Reading the shape-shifting text: the context and impact of the diverse strategies of the *McSweeney's* periodical, with particular attention to its status as a new approach to literature, as represented both by commentators and its creators.

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Declaration.

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract.

This thesis interrogates the cultural impact and literary significance of the *McSweeney's* periodical. It argues for a particular approach to the study of the periodical form that focuses on the unusual textuality that results from a serially produced text; one of its objectives is to understand the implications of making a representation of a periodical as a whole text. The complications that result from representing a serial text composed of multiple individually authored texts are taken as productive for this thesis, as it attempts to uncover what this process reveals about how periodicals differ from the traditional objects of literary criticism. This thesis considers the *McSweeney's* periodical from several perspectives at different points in its publication history, moving from its founding statements to its anthologies, and looks at it through various lenses, including an analysis of its form/style and a consideration of its politics. The intention of this thesis is to identify and describe the particular strategies of the periodical and locate them in their appropriate context.

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Acknowledgements.

Abbreviations used.

Best of – The Best of McSweeney's
Better – The Better of McSweeney's
Tendency – Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency
Times – New York Times
Treasury – McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales
USoM -- The United States of McSweeney's

Introduction.

What is *McSweeney's*? A shape-shifting text.

What is *McSweeney's*? This is a question with several possible answers, and these touch on issues that are central to this thesis. *McSweeney's* is primarily a periodical with an unusual physical format containing short fiction by contemporary writers. Over fifteen years, it has published a diverse range of emerging and established writers, and contributed to a resurgence in the short story form and the standing of the literary periodical. This description belies the complexity of the identity of *McSweeney's*, as the combination of a shape-shifting physical form and a porfolio of content involving hundreds of writers has spawned conflicting representations of its activities. It is variously discussed as a successful, mainstream periodical that advances the careers of its writers, or as a site of quirky and unusual literary experiments. These and other contradictions emerge because of the dense and multiple nature of the serial periodical format; these problems are amplified by the injection of shape-shifting and flux into this format by *McSweeney's*. The aim of this thesis is to understand the strategies and context of *McSweeney's* and produce a satisfactory description of the periodical's identity, given the challenges I observe from its interactions with literary culture.

McSweeney's was founded in 1998 by the American writer Dave Eggers. Initially established as a literary quarterly, it has since expanded into various side-projects including a non-fiction magazine (the *Believer*), a DVD periodical (*Wholphin*), a daily-updated humour website (*Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*), a book publishing arm (McSweeney's Rectangulars), a non-profit literacy foundation (826 National), a childrens' book imprint (McMullens), a sports magazine (*Grantland*), and a food magazine (*Lucky Peach*). All of these are to a greater or lesser extent a part of *McSweeney's*, falling under its publishing umbrella. In fifteen years, the *McSweeney's* periodical has published forty-four issues of short fiction and other literary content. Each issue adopts a different physical form: Issue 4 is a series of pamphlets enclosed in a cardboard box, while Issue 17 is designed to look like a bundle of mail, and Issue 33 is a fully executed version of a Sunday newspaper. Given this shape-shifting behaviour (of both the overall project and the periodical itself), it becomes impossible to be certain that a speaker's understanding of the *McSweeney's* periodical is accurately communicated to their addressee. While this is true of all communication, the periodical offers more of a challenge than most other texts. This difficulty in conceiving a stable linguistic representation of either the various projects associated under the umbrella of '*McSweeney's',* or of the periodical itself, seems to touch

on some of the reasons why it has become such an important part of early 21st century American literary culture.

McSweeney's is a shape-shifting text. As a publishing enterprise it has several incarnations. As a periodical, it has multiple issues, none of which share the same format. This thesis will explore the different positions that the *McSweeney's* periodical occupies and is taken to occupy in 21st century literary culture. The dual focus here is intentional: my interest is in both how *McSweeney's* represents its own activities and how these activities are interpreted and received in literary culture.[1] Originally pitched as a small press response to established magazines, it is now considered as one of the most important literary publications in America, as suggested by the diversity of side-publications it has created. It follows an offbeat agenda and has an unusual editorial voice that allow it to be represented as unconventional. Its ambiguous status as not-mainstream and not-small press invites consideration of *McSweeney's* as a text which does not occupy a stable cultural position. Its formal shape-shifting is reflected in this unstable position.

The shape-shifting form of *McSweeney's* identifies something unusual in their activities. The periodical is primarily unusual when considered in comparison with other journals and magazines, because its form runs contrary to the dominant paradigm of periodical production, i.e. engendering familiarity and loyalty in a readership through consistent and regular form.[2] As the first of several paradoxes, it may be this 'rebellious' strategy that contributes to the popularity of *McSweeney's*. I describe this as a paradox because we assume that readers continue to read periodicals because they are confident they know what it will contain. The periodical medium is founded on this assumption—that readers are more likely to purchase subsequent issues if they are reasonably certain what they purchase will meet their expectations. The shape-shifting form of *McSweeney's* appears to reject this periodical paradigm. The only predictable aspect of the *McSweeney's* form is that it has no predictable form. This bleeds into the representations made of its identity, as I will discuss below.

The various activities it has engaged in during the spectrum of its publication has made it a productive focus for thoughts about the literary marketplace. Various representations can be made of *McSweeney's*: its diversity allows multiple perspectives of its cultural position to be constructed. It can be a small-press, independent journal, or a powerful, established

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[1] I will provide my definition of the concept 'literary culture' below.
[2] Horst Moser, *The Art Directors' Handbook of Professional Magazine Design: Classic Techniques and Inspirational Approaches*, London: Thames & Hudson (2003), p.46.

publishing presence. An *Observer* article has called *McSweeney's* 'the natural home for the leading fiction writers of [its] generation'.[3] The *New Statesman* has tellingly labelled it 'the place publishers look for new talent'.[4] A blog by the Hesperus Press labels *McSweeney's* as 'indie lit'.[5] An article discussing the launch of the *Believer* magazine describes *McSweeney's* as having a 'DIY credo'.[6] Which position it is taken to represent depends on certain factors—what elements of the *McSweeney's* project a speaker refers to, and the speaker's interpretive community. This capacity to take on different roles in literary culture is useful for thinking about its context, i.e. 21st century literary production.

The context of *McSweeney's* is a diverse literary culture, but one which is frequently conceived in binary terms. Terms like mainstream, small-press, experimental, indie, DIY, and commercial are used to assign writers, publications and groups of writers into fixed categories. These labels encourage fixed representations, and my thesis will attempt to understand the purpose and implications of these classifications. They are 'strategic acts', to borrow Brian McHale's term.[7] The division of culture into opposite binary points on a spectrum is a strategy used by participants in a culture to facilitate discussion of cultural production. Positions like mainstream and small-press provide us with, among other things, the capacity to develop comparisons between texts, writers, and movements. The graphic novel *Asterios Polyp* explores the concept of duality through the life of its title character and the potential life of his unborn twin, Ignazio. Asterios, an architect who specialises in theoretical rather than practical architecture, constantly interprets the world as structured by binaries. In an abstract dream sequence, Mazzucchelli has Asterios present his most concrete expression of his worldview:

> By choosing two aspects of a subject that appear to be in opposition, each can be examined in light of the other in order to better illuminate the entire subject. As long as one doesn't mistake the system for reality.[8]

Asterios's closing remark highlights the constructed nature of binaries. They are imaginative constructs, not descriptions of real positions. Texts and writers perform these positions, but there is a danger that these performances are mistaken for truth/reality, like a Shakespearian

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[3] Stephanie Merritt, 'What fresh hell is this in the world of literary journals?', *The Observer*, 10 April 2005, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/apr/10/features.review (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[4] Ben Markovits, 'Novel of the week: You Shall Know Our Velocity', *New Statesman*, 24 February 2003, http://www.newstatesman.com/node/144882 (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[5] HMJ, 'Indie lit magazines: from Virginia Woolf to McSweeney's', *The Hesperus Press Blog*, 5 July 2010, http://hesperuspress.wordpress.com/2010/07/05/indie-lit-magazines-from-virginia-woolf-to-mcsweeneys/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[6] Leon Neyfakh, 'Indie's write wing: The Believer and Open City put rock in a lit place', *Boston Phoenix*, 15-21 July 2005, http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/music/other_stories/documents/04819511.asp (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[7] Brian McHale, 'Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing', in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*, ed. by Bran Nicol, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2002), pp.278-300 (p.278).

[8] David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*, New York: Knopf (2009), p.185.

actor taken to really *be* Hamlet (or Macbeth, or Hal, or Romeo). By considering binary positions as performances, these categories should more properly be understood as constructs, the elements of which can be broken down and analysed. As already suggested, there are multiple types of binary that are relevant to *McSweeney's*. I consider all these binaries to be variations on the division 'centre' and 'periphery'. What I mean to argue by this usage is that binaries inculcate an oppositional relation, as alluded to in the Polyp quote above. 'Convention' and 'experimentation' or 'commercial' and 'small press' indicate differences in approaches to literature, but both pairs also imply a diametric opposition.

Binaries can be understood as contributing to the formation of literary movements. It is helpful to be able to group certain tendencies in writers under such umbrella terms. The labels 'experimental' or 'realist' facilitate the aggregation of writers and readers into literary communities. They can be deployed as metonymic terms, to be used in debates as representative of literary methods and ideas. They make it easier for individuals to associate themselves with specific approaches to literature without constantly restating their preferences/assumptions. They allow (or even encourage) literature to be divided into distinct fields and opposing positions. These traditionally allow the individual to indicate which position they believe a writer or text to occupy, or to which position they align themselves. These positions are meta-narratives, constructed spectrums of literary categorisation that do not necessarily predetermine a writer's intentions or a reader's interpretation. Late 20th century theorists and texts have argued for the constructedness of meta-narratives, challenging the possibility of upholding rigid definitions of such categories. Texts are not intrinsically avant-garde, for example, but achieve this status only as an output of the processes of literary culture, e.g. in the way a text is marketed or pitched, in how critics label it, or in the various ways a text can be received or reused by readers. Though these positions are constructed, they can nonetheless be viewed as stable constructs, to a greater or lesser extent. Texts that appear to be unquestionably of one category are those whose self-representation accords most uncomplicatedly with the representation evoked in reception. The illusion of a consensus over a text or writer's status to some extent disguises or masks the collectively imagined nature of this status. Nothing in literary culture is fixed or pre-determined: it is always constructed through textual processes.

The shape-shifting nature of *McSweeney's* amplifies the number of possible positions it can be represented as occupying. It is described with several diverse labels, and these are problematic due to the binary frames that they perpetuate (frames that I argue are reductive).

The conceptions of the *McSweeney's* project in literary culture are somewhat paradoxical; it is conceived as a text of either the centre or of the periphery, as commercial and small press. This thesis does not attempt to classify the periodical as one or the other of these; rather, it is concerned with understanding the factors involved in these constructions. Different critics consider its position in different ways: it is assigned to either end of a binary spectrum to suit the critic's intention. This perpetuates the idea that texts have to be assigned to one position or its opposite. As a brief illustration of this: the literary magazine *n+1* commented in 2004 on the popularity of *McSweeney's* in an editorial in their first issue titled 'A Regressive Avant-Garde'. This article utilises a binary conception of literary culture. In the article the *n+1* editors construct a representation of *McSweeney's* as a non-centre movement via a comparison with Surrealism:

> The Eggersards should be compared to schools of the historical avant-garde, the short-lived groups that reorganized European literary culture around bohemian factions.[9]

The article considers the contribution of *McSweeney's* to American literature by comparing it to other movements that formed around innovative stylistic practices. The tendency of Surrealist writers and artists towards methods privileging surprise and chance was a formal response to a philosophical objection to the established/traditional approaches to art. To compare *McSweeney's* to Surrealism is to consider *McSweeney's* as possessing a similar relationship to tradition, i.e. that they are rebelling or reacting against an established norm, approach, or style. The *n+1* editors use this comparison to highlight how the writers associated with *McSweeney's* have forged 'an identifiable style'.[10] This praise, however, is limited to an acknowledgement of their stylistic difference to an existing culture. The article goes on to argue that this is undermined by their formal innovations being derivative of earlier avant-gardes and by an overriding anti-intellectual tendency to their work. My contention is that the *n+1* editors have applied a binary frame (i.e. avant-garde vs convention) to *McSweeney's*, and expect its activities to conform to the patterns of earlier avant-gardes. *n+1* constructs a specific position for itself as an outsider magazine, as part of a 21st century avant-garde. *McSweeney's* seems to avoid this strategy, I argue. That *n+1* devoted an editorial to this topic in their first issue is suggestive of the credibility *McSweeney's* had accrued in its first six years of publishing—it was a productive focus for the *n+1* editors to elaborate their own interpretation of contemporary culture. This thesis

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[9] n+1 Editors, 'A Regressive Avant-Garde: McSweeney's/Believer', *n+1*, 4 July 2004, http://nplusonemag.com/regressive-avant-garde (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[10] Ibid.

will explore the construction of these positions as a strategic process in literary culture, and consider how the activities of *McSweeney's* can be understood in the context of this process.

This thesis will imagine *McSweeney's* as exploring the overlap and intersection of several binaries: between centre and periphery, mainstream and small press, establishment and little magazine, tradition and experimentation, et al. It is a text that interrogates the validity of a binary conception of culture. The constant variety and eclecticism evident in the activities of *McSweeney's* reflect a consistent challenge to the possibility of stable cultural positions. My thesis will look at the nature of literary identities, how representations of periodicals are constructed and what significance they have. The various functions that *McSweeney's* has in literary culture allows me to adapt several methods for exploring literary representations. In addressing the activities of the periodical I will look at some of the key themes involved in its literary context: how periodicals produce an impression of stability despite constantly changing what they publish; the legacy of realism and postmodernism and its influence on contemporary literature; how periodicals respond to and shape their culture.

An initial problem presented by writing a critical work about a text as diverse as *McSweeney's* concerns terminology. As my thesis attempts to define the activities of *McSweeney's*, I would like to begin with some degree of certainty over what I mean when I use the word '*McSweeney's*'. The difficulty in achieving this stems from the fact that *McSweeney's* is not a single text with which all readers can have a common experience. It is a composite, fragmented and varying text. How, then, can I narrow this down, impose uniformity on my use of the term '*McSweeney's*'? One strategy would be to say that my referent is the forty-four issues of the *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* journal published to date, numbered 1 to 44. Though I will mainly be writing about the journal, it is difficult in practice to maintain a rigid distinction between the journal and the wider *McSweeney's* enterprise. The term could also refer, more nebulously, to the various publishing and media enterprises associated with the *McSweeney's* journal through shared editors/creators or through funding, such as the *Believer*, *Lucky Peach*, *Grantland* and *Wholphin*. One possible solution could be the typographical demarcation practiced in an *A.V. Club* article by Tasha Robinson, which described the *McSweeney's* founder Dave Eggers as:

> the fulcrum of a new postmodern literary movement, centering on his anthology website *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency* (mcsweeneys.net), his dense literary journal

> *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, and eventually his publishing company, simply McSweeney's.[11]

Following literary-critical tradition, the titles of discrete texts (the periodical and the website) are italicised by Robinson; the publishing company or 'movement' is not. This does not seem to me a workable solution: it becomes slippery in practice to maintain a distinction between a *McSweeney's* text and the group of creators involved in its production. Even if I was to assert that my referent is solely the forty-four issues of the journal, then this is still problematic because of the difficulty in conceiving this output as a discrete text. *McSweeney's*, considered as the totality of all the issues published, cannot be easily represented or conceived as a single object, or described as possessing one typical format. As explained above, the *McSweeney's* journal is a composite, shape-shifting text. It takes on many forms, and this metamorphic practice problematises critical discussion of its meaning.

