

## Liquid Lives: Solidifying Strategies in Jon McGregor's Early Novels

According to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, the contemporary phase of globalized modernity means always having strangers at one's door. These strangers cannot simply be identified, however, with the outsider, the foreigner, or the refugee, for strangerhood has become the condition of all individuals in "liquid modernity". "Liquid" is Bauman's metaphor for the transformation of once-solid social orders and state institutions by highly mobile, highly unpredictable global capital flows, the outcomes of which have been "[p]rogressive deregulation of labour markets and 'flexibilization' of work [...], growing fragility of social positions and instability of socially recognized identities" (*Strangers* 29).<sup>1</sup> The stranger is the bane of liquid modernity, but also its ubiquitous representative. Liquidity makes strangers of citizens by uprooting them from solid social structures whilst demanding that they re-embed themselves within personal and collective identities increasingly characterized by impermanence and weightlessness. Discarded by political authorities that no longer consider it their role either to ensure universal economic security or to entrench citizens in civic life, the stranger is "liberated" from duty to, and responsibility for social reproduction. Instead, s/he lives in "an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders" (*Liquid Modernity* 7-8). The patterns for self-fashioning that can be woven are, however, no longer clear, the roles to be played neither given nor self-evident, and the new beds offered by consumer society not to be occupied for long before fresh opportunities for tenancy become available. Itinerancy characterizes the liquid phase of modernity, and the stranger's dreams of solid and lasting identity (both social and personal) are forfeited to the injunction to

unpick connections to the past through continuous reinvention. Estrangement is thus just as much an *a priori* of identity in liquid modernity as it is of the encounter with the Other; it is the ambivalence at the core of any postulated selfhood that disrupts its relationships to the Other, to the collective, and to the society it inhabits.

The work of Jon McGregor illustrates the dilemmas of such endemic strangerhood. Born in 1976, McGregor has grown to maturity in Bauman's world of liquefying constants. He is one of a generation of British novelists (like Hari Kunzru, Olivia Laing, Tom McCarthy and Adam Thirlwell) whose writing reflects upon, but also exemplifies the discontinuities generated by the drivers of liquid modernity. These discontinuities are aesthetic as well as socio-economic, and McGregor's narrative vision is as restless as the lives he describes. He has shifted style in each novel with an identifying technique (the museum catalogue entries of *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006), or the reiterative structure of *Reservoir 13* (2017), set on each New Year's Eve after a girl's disappearance) distinguishing each work from its predecessor. He inhabits the "until-further-notice" contingency that Bauman analyses, even as he details the depredations that it produces. His early works in particular dramatize the personal and social dysfunctions of identity in liquid times. *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002) and *So Many Ways to Begin* are filled with characters that are strangers to themselves, living amongst others with whom they connect superficially in locations shaped by migrancy and intermittence. When David and Eleanor Carter move to Coventry in *So Many Ways*, they do so as part of post-World War Two population planning that sees the city reconstituted from bombed rubble into a cosmopolitan hub of decolonized immigrants and beneficiaries of welfare-driven class mobility. The more rundown of the houses on the street in *If Nobody Speaks* accommodate their fair share of itinerant residents too: students in temporary

lodgings and those at the lower end of the socio-economic order. In these places, situatedness never matures to integratedness and the identities built there are marked by the consciousness of contingency. McGregor's protagonists, disembedded by the waning of inherited social roles, search for reference points from which to regard their lives. Denied any illusion of *de jure* belonging, they are handed instead the task of 'compulsive and obligatory self-determination' (*Liquid Modernity* 32) but without authoritative guidance on how the identities created could be legitimized. While advice on how, and who, to be in liquid modernity is not in short supply, all is underwritten by short-termism and likely to be rendered obsolete by future persuasive influences. The impact of this in McGregor's work is socially and self-alienated characters in search of contexts, past trajectories, or future directions that would enable them to piece together meaningful versions of themselves and escape the provisionality and inadequacy that dogs them incessantly. How they go about postulating identities, and the success of the strategies they employ to solidify their selfhoods will be the focus of the exploration that follows.

This essay argues that McGregor's early novels portray two primary methods through which his characters attempt to resist liquidification by embedding themselves within solid identities: self-narrativization and an archival impulse (to borrow Hal Foster's term). The narrative and archive as presented in these novels are constitutive apparatuses for self-telling that allow protagonists to respond to the obligation to shape themselves, but they are friable, unreliable, and tend towards solipsism. More importantly, they are doomed to failure because they fantasize permanence out of contingency. The centripetal and consistent qualities associated with identity are romantic illusions in a liquid context where the imperative is to keep moving, never to settle in one place for too long, and where fixity of identity actually

becomes an impediment to re-constitution. These rooting mechanisms thus paradoxically exacerbate a condition of existential precarity in which failure is an ever-present threat and where incompetence and weakness are the likeliest self-admonishments. The consequence of this, as these novels evidence, is that estrangement from self and others is reinforced.

