to think that. It would be simple of you to oppose the idea of the frame to – let us take the most famous example – that of the *frame-breaker*, the Luddite who breaks the machinery of production and gives way to a word meaning *backward facing idiot*. As if the frame could ever be defeated. But it would, equally, be a mistake to dismiss the Luddite entirely. And to those of you who might consider yourselves *frame-breakers*, the Professor added in the hope to please all positions, I would say, fine, do that, why not. And yet, a framework is never complete. Do not forget that, either. The first and most obvious usage of the word, namely, to describe a supporting structure, a structure for which the outline or skeleton is not filled in, might be read as an indicator that each frame is only ever partial, or skeletal anyway, and will have holes admitting to the outside and indeterminate regions within. The framework is never so much a problem as are the walls, something early peoples intuited as they made theirs from straw and shit.

Here the Professor most likely overplayed his hand. The man had over-analysed.

I can swear their feet twitched below their fixed desks, the Professor recalls.

And frames can corrode, or become warped, or fail, the Professor said, very probably now well pleased with himself with how this was going. But this first and most obvious understanding of the word relies heavily upon architectural metaphor and an architect's outlook, and this would be the outlook, moreover, of those who have never been in a prison cell, nor had cause to fear one.

Now the Professor really felt he had covered all bases.

To be in the frame means also to be brought to visibility – an elemental but important point – and so, a light architectural frame, with porous walls and cantilevered ceilings, will do little against the spotlight. Furniture too, will have a frame, and one way of removing oneself from being enframed would be to become a piece of furniture.

The Professor said that when Gordon sat at the back of the lecture, Gordon must have soon known that the lecture applied directly to him. Gordon would not evade the frame forever, he must have known that too. Once he achieved notoriety, Gordon would be immobilised by that notoriety. His existence would be defined, his chief crimes against sense would at last be set for the system to incorporate into its calculations. Whatever mischief Gordon subsequently managed, it would be limited by this framing, by his legibility. This is how people like Gordon die prematurely and become their own obituaries. Some die so absolutely they are not even worth writing up – they outlive themselves.

Institutionalised people simplify their companions all the time and ensure that almost all incomers eventually amount to nothing. After an initial period of uncertainty during which a new employee's characteristics remain indistinct, they soon acquire a reputation for being this or that kind of person, and after that, their personhood is set and all involved can play into their own comparatively fixed characters of being. This must include the inductee too, since to frame does not simply mean to enclose, but also to adapt oneself. The organisation, the social order, is something into which the inductee frames their being. It is a condition of their admission.

Gordon preferred to encourage rumour, it has been said. So long as they remain circulating, rumours tend towards a degree of semantic fluidity and have the qualities of a dream, only, a dream is individuated fluidity, whereas rumour is social fluidity. The Professor did not say as much, but it is possible that Gordon evaded the demand to frame his own thoughts in any conventional way, and that he himself thought in rumour and hearsay just as much as he encouraged rumour and hearsay in others. Everything Gordon thought had the qualities of rumour, and everything he conceived had the flavour of hearsay. This might explain what Gordon did and what he said, expressing the operations of a mind that had released itself from fixed points of reference, and had made itself available to distortion, the intuitions of migration and lateral movement. If Gordon made mischief with others, it must be understood that the operations of Gordon's mind – his thinking structures – were concurrently making mischief with themselves. His thoughts were already interpolated as Gordon took what he saw and exchanged the elements of his perception. His was a natural derangement. And so, whilst it may be true that the structures of the university – both

architectural and procedural – were in a sense antithetical to Gordon's ways of being in that he placed himself at odds with those very structures, they were also productive if not essential to every mannerism that Gordon manifested. By remaining within the space of the university, Gordon was formed in among structures and strictures which became the material for his derangements. He remained within its embracing structure even when, or precisely because, he was thinking in rumour and conceiving ideas, thoughts, that had the flavour of hearsay. The institution gave his activities their mechanical reference points. At most, Gordon was the excrescence of a frame. This much the Professor did say.

The English Professor may well have been right in that the organisation probably constituted Gordon, and others like him, even down to his posture and so to the very parameters of his bodily frame, or how he might frame, or give expression to, or fix his facial characteristics to suit occasions. Characteristically, for Gordon, these bodily and facial characteristics remain ill-remembered. And where some might decide that Gordon was hunched, for instance, or had a lurking gait, to take another common figuration, others would give him a belligerent posture.