Furthermore: what type of text is *McSweeney's*? Is it a literary journal or a magazine, or something else? The different publication formats of *McSweeney's* complicate answering this question. The terminology that I choose is important because the language that I use will inevitably carry connotations that may blur my meaning. To call *McSweeney's* a 'magazine', for example, would imply that it possesses certain predictable formal characteristics. Can it be called a magazine when one of its issues is composed of eight miniature books, as Issue 28 was? Can it be called a magazine when one of its issues is a box with various papers inside designed to replicate World War II ephemera (Issue 19)? It may be useful to consider how the language used in diverse media to describe *McSweeney's* constructs its several possible identities:

> *McSweeney's*, the magazine founded by Eggers…[12]

> *McSweeney's* 29 offers everything a good book should.[13]

> *McSweeney's*, the literary journal edited by Dave Eggers…[14]

> You should try and look at a list of *McSweeney's* books online or through there [sic] quarterly review.[15]

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[11] Robinson, Tasha, 'Dave Eggers Interview', *A.V. Club*, 23 February 2005, http://www.avclub.com/articles/dave-eggers,13916 (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[12] Melvin Jules Bukiet, 'Wonder Bread', *The American Scholar,* August 2007, http://www.theamericanscholar.org/wonder-bread/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[13] The McSweeney's Store, https://store.mcsweeneys.net/products/mcsweeneys-issue-29 (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[14] Kevin Canfield, 'Book Tours: Can readings be fun?', *Poets and Writers*, November 2004, http://www.pw.org/content/book_tours_can_readings_be_fun (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[15] *Yahoo Answers Page*, http://malaysia.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080203002208AAjzn9N (Consulted 22 October 2013).

The above sample contains language used by a literary commentator, a *McSweeney's* promotional blurb, a publishing commentator, and an internet user answering a question about a reference to *McSweeney's* made in the 2008 film *Juno*. Is *McSweeney's* a magazine, a book, a literary journal, or a quarterly review? Each of these terms have been used to describe it, and each refers to elements that are relevant to *McSweeney's*. However, none of these adequately describe the totality of *McSweeney's* texts. There is no consistent description of its practices in the representation of *McSweeney's* in popular culture. As a cultural text, it seems to actively resist being pinned down with a single definition.

My response to this challenge is to describe it with the broad term 'periodical'. I define 'periodical' as a published text that appears in a new edition on a regular schedule. It is distinct from the more specific format implied by 'magazine'. All magazines are periodicals, but not all periodicals are magazines. I will use 'magazine', 'journal', and other such terms when referring to these specific periodical types, or examples thereof; most periodicals can be safely classified into these categories, because they maintain regular and predictable form. The shape-shifting qualities of *McSweeney's* necessitate this terminological step backwards into 'periodical'. This may seem a minor point, but the implications of the language used to describe a text provide insight into its cultural function; labels are strategic acts, as discussed above. My conviction on this matter is also inspired by the sociology of the object; I will explore these theories below, discussing how paying attention to an object's production can help understand its complex existence in culture. The same principle can be applied to labels and terminology. The inconsistency evident in descriptions of the identity of *McSweeney's* is a productive inconsistency, supporting my assessment of something intrinsically shape-shifting in its literary activities.

In considering the question of what significance *McSweeney's* has in American literary culture, two questions are raised: what is literary culture, and how do periodicals function within it? The short answer to the latter question is that periodicals perform and produce literary culture, but a fuller answer to both questions will be provided below.

The strategies of *McSweeney's* require a flexible approach: its resistance to traditional forms problematises the methods of traditional literary criticism. In this thesis I work with a composite methodology, borrowing from literary criticism, cultural studies, bibliography, and the sociology of the object. My constant concern is with the relationships between literary content, periodical form and culture. The periodical is the notional object of my research. However, to fully appreciate the interactions of the periodical with both literary

and non-literary culture, I adopt a broad conceptualisation of the 'text', drawing on my experience of both reading and teaching the theories of Terry Eagleton and *Ways of Reading*.[16] I consider in practice how theories of textuality borrowed from cultural studies can help to interpret the overall project of *McSweeney's*.[17] My work proceeds by reproducing, constructing and amassing representations of texts, and making sense of these with the help of appropriate theories.[18]

My thesis takes as its general subject the interactions of *McSweeney's* with literary culture—this is what I hold to be the most significant function of periodicals, in that they both reflect and produce literary culture. In his book on Romantic periodicals, Mark Parker states that when we look at periodicals we must 'investigate both the place of the magazine in culture and the place of culture within the magazine.'[19] They are 'attempts to organize the spectrum of cultural production.'[20] Periodicals manifest the processes of literary culture; they are sites for texts and writers to interact, to clash, to be tested against each other. Periodicals are participants in literary culture, and they are producers of literary culture. My emphasis on literary culture is significant because I do not limit my focus to literary texts—I look at literary culture defined as a complex series of textual relationships and activities. I am influenced in this definition by Genette's theory of paratexts, in providing a frame for thinking about the textual apparatus that affect interpretation of a 'primary' literary text; more on this below. I am also influenced in this formulation by the form of periodicals themselves: what we understand as a 'periodical' is a dense network of texts created by different writers and read in an order particular to each reader. Literary culture, too, is particular to each reader's interpretation of this, dependent on what texts and writers a reader has been exposed to. I deliberately do not focus on other themes that could form the basis of a study of *McSweeney's*, such as the function of the short story in American literature, or how Dave Eggers's editorship relates to his own writing, because I believe that the most interesting aspect of its activities is the periodical's interaction with literary culture.

I mean to explore the intangible nature of literary culture. Literary culture is not a discrete, single thing. It is a series of relations that collectively construct what we call 'culture', as a kind of shorthand. Jeremy Green expresses a similar conception when he discusses:

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[16] The introduction to Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell (1983) is useful for a modern understanding of the ideological assumptions involved in judging what is 'literature'; Martin Montgomery, Alan Durant et al, *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*, second edition, London: Routledge (2000).

[17] In particular Nick Couldry, *Inside Culture: re-imagining the method of cultural studies*, London: SAGE Publications (2000).

[18] This statement roughly follows a similar manifesto in Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press (1987), pp.x-xi.

[19] Mark Parker, *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), p.11.

[20] Ibid.

> ...the conditions under which literary novels are now written and understood. These conditions shape the readership, the literary and political ideologies, the self-understanding, and the aesthetic choices available to writers. To make sense of them is to try and present a snapshot of the *literary field* in advanced capitalism. By literary field I mean that ensemble of interlocking practices and institutions, including the publishing industry, the media, and the university, that constitutes, often in unexamined and unconscious ways, the environment for the practice and reading of literature. Social, cultural and political changes are refracted through the literary field and face the writer as a set of problems to be addressed at the level of aesthetic strategy.[21]

To illustrate my definition: in literature there is a book by F Scott Fitzgerald called *The Great Gatsby*. It is a single piece of literature, an identifiable and comprehensible thing. To discuss the literary culture of *The Great Gatsby*, on the other hand, involves a myriad of potential relations and activities: it could refer to the writers and texts contemporary to Fitzgerald that influenced *Gatsby*; the writers and texts contemporary to Fitzgerald that did not influence *Gatsby*; opinions about the book shared by reviewers, critics, and readers; film or comic book or stage or audiobook adaptations; book groups selecting the novel to commemorate Fitzgerald's birthday; Tumblr posts quoting the final sentence of the novel to suggest one's desired online personality. Literary culture is something unique to each individual's relationships and interactions with literature. Periodicals are agents of literary culture, circulating texts and shaping movements. They are not discrete objects of literature—it is easier to communicate a stable understanding of what constitutes the text of *The Great Gatsby* than what constitutes the text of the *New Yorker*. Periodicals actively produce and circulate literary ideas, while also participating in and contributing to topics with contemporary relevance. They can have several functions, serving as a forum for debate or new writing, but more generally they are spaces where multiple literary texts are placed together for a reader to make sense of. They both emulate and facilitate the process of a reader encountering texts and perspectives on texts; in this sense, they can be considered microcosmic versions of literary culture, rather than as straightforward literary texts.

The first chapter of my thesis is devoted to exploring the texts and theories that have formed the methodology I use to approach the periodical form. The literary culture of *McSweeney's* involves not just the periodical but a series of texts including, but not limited to, anthologies, interviews with editors/writers, reviews, other texts published by creators involved with *McSweeney's*, and a dense network of anecdotal cultural response accessible online. This broad conception of literary culture will be reflected in my research—as explained above, I look to several fields to understand more fully how literary texts function in contemporary culture. The second part of my methodology will explore these fields, but my first section

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[21] Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2005), p.3.

looks at the strategies used by critics to represent the problematic textuality of periodicals, to investigate the varying functions and meanings ascribed to this unusual form. My intention is to use my investigation of periodicals to expand upon my assertion that periodicals are best considered as texts that both produce and reflect literary culture; I will then move to explain my tools for analysing this cultural role.

My intention throughout my work is to explore what I identify as the shape-shifting practice of *McSweeney's*: neither subcultural nor establishment, but shape-shifting, commenting on and exploiting the relationship between binary positions. The difficulty in achieving a stable critical conception of *McSweeney's* is a guiding concern. My second chapter is a continuation of some of the issues raised by this introduction, seeking to understand the nature of literary binaries by exploring the founding myth of *McSweeney's*. I aim to illustrate the strategies and devices through which the early *McSweeney's* can be seen to adopt an indeterminate position in relation to the dominant literary culture. I focus primarily on the first issue of *McSweeney's* and several of its contexts, investigating the connections between the periodical and other magazines, journals, and writers.

My third chapter expands my corpus from the first issue of *McSweeney's* to consider various strategies that the periodical uses to represent its own activities. In looking at editorials, websites, and anthologies I will investigate how the periodical's creators interpret its spirit. The anthologies produced by the periodical in particular provide a productive field through which to consider this. In addition, I look at Issue 10 of the periodical, which is one of its most popular; it was also published by Vintage as *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales* in a separate bookstore release. This double-coded identity provides the spark for a discussion of what kind of identity *McSweeney's* constructs for itself, building on my second chapter's discussion of realism and experimentation; this chapter explores further precisely *what* strategies are represented as fundamental to the periodical. I explore how the myth of *McSweeney's* is constructed by a constant evasion of a stable format.

In my fourth chapter I attempt a counterpoint to my second and third chapters by resisting the representations made by the *McSweeney's* creators of their own identity. This chapter presupposes that I, as a well-read observer and determined investigator of *McSweeney's*, can produce a more accurate and informed representation of the periodical's activities than others. I try to describe the aesthetic strategies and formal decisions manifest by the periodical's spectrum of forty-four published issues. My intention is not to replace other representations but to supplement them, and to explore to what extent the diverse, shape-

shifting material of the periodical's issues can be considered to have a typical pattern; a motivation perhaps less vital outside of literary criticism. With this motivation, I hope to be able to understand more about how the hundreds of stories and writers published by *McSweeney's* relate to the context of its publication.

My fifth chapter is a coda, without being a conclusion, evaluating the political impact of *McSweeney's*, based on my representation of its activities in my other chapters. The periodical developed a tendency towards overt political and social themes in the latter part of its publication spectrum, and this chapter attempts to understand the motivations behind this move and the implications of it. In this chapter I consider the political position of the periodical, looking mainly at Issue 30, the cover of which evokes the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States as its direct context. I will explore the possibility of reading *McSweeney's* as a political entity, considering how its activities can be read to understand how it interacts with contemporary America.

Chapter 1: Developing a methodology for reading *McSweeney's*.

There is no substantial body of criticism on the subject of *McSweeney's*. This seems to be for two reasons: its contemporaneity and the apparent lack of interest in periodicals among literary critics. Periodicals seem to offer a greater challenge to critics than the traditional literary text, in terms of their difficult textuality, or the material contained in periodicals may be seen as too ephemeral to justify substantive analysis. What exists as a body of criticism on *McSweeney's* is a dispersed accumulation of journal articles, cultural criticism, popular journalism, and amateur internet response. While there are some significant papers on topics related to *McSweeney's*, there has been no attempt that I have encountered to understand how the entire spectrum of its periodical functions.[22] With this in mind, my thesis begins by assessing the challenges involved in the study of a literary periodical.

How does one approach critical study of the periodical form? As a medium it presents a different form of textuality than the traditional object of literary criticism, mainly because it generates a massive amount of text that is problematic to accommodate. The protagonist of Frederick Barthleme's short story 'Pool Lights' is overwhelmed by this constantly expanding accumulation of periodical numbers:

> At midnight Friday you go into the small living-dining room and click on the overhead light. There, in neat low stacks along three walls, is the summer project: piles of *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Money*, *Road & Track*, *Stereo Review*, *American Photographer*, *Skin Diver*, and *Vogue*. All from American Educational Services at a terrific discount. When they started piling up unread, they became a collection. After better than a year, the subscriptions got cancelled. And after two moves–one across country, one across town, the project was born: maybe save an article or two, a peculiar picture, a curious headline, and toss the rest. Reading every word seemed at first a possibility, but finally the idea was exhausting. The project isn't far along.[23]

This difficulty, of the 'exhausting' textual mass that periodicals produce, is caused by the serial nature of their publication. I define the periodical as a text that appears in a new edition on a regular schedule. This fact about the medium predicts one of the basic periodical strategies—every issue must be different from the previous, while remaining identifiably connected to the overall spectrum of the periodical as a whole. To ensure their economic survival, they must inculcate a regular purchasing habit in the reader (or, better,

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[22] There are a number of studies on Dave Eggers that touch on *McSweeney's* as a significant element of his literary persona, e.g. Sarah Brouillette, 'Paratextuality and Economic Disavowal in Dave Eggers' *You Shall Know Our Velocity*', *Reconstruction* 3.2 (2003), http://reconstruction.eserver.org/032/brouillette.htm (Consulted 22 October 2013); Caroline Hamilton, *One Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing and Publicity*, New York: Continuum (2010). Similarly, there are papers on *McSweeney's* that provide interesting but not satisfying perspectives on the periodical, e.g. Alexander Starre, 'Little Heavy Papery Beautiful Things: McSweeney's, Metamediality and the Rejuvenation of the Book in the USA', *Writing Technologies*, 3 (2010), 25-41, http://www.ntu.ac.uk/writing_technologies/back_issues/vol_3/107434.pdf (Consulted 22 October 2013); Daniel Worden, 'The Shameful Art: McSweeney's Quarterly Concern, Comics and the Politics of Affect', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 52.4 (2006), 891-917.
[23] Frederick Barthelme, 'Pool Lights' in *Moon Deluxe*, New York: Grove Press (1983), p.119.

encourage subscription). Readers are more likely to buy a periodical again if they feel confident they will like its content, which is more likely if they are reasonably sure they know what type of content future issues will feature. In this way, repetition suggests ways of understanding how a periodical figures its audience through successive displays of content or formal strategies. This recurrence of a certain type of content or formal trait is an inscription of the apparent interests of its readership. The repetition of periodical content is reflected in a regular, predictable physical format. What we refer to as their 'format' is constructed through the repetition of certain characteristics of form and production, such as weekly publishing and an A4 page size with the *New Yorker*, and a quarterly publication schedule and a 'book-size' format with the *Paris Review*. The paradigm of the periodical object is to create an illusion of permanence through the repetition of physical characteristics. A periodical must provide a certain combination of both repetition and variation if it is to be a success. They are designed to imagine a continuum of a reader's experience with the publication. Each experience with the periodical should be part of a regular experience, and the text should be designed to facilitate this. Each issue should be similar enough to a reader's initial encounter that they are satisfied that subsequent issues will replicate, or approximate, the original experience. The formal diversity practised by *McSweeney's* complicates this, because of the greater extent of change from one issue to the next. Its strategy disrupts the paradigm of the periodical object, potentially negating the implicit guarantee of repeat experience.

The constant reconstruction and rearticulation of what constitutes the periodical presents a challenge to the critic, in terms of how to adequately represent such textuality. In particular, representing what I call the periodical spectrum—the entire output of a periodical during its publication term—is problematic. Though it is possible to identify strategies that remain relatively consistent throughout a periodical spectrum, it is never *one text*. Periodicals as a whole are radically different from the traditional concept of a text because they are constantly changing from one issue to the next. I find the cultural studies theorist Nick Couldry's notion of 'textuality' useful for negotiating this problem, as he highlights that we must pay attention to the potential ways that texts are used by readers (or the potential ways that they are designed to be used) to understand their functions.[24] He distinguishes between 'unputdownable' and 'putdownable' texts; this model is based on single texts, but can be expanded to consider periodical spectrums. Films and novels are unputdownable, as they are designed assuming that their audience will watch/read them with attention to their

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[24] Couldry (2000), pp.70-72.

coherence, to their overall resolution. Periodicals, on the other hand, are putdownable: they do not demand the same level of concentration.[25] Periodicals enact a discontinuous form of textuality, one that does not require the reader to read from beginning to end, for example. Couldry goes on to suggest that periodicals are 'hybrid' forms of textuality, that can be considered as both discontinuous and coherent: 'they work as both flow and as individual texts'.[26] This theory describes the experience of reading an individual number of a periodical. Given my interest in the overall corpus of *McSweeney's*, I would expand this to include the periodical spectrum. There are three distinct types of textuality for the critic to consider when approaching a periodical:

1. The entire run of a periodical.
2. An individual number of a periodical (read as a coherent text).
3. The individual contents of a periodical number.