Narrative and archival techniques are examined here principally as means of exploring personal identity, though the relationship between personal and social identity is, of course, one of co-determination. In liquid modernity, many of the markers of social identity (class, association, nationality, ethnicity) become fluid under the influence of mobile capital, and are less useful as means of embedding individuals as parts of enduring collectives. The self-fashioning of identity that displaces social patterning requires organizing metaphors, and narrative and archive are isolated here, in part, because they resonate with broader contemporary discussion on the paradigm shifts in metaphor that a time of huge social and technological change has brought about. Lev Manovich (2001), for instance, regards narrative as a relic of ages poor in information where the knitting together of mythical and religious stories compensated for the unreliability of material ways of explaining the world. Knowledge, he suggests, was once a field of work; narrative the domain of aesthetics, but contemporary technologies of information management, such as the database, move information itself into the cultural sphere to the detriment of the narrative: 'today we have too much information and too few narratives that can tie it all together. [...] information access is no longer just a key form of work but also a new key category of culture' (217). Manovich's portrayal of narrative is too simplistic, but his point about how the reification of information produces new metaphors that capture the reality of the digital age is valuable and is picked up by Ernst van Alphen.

He argues that contemporary information management signifies an epistemic shift towards the archive as a co-ordinating metaphor for the digital age: “Whereas the role of narrative is declining,” he contends, “the role of archive, in a variety of forms, is increasing. [...] the archive has become the dominant symbolic and cultural form” (7). The decline in narrativity that van Alphen identifies results not from a paucity of stories about human being, but from a discursive evolution that renders narrative form less adept at turning those stories into meaning in the contemporary world:

The database represents the world as a list or collection of items, whereas narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory for representing the world. The kind of imagination proposed by the database appears to be spatial, whereas narrative organizes experience first of all on a temporal basis. [...] But in our computer age it is the database that becomes the predominant centre of creative processes that are deployed to make sense of human experience, cultural memory and the world in general. (9)

Put another way, the syntagmatic axis on which narrative sequencing operates is being challenged by the paradigmatic axis of optionality in a way thoroughly in tune with liquid modernity’s episodicity. Narrative is predicated on a continuum of cause and purpose, whereas the archive/database assumes potentially infinite consignment and accumulation.<sup>2</sup> Such an epistemic shift has profound implications not just for how a life-story might be formed and validated, but also for the legitimate content of that story. Van Alphen does not consider narrative surpassed as a vehicle for expressing human experience, but he thinks its role is being significantly reduced and subordinated to the organising framework of the archive.

Hal Foster acknowledges this metaphor shift as a consequence of the naturalization of the “mega-archive of the Internet” (4), but his interest lies in the potential for art to aestheticize the database in ways which “call out for human interpretation, not machinic reprocessing” (4). Where for van Alphen narrative is increasingly subordinate to the archive, Foster regards it as the means of humanizing the archive’s sublimity. Narrative draws from the archive’s “promissory notes” (4) the threads of connection that not only legitimize the archive’s operation, but also frame it within the symbolic orderliness of the syntagm. Such an approach attempts to fuse narrative and archive, positing the possibility of a narrative resolidification of the archive’s promises. Foster identifies what he calls an “archival impulse” (4) in contemporary art, including a tendency towards *détournement* (“hijacking”), which frames a found object, image, or text as an uncanny or paradoxical supplement to existing aesthetic perspectives. By isolating and stylizing archival materials, artists such as Tacita Dean, Sam Durant, and Thomas Hirschhorn “make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” (4), piercing contemporary anxieties about context and trajectory with the irrevocability of presence and here-and-now tactility.<sup>3</sup>

*Détournement* is a way of humanizing the archive that acknowledges each artefact’s multiple resonances and, by returning the abstract to the particular, re-imbues it with narrative and hermeneutic potential. Moreover, it is a strategy that brings the decontextualized object back within the “mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone” (“System of Collecting” 7). In other words, cathexis extends the possibility of resolidifying the narrative path that the archive diffuses. In both McGregor’s novels the archive functions not as a complement to the narratives that the protagonists attempt to tell about themselves and their places in the world, but as a precursor to those stories. The scattered and

rough-hewn artefacts of their pasts, along with the rehearsed lines of increasingly precarious social performances, are moulded into sense-making narratives of belonging in the hope that they will root them comprehensively within meaningful identity positions. The archival impulse and narrativization are therefore intertwined as steps on the way to self-assertion, but the moot point is whether either or both are adequate to the task of constituting personal or social identity in the liquid modern condition. I argue that McGregor ultimately concludes that, separately and together, they cannot encapsulate lived experience and must finally give way to an acceptance of strangerhood based on a form of ethical *being-for* the world in all its otherness.

