The Novel as the Future Anterior of the Book:

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* **and Ali Smith's** *the Accidental*

At the end of *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), a study that documents the breaking away of media from human physiology, Friedrich Kittler states: "under the conditions of high technology, literature has nothing more to say" (262). This doesn't mean that he foresees a lack of things being written; rather, Kittler refers here to the increasingly likely scenario of machines being able to "speak" to themselves and each other, through networks and systems that bypass human cognition. The critic's role in this setting would be to "read" these networks as the language underlying all others. Such an approach to literary history, Johanna Drucker stresses, aims "not to give a techno-determinist reading of literature, but to proffer a highly literary reading of the technologies of inscription as texts" (2013). Novels can still show up under this media historical lens. But their vital capacity to register the technologies of inscription and data transfer that produced them—*Dracula* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are two novels on which Kittler has written in this vein—is recast as writing's capacity to grasp and speak of its own production, evidence of matter informing matter rather than a dialectical relationship between transcendent and material realms (1997; 50, 101).

This essay is about two fictions that seem to cede their reflexive capacity to media in this way. Kittler's description of an inscription technology as something increasingly able to speak for and of itself, and to replace in this capacity traditionally human forms of self-reflection, is a scenario *Remainder* and *the Accidental* each take seriously. Both novels promote consciousness of bookishness; of the codex as a machine that is sequential and material; of the printed page; of moveable type. More importantly, both offer a view of the paper page that seems provided by

the technologies that move beyond it rather than by a human consciousness of matter. Partly in honor of these novels, and partly as an experiment in thinking through our current interest in surfaces and materials, my theoretical alliance in this paper remains with media archeology. But even in the terms of Kittler and Latour, I will suggest, the reflexivity of the kind at work in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and Ali Smith's *The Accidental* is difficult to parse entirely as a process of media's self-begetting.

This is partly because Smith and McCarthy account very differently for what the codex book *will have been*, implying that they represent it from the perspective of a media platform that has succeeded the book but also opening up the question of what that platform is. In this sense, their novels differ from reflexive classics like *Don Quixote* or *Tristram Shandy*, which animate the page much more directly as something articulate about its own trajectory. But *Remainder* and *The Accidental* are also unlike the digital novels, the techno-texts of N. Katherine Hayles's description, which deploy the screen medium as a palpable referent shared by reader and writer, active in shaping the story told by the text (2011). Instead these novels pry themselves away from the book as their scene of composition even as it continues, a decade after their publication, to be the form in which they are most likely to circulate. Their description of their own mediation involves a relationship of exteriority to the book that is fictional because it states how the future is to be occupied, but does so before it has arrived.

One way to describe this move is as invoking the future anterior, a perspective that Mark Currie defines as "not the actual future, but an envisaged, virtual future which is part of the present, experiencing the present moment as one that *will have been*, as something that *will have happened* (2013:61). In *Paper Machines* (2005), Derrida describes the future anterior of the paper as the view that opens up of an inscription technology once it is no longer directly in use as

a medium, but is still present as a point of reference. Pointing to paper as something that continues to occupy us imaginatively in electronic times, he argues by way of an analogy: one drives, he suggests, with both hands and feet, moving forwards along the road while all the time looking into the rear view mirror into the world receding into the distance (64). By this logic, the first sign of our bodies moving into the future is the rearview mirror image of the past. But for Derrida, as well as for Currie, the future anterior is as much grammatical proposition as mechanical production.   Novels like *Remainder* and *The Accidental* perform in these terms in a space opened up by media history, but the capacity they deploy, to look from a non-native perspective at the technology of paper and print is at least partly their own production.

1. Locating Transcendence

Of all recent novelists, McCarthy may be the most widely recognized as working at the juncture of media archeology and fiction, touted for his enthusiastic handing over authorial power to information currents and media formats. Critics, including Justus Neiman, Peter Vermeulen, and Matthew Hart, by whom he was recently interviewed at length, have given him much credit as spokesperson for the idea that currents of media change are shaping the novel today. Commitment to this position plays out in *C* (2010), which tracks the life of its protagonist, Serge, at points of contact with early twentieth-century technology. Machines used to encode and convey language as physical data—gramophone, telegraph, radio—feature in the novel, suggesting that the text itself is a channel for the material passage of information. McCarthy's non-fiction writing on the topic of authorship returns often to the image of novelist as more DJ than artist, involved in transmitting a "set of signals that have been repeating, pulsing,