Serial texts like periodicals involve a more complex process of textual identity than the traditional objects of literary criticism. As a shortcut to explaining this, consider again my discussion of the difference between literary texts and literary culture: a novel like *The Great Gatsby* offers a relatively straightforward "thing" for a critic to represent. *Gatsby* is a single text by a single author. A periodical like *McSweeney's* or the *New Yorker* is an accumulation of several texts that, taken individually, are themselves composed of several texts by several writers.

This is an important distinction as a periodical spectrum involves an incredibly dense network of texts. This complexity originates in the serial format of periodicals, discussed above. The *New Yorker* has been in print for over eighty years, publishing over four thousand issues. When Ben Yagoda described researching his book about the magazine, *About Town*, he referred to a summer spent consulting the paper archives of the New York Public Library.[27] In the early 21st century, the magazine began experimenting with digital technology—they released *The Complete New Yorker* on DVD in 2005, and in 2006 the same data on a portable hard drive. This has made researching the magazine a more practical endeavour. However, discussing this corpus empirically, without being influenced by subjective or arbitrary selective criteria, is still a challenge. A significant problem that my thesis presents, then, is that to speak of 'the periodical' is in a sense somehow untrue or impossible—there is no such thing as 'the *New Yorker*' or '*McSweeney's*'. Furthermore,

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[25] Couldry (2000), p.71; Couldry refers to 'magazines' but would surely assent to my glossing his term as 'periodicals', given his interest in the specific functions of textual forms. His consideration of magazine form is a theory of periodicals, whether his language acknowledges this or not.
[26] Couldry (2000), p.72.
[27] Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, London: Duckworth (2000), p.17.

since *McSweeney's* is still in print, by the time my thesis is completed there will be new issues published that I will not have the opportunity to fully include in my research. If by my use of the title '*McSweeney's*' I refer to the complete publication history of the periodical, this may be an untrue statement when my thesis is read. Any generalisations I make about the type of fiction published by *McSweeney's* could suddenly become inaccurate, depending on what agenda they pursue after I finish. This is not to say that this is an obstacle for my study. Rather, I mean to illustrate that periodicals have an unstable textual identity, and that, in the absence of any intrinsic identity, representations of periodicals are inevitably limited; these limits, however, are worth investigating.

This preamble, then, sets forth the difficulties that I hold the periodical form as presenting to literary criticism. How do writers represent this form, in light of the serial textuality constructed by the periodical paradigm; what strategies do critics use to write about periodicals that could inform the framework of my research?

The New Yorker.

Much of my initial reading while researching this work focused on the *New Yorker*, believing it to be an earlier analogue of *McSweeney's*—an ostensibly niche publication that has fostered movements in American literature. The literature I found on the *New Yorker* was a mixture of critical, journalistic, and biographical. This initial section is therefore a case study of the different ways in which a significant twentieth-century periodical (the *New Yorker*) is represented, i.e. I use the *New Yorker* to begin my exploration of some approaches taken to mediating the enormous textual footprint of the periodical form.

There are two strategies that writers adopt in treating the *New Yorker*: discussing its entire output, or focusing on a specific era, feature, or characteristic of the periodical. Only one writer has attempted a comprehensive survey of the magazine. Ben Yagoda's *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (2000), written to coincide with the magazine's seventy-fifth anniversary, notes the 'biographical, autobiographical or anecdotal' focus of much of the existing writing about the *New Yorker*.[28] A list of works on the *New Yorker* that I have encountered reflects this point:

> *Ross and the New Yorker* by Dale Kramer (1951)
> *The Years with Ross* by James Thurber (1959)
> *Ross, the New Yorker and Me* by Jane Grant (1968)
> *Here at The New Yorker* by Brendan Gill (1975)

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[28] Yagoda (2000), p.23.

About the New Yorker and Me by E.J. Kahn (1979)

Onward and Upward: A Biography of Katharine S. White by Linda H. Davis (1987)

At Seventy: More about the New Yorker and Me by E.J. Kahn (1988)

Katharine and E.B. White: An Affectionate Memoir by Isabel Russell (1988)

The Last Days of The New Yorker by Gigi Mahon (1989)

Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of the New Yorker by Thomas Kunkel (1997)

Here But Not Here: My Life with William Shawn and the New Yorker by Lillian Ross (1998)

Remembering Mr. Shawn's New Yorker: The Invisible Art of Editing by Ved Mehta (1998)

Some Times in America: and a life in a year at the New Yorker by Alexander Chancellor (1999)

The World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury by Mary F. Corey (1999)

About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made by Ben Yagoda (2000)

Defining New Yorker Humor by Judith Yaross Lee (2000)

Gone: The Last Days of the New Yorker by Renata Adler (2000)

Letters from the Editor: The New Yorker's Harold Ross edited by Thomas Kunkel (2000; letters covering the years 1917 to 1951)

A Life of Privilege, Mostly by Gardner Botsford (2003)

Maeve Brennan: Homesick at the New Yorker by Angela Bourke (2004)

Let Me Finish by Roger Angell (2006)

This excludes works like *Wonderful Town* (2001) and *Covering The New Yorker* (2000), which primarily anthologise material that has already appeared in the magazine. Of the twenty-one books above, only three do not have biographical intent: *The World Through a Monocle*, *About Town*, and *Defining New Yorker Humor*; the strategies of these texts will be discussed below. The other eighteen books foreground their focus through the recurrence of proper nouns and pronouns in their titles, e.g. *Ross, the New Yorker and me; My Life with William Shawn*. I do not wish to speculate at this point on why the *New Yorker* has not attracted more critical attention; rather, I wish to consider what image of the magazine is created by this profusion of biographical accounts. For example, Judith Yaross Lee, in her introduction to *Defining New Yorker Humor*, argues that the early books on the magazine ignored the contribution artists like Peter Arno and Rea Irvin made to its development. She argues that writers wants to write about other writers, rather than visual artists.[29] This occlusion was repeated by later writers, and Lee's work is framed as a response to this oversight.

That memoirs and biographies are prominent in written accounts of the *New Yorker* is somewhat appropriate, given the popularity of the magazine's 'Profiles'. These 'concise biographical sketches' were one of the innovations that Yagoda argues was behind the magazine's initial success.[30] One strategy that is evident from the titles of the above is to concentrate on the *New Yorker*'s editors. In trying to find a way to extract a unified meaning

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[29] Judith Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi (2000), pp.12-13.
[30] Yagoda (2000), p.133.

from the *New Yorker* (indeed, from any periodical), the idea of a single agent responsible for the creation of meaning in the texts is an appealing prospect. Periodicals are collaborative texts, and thus amplify the difficulties in trying to create a connection between an individual creator and the meaning of the text. Faced with the problem of trying to discuss how periodical texts can have meaning which is constituted *by*, but separate *from*, several individual texts, it would provide a great deal of simplification if it was possible to cite a single person as the controlling figure behind this meaning. The editor is the logical choice to occupy this position. I would suggest that to write about the *New Yorker* via its editors is a strategy to mediate the vastness of its periodical spectrum.

One effect of this strategy is that the primacy of the editor is often emphasised over the collaborative nature of periodical production. The editor is implicitly situated as somehow responsible for the entirety of the *New Yorker*'s content, or at least the effect this content has on its readers. David Remnick, the current editor of the *New Yorker*, in his introduction to *The Complete New Yorker* DVD set, calls Ross the 'inventor' of the magazine.[31] In some popular accounts the magazine is written about as the personal responsibility of Ross, its initial failure and subsequent success as created by and having consequences for him. He is described as 'founder', having laid out 'the design and editorial principles' of the magazine, and that it became a success 'grown from his intense dedication and his sound instincts and judgment'.[32] To write about the *New Yorker* in relation to an individual therefore may become an exercise in suborning the periodical's contents to a narrative of that individual's work. This strategy breaks down the periodical and reconstructs it around one central figure; other creators are not totally overlooked by this method, but their importance is distinctly underplayed.

There is a loose parallel between this biographical refiguring of the *New Yorker* and the methods of auteurist film criticism. Film involves the work of scriptwriters, actors, directors, producers, musicians, cameramen and camerawomen, sound engineers, carpenters, make-up artists, cooks, drivers, stunt actors, and many others. Periodicals also involve the work of several individuals—writers, editors, artists, designers, sub-editors, proofreaders, fact-checkers, publishers, and others. Auteurism as a critical practice developed in the mid-twentieth century, borrowing the concept of authorship from literary studies.[33] Auteurist film

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[31] David Remnick, 'Introduction' in *The Complete New Yorker DVD Collection*, New York: The New Yorker (2005), pp.6-8 (p.7).

[32] Andrew Levy, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993), p.132; Trysh Travis, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About The New Yorker', *Book History* 3 (2000), pp.253-285 (p.255); Yagoda (2000), p.240.

[33] Barry Keith Grant, 'Introduction' in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader* ed. Barry Keith Grant, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (2008), pp.1-6 (p.1).

critics seek to elevate one individual, usually a director, to a role as primary source of meaning in a film text. While they do not claim that directors are literally involved in every aspect of a film's textuality, they cite the director's function as overseer and guide as justification for their interpretations. This is a strategy that attempts to elucidate patterns from the complexity of collaborative film texts. It is a model of authorship influenced by traditional arts criticism, using the single creative figure as a method for intepreting a text. If one was interested in transferring this model to periodical criticism, this emphasis on the individual would match with the implied central position of the editor in the production of the periodical. Instead of 'auterism', perhaps 'editorship' could be a solution to understanding periodical textuality.

This seems problematic for reasons alluded to above. The benefits (the possibility of creating an individual narrative from the mess of periodical textuality) seem to outweigh the drawbacks (the occlusion of other creators, the sacrifices involved with imposing a single narrative on a collaborative text). Peter Wollen has described the practice of auteur theory as 'an operation of decipherment; it reveals authors where none had been seen before'.[34] By focusing on editors as central figures, writers like Thomas Kunkel and Ved Mehta create meaning from the *New Yorker*'s publication history by constructing personal narratives of the achievements of Harold Ross and William Shawn. While this is valuable for an understanding of the craft of editorship, as a method for this thesis it would be unsuitable because my interest is not just in editors or even in periodicals—it is in the interactions of these with culture, which cannot be fully understood by limiting one's focus to an individual. Barry Keith Grant argues that one branch of auteurism, pioneered by Wollen, came to conceptualise the figure of the director not as the primary organiser of meaning in a text, but 'a reading strategy' to be combined with other codes elucidated by textual analysis.[35] This more developed form of auteurism seems a useful guide for this thesis's direction:

> Auteurism's great legacy is that it encouraged a more serious examination of the movies beyond mere "entertainment" and helped move the nascent field of film studies beyond its literary beginnings to a consideration of the film's visual qualities. While structuralism and semiotics ultimately seem limited in film analysis, in part because they tend to emphasize narrative over visual aspects of the texts, auteurism was in fact responsible for shifting focus from story to style, from content to form, and for showing how form was crucial in shaping content.[36]

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[34] Peter Wollen, 'The Auteur Theory' in Grant (2008), pp.55-64 (p.56).
[35] Grant (2008), p.4.
[36] Grant (2008), p.5.

To focus on style and form is more satisfying for understanding a periodical's cultural interactions. To think about creators would not reveal much about *McSweeney's*; a more appropriate form of investigation will be to articulate a methodology that emphasises what is unique about periodicals, not what they have in common with other literary texts. Editorship will be an important concept in my thesis as one aspect of how periodicals produce meaning, but it will not guide my investigation.

The three works that adopt a more comprehensive approach to conceiving the *New Yorker* offer more instruction in terms of how to think about periodicals. These books focus primarily on the magazine itself, rather than its creators. Ben Yagoda's *About Town* looks at the entire history of the magazine, while Mary Corey and Judith Yaross Lee investigate the mid-century *New Yorker* and its early humour content, respectively. Yagoda gives himself the task of understanding 'the role [it] has played in American cultural life' and writing 'a critical and cultural history' of the magazine.[37] As this is broadly the same goal I have for understanding *McSweeney's*, looking at *About Town* is therefore useful for thinking about how to negotiate the potential enormity of such a task. Yagoda adopts two methods towards his aim of representing the entirety of the *New Yorker*'s history: providing a chronological account of the magazine's history, and focusing on its internal processes. Committing to a beginning-to-end retelling of the *New Yorker*'s origins and development is a noble task, given that no such book existed before this, but it sacrifices detail for broad coverage. Yagoda does not achieve the kind of critical insight that Corey and Lee are able to by the scope of their research, as I will explain below. This narrative of the making of the magazine is a feature of *About Town* determined by Yagoda's methodology. His decision to write this book was sparked by the bequest of the magazine's archives to the New York Public Library in 1991. The research he conducted with the aid of these archives forms the basis of his approach to the magazine.[38] He uses evidence from letters, manuscripts, and other documents of communication between writers, artists and editors. This effectively makes *About Town* into a reconstruction of the production of the *New Yorker,* creating a display for readers of the interactions between its creators. This internal bent is signalled by the book's subtitle: it is about '*The New Yorker and the World it Made'*. It is not about its effect on our world, or wider society, but rather the way that the magazine developed its own community and worldview.

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[37] Yagoda (2000), p.23.
[38] Yagoda (2000), p.17.

One of the most famous works associated with the *New Yorker* is Truman Capote's non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*. This work was originally conceived as a *New Yorker* article in 1959; it eventually appeared as four long articles in the magazine, in 1965, and a book, in 1966. There is much one could discuss about the significance of Capote's work in literary, cultural and social terms: his invention of a new literary form; the popularity of true crime as a genre; as an indictment of the class structure of post-war America; the ambigious moral issues involved in Capote's relationship to the killers. Yagoda spends three pages on a discussion of *In Cold Blood*, and focuses on its significance in the context of the editorship of William Shawn and the tradition of *New Yorker* non-fiction:

> …how to present that material? One option was in the manner of a traditional New Yorker Reporter at Large…

> …he chose as his stylistic model a New Yorker piece from twenty years earlier, John Hersey's "Hiroshima."

> …this presented an inevitable problem in terms of the accuracy the magazine had traditionally demanded.

> Shawn often edited pieces after they were set in type, and that was the case with "In Cold Blood."

> There is no evidence that Shawn ever did discuss this or any other problem with the author.[39]

Yagoda's interest is in creating a narrative of the internal workings of such a massive magazine project, not in articulating its connections with an external culture. It must be noted that my discussion of Yagoda's methods is not intended as criticism—*About Town* meets its stated intention of documenting a history of the magazine. The large-scale comprehensive approach and internal focus of *About Town* are not helpful for my purposes in formulating a methodology to study periodicals.

Mary Corey offers an alternative approach. Her book, *World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury*, offers a comprehensive account of the magazine, but on a more limited scale. Corey investigates the output of the magazine in the 1940s and 1950s, and does so through making connections between the *New Yorker* and the socio-cultural status of its readership. Yagoda is broad and makes internal connections; Corey is narrow and makes external connections. She focuses on this time period for its 'cultural potency', arguing that at this time it was 'widely read and widely talked about and came to have serious social

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[39] Yagoda (2000), pp.347-348.

cachet'.[40] Corey's decision to focus on a specified time period allows her the possibility of achieving a more perceptive analysis than Yagoda. Two of his seven chapters are on the period from 1938-62; Corey devotes a whole book to this. In terms of what she tries to uncover, her book investigates the relationship of the magazine to its reading contexts at a specific point in time. One of the recurring themes of Corey's book is her assessment of the *New Yorker*'s function as a salve to upper-middle class guilt. Through close analysis of the socio-political implications of various types of content, including cover art, comment and advertising, Corey creates a representation of the magazine that describes both the place of the magazine in culture and the place of culture in the magazine. For example, the fifth chapter explores the issue of race in the postwar *New Yorker*, juxtaposing close readings of a 1952 St. Clair McKelway short story, representations of American blacks on the magazine's cover, a 1944 report on race in America ('An American Dilemma'), and a Dwight Macdonald essay about the *New Yorker* in *Partisan Review*. Corey uses her source material to investigate a vital social issue. In concluding her book, she makes a statement that would not have been likely to feature in *About Town*:

> The New Yorker's tone and format were admirably suited to the constraints and ellipses of postwar discourse, and the magazine appealed to a significant element of the American public because it could resolve two of its more powerful preoccupations: a desire for social distinction and a genuine concern with egalitarian principles.[41]

Yagoda's broad approach and focus on the internal workings of the magazine made critical analysis of this type unlikely. Corey's method is more appealing. When Corey discusses 'the New Yorker' here she does not refer to the entire periodical spectrum; she is writing about the relationship between a specific series of texts and the social concerns of a certain historical moment in which they were produced. She is writing about how a periodical was affected by and effected the culture it was produced in. This is a guiding theme of my research, and predicts my interest in Mark Parker's new historicist methods, to be discussed below.