### **Narrative Disorders**

*If Nobody Speaks* captures the discontinuity of liquid modern experience both structurally and diegetically. Its episodic organization and frequent cuts between houses inhibits deep psychological engagement with any of the protagonists and mirrors their own curtailed sociability. ‘Drifting from one episode to another, living through each successive episode while oblivious to its consequences and even more ignorant of its destination’ (*Liquid Life* 33), the neighbours are rooted in a present from which any kind of collective narrative purpose seems absent, and their own agency obscure. McGregor’s decision to structure the text around the events of one day reinforces this insularity, circumscribing narrative development by slicing off the before and after and staging the banal comings and goings in the continuous present. Taken together, the events in this place on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1997 are presented as one of Foster’s found objects, decontextualized for the purposes of emphasis, and historicised only obliquely – this was the day on which Diana, Princess of Wales was killed in a car accident in Paris, a happening that is mirrored in the car accident on the

street around which the text revolves. Obviously such compaction is a well-worn literary technique, but McGregor's contribution to the slice of life emphasizes disconnection and denarrativization rather than any exemplary form of historical continuity or significance. The day is an episode amongst a series of episodes, marked only by the non-tragic death of a nameless individual and the survival of others.

Yet, while this may suggest a structural ambivalence towards narrative as an organizing paradigm, the novel's protagonists are deeply invested in it as a way of making sense of their lives. The novel is bursting with the micro-narratives of each of its characters, who reveal their desire not only to tell themselves, but also to belong by legitimizing their life-stories within grander narratives of national or social significance. Regarding his life and marriage in the light of a cancer that is likely to kill him, "the man in the upstairs flat at number twenty" pulls at the threads of memory to discover which are connected to something. The defining moment in his life – the calling into "place in the way of things" (107) – should have been the Second World War, a moment when the individual could be subsumed within the collective need. However his combat experience was a disappointing one: "he had travelled half-way across Europe, and when it was over he had travelled back, but somehow the war had passed him by, as if he'd been asleep when the others had started and he'd spent the whole time trying to catch up" (178). His experience brings him into contact with all the misery of war but none of its anticipated heroism, and he is left shuffling his memories around, "unspoken because there is nothing to say" (180), and uncertain of how to accommodate the coming together of the public and private that his call-up represented.

His inability to make the past meaningful echoes the anxieties for the future expressed by the students. They fear the absence of narratives of belonging that are

bigger than them, the ones that would coalesce the fragmentary and dividual into the inclusive and consequential. At least for the old man the national cause was clear and urgent, but the students wonder what narratives remain for them to inhabit. “For fucksake”, bemoans one of them, identifying the diminishment of British industrialism with concomitant social and personal losses, “didn’t our parents used to make stuff for a living?” (174). Another casts his sense of displacement in gender terms, describing his struggle to deal a fatal blow to a fish he has caught as evidence that the role of the “masculine hunter” was beyond him. So if traditional labour or gender narratives fail them, what avenues of belonging remain? One offers a more contemporary, but similarly limited mantra of self-determination:

You’ve got to travel light she says, start in a new place with empty hands. It’s good for your karmic energy she says, and the other girl looks at her and laughs. Where did that come from she says and the girl in the pyjamas shrugs, she says I don’t know I read it in a magazine or something and she drinks her tea. (190)

Making a virtue of the necessity of self-reliance, this cliché of self-actualization echoes hollowly when mashed-up with the narcissism of celebrity culture and poses the question of what sustains the disembedded, liquid modern subject when the narratives of both society and self resonate increasingly emptily. What little hope there is for coalescence is crushed when even the moments of intersection between public and private are robbed of symbolic connection. The “girl with short hair and glasses” anticipates the 1997 general election, which brought Tony Blair’s New Labour administration to power, as a moment of exceptionality; she

watches the results come in with her friends, sensing how the evanescent “excitement of history” (40) can bring people together in uncommon ways. Yet, her friends were “Already looking like ghosts” (40), as the fleeting insubstantiality of these moments of narrative cohesion becomes plain. As with the conspicuous mourning for Princess Diana that would follow the other car accident within the novel’s timeframe, a togetherness which breaches the impermeability of late-capitalist individualism is installed and almost immediately dismissed as illusory or dysfunctional. Bauman describes these forms of momentary kinship as “cloakroom communities”, “conjured into being, if in apparition only, by hanging up individual troubles, as theatregoers do with their coats, in one room [...] and promptly dismantled again once the spectators collect their coats from the hooks” (*Identity* 30-1). Solidarity cannot be sustained under a directive of continuous reinvention, and though public and private are tied together in “cloakroom” moments when some common direction of travel is peripherally discernible, it is quickly compromised or obscured by the obligation to reject identification that may tie subjects to indissoluble commitments.

Where *If Nobody Speaks* regards the meaning-making qualities of narrative as too discontinuous to be recuperative, *So Many Ways* stringently examines the notion of a personal historical trajectory as a credible organizing principle for a life. It is a novel that displays a deep-seated anxiety about the obliteration of meaningful attachments to the past, and the disappearance of a set of common narratives, which, however imaginary, prop up a sense of postulated community. The shapes of shared stories, such as an identifiably “British” identity or place-belonging, are still discernible and socially functional in this novel, but their contents have largely been hollowed-out, leaving the imaginary residue of collective belonging without supporting evidence in reality. McGregor’s characters are conscious of the lack of

grand narrative that shapes their social subjectivity, just as they are aware of the lack of any determining forces (other than chance) that direct their lives on the smallest level, but this consciousness does not diminish the romantic yearning for purpose on a historical scale. For David's sister Susan, the imaginary connection to the past is nostalgia for something substantial: "it made her feel a part of something bigger than herself, tied to a time when there were bigger things to feel a part of" (19).