modulating in the airspace of the novel, poem, play—in their lines, between them and around them—since each of these forms began" (2012c: Sec 1). In keeping with this description of the writer, McCarthy has expressed fascination with the idea of an archive being, not the author's voice, but a series of keystrokes and moments in digital history. He speaks in one interview in praise of the strand of "genetic criticism" that uses the forensic evidence of writing to track the movement of authors from one draft to the next, their intersection with other texts in their reading, and the cross-fertilization of language that shows up as the influence of one document on another. This does not apply only to the print or manuscript archive. McCarthy points out that digital documents harbor just as much material evidence of the writer's life if they are read by "software that can reconstruct every keystroke you made since the beginning of time – MacBook, floppy discs, the lot" (2012b). In this spirit, McCarthy seems to be craning actively to see his work from the angle Kittler suggests, as a material transcript that makes intellection no more or less than another medium.

Remainder can, and has, been read in these terms as an essay into the idea that cognitive and subjective experience should be approached materially; a fiction carried by the whole raft of arguments in favor of approaching texts as surfaces rather than depths. McCarthy's unnamed narrator appears as a mind from which memories and emotions have been wiped by a mysterious accident, a patient whose thoughts and movements are broken down into constituent parts and pathways and consciously re-learnt. Using money received in compensation for the accident, he builds up memories by creating the physical environments he believed triggered them, chasing down authentic experiences by reproducing the movements and sequences from which they arise. As a plot, this physical furnishing of a cognitive world is both witty and strangely enthralling, involving sets inhabited by vast numbers of people paid to re-enact specific

sequences. Theoretically, it is also in keeping with what media theorists, including Hayles and Kittler, but Bernard Steigler, and Mark B. Hansen, and Bruno Latour would now describe as the essential contribution of technical, medial and material technologies as scaffolding the domain of human cognition.

One clue to the fact that *Remainder*'s own status as writing is implicated in this theme is its narrator's interest in circuits and pathways. The process he describes as his "getting a grip on space" after the accident involves thinking of a network into which he is securely plugged. Riding the tube to Heathrow is only possible if he keeps "thinking that rails were linked to wires that linked to boxes and to other wires above the ground that ran along streets, connecting us to them and my flat to the airport" (15). Networks like this make action and representation part of one physical continuum, flattening language and thought together. The equivalence of representation and event is celebrated, for instance, in the narrator's endorsement of the diagrams that record crime scenes. Euphorically describing these texts as a kind of hieroglyphic writing, he connects them directly to the actions they represent: "Each line, each figure, every angle— the ink vibrates with an almost intolerable violence, darkly screaming from the violence of white paper: something had happened here, someone has died" (185). By this logic, text is placed squarely within the category of the imprint John Berger describes, with photographs, footprints, cardiograms perceived as analog traces of an event (293).

The coup for such an account of mediation is to make all text conceivable as the material impression left by one medium upon another. *Remainder* stages this possibility during the narrator's first walk-through of his carefully produced London tenement building. Preparing to cross paths with one of the actors, whose job is to place her rubbish on the landing before her door, the narrator explains:

5

> I'd showed her exactly how to stoop: the inclination of her shoulders, the path slowly carved through the air by her right hand as it led the bag round her legs and down to the ground (I'd told her to picture the route supporting arms on old gramophone players take, first across and then down), the way her left hand rested on her lower back above the hip, the middle finger pointing straight at the ground. We'd got all this down to a t—but we hadn't succeeded in working out the words she'd say to me. (143)

Under these conditions, the actor's words appear as the product of the highly controlled physical arrangement. The body that speaks is tuned like an instrument, an "old gramophone player." The words it comes up with are inane—"Harder and harder to life up"—but they strike the narrator as perfect, creating one of the bursts of physical pleasure he gets from his enactments when they go right: language is sound excreted, unthought, owned by no-one.