Judith Yaross Lee's work, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, offers a similar response to the problem of studying periodicals, looking directly at texts and their function. Lee's work is less concerned with the relationship of the magazine to its culture (it creates a narrative of the development of its humour content), but her methodology contains some instructive lessons for thinking about the production of a magazine:

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[40] Mary Corey, *The World Through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1999), p.x.
[41] Corey (1999), p.206.

> I treat magazine publishing as an interpersonal process resulting in a series of concrete products, that is, New Yorker numbers, as well as the imaginary spectrum created from these individual points on the line, the magazine. As a result, I have set my sights on the magazine and its contents and regard its people and editorial practices as the means to those ends. […] The magazine's contents reflect particulars of time, place and experience—among the editors as individuals and members of an organization, as well as among artists and writers making personal choices about what kind of work to produce and how best to profit from it. Some of those choices, I presume, indicate perceptions about what editors will buy and what readers will enjoy.[42]

Both Corey and Lee show awareness of production issues, of the context of the periodical's publication. Their intention is to discuss *aspects* of the magazine, rather than the magazine alone. That they both look at editorial correspondence and advertisements is determined by their shared intention. Lee's work also formulates a theory of how to conceive of the periodical. Her discussion above of the 'imaginary spectrum' created by individual issues of the *New Yorker* is a useful attempt at negotiating the problematic textuality of periodicals. This will form part of my approach to *McSweeney's*.

To produce critical analysis of the kind that I believe is appropriate for *McSweeney's* requires a more detailed level of analysis than would be possible if I tried to, for example, provide a biographical account of its development centred on Dave Eggers, or construct a complete narrative of the journal's development from its origins. Instead, I sacrifice some of this large-scale perspective for a more local investigation, my aim being to understand something about the uniqueness of how *McSweeney's* interacts with culture, and how its particular strategies and formal innovations have emerged. To achieve this kind of insight, a different methodological framework is necessary—inspired by the attention of Lee and Corey to formal and contextual concerns, I draw on the field of new historicist criticism of Romantic periodicals to provide more focused strategies.

New historicism.

Romantic periodical criticism is more developed than that of twenty-first- or twentieth-century periodicals. The most instructive texts that I found in this field came in particular from new historicist approaches to the periodical like Jon Klancher's *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (1987) and Mark Parker's *Literary Magazines and British Romanticism* (2000). Parker begins his text by discussing 'the lack of an existing conceptual framework for the study of magazines', suggesting that it is as difficult to approach periodicals that ceased publishing two hundred years ago, as it is to study contemporary

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[42] Lee (2000), pp.14-15.

periodicals.[43] How, then, do these critics choose to represent periodicals, and what implications do their methodological decisions have for how their investigations proceed?

In her introduction to the 2003 collection of essays *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture*, Kim Wheatley begins by arguing that the twentieth-century tendency of Romanticists to ignore periodicals reflected a theoretical aversion to the collaborative nature of journals. She suggests that the critical desire to investigate texts for the works of particular writers was a symptom of an approach to Romantic periodicals that privileged individual authorship; this in itself being a Romantic impulse.[44] This objection resonates with my analysis of biographical response to the *New Yorker* above. The move towards more sophisticated approaches at the turn of the century came with the popularity of new historicist theory, and an egalitarian interest in 'the full spectrum of print culture', as opposed to previous, more narrow investigations of the literary content of periodicals, isolated from their cultural significance.[45] In line with the theoretical principles of new historicism, periodicals came to be investigated for their relationship to the political and cultural context of nineteenth-century Britain. Wheatley cites Klancher and Parker as pioneers of this more community-focused method.[46]

Klancher's 1987 work is cited as a 'groundbreaking' study for its assertion that periodicals themselves (rather than simply their content) should be re-situated as texts worthy of sustained critical attention.[47] Wheatley identifies two features of Klancher's methodology as especially important:

> The first is that the periodicals create various separate readerships with different assumptions about how to interpret words and the world. In his chapter on the major Reviews and magazines, for example, Klancher argues that these periodicals at once function to create middle-class intellectual desire and teach social codes that help define that class. Second, Klancher has also changed the way scholars think about Romantic-era periodicals through his contention that the Reviews and magazines offer a "transauthorial discourse" (52), a term that can also apply to the more popular journalism that he discusses. Instead of thinking in terms of separate writers for the periodical, Klancher treats the periodical itself as an agent, diffusing its influence through such characteristic practices as anonymity and collaborative authorship.[48]

The second feature, his invention of 'transauthorial discourse', is an attempt to deal with the problematic textuality of periodicals—the possibility of reading an individual number as communicating as a single, coherent text. He argues that the conflation of writer, editor and

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[43] Parker (2000), p.2.

[44] Kim Wheatley, 'Introduction' in *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture* ed. by Kim Wheatley, London: Frank Cass (2003), pp.1-18 (p.2).

[45] Wheatley (2003), pp.2-3.

[46] Wheatley (2003), pp.6-9.

[47] Wheatley (2003), p.7.

[48] Wheatley (2003), pp.6-7.

publisher in a collaborative periodical create 'an essentially authorless text'.[49] This was contributed to by certain practices like anonymity and pseudonymity, but transauthorial discourse as a critical concept is helpful as an alternative conception of the reading experience of periodicals. Like Couldry's theory of putdownable textuality, it acknowledges that reading these texts is not the same as reading a novel. Klancher's theory is that a periodical text, an individual issue, can be seen as communicating with its reader through a distinct personality. It is authorless, but the fact of interpretation creates a substitute author: the transauthorial discourse:

> …this audience learns to operate those interpretive strategies through which it can "read" a social world, a symbolic universe, a textual field, and to discover its own purpose within them. […] When we look closely at the language of its text—in such representative journals as Blackwood's, the Athenaeum, the New Monthly, Fraser's, and the Edinburgh Review—a powerful transauthorial discourse echoes through its protean collocation of styles, topics and voices.[50]

There is no single figure responsible for this; rather, it is a result of the reading experience, something created only in interpretation. This concept of transauthorial discourse influences my approach to 'reading' a periodical, but this sacrifices attention to the individual contents of periodicals, Mark Parker has argued. Parker's book is in a sense both a maturation of and response to Klancher's theory of periodicals. Klancher's work was significant in the late 1980s for redressing the Romanticist tendency to treat periodicals as archives for individual writers, ignoring their significance as literary-cultural documents in their own right. Parker, while acknowledging the benefits of Klancher's method, argues that 'the form of the magazine undermines either an exclusively author-centred or an exclusively poststructural approach'.[51] In an analysis of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Klancher argues:

> There is a strong stylistic tendency in this most influential of middle-class journals to experiment with turning the form of a discourse into a layer of its content, forcing the sentence to signify more than it can possibly say.[52]

By focusing on the style in this manner Klancher seems to neglect the reality of reading a periodical, the experience of which is too complex for such extreme positions. Parker's methodological discussions seem to me to offer a more balanced approach for thinking about periodicals. Any piece of research that tries to relate a text to its culture must make some attempt to look at it comprehensively: to focus solely on one writer would therefore be folly. However, to exclude any conception of the individual would be the opposite extreme.

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[49] Klancher (1987), p.51.
[50] Klancher (1987), pp.51-52.
[51] Parker (2000), pp.3-4.
[52] Klancher (1987), pp.54-55.

A balance must be struck. Parker's approach accommodates the possibility of the two interpretive strategies I believe are most common for readers: deriving meaning from an individual writer's contribution and reading a more or less coherent message across the contents of an issue.

It is not just Parker's treatment of Klancher that is useful. In my introduction I cited his statement that when we look at periodicals we must 'investigate both the place of the magazine in culture and the place of culture within the magazine.'[53] The periodical is enmeshed in literary culture, and Parker's method attempts to find a critical position from which to properly accommodate this. His analysis of Charles Lamb's 'Elia' essays is a good example of his balanced approach, investigating Lamb as a vital figure in the literary community of the early 19th century, this community, and the 'most immediate context [of the essays]—the material surrounding them in the *London Magazine*'.[54] This combined focus seems the most important to me, as it is my intention to explore the interactions of *McSweeney's* with its culture in a way that emulates (to a limited extent, I acknowledge) in some sense the experience of a reader encountering the periodical. To understand how it reflects, shapes and produces the literature of the early twenty-first century I adopt a methodology that emphasises the cultural context of *McSweeney's*. Texts and documents that are secondary to the actual issues of the periodical will be given equal weight in my discussion, to achieve an appreciation of the periodical's culture. With this aim in mind, my next section details some important texts and writers that have influenced my approach to this process of interrogating a literary *culture*, rather than a single text.

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[53] Parker (2000), p.11.
[54] Parker (2000), pp.56-58.

On literary culture.

McSweeney's does not exist in a vacuum. This has implications for how my thesis will proceed—I will not be investigating the *McSweeney's* periodical in isolation, but with a consideration of its contexts, of its connections to and interactions with literary culture. With this in mind, and the following sections provide theoretical and methodological background to how I approach literary culture.

Materiality.

McSweeney's experiments with physical form; this foregrounding of materiality invites a consideration of design and production concepts. Moylan and Stiles's collection *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* contains various essays which concern themselves with 'a recognition of the materiality of texts' and 'the ways that texts signify and perform cultural work'.[55] The material text is conceived by Moylan and Stiles as 'a nexus in the intersection of literature, culture, and history'.[56] The close involvement of the periodical in the literary market seems to demand attention to these issues. The essays in this collection investigate the relationship between interpretation of a literary text and the realities of book production, considering processes like cover design, the role of editors, and bookstore mentality. Some of the subjects covered by these essays include the interactions between tourism culture and Nathaniel Hawthorne in custom-made editions of *The Marble Faun*; an investigation of the Riverside Literature series of high school classics through their packaging and dissemination; and a discussion of how the figure of 'Herman Melville' has been interpreted variously by book designers for the literary market.[57]

This focus on production issues resonates with theories of the sociology of the object, exemplified by Igor Kopytoff's 'cultural biography of things'. In a 1986 essay, Kopytoff proposed borrowing a conceptual approach from anthropology, to ask similar questions of commodity objects as we ask of people, such as:

> Where does the thing come from and who made it?

> What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things?

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[55] Michael Winship, 'Foreword' in *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* ed. by Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (1996), pp.vii-viii (p.vii)
[56] Michele Moylan and Lane Stiles, 'Introduction' in Moylan and Stiles (1996), pp.1-16 (p.12)
[57] Susan S Williams, 'Manufacturing Intellectual Equipment – The Tauchnitz Edition of the Marble Faun' (1996), pp.117-150; Lane Stiles, 'Packaging Literature for the High Schools: From the Riverside Literature Series to Literature and Life' (1996), pp.248-275; Michael Kearns, 'The Material Melville: Shaping Readers' Horizons' (1996), pp.52-74 – all in Moylan and Stiles (1996).

What happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?[58]

Paying attention to how an object is created and used can provide insight into the cultural function and meaning of the object. Asking these kind of questions can help understand the complex existence of the material text that Moylan and Stiles refer to. By explicating the periodical's connections with the marketplace, for example, we can begin to understand its cultural significance. Object theory provides a method through which literary studies can locate a text in the context of its production. It provides a set of categories with which to think about periodicals and literary texts. I have distilled the fields that Kopytoff explores into the following list, which I use to consider *McSweeney's*:

1. Conception
2. Design
3. Manufacture
4. Dissemination
5. Marketing
6. Reception

With this list, I do not mean to signal that my thesis will proceed by creating typologies of individual numbers of *McSweeney's*. Rather, this set of production concepts informs the overall approach of my thesis. An awareness of these different stages of the 'life' of an issue of *McSweeney's* will underpin all of my work. All analyses of literary texts will proceed from an assumed consideration of these issues, which I see as crucial to the cultural interactions of *McSweeney's*. Arjun Appadurai argues that objects (commodities, for his theory) embody or communicate certain kinds of knowledge about how they are produced and how they are consumed.[59] I posit that knowledge of these categories is fundamental to literary interpretation, and influences the relationship between reader and text. These categories help translate aspects of the reality of the periodical reading experience into critical units. They allow me to conceive representations, conceptual reconstructions of the relationships that are involved in the creation and use of texts.

Paratexts.

A similarly expansive conception of literary culture can be found in Gerard Genette's 1987 work *Paratexts*: a typology of the different ways that texts are framed for readers. His corpus is potentially endless, covering devices from back-cover blurbs to prefaces and indexes, or from interviews to reviews and marketing material. My initial interest in

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[58] Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things – commoditization as process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective* ed. by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1986), pp.64-94 (p.66).
[59] Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value' in Appadurai (1986), pp.3-63 (p.41).

Genette's theory was in terms of forming a method to think about the tendency for the *McSweeney's* issues to be playful with editorial columns, usually placing them inside the copyright page. However, within the context of my consideration of the text-in-culture, Genette's work can be seen as a precursor of my thesis's approach. His attention to paratextual devices does not ignore the meaning of a text; rather, it enhances our understanding of it, directing our attention to the interactions a text has with its culture.

Genette articulates a distinction between peritextual and epitextual material in his discussion of paratexts—the inside and the outside. Peritextual material is everything connected to the book object (blurb, cover, publishing information, etc); epitextual material is that which is not connected to the book (advertising, interviews, etc). Epitextual material in particular is relevant for my thesis, as it is involved in the creation of literary culture, in how external material frames the reader's experience of a text:

> The distanced elements are all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries and others). This second category is what, for lack of a better word, I call epitext.[60]

Epitexts are essential to my investigation because they allow the critic to focus on contextual factors, i.e. the relationships *McSweeney's* has with other elements of literary culture. I will reconstruct the interactions of *McSweeney's* and other literary formations through textual analysis of articles, interviews, reviews, and more. Genette's focus is on that which is not the conventional object of literary criticism, i.e. the discrete creative work of literature. *Paratexts* is intended as a handbook of sorts, a categorisation of new possible sites for the critic to explore, consideration of which enriches our understanding of the core text. Genette foregrounds the devices and strategies that mediate the literary work, that intervene between the reader and the writer. He proposes methods for thinking about the cultural context of a literary text. *Paratexts* is an acknowledgement of the intertextual nature of literary production. *Paratexts* encourages and endorses my epitextual analysis of websites, advertising and interviews, as well as my peritextual investigation of blurbs, cover images and author profiles.

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[60] Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*, trans. by Jane E Lewin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1997 [1984]), p.5. Genette's typology was created in 1984; the expansion of the media and the internet has obviously led to a greater range of elements that could be considered paratextual. This thesis will incorporate the spirit of Genette's work while exploring paratextual forms that emerged after the publication of *Paratexts*, e.g. Facebook profiles.

Literary production.