This loss of credible national narrative is mirrored on the personal level by David's desperation to locate himself within time and space. Unmoored by the discovery in mid-life that his parents are adoptive, he fetishizes the unearthing of an individual genealogy that would categorically pin his story onto the historical map. That this obsession proves not only futile, but also destructive to his family relations does not detract from the seductiveness of the illusion of a singular beginning to his story. Narrative promises a first line and a last word; reliability is hard-wired into its syntagmatic unfolding, and yet, as David discovers, it is continuously problematized by emplotment. Unlike Eleanor, whose tempestuous relationship with her mother gave rise to a depressive introversion and limited affective connection to her own child, David's history cannot be plotted because he cannot reliably trace the generational lineage or identify any of the people from whom he may have inherited his qualities of selfhood. Without the kind of genetic link that Eleanor can boast, he cannot tell a story of himself that is organic or recuperative. Instead, the only story he can relate is one of contingency and self-shaping, ordering *ex nihilo* a collection of discontinuities into a private constellation.

Without a pre-determining shape, David's life narrative depends for its robustness on the ways in which he recounts it. It equally depends on the willingness of a listener to indulge him, a necessity that fills him with an existential anxiety of

recognition manifested in multiple variations of the phrase “If he was asked”, or the more poignant “if there was anyone who wanted to know” (26). The ability to shape the self – and the external world - through the stories that are told, hinges on the willingness of a listener to indulge and encourage the telling, but David’s fear is that such altruism is rare and easily rescinded is a world of restless attention. Imagining himself into the role of practiced guide, he draws the attention of onlookers towards the depths of his constructed past, pointing out the connections to their own stories, and thickening the intersubjective commonality between them as a reminder that all stories cross and co-determine. By this means he attempts to give substance to his precarious sense of identity, a solidity of being that his genealogical story lacks, but, without any authorizing claim, this self-legitimization is always fragile and at risk of collapse.

David’s inability to accept the unknowability of his heritage throws him back onto alternative strategies for narrativizing himself. Where archaeology fails and self-dramatizing proves unsatisfactory, the seeming solidity of the object world provides him with a less linear, but more visible aetiology. His training as a curator endows him with a methodology for generating cohesion from randomness through the artful inflections he can bring to discrete objects. These inflections are not necessarily descriptive, for if the world refuses willingly to give up its stories to the telling, McGregor suggests, they must be sought in alternative vocabularies of affect and touch. David’s curatorial instinct provides ways in which material can be endowed with whole architectures of feeling and experience. Even the most mundane objects are articulate, condensing unspoken, and perhaps unspeakable, relations with the world and others. They are thingly representatives of whole worlds of interconnection, and singular distillations of the multiple. David’s relationship with

his “finds” is fetishistic in the sense that in them he discerns both intrinsic and extrinsic structures of feeling that transcend their utility. Some cigarettes preserved from the First World War transport him to the trenches with such a powerful jolt of excitement that “he couldn’t move and he couldn’t bring himself to look away” (34). What fascinates him most is the contingency that governs the survival of these evocative objects, the thought that they could have been lost and yet have found their way into his hands. They are “at once indestructible and hopelessly fragile” (34), and speak of the paradoxical solidity and yet provisionality of the past. Furthermore, these exhibits coalesce histories of beginnings, endings, and trajectories of ownership that are more eloquent than the object itself can articulate. The thing becomes a decontextualized material memory, silently encapsulating voluble stories.

Narrative, this implies, is intrinsic in things however disconnected they may be. Its recalcitrance can be overcome by imaginative persuasion, as if extraction can bring forth a storied essence rather than only inchoate and indecipherable fragments. Narrative as the linear syntagm into which they can insert themselves fails the protagonists of *So Many Ways* and *If Nobody Speaks*, just as being called into “place in the way of things” proves a fantasy. In the detraditionalized, disembedded reality that Bauman describes, social systems no longer provide the blueprint for individual or collective determination. Common narratives diminish and with them go patterns of self-telling. But the narrative potential of the fragments that remain offers an alternative route to self-realization based on the accumulation and purification of life’s residues. Where the syntagm of the story proves ineffective, the paradigm of the archive promises many alternative ways to begin.