This scene is a pivotal in *Remainder* as a triumphant distillation of cognition to technology; language to mediation. But the outburst of pleasure that comes from language produced in this way also raises the question of what, if any, role transcendence is to play in a world for which pervasively material explanations can be offered. The narrator's response to this scene is to experience a buzzing, a sort of caricature of transcendence, associated more generally with his fascination in movements that cannot be accounted for as the sum of their material parts (death, accident, spillage). For this narrator, so invested in putting sequences and parts together, in choreographing movements on a scale that accounts for their future unfolding, is also is also deeply attracted to the idea of creating nothing from something; in the leap from a material practice to immaterial experience and back again.

The scene from *Remainder* that exemplifies this obsession involves him watching windscreen wiper fluid poured into a car and apparently disappearing, a "jump" so gratifying that he arranges for the scene to be staged over and over again. Another site of his obsession with disconnection is the loyalty card given to him at a chain coffee shop. At several points, he purchases coffee simply in order to watch this card fill up, to puzzle over the mysterious relation

6

of the eleventh coffee to the ten punches. The relation could, of course, be explained in terms of

the dialectical materialism that the new materialism is rejecting. Historical materialism could

account for the relation of the loyalty card to the liquid it produces dialectically, as one of capital

or even of cultural prestige and gentrification. Once these approaches are cleared away, we are

left with the problem of how to explain the fact that a coffee, something hot and liquid and real, a

substance that appears several times in *Remainder* as a agent of its own, springs from the shapes

made on a little piece of card. How does the shift between one register and another occur?

Where does the leap between paper character and real stuff happen?

For Bruno Latour, probably the most widely known advocate of the idea that intellectual,

spiritual, and psychological beings can be parsed as an entanglement with the material, the

question of the transcendent most often appears a ruse. Spirits, fetishes, consciousness are not in

his histories distinct from scientific and empirical "facts," and all can be explained as a relation

to or a false rejection of the material world. On these grounds, Latour's work has become a

touchstone for critics wanting to advocate for new ways of reading texts as surfaces rather than

depths. But in his latest work, *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013), Latour stresses "a slight

gap, a little leap" that alloys the existence of even the most stable entities: mountains, yeasts,

cats all rely on what he calls "modes of existence" in order to compensate for their appearance in

time being discontinuous (111). Transcendence is located in this way as swinging between

material and imaginative (or cultural) registers, an exchange that different "modes," such as

"Law," "Representation" or "Religion" license. Law, for instance, allows us to imagine crime

having certain material consequences; Religion to imagine the arrangement of certain objects

having spiritual ones. As Latour describes it, "there is always a leap, a fault line, a lag, a risk, a

difference between one stage and the next, one mediation and the next, n+n1, all along a path of

alterations. Continuity is always lacking" (210). An object's temporal extension must be

supplied by something other than the object itself. Transcendence as it is defined here is

characterized by nothing better than the relation between paper (on stage, as a book) and the

beliefs and experiences that seem to emerge from it. Under the sign of "Fiction," the paradox of

moving from paper to imagination and back again is sanctioned. This is not a direct return to the

realms of metaphysical explanation, but it is an admission of the involvement of something other

than objects themselves in the movement of objects through time.

We can draw back from this larger argument to the sense that the novel, even once it is

ontologically conceived, must perform it its own little leap, between the world of pages, letters,

paper in which it is crafted, and the form in which it is read. In Latour's terms, we know of the

book and the theatrical performance that: "you have to keep holding it so that it will hold you"

(247). The more attention is drawn to the way pages or characters exist in our hands, the more

likely we are to overlook the lapses of time that divide their writing from their printing; the

moments of them being in one mind or hand from the moment of their being in the next. To put

this in terms of McCarthy's coffeeshop loyalty card, it is an abstraction that connects one coffee

to the next by insisting on a relation of cause and effect. The hybrid form in which coffee

continues to flow can be seen, however, to be irreducible to either thought or matter. Thus even

Latour's account of a "mode" like fiction relates in this sense to the book as something that must

be imagined in and through time; that cannot simply 'be' in this domain without assistance. A

tense like the future anterior becomes important as a way of guiding that passage. While not

obviously counterfactual, it is a discursive operation that introduces the future as a matter of fact

while it is still a matter of fiction.