Any work on *McSweeney's* must acknowledge that periodicals do not exist in a vacuum, but operate and participate in culture. One implication of this is that they operate in a literary marketplace. I have already discussed some of the effects of the market on the periodical medium. The interactions of this market and literary culture more generally will be a significant theme in this thesis. Economic and literary motivations are often represented as at odds with each other. Novelist Paul Theroux alludes to this in a 2010 interview on the state of fiction writing:

> Fiction writing, and the reading of it, and book buying, have always been the activities of a tiny minority of people, even in the most-literate societies. Herman Melville died in utter obscurity. F. Scott Fitzgerald's books were either out of print or not selling when he died. Paul Bowles was able to live and write (and smoke dope) only because he wrote for Holiday, the great old travel magazine.[61]

Theroux makes two useful points for my purposes: that the writing of literature rarely guarantees a writer an income, and that authors often make their living from writing for periodicals. Periodicals have been closely connected to the labour of writing since the advent of the modern American magazine in the late 19th century. The periodical as an American form emerged in the context of publishers privileging commercial over literary motivations. The absence of international copyright legislation in the early 19th century meant that American readers were presented with a glut of cheaply printed and cheaply sold editions of work from famous writers like Scott and Dickens—these texts were known as 'pamphlet novels', owing to their flimsy bindings. American publishers were not obliged to pay royalties to the original authors; this led to a proliferation of unauthorised reprints. Since the supply of and demand for cheap, foreign, pirated literature was abundant, the demand for native fiction fell—it was not profitable for publishers to pay writers for that which the public did not buy. Thus, American authors ceased producing novels in any significant number—until new copyright legislation was put in place.[62] The short story became more prominent at this time, disseminated in the burgeoning periodical press which brought more of a wage than long-form writing. Periodicals became a means for writers to make a living. *New Yorker* editor David Remnick recalls founding-editor Harold Ross's assertion that the magazine never published Ernest Hemingway 'because we didn't pay anything'; Hemingway, much like his contemporary F. Scott Fitzgerald, made a living from publishing

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[61] Paul Theroux, 'Fiction in the Age of E-Books', *The Atlantic*, August 2010, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/08/fiction-in-the-age-of-ebooks/8041 (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[62] Kevin J. Hayes, *Poe and the Printed Word*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), p.90

in periodicals like Collier's and the *Saturday Evening Post*.[63] In an introduction to a short story anthology, Joyce Carol Oates asserts that most of the writers featured in the collection have relied on magazine publication to a greater or lesser extent to make a living (lesser in the second half of the 20th century).[64]

Consideration of the literary marketplace will form part of my thesis. Though not a literary study, James Harkin's *Niche: Why the market no longer favours the mainstream* is useful for thinking about issues of cultural production and the marketplace.[65] In this book Harkin looks mainly at business practices that thrive by avoiding mass appeal. His focus is on strategies that somehow harness niche interests, but his consideration of what drives consumers towards niche products and services has some relevance for my work on *McSweeney's*. Similarly, Kaya Oakes's *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* provides a survey of DIY cultures that can help understand the origins of *McSweeney's*.[66] Oakes undertakes a theoretical consideration of how subcultures relate to mainstream culture, and her work explores the incorporation of subcultural art into the mainstream in a 'branded' or 'aesthetic' form by, for example, considering the crossover appeal of grunge music or the repurposing of the 'local coffee shop' by Starbucks.[67].

Representations in literary culture.

A significant part of my thesis will discuss representations of literary texts; as this involves assumptions about how periodical texts function in literary culture, my use of this term deserves some exposition here. Readers and critics translate texts into representations when writing about or discussing them. The serial textuality of periodicals raises questions about this process, as already discussed above. It is not possible to accurately describe how readers conceive of a periodical's identity as this process involves several variables. As with any text, a reader's interpretation of a periodical is not based solely on its content but is produced from a network of texts and contexts. The difference between the interpretation of a periodical and a traditional literary text (such as a novel or poem) is that the primary textual element of this process is less fixed. For example, a reader's conception of the *New Yorker* will vary depending on what issues they have read and, furthermore, what parts of those issues they have read. Different conceptions of the *New Yorker* are produced by a

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[63] David Remnick, 'Introduction' in *Wonderful Town: New York Stories from the New Yorker* ed. by David Remnick, London: Pavillion (2001 [2000]), p.ix-xiii (p.x).
[64] Joyce Carol Oates, 'Introduction' in *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories* ed. by Joyce Carol Oates, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (1992), pp.3-14 (p.9).
[65] James Harkin, *Niche: Why the market no longer favours the mainstream*, London: Little, Brown (2011).
[66] Kaya Oakes, *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture*, New York: Henry Holt and Company (2009).
[67] Oakes (2009), pp.194-5, 12.

reader who mainly read the cartoons and profiles of the Wallace Shawn era, and a reader of the David Remnick magazine, interested in the magazine's renewed focus on fiction and topical journalism. A 'typical' reading encounter with a periodical cannot be described or imagined easily.

Periodicals nevertheless possess identities within literary culture. The *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, *Harper's*; these magazines are all represented as discrete literary participants with respective agendas and styles. Despite the complex textual basis of these representations, periodicals are given a coherent identity during the reading process, to suborn them to traditional narratives of interpretation. The textual components of a periodical construct something greater than their constituent elements. The articles, stories, images, design and editorial content of multiple periodical numbers combine to form a textual excess, and it is this excess that forms a key element of a reader's understanding of a periodical's identity. To use periodicals in literary discourse, readers abstract an identity for the periodical's ouevre from the texts they are familiar with. They make representations of the periodical, and these can therefore be investigated for how the periodical is understood, manifesting what elements are considered significant from the project.

The textuality of the *New Yorker* magazine offers a useful illustration of the complexities involved in representing a periodical.[68] The *New Yorker* was launched in 1925; in the near-ninety years it has been in print, it has published approximately four thousand issues. Is it possible to create a single representation of such an enormous textual corpus? Is this necessary or desirable? While it is difficult to answer whether not it is desirable, technology has made it possible in a broad sense within the last decade. The entire publication history of the *New Yorker* can be purchased in two forms: a set of eight DVDs or a hard drive, both containing scanned mages of every issue of the magazine ever published (regularly updated via the internet). Technology allows a reader to possess the complete *New Yorker*, or access to its complete published work, at least. It is more of an unfiltered archive than a representation of a periodical, and this is an atypical method of responding to serial textuality.

The representations that are made of periodicals function as agents of the complete textuality of a periodical, acting for it in literary culture. They are paratexts, framing a reader's experience of a periodical. Anthologies, for example, introduce readers to the type of

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[68] As *McSweeney's* is a more difficult periodical text than the majority of periodicals, looking at the *New Yorker* as a conventional periodical would indicate that representing *McSweeney's* is exponentially more challenging.

material they could expect to find in a periodical, performing a function not directly related to but similar to a review of a novel. Periodical representations can be divided into two categories: a periodical can construct a representation of itself, or critics/readers can make representations of a periodical. Periodicals represent their own identities in various ways, from talking about their next issue in editorial columns, to publishing anthologies that make certain statements of their ethos. While I will not explore all possible strategies for representing periodicals, a typology of these should include these categories:

Representations by periodical	Representations of periodical
Selected anthologies	Media coverage (books, articles)
Editorial columns/voice	Profiles of editors/writers
Websites/advertising	Stereotypes/labels

My third chapter considers the function of these representations. The main implication of all these kinds of representations is that they involve some element of loss or sacrifice: in creating a single representation that accommodates multiple texts, something must be left out. They necessitate highlighting certain features or elements of a periodical at the expense of others. We can therefore analyse what remains as considered (by the speaker/creator) crucial to the periodical's identity. Representations are interesting for what they leave out, and why: they allow us to think about how the textuality of a periodical is conceived.

There are various ways that periodicals represent their own identity. Editorials can manifest in several ways, from a 'letter from the editor' column and editorial responses to reader enquiries, to how the periodical writes submission criteria or subscription information. These type of features anchor a serial text and provide a form of stability for readers encountering the text across several issues. Editorial features push against the inherently untethered textuality of periodicals: they imbue the spectrum of the periodical with continuity, markers to affirm that there are people concerned with the progression of the text from one issue to the next. This primary function can obviously be combined with more specific individual functions to provide colour to the identity of a periodical, such as information on significant contributors, discussion of a thematic focus, or drawing attention to particular articles. Titles like '*McSweeney's*' or 'the *New Yorker*' or 'the *Paris Review'* are further examples of the epitextual process of distilling a periodical, in that they provide a single point of access or reference for the amassed textuality they produce. Genette describes a text's title as 'an object to be circulated', to act for a text in a public sphere. A title is used to identify a text in discourse, not just to those who have read it, but to those

who may read it, and even to those who will never read it. As Genette describes, the public participates in the 'dissemination' of a title, increasing awareness of the existence of the text.[69] Titles provide a practical solution to the unencounterable textuality of periodicals and allow their use as participants in literary culture. Websites provide another method through which periodicals represent their own identity. Most cultural institutions are now expected to have websites and Twitter/Facebook/Tumblr presences. It was significant that the first issue of the periodical was closely followed by the creation of *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, its online presence. Periodical websites can take several different forms. *McSweeney's* use their website for the publication of humour content judged too ephemeral or topical for the print edition, to preview periodical content, to feature interviews with writers, and to provide access to its online store where readers can buy the periodical and related items. Other functions that periodical websites can take on include full reproduction of physical issues, commissioning original content for the web, and providing interactive facilities for feedback or submission of content. Websites can focus on promoting the print periodical or offering a combination of print and original online material. Some periodicals like the *Mississippi Review* operate wholly separate online and print editions. There are also hundreds of online-only periodicals, which I will not discuss here—my interest is in how websites represent the complex physical textuality of periodicals.

Anthologies provide an opportunity for periodical editors to construct a specific representation of their publication—a physically separate epitext. These offer us a chance to speculate on the intentions of periodical creators, on how they conceive of the significant elements of their periodical. One objective of the anthology form is to make material from the periodical available in a different, usually more accessible format—both in terms of being disseminated to a wider potential readership, and in a form that has more longevity than periodical issues. Anthologies collect stories and content from individual issues of a periodical that may be out of print and allow them to be accessed again. Anthologies provide an archival function that periodicals do not. Periodical issues are contemporary documents, but anthologies can provide a more distanced perspective on a cultural period. Typically printed in greater numbers than single issues, anthologies are more likely to be accessible for a longer period of time. Anthologies have several potential archival functions that individual periodical issues do not (or are less likely to have):

1. more likely to be retained by bookstores/libraries/Amazon/etc
2. more likely to receive multiple print runs

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[69] Genette (1997 [1984]), pp.74-5.

3. able to feature on best-seller lists
4. more likely to be object of a review/discussion in periodicals/press

These functions aid the longevity of an anthology, giving it a solid existence. In the early 20th century this function would have seemed more essential than today, when most information can be accessed through research libraries, but it is a function still useful for readers of *McSweeney's*—their anthologies circulate material from their early issues which are now out of print and difficult to obtain. Beyond this archival function, however, anthologies provoke periodical editors into making a representation of the periodical that attempts to distil its ethos. An anthology archives a certain representation of the periodical, the ways that its creators choose to represent its work.

As well as making their own representations of their identity, periodicals are also subject to how others choose to represent them. Representations of periodicals by others involve more abstract processes than representations by. These type of representations are not motivated by trying to replicate elements of the periodical or advertise its activities, but to provide some interpretation of its meaning or significance. Books written about periodicals are one of the most straightforward ways that representations of periodicals are made. A book like Ben Yagoda's *About Town: the New Yorker and the World it Made* can be read for the author's interpretation of the periodical's significance: that Yagoda feels the magazine deserves a book-length analysis, for example. More focused books like Lee's *Defining New Yorker Humor* manifest their authors' specific interests; I have touched on the difference between Lee's and Yagoda's strategies above. The approaches differ in how they represent the periodical according to the motivations of their authors. To attempt to contain a periodical's textuality in a single text involves decisions about what the writer feels is representative of the periodical, similar to the construction of an anthology. Press or periodical coverage of periodicals confronts a similar challenge to that of a monograph: selecting elements of the periodical to construct a representation of it suitable for a short article. The elements that they choose to write about with reference to the periodical suggest the type of representation they intend to construct, or what they believe is significant about the periodical. The *New York Observer* newspaper, with its focus on New York life and culture, often makes reports on the staffing of the *New Yorker*. Perhaps because of the absence of an editorial masthead in the magazine, the *Observer* has taken an interest in investigating who works on it, presuming an interest on the part of its readers in this.[70] The

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[70] John Koblin, 'The Last Magazine Standing', *New York Observer*, 11 November 2009, http://observer.com/2009/11/the-last-magazine-standing/, (Consulted 22 October 2013).

literary weblog the *Millions* has an occasional feature providing an account of all the fiction published in a year by the *New Yorker*. This has a similar effect to the magazine's own fiction anthologies, validating its content as worthy of reprisal beyond the individual number. Another effect of this is to highlight the magazine's tendency to favour authors it has published before over new writers: C. Max Magee's account of the fiction published by the *New Yorker* in 2008 identifies that Alice Munro had four stories printed by the magazine, and two by Roddy Doyle, Yiyun Lee, Daniyal Nueenuddin, Annie Proulx, T.C. Boyle, John Updike, Janet Frame, Louise Erdrich, and the deceased Roberto Bolano.[71] The *Observer* and the *Millions* write about different aspects of the *New Yorker*, appropriate to the direction of each: the former has an interest in the overall function of the magazine, while the latter looks specifically at its literary output.

Observing how periodicals are treated in response can also provide a refraction of the periodical's cultural significance. Any statement about a periodical involves an implicit or explicit representation of a periodical's identity, making manifest assumptions about what elements are important to the speaker from the periodical's textuality. This process is also evident in the way the periodical is discussed in response: the generalisations that writers make about the *New Yorker* construct a gloss of the magazine's impact—the values it is commonly perceived to practice and propagate, the type of writing it is taken to publish. For example, the *New Yorker*'s influence in the realm of fiction writing demonstrates some ways in which the work published in periodicals takes on a significance beyond the text. 'The *New Yorker* short story' as a phrase has become a stereotype or cliche for a certain type of fiction, or for the idea of a certain type of fiction. The phrase denotes both recurring tendencies in fiction (a neutral formulation) and a bias towards certain types of fiction (a negative formulation). It is understandable that a periodical develops a 'taste' for what kind of stories it publishes, and unlikely that it will publish something radically different each issue for nearly eighty years. However, some claim the bias towards a dominant style as an oppressive and stultifying tendency. It implies homogeny, that the magazine does not try new things. As early as 1929, the magazine's fiction editor Katharine White was formulating its approach to fiction in a generalised way; in a letter to a contributor she wrote 'the short stories that we use have to be quite special in type—*New Yorker*-ish.'[72] In 1942, reviewing a collection of its stories, Lionel Trilling wrote that the main features of *New Yorker* fiction

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[71] C. Max Magee 'A Year in Reading: *New Yorker* Fiction 2008', *The Millions*, 5 January 2009, http://www.themillions.com/2009/01/year-in-reading-new-yorker-fiction-2008_6815.html, (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[72] Yagoda (2000), p.55.

were its 'moral intensity' and the tendency for its characters to fail at their endeavours.[73] Ruth Franklin, writing about Michael Chabon's editorship of *McSweeney's* 10, labels Chabon's description of 'the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story' as 'better known as the *New Yorker* short story'.[74] The label indicates Franklin's interpretation of *New Yorker* fiction as fitting this model. Ben Yagoda describes 'the *New Yorker* short story' as a cultural category 'implying a specific kind of aesthetic lens on experience'.[75] The elements that tend to recur in this stereotype of the *New Yorker* story include upper-middle class characters, an urban setting (often, but not necessarily, New York), an urbane tone, slow pacing, an everyday or banal subject, and a moment-of-truth ending. It seems unnecessary to fully explore whether or not all *New Yorker* fiction conforms to this model—what is more relevant for this thesis is why this stereotype has come about, and what function it serves. A conservative estimate would hold that the *New Yorker* has published over three thousand short stories. The prospect of generalising a common approach to short fiction out of thousands of stories seems insurmountable. The stereotype of the '*New Yorker* story' is a response to this problem, an attempt to ignore the heterogeny of the magazine's output and impose some kind of order or pattern onto it.

These are but some of the ways that periodicals are represented in literary culture. As I will go on to explore, the *McSweeney's* periodical introduces a further complexity to the interpretation of a periodical identity. The conventional format of periodicals provides a mediation of their problematic textuality by instilling repetition and stability as central aims. Periodical conventions (similar/identical physical form, a consistent design, repetition of logo/masthead, regular features) provide an anchor for readers, making discrete encounters with the periodical familiar through formal means. The result of these conventions is to allow a regular format to be imagined for the periodical. This can be inserted as a constant of sorts into the interpretive experience I describe above. The complicating act of *McSweeney's* is to resist a regular format, and this will be further discussed in my third and fourth chapters.