### **The Archive’s (Dead) Ends**

As an alternative to the singularity of a narrative of origins, the archive that David fantasizes through objects privileges spatiality over temporality for it can hypothetically contain everything that relates to an individual life without succumbing to the imperatives of origin, *telos*, or selectivity. As a child he dreams of owning a museum in which: “I won’t have anything in storage [...] it’ll all be out on display and if there isn’t enough room I’ll buy an even bigger museum” (41). Without the need to discard anything, David’s imaginary archive becomes total, and in the process offers a compensatory model of the completion that he seeks – by narrative means – in the search for his birth mother. Where narrative indisputably goes somewhere, and thus entails change, the archive operates through consignment and accrual, encapsulating the weight of secure authority and the enchantment of possession. Each preserved item functions as a synecdoche of completion-in-itself, a “paradigm of perfection” as Jean Baudrillard suggests, “where the passionate enterprise of possession can achieve its ambitions, [...] to institute an unconscious and triumphant discourse” (8). But of course while the contents of the archive as a whole are infinitely determinable, they are also finitely indeterminable. What would an archive, or, for that matter, a life narrative, mean if nothing were excluded?; total possession would guarantee not a triumphant discourse but a flat, non-hierarchical homology. This is the problem that afflicts “the boy from number eighteen” in *If Nobody Speaks*, for his archival attempts are largely indiscriminating, aleatoric responses to a sublime over-determination. He buckles under the weight of “too much of everything, too much stuff, too many places, too much information, too many people, too much of things for there to be too much of” (216). Given that excess, a rational strategy would demand selection, but the boy’s response is a neurotic gathering together of urban rejectamenta - discarded receipts, used syringes, bits of broken glass – which, when

ordered and displayed in a cabinet, he believes to be trans-valued from worthless jetsam to exemplary artefacts of modern transcendence.

For David and “the boy from number eighteen”, archives function as systems for understanding that remedy the elusiveness of points of origin by substituting them with objects whose “meaning is governed by myself alone”. However, as Derrida argues in “Archive Fever”, archives are always covert expressions of the need for fixed beginnings and endings because the desire to archive is a manifestation of the death drive. Ontologically, the archive emerges from a point of commencement: the “*arkhe*” is “the originary, the first, the principle, the primitive” (9), and the fever (*mal d’archive*) that it induces is “an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (57). In fact, “No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no “*mal-de*” can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d’archive*” (57) - the archive, and its affects, are a direct product of *thanatos*. John Forrester has made the case that Freud’s collecting habits were initiated by the death of his father, and throughout his clinical career, collecting “symbolize[d] the battle of life within death, of life being infiltrated by death” (232). Both Derrida and Forrester see the act of collecting objects together as an iteration of repetition compulsion that Freud associated with the desire for a blissful forgetting and a return to the inorganicity of non-being, so in its very conception, the archive, as an announcement of what Marla Morris terms “‘I am here,’ ‘I have arrived’” (300), is also “an acting out without remembering—a veering toward zero” (298). Far from being an escape from origins, the archive delivers McGregor’s protagonists right back to beginnings; indeed it is a reminder of the inextricable marriage between beginning and meaning.

This is acknowledged in *So Many Ways* in David's consciousness that his public role as curator balances the need for collective meaning-making with a less articulated recognition that museums coalesce the contradictory impulses that surround memory and forgetting, origins and destinations:

He'd learnt working at the museum, how many people wanted someone to tell their family's story to, how often the children of people who died would bring their parents' possessions to the museum to be archived or put on display, assuming that because these objects had belonged to someone who was no longer alive they would naturally take on a historical importance, assuming that the words museum and mausoleum were somehow the same. (209-10)

That final concatenation of museum and mausoleum highlights Forrester's point that while forgetting can act as a spitting out of the past, "there is forgetting as digesting, incorporating, in which one remembers by becoming the thing remembered" (245), forgetting also becomes encrypted in the very things retained from the past. Thus, the archive represents an attempt to forget as much as it suggests the opposite, and each object consigned to it is the instantiation of death and the "veering towards zero" of non-meaning. Such is seen in *If Nobody Speaks* where, among the prized possessions of "the boy from number eighteen" is a small clay figurine that, on his death, is passed onto Michael and ultimately "the girl with short hair and glasses". It is a Japanese ceremonial idol used to commemorate the deaths of the stillborn, aborted, or miscarried, which, in a garden close to Tokyo, are gathered and adorned with small strips of cloth by their grieving mothers. The idol is thus a very literal artefact of death, but it is also a signifier of repetition compulsion both in its ritual status, and in

its narrative role, where, being passed on to finally reside with the pregnant narrator, it retains its totemic power as a blunt reminder of death in life.