2. Remainder at the Limits of the Page

In order to show this at work, I want to look more closely now at how *Remainder* and *the Accidental* perform this hoist forwards in time differently, each by working up a fictionally exterior relationship to the books they are. Of these two novels, *Remainder* is the least obviously concerned with representing paper. There are no books in this novel, little reading, and almost no indication of McCarthy's interest in print mediation. McCarthy does, however, set up a close alliance between the damaged mind of the narrator and the form of codex book. This relationship is less obvious in the narrator's account than the one he has with film, the medium about which he speaks regularly. He wants, for instance, to produce a life that has the smoothness of scenes from films but he does not want the scenes he creates to be recorded or replayable as film. Justus Neiman argues that *Remainder* stages in this way the irony by which film makes presence accessible, reversible, only at the cost of "embalming" it in time (588). The narrator's "reenactments" are modeled on the world of film, but they are haunted by film's barring the events it records from involvement in real accident and uncertainty. "Paradoxically," claims Neiman, *Remainder's* "reenactments depend on both the temporal reversibility and manipulation of cinematic time—the narrator rewinds and slows down the movement of his actors—and on an obsessive cycling around cinema's capacity to deliver an asymptote of the real" (598).

With film, rewinding and repetition become signs, then, of representation being severed from the world. Yet the narrator's fantasy of a medium that would make reversibility and control compatible with authentic and ongoing experience can also be read as a comment on the mechanism of the codex book. As a form of data storage, the book enables much more freely than film the temporal reversibility of the events it represents without locking them out as strictly

from material contingency. The narrator's desire to re-read scenes; to return to them at points of his choosing, as known sequences with which he must, in limited terms, always interact for the first time but which are also always already there invokes the book in terms quite similar to the ones book historians are now using to discuss the specificity of print reading. Roger Charter, Peter Stallybrass and Michael Warner have all asserted that sequential reading was never the real provenance of the book: in a longer perspective, what its machinery enabled better than any other medial form is a freedom of movement, the kind of spatio-temporal access that *Remainder*'s narrator pursues as a relation to his enactments. His ideal way of occupying the past as he creates it resembles quite closely the turning of a book's pages:

> "I shall move throughout the space," I said, "as I see fit. We'll concentrate on different bits at different times. Different locations, different moments. Sometimes I'll want to be passing the liver lady as she puts her rubbish out. Sometimes I'll want to be out by the motorbike. Sometimes the two at once: we can pause one scene and I'll run up or down the stairs to be inside the other. Or a third. The combinations are endless" (89)

Unlike scrolls, which must be unwound and held open with both hands, and unlike film, which remains difficult to traverse freely, the book enables what this plot-level experimentation aims to achieve: the ability rewind, to pause and to handle the past in a material form that may still unfold as direct experience.

In his discussion of Wordsworth's "I wandered Lonely as a Cloud" as a poem printed with deliberate effect across on the recto and verso of a page, Richard Menke underscores the success of the paginated environment in these terms. Turning between these portions of the poem, he argues that the reader experiences the memory of the daffodils as Wordsworth intends: as two layers of visual recollection from which writing has been excised. While the chief effect of memory is visual, the book is vital in its delivery: "only writing," argues Menke in reference to the technology of the printed page, "can offer a model for discrete, repeatable replay wholly

divorced from social context" (35). *Remainder'*s narrator shares Menke's sense of the desirability of "discrete, repeatable replay" as the shape both memory and the codex book take, with both making sensory involvement in a sequence of events that has already unfolded possible. The enthusiasm with which he pours in the course of the novel over books on forensics, refers to catalogues, and hunts down police files, underscores his higher level of satisfaction with codex as form of data storage than with any of the other technologies he encounters.

Book historical arguments such as Menke's take advantage of the digital present as a platform from which to understand better that technologies of the past; technologies that are in some very real sense no longer primary to literary historians, from whose archives paper is increasingly absent. In contrast, *Remainder* uses the narrator's allegiance with book-space to cast a critically askance view at the material form novel's words are still likely to take. Yet in this case, reflexivity involves putting a distance between his bookish fantasies and a novel that showcases the limits of its narrator's mind. For while there are many ways in which McCarthy's views on information transmission can be lined up with his narrator's, *Remainder's* way of making the book apparent as an instrument of replay still involves grasping it from a distance as a form limitation. The narrator's ideal form of repetition, for instance, is embodied in the figure 8. The novel opens with the narrator receiving eight and a half million pounds as his compensation payout and then bemoaning the half a million extra for skewing the perfection of the round number. It ends with the narrator locked in a flight path that takes the shape of an "8." In between, we learn of the narrator's fascination with activity that can be tracked as loops. As a patient, he admires the way that "everything in hospital runs on a loop. I watched the trolleys clatter round their circuits from the kitchen to the wards' back entrances, the bin bags piling up

in the rubbish compound, the ambulance drivers and their vehicles, still between marked lines"
(52). On the street, he watches a group of homeless people and "started to see a regularity to the
pattern of their movements, the circuits they made between two spots" (55-6).