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[73] Yagoda (2000), p.155.
[74] Ruth Franklin, 'The 98-Pound Gorilla in the Room', *Slate*, 3 April 2003,
http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2003/04/the_98pound_gorilla_in_the_room.html, (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[75] Yagoda (2000), p.12.

Chapter 2: Establishing a non-dichotomous literary culture.

This chapter will perform a number of case studies on texts, writers and contexts related to the first published issue of *McSweeney's*. Looking at the launch of *McSweeney's* allows me to investigate the processes involved in the performance of its literary identity. I want to understand the founding myth of the periodical; this will involve considering what aspects of literary culture it interacts with and how it interacts with them. In each case study I choose a small textual corpus that allows me to expand into several related areas of literary culture. This is an attempt to replicate (in a self-consciously limited fashion) a potential reader's experience in encountering the first issue of *McSweeney's*. I imagine various possibilities as to how it may have been received and what interpretive communities it interacted with. I consider some themes and debates it engaged with, and what associations the writers and texts published in its first issue carry. As a result of this, I will not look solely at *McSweeney's* 1, also investigating its contexts to understand the literary culture it emerged into. This chapter will explore how the first issue of *McSweeney's* can be understood in relation to these; its performance of a non-dichotomous ethos is linked to the tension between binaries like realism/experimentalism in literary culture. My case studies establish a framework for reading the significance of Issue 1's strategies.

This chapter is motivated by an interest in the bifurcation of literary culture into distinct approaches or movements, such as 'realism' or 'experimental'. (There is some conflation in criticism of 'experimental' with 'postmodern'; 'postmodern' is used in various ways, but most frequently in response to *McSweeney's* it indicates either a specific period in the 1960s/70s of high postmodern writing or is used as a cypher for any type of experimental writing that is not realism.) These type of labels come with attendant implications for preferred methods and value judgments on what literature should be. The first issue of *McSweeney's* makes a claim for the periodical as beyond such binary divisions of literature, and appears to be concerned with undoing and replacing these with a non-dichotomous approach. I will go on to explore how the issue connects with these binary constructions, and what is imagined as a replacement, i.e. what is offered as different in the first issue to justify this position. Dave Eggers has articulated the ethos of *McSweeney's* in certain paratextual material; the following quotation comes from an introduction to an anthology of the first ten *McSweeney's* issues, published in 2005:

> Both the random, the experimental, and the straightforward-and-gut-twisting can coexist, can inform each other, can cross-pollinate even, and we are all the better for it. Too often, the world of books goes through hand-wringing and then extermination, when the powers-that-be decide either that a) All books should be form-busting and structurally brave; or else the

opposite, that all books that attempt in any way to move the medium of fiction in any new direction are practicing "gimmacry" or even "gimcrackery." […] If we can only remember—oh lord if only!—that we should be allowed to innovate, that the traditional can exist side-by-side with the experimental, then we will all foster a far more healthy environment for the creation of great books.[76]

Here, Eggers asserts that experimental and realist approaches to literature need not be seen as opposed. He describes 'the experimental' as 'form-busting and structurally brave', and realism ('the traditional') as 'straightforward-and-gut-twisting'. Eggers's language here is parodic, incorporating the stereotypes that critics make about experimental literature and realism. He critiques the idea that 'all books *should* be' experimental or realist, that there is no middle ground (my emphasis). He means to highlight the charged way in which literary labels are used, that advocating an experimental approach will often entail a critique of realist literature. His introduction sets out an anti-binary manifesto, a non-dichotomous position. *McSweeney's* is represented as transcendent, above the pettiness of such divisions ('powers-that-be', 'handwringing' and the misspellings of 'gimmickry' conveying a knowing superiority). Eggers uses language that evokes a collapse of boundaries: 'coexist', 'cross-pollinate', 'side-by-side'. The newness of *McSweeney's* is formed from this act. He rhetorically demolishes the distinction between realism and experimental literature, and imagines 'a far more healthy environment'—a literature not judged according to its adherence to one literary style or another. This 2005 editorial by Eggers is a manifesto for the *McSweeney's* project—written seven years after the first issue, it makes a performance of the literary direction of the periodical. It is possible to trace this performance back to its first issue, and the remainder of this chapter will investigate this performance. The issue did not contain any explicit statement of its intention to reject the existing literary paradigms, but it is a strategy observable in the connections it makes to other texts and in the aesthetic decisions its editors make.

The most powerful statement of the periodical's agenda was the inclusion of a short story by David Foster Wallace in Issue 1. In 1998, Wallace was a writer whose literary identity manifested a collapsing of binary positions arguably similar to that which Eggers would later describe as the aim of *McSweeney's*. Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) 'instantly became a publishing phenomenon', selling in massive numbers and gaining substantial media coverage.[77] David Lipsky was commissioned to interview Wallace for *Rolling Stone*—a significant achievement for Wallace's identity, being a rare crossover of literary

[76] Dave Eggers, 'McSweeney's Publishing', in *The Better of McSweeney's: Volume One – Issues 1-10*, ed. by Dave Eggers, San Francisco: McSweeney's Books (2005), pp.2-4,362 (pp.4,362).
[77] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press (2003), p.6.

figures into a music publication.[78] At the same time, *Infinite Jest* was acclaimed as one of the most significant literary achievements of the late 20th century, and his persona in literary culture was replete with non-centre representations: an in-depth interview in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993, being a panelist on the high-culture *Charlie Rose Show* and receiving a Macarthur Genius Grant, both in 1997. He was considered successful in mainstream publishing and a serious and important literary figure; these positions are not often occupied by the same writer. While it is possible to find evidence identifying Wallace as either a successful mainstream or an experimental writer, his literary identity should more accurately be conceived of as beyond this binary. He is represented as both, rendering the binary either/or framework irrelevant, and, going further, as challenging the assumptions and implications of such a binary formulation of literature. My argument is that Wallace is an example of a writer whose literary identity can be described as non-dichotomous: that he wrote experimental fiction and *also* sold a lot of books and was widely read is something unusual in literary culture. In an article on Wallace's oeuvre, Paul Giles describes him as flattening the 'authoritarian distinction between center and margin', where postmodernism simply privileged the latter over the former (Giles situates Wallace as writing in a period after high postmodernism, a categorisation I discuss below).[79]

Wallace's status made him a key part of Eggers's plans for *McSweeney's*. In a memorial written after Wallace's death, Eggers wrote:

> Dave was the first person we asked to contribute to McSweeney's, thinking we could not start the journal without him. Thankfully, he sent a piece immediately, and then we knew we could begin. We honestly needed his endorsement, his go-ahead, because we were seeking, at the start at least, to focus on experimental fiction, and he was so far ahead of everyone else in that arena that without him the enterprise would seem ridiculous.[80]

With another retrospective representation, Eggers makes Wallace and his status as a champion of experimental writing a crucial element in the founding identity of *McSweeney's*. Eggers highlights 'experimental fiction' as Wallace's field; this is a slight terminological problem, as I argue for Wallace (and *McSweeney's*) as concerned with demolishing the distinction between 'realist' and 'experimental'. My response to this is that the language of literary positions can be slippery and used casually, and Eggers's other statements on the direction of *McSweeney's* would seem to justify that it is not intended to solely be a publication of experimental fiction. The manifesto that Eggers gives in the

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[78] David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip With David Foster Wallace*, New York: Broadway Books (2010).
[79] Paul Giles, 'Sentimental posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53.3 (2007), 327-351 (327).
[80] Dave Eggers, 'Recollection', *Sonora Review*, 55/56 (2009), 38-40 (38) [in 'Thank You David Foster Wallace' section].

Better of McSweeney's reads like a description of Wallace's work: 'the random, the experimental, and the straightforward-and-gut-twisting can coexist'.[81] Before Wallace's death, Eggers wrote an introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* that discussed the tendency for literary critics to conceive of readability in literature as 'an either/or proposition, that the world has room for only one kind of fiction'.[82] When the first issue of *McSweeney's* was published in 1998, two years after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace possessed a literary cache unlike any other writer, having written a best-selling novel that was widely publicized and sold well, but one that was nonetheless an innovative and experimental work of fiction. Wallace in 1998 represented an alternative to the binaries of tradition versus innovation, of realism versus experimental literature.

Stefan Hirt has provided a summary of the position I take Wallace to occupy:

> [Wallace] employs elements from both [experimental postmodernism and representational realism], which in his text enforce and check each other. While its classic postmodern features force the reader into an active engagement with the text, assert the narrator's awareness of its arbitrariness and provide playful, parodic entertainment, the representational aspects attest to the text's relevance to the reader.[83]

To put it more bluntly, he writes smart fiction, but he also writes entertaining fiction. This is the aim that Wallace seemed to direct his writing towards. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace made the following statement in favour of a literature free from imposed labels:

> The whole binary of realistic versus unrealistic fiction is a canonical distinction set up by people with a vested interest in the big-R tradition [Realism]. A way to marginalize all stuff that isn't soothing and conservative.[84]

Wallace is concerned with an engagement with writing on its own terms. He does not restrict his criticism to proponents of realism, also discussing the dangers of innovative writing:

> Writers today can do more or less whatever we want. But on the other hand, since everybody can do pretty much whatever they want, without boundaries to define them or constraints to struggle against, you get this continual avant-garde rush forward without anyone bothering to speculate on the destination, the "goal" of the forward rush.[85]

Wallace's article 'E Unibus Pluram: television and U.S. fiction' argues for a parallel between the rise in such "empty" experimentation and the increasing dominance of

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[81] Eggers (2005), p.362.
[82] Dave Eggers, 'Foreword', in David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, New York: Back Bay Books (2006 [1998]), pp.xi-xvi (p.xi).
[83] Stefan Hirt, The Iron Bars of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self, Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag (2008), p.143.
[84] Larry McCaffery, 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13.2 (1993), 127-150 (142).
[85] McCaffery (1990).

television as the primary mode of cultural consumption.[86] One of Wallace's points is that writers who practice true innovation, writers of high postmodern literature, 'weathered real shock [to] invent this stuff in contemporary fiction'.[87] As McCaffery puts it in his interview: 'these devices had very real political and historical applications'. Modern writers who imitate these techniques who are not working within the same socio-literary context are 'crank-turners' according to Wallace. He counters this approach to literature with this view: 'fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being'.[88] It is this attitude that Hirt would attribute to attention to 'the text's relevance to the reader'; a commonly held motivation of realist writing.[89] In 'E Unibus Pluram' Wallace considers a return to this realist aim:

> The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gap and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness.[90]

This commitment to sentiment and feeling is to some extent unexpected from Wallace. At no point in his career could his writing have been described as anything other than experimental, in terms of the techniques it deploys and innovation it practices. His advocacy of the aims of realism in his essay—'human troubles and emotions'; 'sentimentality, melodrama'—is unusual. It is this dissonant position that marks him as unusual among contemporary writers. Wallace, in trying to articulate a position that is not realist and not experimental, arrives at what I label a non-dichotomous literature. Wallace resists binary positions, striving for a literature of possibility, not limited by the assumed intentions associated with a writer confined by a 'realist' or 'experimental' label. He describes a literature free from the restrictions of an either/or approach, that combines the difficult and the enjoyable, using the former to enhance the latter, and the latter to facilitate persistence with the former.

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[86] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Plurum: television and U.S. fiction' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, London: Abacus (1997 [1993]), pp.21-82.
[87] McCaffery (1993), 138.
[88] ibid.
[89] Hirt (2008), p.143.
[90] Wallace (1997 [1993]), pp.80-1.

Wallace's interest in exploring these issues explains to some extent the critical penchant for labelling him as a post-postmodern writer.[91] This label indicates Wallace's wilful separateness from the postmodern tradition as it is generally understood (I use non-dichotomous as my interpretation of his position to articulate this separation). His status as one of the few writers trying to understand and move beyond the implications of a literary culture organised through binaries is crucial to his appeal as an ambassador for *McSweeney's*. Eggers's admission that they desired Wallace's approval for their project demonstrates their interest in associating the early periodical with his literary strategies. This is something identified by critics, as the influence of his style on the periodical is frequently noted. Marshall Boswell describes Eggers as a writer who has 'copied the elusive Wallace "tone"'.[92] A 2004 article by Gordon Burn and a 2011 Maud Newton piece identify various stylistic features in writers of the *McSweeney's* set that they both attribute to Wallace's influence.[93] Given the status that Wallace has been held in, it can be understood that *McSweeney's* would desire to associate with his identity.

While the last section of this chapter will explore in more depth the influence of Wallace on *McSweeney's*, a cursory survey of the early issues of the periodical identifies certain strategies that could be identified as evidence of this. Rick Moody's 'On the Yule Log' in Issue 1 utilizes a footnote to explain its origins; Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and his various essays brought new attention to the footnote as a literary tool.[94] The publication of Gary Greenberg's article on the Unabomber in Issue 3 and Sean Wilsey's profile of Marfa, Texas in Issue 2 represent a commitment to long-form journalism arguably fostered in the *McSweeney's* community by Wallace's excellence in this field in the late 20th century. George Saunders' story 'Four Institutional Monologues' in Issue 4 shows a similar interest in the registers of "official" language. In this loose fashion, then, incorporation of Wallace's approach to style could be argued to be part of the strategy of the early *McSweeney's*. While not contending that these writers are necessarily trying to replicate Wallace's techniques, his status as the most prominent writer of innovative contemporary fiction is affirmed by the possibility of identifying his influence on other writers—or at least the similarity in others'

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[91] Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Amsterdam: Rodopi (2010), p.303.
[92] Boswell (2003), p.19.
[93] Gordon Burn, 'The believers', *Guardian*, 27 March 2004, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/mar/27/fiction.zadiesmith (Consulted 22 October 2013); Maud Newton, 'Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace', *New York Times*, August 19 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/magazine/another-thing-to-sort-of-pin-on-david-foster-wallace.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[94] Michael Martone, 'Footnotes and Endnotes', *Sonora Review*, 55/56 (2009), 51-58 [in 'Thank You David Foster Wallace' section].

style to his. *McSweeney's* 1 illustrates a commitment to fiction that uses innovative techniques in the service of connecting with the reader.

My first case study looks at three representations from Dave Eggers on the establishment of *McSweeney's*, considering how it was constructed in relation to the existing literary culture. The texts in this section feature a mix of contemporary and retrospective views, reinforcing my assertion that literary culture must be understood as a series of inter-related constructions rather. The texts I look at in this section are: an email from Eggers to potential contributors (for founding aims), an introduction to a *McSweeney's* anthology (to consider self-mythologising/historicizing) and an interview with Eggers (to pitch self-representation against an outsider's view). My intention is to explore different conceptions of the same event (the first issue of *McSweeney's* and its impact).

I then turn to the first issue of *McSweeney's* to interrogate its performance of the ethos I describe, mainly through investigating an article that explicitly addresses the relation between McSweeney's and an established periodical, Rick Moody's 'On the Yule Log'. The first issue of the periodical contained some content that had been rejected by other publications; this positions the text as an outsider to established culture. The letters page contains a humour piece about a rejected film script; Marc Herman's story 'The Discovery of El Dorado, City of Gold' frames itself as a 'Draft text of a proposal for a focus group study', the textual uncertainty suggesting an unpublishable quality; Stephen J Shalit (a pseudonym for Eggers) provides an article in three stages of revision that was commissioned and rejected by 'a certain award-laden magazine concerned with enjoying the outdoors'.[95] 'On the Yule Log' is framed as an article originally commissioned for and rejected by the *New York Times*. The context of this article (replete with connections between writers and periodicals) is productive for thinking about literary communities and their association with the performance of literary identity. A writer's literary identity is not an uncomplicated thing: it is a performance, a construct. A writer's identity emerges as an agglomeration of elements from various texts and representations: their identity is itself a text. "Rick Moody" as manifest in this *McSweeney's* piece should be thought of as a construct separate from Rick Moody the person. This approach takes its cue from Peter Wollen's distinction between Howard Hawks the person and "Howard Hawks" the critical construct manifest as a directorial presence in his films.[96] I want to think about how writers self-identify (and are identified) with certain positions, and how this activity contributes to the creation/

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[95] *McSweeney's* 1 (1998), 6, 35, 83,
[96] Grant (2008), p.5.

perpetuation of literary communities. Analysing the literary identity of Rick Moody will allow me to explore how performances of binary literary positions touch on deeper issues of style, content and the function of literature. With this in mind, my intention is to discuss how Moody's text can be understood as a performance of the non-dichotomous agenda of the *McSweeney's* project.