If the archival impulse/sickness that overtakes David and “the boy from number eighteen” is intended to repudiate the aetiological and teleological architecture of narrative in favour of multiple points of commencement for the art of meaning-making, then it is shown to fail in both cases. The archive is a covert mechanism for establishing origins that operates by deliberately forgetting starting points, and where it leads is not ultimately towards cohesion and completeness as both protagonists desire, but toward indeterminacy. As Carolyn Steedman argues, “Archives hold no origins, and origins are not what historians search for in them. Rather, they hold everything *in medias res*, the account caught halfway through, most of it missing, with no end ever in sight. Nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, although things certainly end up there” (1175). The archive as a metaphor of organizing power, as a means of arranging and bringing into safety the alienness of an unnarrativizable world of stuff, is always already a dead metaphor. It cannot, and, more pertinently, will not – Steedman endows the archive with truculent, obdurate agency - proffer the kind of totalized and reassuring knowledge that might produce ends and meanings. Moreover the questions that might be asked of the archive are destined to remain unanswered because, as Morris suggests “[t]he interminable question of the archive does not have one answer” (299). The “interminable” archive is without time, and being such it cannot offer any end, least of all one that might produce solace. Instead it offers only ways to begin – ways, like the multiple potential histories of David’s story, that are freighted with different affective valences, but without temporal trajectories. Throughout the narrative, McGregor employs

constructions such as the following to accentuate the contingency of stories that could have been told differently:

Stewart [Eleanor's father] stood, with one hand on the door frame, one foot on the front step, watching the pair of them until they'd rounded the corner at the bottom of the hill, waiting to see if one of them might turn round, just once. Or he went back inside as soon as they'd said their goodbyes, closing the door sharply behind him, breathless with rage and regret. Or he waited a moment, went inside to put the kettle on, and came back out to see whether they might not, after all, still be there. (148)

Such re-imagining of history's break-points disrupts any notion of singular cause and effect, producing instead a form of archival multiverse that allows David to ignore and deny the uncertain start and end-points of his life through a series of unanswerable questions, most notably: what would have become of him if this had/had not happened? The narrative of genealogical inheritance fails David because it takes him only to the wrong Mary Friel; the archival impulse fails him because it continuously returns him to the point of commencement but without any consoling certainty. For "the boy at number eighteen", archiving the material culture of his surroundings does not bring him closer to a sense of control over those surroundings; at best it produces a voyeuristic fetishization of the object world that stands in place of a commitment to the experience of life as an engagement with others. The boy's death at novel's end is as anti-climactic and as without meaning as his quietly lived life.

Narrative and archive operate in McGregor's novels as organizing metaphors, which suggest the possibility of mustering the collage of life events into personal order and sense. They are constitutive metaphors that shape subjectivity, but they are also constructive metaphors to be understood as ongoing building projects to resist the erosive effects of detraditionalization. Both promise ways of piecing together the distant and disparate into patterns, linking past to future, and endowing the ordinary with purpose. In many ways, they are perfect metaphors for a liquid age in which life is regarded as an art, and artful self-making as the work of life. However, they fail as embedding strategies because they allow for no translation beyond the personal; they are ultimately self-referential paradigms incapable of producing an ethical "life politics" (*Modernity and Self-Identity* 214) that can incorporate others. None of the key protagonists in these novels achieves self-transcendence through narrative or archival means: "the boy from number eighteen" reaches to the future with his time capsule of detritus, but dies unnoticed, and David has to accommodate himself to an illusion of inheritance when he reaches a dead end in Ireland. Narrative no more builds out of the material of the archive than the archive can provide anything other than a way back to zero.

However, this dual failure to supply beds and stories to be inhabited is not the whole picture of these novels. Alienation and exhausting self-critique might be the price of individualism in liquid modernity, but it would be hard to argue for McGregor as anything other than sympathetic towards his protagonists' battle for purpose. Even in his bleakest work, *Even the Dogs* (2010), which focuses on the cyclical grind of a community of addicts as they bargain with their habits, there is a pathos of kinship in isolation that produces moments of humane care for the Other that indicates the recognition of community and commonality. The Other enters at

moments when the shared condition of strangerhood cannot be ignored, and the buried ethical command to *be-for* the Other stirs. Such moments can produce an overcoming of private sorrows, and though these epiphanies of empathy are always modest, they nevertheless offer an alternative way of self-understanding. Unlike the narrative and archive, this ethic demands no answers or endings, accepts silence and the weight of the unsayable, and celebrates the intimacy of the ordinary. It can best be illustrated through a diversion to consider why Antony Gormley's sculpture *Field for the British Isles* (1996) is such an interesting reference point in *If Nobody Speaks*.

### ***Field and the Ethics of Being-For***

Towards the end of the novel, “the girl with short hair and glasses” and “the boy from number eighteen”'s brother, Michael, visit a staging of Gormley's *Field*:

It was in one room, a large room with long skylights, and we stood by the doorway and looked in at it, at them, looking over them, thousands and thousands of six-inch red clay figures, as roughly made as playschool plasticine men, a pair of finger-sized sockets for eyes, heads tilted up from formless bodies. Each one almost identical, each one unique. We knelt there, looking at them looking up at us, the thousands of them, saying I wonder how long and I wonder if they all and I wonder what. (230-31)