There were other theories. Everything has become a static image, Gordon apparently said. Since the introduction of cinema and its popularisation in the early twentieth century, all movement stopped. This was the logic of the cinematic frame; simulated movement from static images became the simulated movement of social orders. From this point, social existence was constituted as celluloid was populated, that is to say, in almost indistinguishable yet frozen chunks of dead social matter. If societies continued to move, it was only on this principle. All societies were since built of these static pieces and this accounts for their lack of dynamism, their unnatural or corpse-like inertia, and their hostility to nature. Human existence since the invention of cinema, Gordon said, is geared towards a barren earth, an orbital rock with the fertile or growing layer stripped off, the seas broiled away, so that the surface could become, eventually, one permanent frame to underlie all frames, like the surface of the Moon or Mercury, or at a push, Mars. The surface of each is known for its antiquity, which is why, for all intents and so on, the surface of each might be considered static, from the cinematic aspect. To which Gordon added, or was said to have added, that all civilisations since the invention of cinema

had effectively colluded with unparalleled connivance, hitherto unknown in the history of civilisations, and had, together, and despite their differences, managed to reduce the available choices, and so the future of the Earth, to Gordon's two alternatives.

First, the static frame or barren rock of a planet such as Mercury upon which the frame has achieved ascendance. Second, the divergent case of Venus, a planet that remains diabolical and upon which all frames dissolve almost immediately and so cannot be said to exist. Venus is always thought to be Earth's future, one available future, whereas Venus also speaks of its past. Venus recalls a dynamism which human beings have lost access to. Its unavailability is a marker of a loss of sense they came to revere, in their abjection, and which took the form of the cinematic frame. The frame will come to dominate, Gordon said, or it will dissolve entirely. Either way, we will be finished, and anything we once called life, will be finished too. We have before us, and because of us, because of the corpse-like inertia of our systems, these two options, the light-addled surface of Mercury which cinema prefigures, or Venus which it does not. [. . .]

It is worth asking if Gordon liked to toy with the academic tendency to take so-called theoretical reason seriously, and so take someone supposedly possessive of it seriously too. It could well be that Gordon's various theories, so reported, were attempts to discover where the limits of this interaction lay, and how outlandish a claim might be if it was still delivered with the appropriate diction. With the right delivery the most impossible theories may be mooted. When delivered right, even unpalatable things may be said and others may be made to chew them over. Gordon may well have gained satisfaction merely from the fact of making others chew over the unpalatable ideas he presented. The most outlandish things may be proposed, up to a point, he discovered, and then, consternation. Every outlandish idea introduced in a respectable way will reach the limits of respectability if pushed far enough. It is possible that Gordon liked to play just shy of that limit, and push his interactions close to the point beyond which Gordon's own advances to academic understanding would finally be ignored and would at last be seen as mere mischief-making in the poorest taste. These perverse intellectual games were the activities of a trickster, it would be decided, a realisation against Gordon that would have left Gordon exposed. Gordon had to pick his moments with care, and only advance heretic ideas

at intervals, moments, between which he became just another humdrum functionary handing out humdrum ideas. It is likely, though, that Gordon soon discovered how to accentuate the perversity of his ideas and lengthen the time of their palatable telling by attributing them always to someone else, and so claim to be advancing, or merely delineating another's theorem, rather than speaking on behalf of his own. A perverse idea is always more likely to gain admission if none involved in the discussion of that idea will claim to be its author. Or better still, a perverse idea is always more likely to gain admission if one's opponent thinks they own it, that they have gained control of it. Yet even this indirect or roundabout approach demanded intervals of ordinary thinking given the increased debasement of his own propositions. The perversions Gordon introduced into discussion demanded these not inconsiderable breaks so that minds could settle, and those minds could reassure themselves that they were trading in serious matters, and not idiotic fancies.

Gordon was not idle during these periods of ordinary thinking. Even workaday existence was productive if framed right, that is, with respect to the etymological base, the Old Norse, where the work of framing referred to the work of making ready for use, or furthering, or advancing—but to ready for what, further or advance upon what, this is not specified. Just as time might be taken to frame an answer or frame an apology and so advance upon an answer or an apology not yet set, so each may be endlessly deferred, an answer never given, an apology never delivered, and yet, never demonstrably withheld either. To frame a response might be to buy time by fakery or express the limits of any kind of response at all, where the person working at politeness, for instance, might say, *I was as polite as I could frame myself to be*, which would mean rudeness was not at all ruled out. There might be an echo of Old Norse trickery in the word too, where, as Gordon leant back to the Old Norse, Gordon became an old Norseman himself in this respect, framing, or advancing upon a world that was, from this much earlier vantage, yet again ill-determined, and whose future had not yet been decided.

Note

1. This extract from the unpublished novel *Situations* was first presented at the *CounterText* roundtable on *Frame/Framing* in Wrocław, January 2025.

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