In my third study I use the writing of Jonathan Franzen to investigate further the connections between style and labels in contemporary literature, to understand the context that *McSweeney's* responds to. Franzen is often represented as one of the foremost advocates of literary realism, which involves his critique of the experimental impulse in literature.[97] As an illustration of this, in a 2002 *New Yorker* essay he labeled the experimental writer William Gaddis 'Mr Difficult'.[98] An investigation of this article's discussion of a binary approach to literature will expand my reading of the context of *McSweeney's* 1, as well as my understanding of how style is associated with literary identity. Franzen's persona becomes strongly connected to a binary approach to literature—my case study will explore the implications of this for his involvement with literary culture, connecting Franzen to his some-time rival, David Foster Wallace.

My final case study begins with an analysis of Wallace's story in the first issue of *McSweeney's*, 'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII)'. I use this to consider Wallace's status as a figurehead for the *McSweeney's* project, articulating the methods and values that he is associated with—specifically, a non-dichotomous approach to literature. Of all the writers associated with *McSweeney's*, Wallace comes closest to putting into practice the ideal of a non-dichotomous literature, both in terms of his writing and his identity. This section investigates what can be learnt about the strategies and intentions of *McSweeney's* through an analysis of Wallace. The rest of the case study applies these insights, concentrating on how *McSweeney's* 1 can be considered an advert for the entire project, how its content and other aesthetic elements manifest a performance of a non-dichotomous ethos.

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[97] One of the most notable responses to Franzen's 'Mr Difficult' was Ben Marcus' article 'Why experimental fiction threatens to destroy publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and life as we know it: A correction', *Harpers*, October 2005, 39-52.
[98] Jonathan Franzen, 'Mr Difficult: William Gaddis and the problem of hard-to-read books', *New Yorker*, 30 September 2002, 100-111.

Case study 1: "Are you taking steps to keep shit real?"

The first issue of *McSweeney's* manifests its creators intention to establish a non-dichotomous approach to literature. This assertion can be explored through various statements made by the founder-editor Dave Eggers about the aims of the periodical. This is not to say that these are uncomplicated statements that should be accepted as truth, but rather as proof of non-dichotomy as a guiding theme associated with the periodical, bled into the project. Investigating the first issue and its contexts makes it possible to reconstruct a kind of manifesto for the periodical's founding identity.

The 2010 design retrospective *Art of McSweeney's* features among its collection of ephemera an email circulated by Eggers to potential contributors in 1998, before the magazine was first published. This email's tone is similar to that of the editorials contained in issues of *McSweeney's*—the designers of the *Art of McSweeney's* were evidently aware of this, as the email is situated in the prefatory section with the book's copyright information, much like the *McSweeney's* editorials are: consistency of design reflects consistency of tone. I describe this characteristic tone as one of 'amateur professionalism': expressing a confidence in their endeavours despite admissions of naivete or skills not possessed. This is one way in which its non-dichotomous agenda is signaled: neither amateur nor professional, but an aesthetic which responds to the possibility of this binary opposition with strategies that comment on its redundancy. Eggers performs this non-position in the email, recounting a discussion about his plan for *McSweeney's*:

> Blank: I think I have a thing for your little zine.
> Me: What little what?
> Blank: That zine you said you were putting out.
> Me: It's not a "zine." And it's not "little."
> Blank: Whatever it is.
> Me: It's not a zine.
> Blank: Well, what is it?
> Me: It's a quarterly.
> Blank: Will it actually be published quarterly?
> Me: No, probably not.
> Blank: Okay, so I have an idea.
> Me: And it's not little.
> Blank: Do you want to hear the idea or not?
> Me: Fine.
> Blank: Okay, so:
> Me: Asshole.[99]

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[99] Dave Eggers, '[Untitled email]', in Editors of McSweeney's, *Art of McSweeney's*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2010), pp.1-4 (p.1).
(NB: The participant labelled 'Blank' stands for a name that is covered with a solid black bar in the book.)

This exchange illustrates some features of the *McSweeney's* periodical: an ambiguity or confusion over its precise format, and this ambiguity being used as a productive feature, for humour or to comment on the format of periodicals. Eggers's fussiness over the labels of 'zine' and 'little' is a conscious act to distance *McSweeney's* from more amateur projects—zines being (usually) self-published periodicals on esoteric topics; 'little' implying 'little magazines', a tradition of small-press publishing most famously found in periodicals like *The Little Review* or *The Dial*, magazines that published groundbreaking modernist art and literature, but did not have a wide circulation. He gestures towards a more established, professional identity for *McSweeney's* by suggesting that a more appropriate label for it would be 'quarterly', then immediately undermines this by saying that it will not perform the expected function of this identity, i.e. being published on a quarterly schedule. The potential periodical is constructed as something not amateur or professional, but something in-between, non-dichotomous. It will contain 'odd things that one could never shoehorn into a mainstream periodical' but will also be 'perfect-bound, and will in many ways look like most literary quarterlies'.[100]

The non-dichotomous approach of *McSweeney's* can be read in the construction and rejection of other types of binary oppositions in Eggers's email manifesto. His description of potential *McSweeney's* features can be read as a more direct commentary on the existing periodical culture. 'Cartoons without pictures' is likely a direct commentary on the *New Yorker*'s cartoon feature. Eggers's idea to replace cartoons with a verbal description of a cartoon's situation is a playful way of engaging with the *New Yorker* tradition. The humour of this feature is found in its elaborate execution: the effort involved in writing a description of a scene and then providing a caption for it as well seems excessive, and this apparent excess is an important part of the aesthetic *McSweeney's* strives for. This strategy is evident in another proposed feature: 'Explanations of newspaper and magazine headlines'. These deadpan expositions of puns and pop culture references display an earnest desire to educate and share knowledge. The feature provides the context and referents for these headlines, removing their primary humour. The humour of this feature is again found in its determined and controlled effort; in a textual act that seems unnecessary, the reader looks to the fact of its creation, its context, for explanation as to why it must be interesting. These examples of meta-humour (and specifically humour about types of humour utilized by periodicals)

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[100] Ibid.

illustrate one strategy that Eggers used to both respond to and (attempt to) replace the existing periodical culture.

In a 2000 email interview with Saadi Soudavar of the *Harvard Advocate*, Eggers expands his commentary on binaries from periodicals to literary style more generally.[101] Soudavar's email exchange with Eggers was published on the *Harvard Advocate*'s website; the interview occasioned what appears to be a clash of representations and was presented in place of a more conventional interview article. Soudavar and Eggers perform different conceptions of literary culture, as I will go on to explain. The differences between Eggers and Soudavar seem to be sparked by the latter's questions that concerned the position *McSweeney's* adopted in literary culture:

> 9. There is talk afoot in the land, Dave, that McSweeney's, content-wise, no longer differs much from smart journals like Conjunctions or Epoch. Even from The New Yorker, for that matter. Which is not to imply that, were The Harvard Advocate to receive a story from George Saunders, we would put our street cred above our commitment to excellence, a commitment from which we have not wavered in over 130 years of excellence. But still: are you concerned that you're not publishing as many unknowns as you had been? And killed pieces? Are you taking any steps-are there any steps to be taken-to keep shit real?

> 10. The real issue at hand, Mr. Eggers, is whether you're on the side of the good guys or the bad guys. […] In my hopeful moments, I feel like McSweeney's is trying to carve out the human space in our culture. In moments of dark suicidal despair, I think McSweeney's is just trying to sell a lot of magazines by being so pretty and "authentic."[102]

Soudavar's questions create a context for *McSweeney's* that suggests a binary conception of literary culture. He considers its relationship to 'smart' (see also: 'little') literary journals and the *New Yorker*, and also its position within the spectrum of 'the good guys or the bad guys'. This latter consideration imagines a binary either/or position—Soudavar questions if *McSweeney's* is independent, authentic, truly literary, or if has purely commercial motivations. Soudavar shows an awareness of the performative nature of literary culture by placing "authentic" in scare quotes. Eggers's response is an attack of sorts on Soudavar—not for the accusation of having 'sold out', but for the question's premise:

> I want to address the "sell a lot of magazines by being pretty and 'authentic'" part here. Honestly, Saadi, what the fuck are you talking about? You're applying principles of mass-marketing to a money-hemorrhaging literary magazine produced out of my apartment. Please. No one here is trying to sell a lot of magazines. Why would we making a literary magazine in the first place, if sales numbers were our goal? And why would we be printing this thing in Iceland, and printing only 12,000 copies? Jesus, son, you have got to stop tearing apart and doubting the people who are obviously, clearly, doing good work. I mean, who the fuck do you believe in?[103]

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[101] Itself a small press literary journal, claiming to be the 'oldest continuously published collegiate magazine' in America.
[102] Saadi Soudavar, 'An Interview With Dave Eggers', *Harvard Advocate*, April 2000, http://www.armchairnews.com/freelance/eggers.html, (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[103] Ibid.

Eggers dismisses the question of *McSweeney's* mainstream (or otherwise) status as irrelevant. In his view, to consider the periodical on these terms is to frame its goals as that of the mass media, to evaluate it empirically or financially. It is Soudavar's use of the 'principles of mass-marketing' that he objects to. He (Soudavar) imagines *McSweeney's* within a binary paradigm, occupying one position or the other. This question of authenticity versus 'sell-out' is irrelevant because *McSweeney's* is not operating in the same field as mass-market periodicals, he claims. *McSweeney's* cannot 'sell out', following this line of argument, because it does not play the same game as the *New Yorker*. He objects to Soudavar's line of questioning as a fetishisation of the centre/periphery, because this binary frame imagines an oppositional relation that Eggers considers unhelpful.

Eggers goes on to speculate on some of the ways he could be considered a mainstream 'sell out', if one were applying the binary paradigm to his writing career: writing an article for *Time* magazine for $12,000; being on the payroll of *Esquire*, *ESPN* and *Details* magazines, paid 'handsomely for doing very little'; his willingness to sell the rights to his first book to Hollywood; his attendance at parties with famous celebrities. By listing evidence that could be used to portray himself as an establishment figure, he is suggesting the arbitrary nature of such positions. More to the point, he demonstrates that these binary positions are performed, by citing the evidence that could be used to make a representation of him as 'establishment'. Eggers's response is also, therefore, a construct, and this performance by Eggers has two important effects: to highlight the constructed and unhelpful aspects to using a binary paradigm and to depict *McSweeney's* as transcending this paradigm. Eggers uses the Soudavar interview to mythologise the early issues of *McSweeney's* as an alternative to traditional conceptions of literary culture. He describes the strategy of the journal as a kind of anti-strategy:

> The Advocate interviewer wants to know if we're losing also our edge, if the magazine is selling out, hitting the mainstream, if we're still committed to publishing unknowns, and pieces killed by other magazines. […] I don't give a fuck. When we did the last issue, this was my thought process: I saw a box. So I decided we'd do a box. We were given stories by some of our favorite writers - George Saunders, Rick Moody (who is uncool, uncool!), Haruki Murakami, Lydia Davis, others - and so we published them. Did I wonder if people would think we were selling out, that we were not fulfilling the mission they had assumed we had committed ourselves to? No. I did not. […] We care about doing what we want to do creatively. We want to be interested in it. We want it to challenge us. We want it to be difficult. We want to reinvent the stupid thing every time.[104]

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[104] Ibid.

This is a clear statement of a non-dichotomous agenda. It echoes the similar statement from the *Better of McSweeney's* cited at the beginning of this chapter. His response to Soudavar seems to express a similar frustration to his exasperation in *Better* at the 'hand-wringing' of literary culture, at the anxiety over where to locate a writer a text, which binary pole to align them to. *McSweeney's* is represented by Eggers as above (or perhaps standing slightly to one side of) considering its own position.

However, this non-dichotomous manifesto is not necessarily one that is expressed consistently throughout the publication of *McSweeney's*. In a 2004 anthology of material from the first ten issues of *McSweeney's*, Dave Eggers provides an anecdote of the founding of *McSweeney's* that seems to situate it within (rather than outside) a binary literary culture :

> I'd moved to New York from San Francisco a year earlier, and my introduction to the glossy world of glossy magazines was in many ways a shock. Writers I knew were having great work rejected everywhere, or having assigned articles killed for any conceivable reason—too long, too difficult, too timely, not timely enough, or too much emphasis on a giant growing slug. I began wondering if it were possible to start a new journal, assembled from these articles not fit for other magazines—a quarterly of orphaned stories.[105]

Eggers suggests that the writers featured in the early *McSweeney's* were excluded from the existing system of periodical publication; that they were outsiders. Eggers bases this construction on a binary opposition: that there is a 'world of glossy magazines' and that *McSweeney's* occupies a place separate from this world. This is not an analysis of how the journal positioned itself at its foundation, however: it is a retrospective representation, and of a different type than the manifestoes discussed above. This representation by Eggers comes in a 2004 anthology published by Penguin, designed to translate the appeal of *McSweeney's* to a mass UK audience; consequently, his tone seems less radical. In this extract, *McSweeney's* 1 is imagined as a literary orphanage—a place for writers without a home in the established system, accepting writers who had problems interacting with the established literary culture. This seems to set the periodical up as a straightforward alternative to mainstream publication, the peripheral pole of a mainstream-periphery binary. This collaboration between *McSweeney's* and a major publishing house perhaps demanded a more conciliatory tone on Eggers's part—discussing the unique qualities of *McSweeney's* but conscious of the possibility of attracting new readers to the project. However, I would argue that this does not undermine the non-dichotomous agenda of *McSweeney's*; rather, it illustrates the agenda being pursued in an indirect fashion. By co-publishing an anthology with a major publishing house, *McSweeney's* achieves a level of exposure and advertising

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[105] Dave Eggers, 'Introduction', in *The Best of McSweeney's Volume 1*, ed. by Dave Eggers, London: Hamish Hamilton (2004), pp.vii-xiii (p.viii).

for the periodical that it would not be able to achieve alone. Rather than restricting themselves to self-published endeavours (the domain of most little magazines and small presses), its creators do not retreat from co-operation with the mainstream; the implications of this kind of cooperation will be developed further in my next chapter.

Case study 2: Rick vs Richard.

'On the Yule Log', Rick Moody's article in the first issue of *McSweeney's*, was originally written for the September 20 1998 edition of the *New York Times Magazine*, as part of a special section in which writers discussed their favourite television show.[106] Moody's piece was rejected by the *Times*. His *McSweeney's* article is a commentary on the relationship between a marginalised writer and a mainstream periodical; as such, it is a useful text for thinking about the binary paradigm of literary culture. The article is composed of two sections: Moody's original article (which he claims to have not edited) and a footnote commentary on its commission/rejection. This exploits a peritextual function of footnotes: they can imply a division between the author of the main text and the editor (visible in footnotes). Moody is given a privileged position, allowed to comment on and evaluate his original text. Moody is his own editor, with the power to frame his experience with the *Times* for the readers of *McSweeney's* 1. He provides his own context, exerting control over the literary identity he performs.

Moody's *McSweeney's* piece describes his rejection by an institution of the literary establishment, the *New York Times*. One possible interpretation of this text is of Moody performing a role as a non-centre writer. 'On the Yule Log' is offered to the reader less as an example of Moody's writing than it is a criticism of the editorship of *Times*, and this latter publication's conception of literary culture. The subject of his *McSweeney's* piece is not his opinion or reminiscence of 'The Yule Log'; rather, it is his relationship with the *Times* that is significant. The meaning of the piece is in the form, the structural relation between *McSweeney's* and the *Times*. The first thing to say about Moody's article, then, is that it constructs a opposition: Moody and the *Times* are imagined as at odds. The language in his footnote commentary communicates a derisory attitude towards the *Times*: "not like I've had the pleasantest experiences with The Grey Lady"; "…the Times Magazine, which I dislike in the extreme".[107] The literary identity that he performs (and by extension performs as part of the *McSweeney's* roster) is one distanced from the literary culture of the *Times*.