These “stargazers” (“Triumph” 41) – roughly moulded hominids created by multiple sculptors “using the space between the hands as a kind of matrix, as a kind of mould out of which the form arises” (*Antony Gormley* 9) - are the barest essence of figural form yet produce a profoundly disconcerting affect. Michael and “the girl with short

hair and glasses” experience the figures as at once intimately familiar and unknowably distant, prompting questions that remain not just unanswered, but also half-asked. In her review of *Field*, novelist Maggie Gee was similarly beset by questions: “Who are these silent people, and what do they want?” (41), while Desmond Manderson felt himself pinioned by the uncanny demand of the faces: “Forty thousand unique beings *look* at you. And in that gaze there is something else: an ethical entreaty. Just by looking, they are calling for help, because that is what a face is. It looks at you” (53). The upturned faces regard the viewer with neither animosity nor friendliness but with a challenge; as Gormley has said of the figures: “the little people in *Field* will outstare all the viewers, and this imparts a confrontational element to the work” (*Some of the Facts* 100). Whether that confrontation is between the “body-surrogates” (*Between You and Me*) *en masse* and the pinioned viewer, or between the viewer and each individual model is crucial because *Field* is an attempt to highlight the ambivalence of the modern encounter between the subjective and the collective. In contrast to much of Gormley’s other work, which dramatizes isolation (*Still I* [1994], *Another Place* [1997], *Angel of the North* [1998], *Event Horizon* [2007]), *Field* overwhelms its audience and its setting with presence; it is the individual viewer that is rendered lonely as s/he stands opposite the gaze of thousands.

Clearly interpreting the barely formed faces as helpless, Manderson experiences the power of the unspoken ethical demand of the Other: “This is what is meant by a responsibility that emerges before knowledge or reason, not in the logic of the community or in the autonomy and symmetry of individuals. On the contrary, it is the surprise and inequality we experience – our capacity and their incapacity – that founds the relationship” (53). The unsettling stare of the little face, the confrontation

that spikes the viewer, revolves around the simple question “How will you respond?” (54). How, in other words, does one balance the account between self and other? It is a question that demands action but not necessarily intentionality, for, as Bauman (following Levinas) asserts, intention is secondary to the call of the Other:

The face which responsibility confronts demands through its meaninglessness, through the unfulfilledness of its potential to assume and carry meanings. It will be only later, when I acknowledge the presence of the face as my responsibility, that both I and the neighbour acquire meanings. (*Life in Fragments* 86)

In interview, Gormley makes a similar point:

According to Levinas, we can only become completely ourselves when we register the fact that our actions and even our thoughts are given a context by being shared. What I try to give form to is the subjective experience of living behind our faces. Whether it’s an actor on a stage or you and me sitting opposite to each other, I’m convinced that our faces belong more to the other than they do to ourselves. (*Between You and Me*)

From these perspectives, identity as a statement of singularity is not owned by one party but emerges only in the response to the postulated ethical question. *Being-for* rather than *being-with* the Other is the foundation of each individual’s identifying experience rather than its negation: “*Being-for* is a leap from isolation to unity; yet not towards a *fusion*, that mystics’ dream of shedding the burden of identity, but to an

*alloy* whose precious qualities depend fully on the preservation of its ingredients’ alterity and identity” (*Life in Fragments* 51). If subjective experience is ‘the point of authenticity in human life’ (*Between You and Me*), but can only be subjective in its uninhibited intersubjectivity, then the authentic point of expression for the self, is its duty to the Other. Liquid modernity, defined by brief encounters, the erasure of consequences, and the jettisoning of duty is infertile ground for the kind of ethics that *being-for* would entail, but I conclude by arguing that it is a version of those ethics that McGregor ultimately offers as an escape from the aporias of narrative and the archive.

The barriers to self-continuity that *If Nobody Speaks* and *So Many Ways* highlight are principally epistemological ones, and, being unable either to unearth or construct reliably solid connections between the disparate parts of their lives, the protagonists fall back on an affective consolation. This consolation can look like quietude, the acceptance of the impossibility of overcoming uncertainty, with the release from striving that that might involve. Yet to describe it as such implies defeat whereas these novels read as celebrations – albeit modest – of the redemptive potential of everyday honesty, loyalty, and care for the other. McGregor underplays the familiarity of the everyday whilst never diminishing or trivializing its weight. By doing so, he elevates the unspectacular to the aesthetic, displaying the quiet beauty of lives that accommodate the momentous and the insignificant within the domestic sphere without a jarring emotional gear change. Domestic work in McGregor’s novels involves the knitting together of half-told intimacies, and it is the quiet articulacy of shared lives that ultimately stands in for the absence of narrative/archival meaning.