Remainder returns to repetition in its final lines, which send the narrator, who has insisted
that the plane he has hijacked "keep turning, out and back" through the clouds, "turning, heading
back, again." This is a turn back to the book we now read as a physical embodiment of the
possibility of repetition, and *Remainder* itself as a book widely seen to invite rereading:
"Pathways," writes Andrew Piper in relation to the materiality of the book, "allow us to do things
over and over again, they are technologies of recurrence, perfectibility, and survival" (54). But it
involves that suggestion that we, readers whose consciousness depends on technologies newer
than the book, perceive these pathways from afar. In this light, books, which we saw earlier as
mechanisms associated with different kinds of openness to replay as authentic experience, appear
in the rearview mirror of the digital text. Despite the kinds of "live" reply that reading on paper
makes possible, it is set apart from the infinitely open field of reading and writing associated
with digital network. Thus, while pages work in the narrator's favor as a way of intermingling
with and controlling the form of the past as materially contingent, their connection with his mind
also enforces the feeling that the reiterability given to narrative by the book as a loop or
limitation.

Remainder's nod to the form of the printed book as a path of return makes best sense,
then, if we understand the narrator's fixation with circuits and with the cordoning-off of matter
as symptomatic, not only of the book's virtues as a technology of preservation, but also of his
cognitive limitation. The narrator's damaged state has been read by Pieter Vermeulen as
evidence of McCarthy's embracing the death of the novel as genre. After the "accident," the

subject of humanist concern ceases to inhabit the narrative, closing down the genre of the novel as we know it and freeing writers like McCarthy to invent new forms of narrative on the premise of this death being acknowledged (566). The related possibility, one that cleaves more closely to McCarthy's own sense of media always providing the condition of our fictions, suggests that the demise and resurrection of the novel staged in *Remainder* involves its grasping the limits of the book from beyond the book. The future that Derrida sees opening up through the view of paper that can be taken once it is no longer primary scene of writing belongs here to *Remainder* as a text that offers up the book we read as a souvenir of a defunct subjectivity. If the narrator's brain injury has rendered his subjectivity book-like, then the novel's larger effect is to contextualize this state of damage as a historical condition, establishing its presence in a network for which the paper book has become inadequate as metaphor. In this sense, while McCarthy is precluded by his own celebration of media from writing to any traditional standard of literary self-consciousness, he creates a fiction that claims for itself a larger media system whose self-awareness we might call the contemporary novel's view of the book.

3. The Accidental's exposing the Page

Like McCarthy, Smith presents the paginated environment as one that the contemporary novel has exceeded. Her latest novel, *How to Be Both* (2014), appears in two different editions that reverse the order of its two parts so as to invite different readings and a sense of the page as a form narrative can no longer take in earnest. But this is awareness is already cultivated by *The Accidental*'s shape as three slices entitled the "The Beginning," "The Middle," and "the End." These sections appear in a sequence that marks in a loose way the progression story of a family

transformed by their summer holiday in Norfolk.   But more obvious referent of Smith's section titles is the physical book as something that imposes a beginning, a middle and an end onto a story that has no such components.   Each of the three sections of *The Accidental* rotates through the thoughts of five characters, representing single events from multiple perspectives. Thus, Smith's first section, "The Beginning," asserts its multiple beginnings, with the middle-aged Michael declaring "the beginning again!" and the depressed teenager Magnus figuring out that "the beginning of this = the end of everything" (36). The sequentiality of the book, Smith suggests, is an awkward fit with such a narrative, which, like Remainder, seems to conceive of its form as a printed book from a position of technically mediated superiority.

The other levels at which Smith treats the book as grounds for provocation in *The Accidental* reinforces its being historically outmoded.   To the extent that her characters are pitted against each other along generational lines, they fall into two camps: that of the forty-something married couple, Michael and Eve, and that of Eve's teenage children, Astrid and Magnus. The differences and affinities between these four people can be measured largely in terms of the media they prefer. A moderately successful literature professor, Michael has spent his life reading books, writing books, and deploying their words and cultural capital lavishly in his habitual seduction of his female students. This gives all his actions a tired and over-simple trajectory: like a bad romance, his encounters always have their end in sight. Eve leads an equally questionable kind of bookish existence, re-visiting the lives of historical characters in the form of the fictionalized histories she writes for a small-minded commercial publisher and dragging her family to rural Norfolk for a summer so that she can write locked away in the grim shed in the garden. Magnus and Astrid, on the other hand, display lively forms of screen literacy—Magnus watches and comments critically on film, and Astrid, the novel's most

poignantly tracked character, obsessively records the minor details of what she sees on a digital camera, imagining herself accountable to the future viewers of this text.

In this constellation, Smith's version of the book seems to share the position of outdatedness assigned to it in *Remainder*; the narrative to tip equally away from paper towards a future endowed to it by lively and provocative teenagers. Towards the end of *The Accidental*, once the family has returned to London, Eve has disappeared, and Michael has lost his job, Michael steels himself in his state of depression to enter a bookshop in London. Plagued by the irony that his plans to take up physical activities have brought him nowhere more lively that this, Michael finds himself seated in a bad smelling chair with a selection of books about mountaineering on his knee. When he finally opens them, what he finds are discombobulated words: "He opened the first book. It was full of wonderful new words. Transaseal, for example. Now there was a word that did what it said on the tin. There was more; there were the words for variations in snow and snowflake: plates and stellars" (263). As these words appear to fall out of the text, the materiality of the book Michael is reading comes into focus: "The core of the body. The shell of the body. The book has fallen open at the symptoms of hypothermia" (265). This arbitrary opening of the pages coincides with Michael's diagnosis of his own "exposure" — "he couldn't believe how many of the symptoms he had" (265). As Michael recognizes his body in this way, he identifies with the physical vulnerability of the book that lies open in his lap. His thoughts drift from the page back to the summer in Norfolk, where he represents to himself the emptying out of his "heart": "His back hurt. He puts his hand to a point halfway up his spine and he finds a hole in himself, in his back. The hole is the size of a small fist. Sure enough, his chest feels queerly empty" (270). The rest of his time in the bookshop is spent connecting thoughts of books and his body as residual objects of pathos and neglect. He mourns the passing of

dictionaries as objects that are no longer stocked, buys a copy of Eve's new book in a moment of tenderness towards her, and leaves the store worrying "out loud that he'd left some mountaineering books he'd been looking at unshelved, upstairs in the café on one of tables" (271).

Michael's demise, so closely connected here to the youth and liveliness of text as something that is being emptied out of the book, has been brought about by his encounter with Amber, the character who has arrived uninvited, but is quickly welcomed, at the family's summer house in Norfolk. Readers of *the Accidental* meet Amber as the human manifestation of Alhambra, the disembodied voice that speaks in the prologue and epilogue to the novel (as well as in short bursts within it) as the embodiment of cinema: "My mother began me one evening in 1968 on a table in the café of the town's only cinema" (1). Alhambra's story is not the novel's self-designated "Beginning." Her presence, which starts the story into being, falls outside the limits of both the novel and the narrative. In this function she has what Currie describes as "the narrative function of representing a collective history of representations." As representation itself, he argues, she is outside time, while as a character who turns up under the name of Amber one summer in Norfolk, she is inside the time of the novel (118). In kindred terms, Alhambra also embodies representation unmediated: she is cinema, but cinema that arrives within a novel. Her arrival there creates, as we have seen, a displacement and emptying out of the book that comes about when words are brought to life. For Currie, this involves "a literalization of a relationship between the outside and the inside of fiction," with literal used, he spells out, "in literal sense, to mean that it pertains to the letters on a page" (117). While Michael embodies the book, Alhambra embodies the future of representation as something porous and interactive. If *Remainder* is a fiction that slights the codex by aligning it with a cognitively injured narrator,

The Accidental does something similar by making Alhambra a supra-human platform from which to see the book—and Michael—as sites of lack.