The answer to so many of the questions that Eleanor and David have of the world is contained within this intimate domesticity, and is not really an answer that

offers the kind of closure that narrative or archive could supply. As David's journey moves to a (false) conclusion, his desire for self-completion moderates to acceptance of the restorative powers of the in-credible – the fiction of their kinship proves sufficient for both him and Mary Friel – and the amassed meanings of his life. Those meanings involve the gradual accumulation of experience, unnoticed across time, and the accruing of material and immaterial freight along the way. It also involves an attritional wearing-away of hopes and expectations. It is thus a dialectical exchange of positive and negative, gaining and losing, knowing and not knowing, growth and recession, and failure and success. Like the older married couple in *If Nobody Speaks*, most of the work of the relationship is done not only in silence, but also at the edges of intentionality, happening with and without conscious organization. Without quite being aware of it, David builds a meaningful life based on loyalty, care, and fidelity to Eleanor and their daughter, Kate, and it is on this solidity that he falls back when the futility of his mission to Ireland becomes apparent. The seductive appeal of fixed identity disappears into the shared togetherness and mutual understanding of a life lived in partnership. The culminating scene of lovemaking gains in eroticism from a learned sensitivity to the other's needs, but also from an awareness of the other's failures and limitations. It emphasizes the importance for McGregor of touch, of physical connection as a way of rooting the self in the reality of the Other.

A comparable scene occurs in *If Nobody Speaks* when, in a moment of respite from the needs of their twins, “the couple at number nineteen” retreats to their bedroom and a lovemaking that because of, rather than despite, its familiarity, reveals a time-wrought intensity:

And in a moment the door will be locked, and the stillness and quiet will be left on this side of the door. They will both drop their politeness and reserve to the floor with their clothes, he will close the curtains and she will unveil her body, she will stand against the wall with her arms raised high, waiting for him to drink in his fill of the sight of her, she will lick her fingers, each in turn, as though sharpening them, and then they will be together [...] (192-3)

The consummation is intensified by its ordinariness; the performance transforms the oft-repeated act into an echo of the first encounter. Such moments are transformative not because they reshape reality into a new story and thus dispense with the need for completion, but because they highlight what is already present. The habitual and unconsidered shapes of relationships, of the *being-for* Others, still have the potential to be revelatory if they are acknowledged: small acts of loving kindness, moments of tenderness in the run or things, dutiful attention to others, momentary escape from regret, allow McGregor's protagonists breaks in vision which temporarily surprise them into a fresh relation with the ordinary. And that shift of perception, however brief, carries an ethical importance, for through it they evaluate their lives as ventures that extend beyond themselves, and, in the process, re-negotiate identity as both a task and a pathos extending beyond the self. *Being-for*, Bauman suggests, "may only come, so to speak, from behind the back of being-with" (*Life in Fragments* 52), it is:

[...] entered for the sake of safeguarding and defending the uniqueness of the Other; and that guardianship undertaken by the self as its task and responsibility makes the self truly unique, in the sense of being irreplaceable [...]. Bearing such a task without relief is what makes a unique self out of a cipher. (51-2)

McGregor's fiction shows that the touch of another can be self affirming in its sheer simplicity precisely because it circumvents the egoistic imperative that dominates practices of self-making in liquid modernity.

*Field* emphasizes the uncanny quality that the confrontation of strangerhood produces, and, as Gormley has reproduced the sculpture in different locations, he has reiterated how the encounter of the one to the many is an increasingly ubiquitous challenge in contemporary globalized societies.<sup>4</sup> By employing multiple sculptors to make the figures, and by the collective action of using the space between the hands as a matrix for articulating each individual's relation to the world, Gormley directs attention to touch and silence as a means of communicating kinship. Jon McGregor's novels similarly valorize such indirect strategies of connectedness precisely because they displace determination from the epistemological to the affective. The archive and the narrative are suspect as methods for pinning experience into space, time, and order because, for all their metaphorical power, they ultimately privilege points of departure and destination rather than equally recognizing the interstitial, the static, and the under-determined as valid sites of meaning. McGregor's belief that both offer only partial, pre-determined shapes for knowing does not discredit them, rather it creates space for alternative, and potentially complementary ways of being in the world. He is not suggesting in any naïve or sentimental way that recognition of, and care for the other is any kind of ultimate answer to strangerhood, but he is suggesting that it represents a baseline human commitment, disclosed *in medias res*, that retains a value outwith beginnings and endings. *Being-for* the Other is not transcendent here, but it is a valuable compensation for the disorientation and losses of liquid life.

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman's favouring of 'liquid' as a metaphor for the current phase of modernity emerged in a series of studies from the beginning of the century (principally 2000; 2001; 2003; 2005; 2006; 2007). While liquid modernity shares many characteristics with a standard definition of postmodernity, Bauman (at least in this phase of his career) rejects the idea of modernity's completion, and employs liquid as a term not

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only to describe an “era of disembedding without re-embedding” (*Conversations* 89), but also to indicate continuity with the modern vision of combatting contingency with certainty.

<sup>2</sup> Database and archive are not equated in this essay – there are clear epistemological distinctions. It is rather in their similar spatial imaginary that they can be compared.

<sup>3</sup> James Putnam (2001) adds Karsten Bott, Christian Boltanski, Kurt Schwitters, and Daniel Spoerri to the list of visual artists displaying the archival impulse in recent decades, and draws a genealogical line back through Warhol to Duchamp and Magritte.

<sup>4</sup> To date, Gormley has produced versions of *Field* in Australia (1989), Brazil (1991), Sweden (1993), China (2003), and Japan (2004).