The difference, however, is that once language is liberated from the book in *The Accidental*, its return to the page becomes a new site of desire.   This is clearest in the sections of *The Accidental* where Michael fantasizes about having Amber "enter" his body. In Norfolk, he construes himself as a surface Amber will break with a dive; a sequence of clichés that she will represent anew: "She had entered him like he was water, like he was a dictionary and she was a word he hadn't known was in him. Or she had entered him more simply, like he was a door and she opened him, leaving him standing ajar as she walked straight in" (61). The effect of this "exposure" is that words become newly apparent, dislodged from the forms of seduction narrative that they have taken in Michael's thinking about Amber until this point. In the middle chapter of the book (the middle chapter of its middle section, which is told from Michael's point of view), letters explode on a page:

> Shock and heart and art had seared off all his skin, then he'd been metalled over with a new self and six new senses, a new tongue that could speak only in lines that were pentameter, intelligences that swore in it was all poetry and signs:
> > a girl call Amber walked across a room
> > and everything became a new-made poem (161)

Following these lines, Smith presents seven poems, each rehearsing in established genres of poetry the shock that has taken place in Michael's being. These poems perform Amber's arrival as creating a new arrangements of letters:

> Million a tesserae was shattered he
>
> No possible, no with together putting
>
> Back. Front,sides,of splinters a splintery (169)

becomes a version of:

SO BRIGHT the heart opening

with a slam.

A new self b r o k e n took the world –

n o o n e (161)

Each of these poems is arranged unevenly, suggesting the effect of handset type and bringing, as Drucker has argued of this technique, "into focus the physical, tangible aspects of language—the size and weight of the letters in a literal sense—emphasizing the material specificity of the printing medium" (1984; 8). But the paper page also comes into play here as the substratum on which the event of Amber's arrival plays out. The first six poems in the sequence are printed only on the recto page, with verso left blank. The feelings of emptiness connected to the book in future scenes are anticipated here in the blasting open of space that occurs with Amber's translation into print.

The surprise, then, is that *The Accidental*, unlike *Remainder*, finally offers itself up as an argument for the currency of the book as a medium; one whose strength rests on the way in which it can yield with dignity to the physical exposure of its materials. This championing of the book is not easily discerned at the level of Smith's plot, where film, just as in *Remainder*, is much more obviously a dexterous and cohesive social force than books.   Once Amber has vanished, taking with her the contents of Michael and Eve's London house, it is cinema that plays the socially reparative role in the family's story. Magnus spends one of his more successful days back in London watching an example of the "genre of film that you are meant to take a girl to," before being reconciled to his sister Astrid (239). Shortly afterwards, Michael, Astrid, Magnus, and Magnus's friend, Jake, find themselves gathered around the television

watching the Hitchcock film "The Lady Vanishes." By the end of the evening the disconsolate Michael feels better, maybe "because the film itself was such a good one, one that, if someone had asked him, he'd have sworn he'd already seen…but in reality he'd never seen and would never have guessed the cleverness or the plot of" (281).

Yet the limitation of film, and the comparative strength of the book, is hinted at in the question Magnus raises about the blackness beyond the screen: "he wonders why the thing films are shown on is called a screen. What is it in front of? Behind this one is probably just a blank brick wall" (239). His inquiry about cinema's hardware being elusive or not existent resonates with Astrid's attempt to find Amber, the child of the cinema, in the scenes of the Norfolk summer she has on her digital camera: "there was nothing. It was as if Amber had deleted herself, or was never there in the first place and Astrid had just imagined it" (225). Here, the very quality of liveliness that Alhambra/Amber has brought to the book makes her materially elusive. In the end, performing what will become an act more characteristic of her presence than all her startling behaviors, Amber has broken Astrid's video camera, throwing it from a highway overpass into the stream of traffic below. At this point, one feels her antipathy to any form of representation that threatens to capture her; but one also feels the contrast between the vulnerability of the cinematic image to total erasure and the book's tenacity as a record of the past. As cinema, Alhambra/Amber disappears: behind her screen there is a blank wall, her image lacks a substratum. Michael, on the other hand, breaks down before us and remains visible: book-like, he can be dissected and exposed while living to tell the tale. The worst that can happen is that he can become blank. As a novel of seduction that has ceased to run its course, he nevertheless remains legible as book whose paper can witness such a death; can contain the crushed and discombobulated letters from which meaning may be resurrected.

For Smith, here and in her earlier novel, *Like* (1997), the sense in which books can be said to speak of themselves comes across in their particular capacity to do so from beyond the pale; in their spectral quality as bodies burnt, broken, and rendered illegible, but still operative recursively, highlighting the material existence of pages that are emptied out and reconfigured as the book's defining capacity to speak in and out of a "broken" medial form. Smith, who is interested generally in breakdown (the narrator of *Hotel World* (2008) reports after death by falling down a long shaft), is also interested in media breakdown. Like Andrew Piper, who foregrounds the "thereness" of the book, and the tenacity of its materiality, Smith expresses her fondness for the medium of paper largely as a recognition of its ability to keep speaking from beyond the threshold of its own encounter with the spectral; the virtual. In this sense her future anterior belongs, unexpectedly, to Michael, even as it is Alahambra's story that writes itself upon the emptied out surface of his body.

Conclusion: the Novel in Media History

To a generation of literary critics who have already conceded the sovereignty of the subject to the autonomy of writing, Kittler's assertion that inscription technologies since Gutenberg have made "so-called Man" an effect of the recording, analysis, and reproduction of discourse may seem little more than a natural extension of post-structuralism's opposition to the subject. In general, we seem increasingly less likely to want to dispute the assertion who we are and how with think is changing radically as the age of print passes. But for literary critics, such media-historical claims are still worth distinguishing from poststructuralist claims for the effects of discourse on subjectivity. While poststructuralism has always sought to grant literature an active

role in the play of language, arguments for the autonomy of media history tend rather to bypass literary content altogether, or to see it as one of the places where the impact of technology registers through new configurations of print, digital media, and database technology. In embracing book and media history as the newest paradigm within which texts can be read, scholars of literature may increase the empirical availability of their objects of study, but they risk the impossibility of defending literature as having any kind of transcendent quality in the history in which it participates; any particularity other than as an effect of media.

This essay has been about two books built to work as self-reflexive elements of the media environment to which they belong, but also about two novels that participate discursively in the complexity of media change more dynamically conceived. As texts that straddle multiple media forms available to contemporary writing, they have the autopoetic quality that allows media archeologists to grant technologies of inscription agency in human history. These are novels, in other words, that enact discourse's ability to speak to its own form as book, but also to project through this conversation the quality of digital mediation being located elsewhere; in the wider possibilities of transmission as McCarthy understands them; in the book's afterlife as Smith conceives it. In Kittler's terms, it is possible to understand them purely as media events, of which traces are there to be read. Yet, the fact that *Remainder* and *The Accidental* cast their backward glances at the textual materiality of the book so differently points to the role of imaginative fiction in giving shape to what might otherwise appear the empirical fact of the codex book's demise, and the coming into being of other ways of reading and storing narrative. Here we find evidence of what Latour would call fiction as a mode: a way of treating objects that makes up for their discontinuities in time.

Remainder, despite being hailed, most famously by McCarthy's fellow novelist Zadie Smith, as reviving the future of the British novel, suggests the limits of the encounter with the printed page as a media event. *The Accidental*, on the other hand, suggests the plasticity of the printed page as a medium on which all kinds of events will register, including the demise of paper. Even as literature in its canonical form proves inadequate to the kinds of consciousness Smith represents, the book—the page, the material of print--seems to respond to its own crisis in ways that newer media cannot. In their different accounts of print mediation, past, present, and future, these fictions suggest how far we are from any consensus about what shape reading will take in the future; and how active novelists remain in the project of reimagining this future, not just as they experiment materially with the shape of the book, but as they imaginatively invoke the different perspectives that a focus on media change can open up. At a point in media history where technologies of writing have diverged widely from those of reading, and where paper books and screens overlap so powerfully on our desks and in our dreams, we face choices about how to describe the location and the future of narrative.

In this light, novels like *Remainder* and *The Accidental* are salutatory examples of why reading fiction at the level of its content is vital to understanding and positioning ourselves in relation to the technologies that convey it. Their message, although it is never directly delivered, is that studying media history is as much a matter of textual concern as surface-oriented observation. Derrida's point about the importance that paper will have as a figure in our texts long after it has ceased to be the surface on which we write is a reminder, not just of our enthrallment with media, but also of our imaginative responsibility towards its past and present forms. In this setting, the "future anterior" of the book belongs more than ever to the novel.

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