One reading of Moody's performed literary identity is as an outsider from the literary establishment. This could situate *McSweeney's* in a binary opposition in relation to the *Times*. However, an obvious point to note is that, though he was rejected by it, he was nonetheless considered by the *Times* as a suitable candidate for its purpose. Moody's article

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[106] 'The Yule Log' is an American television 'show' which consisted of a looped recording of a log fire, broadcast at Christmas with the intention of performing the function of a log fire for those urban families without real fires.
[107] Rick Moody, 'On the Yule Log', *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 61-62 (p.61).

could have been published in the *Times* without this being a particularly unusual or noteworthy occurrence. This suggests the fluidity and constructed nature of the categories I am investigating. If Moody had been published by the *Times*, his identity would have been given an establishment boost, and this discussion would not exist. A writer's influence in literary culture is determined, in part, by the prestige of the forums in which they publish. To be published in the *New Yorker* or *Harper's* is good for a writer's position. Writers are associated with a certain status dependant on a consensus or aggregation of representations; the more a writer is represented in one position, the more stable this position becomes as characteristic of their literary identity. Another type of representation that contributes to the construction of a literary identity is being selected for inclusion in anthologies or periodicals. Moody's fluctuating status as potential-*Times* author and *Times*-criticising-*McSweeney's* author to some extent undermines his self-representation as rejecting the *Times*. He is both antagonistic towards yet ambiguously connected to the mainstream literary culture.

To further consider the implications of Moody's article, I want to fill out its context—what role does the *New York Times* play in literary culture?[108] As a newspaper, its connection to literary culture is not direct; however, my interest in the paratextual nature of literary interactions makes the position of the *Times* (as a widely read cultural mediator) useful for thinking about how literary trends are shaped. The *New York Times* publishes a list of bestselling fiction and non-fiction titles that can be understood as an important text in literary culture. Though this is not to be taken as definitive proof, a Stanford Business School study found that lesser-known writers received a significant boost to sales figures by appearing on the list (which is not a simple gauge of all books sold in America, but rather a more selective sampling of sales in certain bookstores).[109] To consider the culture of the *Times*, the issue that Moody's article was commissioned for can be used to sketch an impression of its literary agenda. The contributors' notes for the writers whose articles were published in the September 20 1998 issue of the magazine suggests the position it tries to take in literary culture:

> Richard Ford is a novelist.
> Robert Pinsky is poet laureate of the United States.
> Stanley Crouch is a writer based in New York.

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[108] As a newspaper its connection to literary culture may not seem immediately obvious; however, my interest in the paratextual nature of literary relationships makes the position of the *Times* (as an influential cultural mediator) useful for thinking about how literary trends are shaped.

[109] Marina Krakovsky, 'Readers Tap Best-Seller List for New Authors', *Stanford Business*, February 2005, http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/news/bmag/sbsm0502/research_sorensen_consumers.shtml, (Consulted 12 January 2012).

Daniel Menaker is the author of "The Treatment," a novel.

Ellen Gilchrist's most recent book is "Flight of Angels," a collection of short stories.

Interpreted as an epitext, this is a document of the literary establishment. The *Times* presents these writers as key figures in and symbols for its (the *Times*'s) conception of literary culture. Daniel Menaker and Richard Ford have a long history with the *New Yorker*.[110] By 1998, Ford had won several prizes for his novels and in 1992 edited the *Granta Collection of the American Short Story*. Robert Pinsky's position as poet laureate needs little elaboration—laureate status is one of the strongest accomplishments of an establishment writer. Ellen Gilchrist had won the National Book Award for Fiction and appeared regularly on National Public Radio. The *Times* used these writers to borrow their literary cache, perhaps to give their focus on the low-culture medium of television an intellectual perspective. Crouch, for example, applies the frame of literature to the prison drama *Oz* when he describes it as superior to 'the vast majority of our celebrated contemporary fiction' in its representation of race relations.[111] The roster of writers selected lend the *Times* their literary authority; these writers also receive a boost to this authority by virtue of their work being published in an established periodical like the *Times*. Rick Moody, by exclusion from this selection, did not receive the validation that the other writers did. His literary identity does not include '*Times*-published' as one of its components (though it does incorporate 'potentially-*Times*-publishable', as discussed above).

Moody's 'On The Yule Log' in one sense performs a simple role as the work of a peripheral writer railing against the establishment in a binary opposition; I read this performance as more significant for its ambiguity, for Moody's lingering connection to the establishment publication that rejected his work. What can this ambiguity tell us about literary cultures? Though Moody is a writer with a significant literary profile (proven by his potential *Times* status), he often chooses to represent himself as peripheral, as outside of the centre. Moody's novel *The Ice Storm* (1994) was adapted into a 1997 film directed by Ang Lee, starring Hollywood actors Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver, among others. Film adaptation is a clear sign of a writer achieving success, but Moody uses this incident to express his discomfort with this success. In an article for the literary journal *Zoetrope*, he discusses what he has gained from this adaptation: a wider audience and large financial recompense.[112]

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[110] Menaker was a fiction editor at the magazine for six years, and Richard Ford has had several fiction and non-fiction articles published in the magazine.

[111] Stanley Crouch, 'My Favorite Show; Oz', *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 September 1998, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/20/magazine/my-favorite-show-stanley-crouch-on-oz.html, (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[112] Rick Moody, 'The Creature Lurches from the Lagoon', *Zoetrope*, 5.3 (2001), http://www.all-story.com/issues.cgi?action=show_story&story_id=121, (Consulted 22 October 2013).

However, his representation of the experience of adapting his novel into a film is, to use his own term, one of 'ambivalence'. He discusses his discomfort with the physical attractiveness of the actors compared to his vision of his characters possessing 'bad skin, multiple canker sores, glasses'. He expresses unease at seeing his characters transformed from his conception of them. Moody's ambivalence suggests a performance, a self-identification as a peripheral, non-mainstream writer. He represents himself as detached from this process of the literary establishment. This conscious detachment is again contingent on a connection to the establishment, a connection that other peripheral/marginal writers might aspire towards and never achieve.

I read Moody's performance as a way of understanding the relationship between the writers featured in *McSweeney's* and the established literary culture. Moody's identity is a non-dichotomous performance: he consciously rejects a position in the establishment, yet frequently demonstrates and discusses his connection to said establishment. He does not occupy either side of a binary opposition of centre/periphery, but is nonetheless engaged with both. His identity can be read as a comment on the binary frame, treating the existence of both positions without being uncomplicatedly one or the other. This makes him a useful figure for the first issue of *McSweeney's*. (I will look at two writers whose identity can be more clearly understood in terms of a non-dichotomous literature below, in David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen).

Moody's persona can also be read to explore issues of style and literary technique—this is useful for understanding the implications of binaries like centre/periphery, in terms of how this can function in parallel with, for example, realism/experimental or tradition/innovation. In discussing literary technique, Moody actively constructs the centre and the style he perceives as characteristic of this. When Moody discusses where he feels his writing fits in, he often describes his work in opposition to a dominant norm; this from a 2005 *Atlantic* interview:

> Admittedly, I was not writing in the prevailing style of 1984: the style of Raymond Carver and, soon enough, of Richard Ford, Mona Simpson, and others of the dirty-realism school. These are writers I occasionally enjoy, so I am not denigrating the genre. I am merely pointing out that with an apparatus as inflexible as the corporate-era writing workshop, students will rarely have the chance to discuss approaches and ideas that lie outside a prevailing orientation, an already agreed-upon list of influences and/or values. Indeed, Carver and Ford are products not only of this corporate era but also of the Reagan-Bush period, so in a way the preference for them in a workshop setting is tautological: the system selects for itself, for its own kind of product.[113]

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[113] Rick Moody, 'Writers and Mentors', *Atlantic*, August 2005, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/08/writers-and-mentors/4101/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).

In this article for the *Atlantic*, Moody frames his own interest in experimental, innovative writing with reference to the tradition of 'dirty-realism'. This latter approach (also labeled 'minimalism' at times) is described as limiting a student's options. His contention is that the popularity of dirty realism is in part due to the tendency of writing workshops to both draw upon and perpetuate 'an already agreed-upon list of influences and/or values'. Moody constructs dirty realism as an institutional force; his alternative approach is not associated with these establishment values. Moody suggests that this approach to literary style is a symptom of larger societal issues that he finds problematic (e.g. his reference to a Republican ideology via the phrase 'Reagan-Bush period'). Moody goes on to suggest that the workshop system inculcates a fixed and repetitious approach to literature:

> Streamline, simplify, avoid complexity, avoid ambiguity, avoid heterogeneity: these are the hallmarks of such a philosophy. […] To the extent that a student comes to expect these questions, or to the extent that he or she writes in expectation of them, the likely product will be stories (or poems or essays) that reduce the chances of innovation, that ratify the workshop as a system, and that ratify the idea of the university but do little for the development of the form or for our language as a whole.[114]

When writers discuss their work their focus is often on writing style as a means of differentiating their work from another writer's. To discuss style allows a writer to discuss labour and the effect of individual exertions upon their output. Moody foregrounds style as a crucial factor in articulating his position on literary workshops; the 'hallmarks' of most workshops are streamlining and avoiding complexity, in his opinion. He regards this approach as discouraging innovation. Moody uses style as a means of separating himself from a certain group of writers; to express that he did not use the 'prevailing' dirty realism approach. Style is used by Moody as a performative indicator of one's position in literary culture; I want to further explore this performance, considering Moody's identity as manifested in other epitexts.

In a 2002 interview with Dave Weich promoting his memoir *The Black Veil*, Moody is asked to respond to the following view of literary style expressed by Richard Ford:

> I don't want to be e.e. cummings. I don't want to be interesting because all of the words are in the wrong order. I want to be interesting because all the words are in the order that I think make sense to the reader. And at the same time not sacrifice complexity, not sacrifice good sense, not sacrifice felicity, not sacrifice intelligence.[115]

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Dave Weich, 'Rick Moody is Just Some Guy', *Powells.com*, 19 May 2002, http://www.powells.com/authors/moody.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).

Ford's statement suggests a literary persona as a conventional writer. He dismisses experimental writing by referring to the experimental poet e.e. cummings and a practice that makes 'all of the words are in the wrong order'. This is an off-hand generalization about experimental writing. His use of 'wrong' is subjective; an experimental writer may believe their order is the 'right' order. Ford's approach to literature is represented by Weich as more or less reader-centred, privileging comprehension. By pitching Ford's view of language to Moody, Weich implies a binary conception of the two writers. Ford is the establishment figure, the conventional writer; Moody is the off-beat experimenter. Weich exploits this binary for rhetorical effect: he is seeking to have a combative interview with Moody and uses Ford's view of literary style to provoke Moody into formulating an interesting response. Weich has selected a quotation from Ford that has the potential to antagonize Moody, one that suggests to write experimentally is to not 'make sense to the reader'. Weich uses a conception of literary culture in which a logical opposition is to pitch Rick Moody versus Richard Ford: what is the significance of this? Ford seems appropriate as a comparison figure to Moody for various reasons: he had a piece on TV published in the *Times* issue that rejected Moody; Moody used Ford as an exemplar of dirty realism above. 'Rick Moody versus Richard Ford' can also be read as 'innovative versus traditional' or 'experimental versus realist'. Weich's opposition of Moody and Ford was framed within a discussion of literary style: by looking at Ford's literary identity (with particular attention to style), I hope to understand more about the implications of Weich's comparison and how binaries function in literary culture.

A sampling of evidence from Richard Ford's literary profile seems to suggest a representation of an establishment figure in American literature. He is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist who has a strong association with the *New Yorker* (useful given the status I assign the magazine in this thesis). An *Observer* writer staying in Ford's guest room considers the 'literary royalty' that could have stayed there.[116] Ford was asked by the *New York Times Book Review* to review Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, a novel lauded for its significance for American writing.[117] He has an article about the life of Raymond Carver in a *New Yorker* number contemporary to the first *McSweeney's*, bestowing an informal status as literary historian.[118] He has also been involved in the production of several

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[116] Phil Hogan, 'To be Frank', *Observer*, 24 September 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/24/fiction.features (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[117] Richard Ford, 'American beauty (Circa 1955)', *New York Times Book Review*, 9 April 2000, http://www.tbns.net/elevenkinds/richardford.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[118] Richard Ford, 'Good Raymond', *New Yorker*, 5 October 1998, 70-79; Rick Moody also has an article in this issue, a short humour piece about Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky: 'It Generally Leads a Solitary Life or Lives in Pairs', *New Yorker*, 5 October 1998, 116.

American fiction anthologies: Ford has edited the *Granta Book of the American Short Story* (1992, new edition 2007) and the *Granta Book of the American Long Story* (1999). He is a figure firmly entrenched in the American literary establishment. Even Ford's article in the contested *Times Magazine* suggests a conventional, static view of culture. He writes about *Mister Rogers*, a children's television series famous for its small-town America feel. Ford defends the potentially 'uncool' nature of his choice by evoking the positive implications of nostalgia:

> Who doesn't long for a daily sampling of idyllic life, a little good will, a little neighborhood of make-believe.[119]

Ford's nostalgic choice is useful here, suggesting retrospection, the valorisation of the past, of tradition over the new. With this evidence in mind, Weich citing Ford's view of literary style gives his view the authority of a conventional, traditional perspective. Ford is used by Weich as the establishment position for Moody to react against. The relationship between Moody and Ford is an analogue for Weich's conception of literary culture. Experimentation is at odds with tradition. Ford's derision of the 'e.e. cummings' approach to literature certainly implies an oppositional conception of literature on his part; again, this is not to suggest an ineluctable opposition on Ford's part—I am trying to show how representations such as Weich's function as strategic acts. This takes advantage of Ford's strong identity as an establishment writer. A binary conception of Ford and Moody is not the only way to figure them, but it is an evidently inviting one for an interviewer's purposes.

In the Weich interview, Moody articulates a more author-centred approach to style in response to Ford's view:

> There's a whole through line in American fiction going from Hemingway to Richard Ford that supposes that the most elegant style is the one that sheers (sic) away the most ambiguity, cleans out the most affectation, and leaves the most transparent style. My contention is that that style is just as stylized as an ornate style. Hemingway, clearly imitative of Gertrude Stein, the ultimate experimenter, was therefore a stylized writer. I'd say the same thing about Ford. […] In my style, the idea is that it's more ornate because that's what consciousness is. To the extent that it hurtles, that it's circular and hurtling, it's because that's how I feel consciousness is, that's what it's like to be a person. You don't have these perfectly transparent, simple thoughts. You have thoughts that are all cluttered up, like overused bookshelves.[120]

Moody argues that all 'style' is constructed, that there is no form of writing that is 'transparent'. In defending his own, experimental style, he sets forth a theory of literature that is close to the position I adopt in this thesis: that all categories are imagined constructs.

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[119] Richard Ford, 'My Favorite Show; Richard Ford on 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood'', *New York Times Magazine*, 20 September 1998, 23.
[120] Weich (2002).

These are aggregate concepts often retrospectively placed on writers and texts. The labels often reveal more about the labeler than the labeled, about their agenda in assigning writers to certain factions. It does not seem interesting merely to label a text or writer as 'oppositional' or 'indie'; it seems more useful to me to ask how these labels come to be attached.

The constructedness of these categories means that it can be possible to contradict them: just as I used epitexts above to categorise Ford and Moody as proponents of narrowly defined, opposing literary tendencies, I could also find material to identify them both as advocates of a more open conception of what literature can be—of a non-dichotomous literature. In recounting Richard Ford's visit to her MFA class, Catherine Lacey mentions a criticism of Moody by Ford:

> At one point Ford said, "Rick Moody, who I deeply disrespect, once said something about how there are only two kinds of writers: writers like Hemingway and writers like Beckett. I disagree with that… It's too narrow a perspective on what a writer can be… Writing is supposed to broaden your world, open things up… Rick is probably a nice boy, he just says silly things."[121]

Ford critiques the kind of binary categorization that I have earlier used him as part of. Here, he is not a spokesperson of the centre but an advocate of the redundancy of oppositional classifications. It is possible to convert Rick Moody by a similar deployment of appropriate quotation:

> What I want is for the house of fiction to have many windows. I think that there's a window that will suit Jonathan Franzen just fine. Meanwhile, I am so far from being a recommender of the post-ironic. I find that whole argument ("What we need is post-ironic literature!") vulgar and pedantic, brought to you by joyless "Morning Edition" listeners whose tote bags are too small to carry a range of items. It's not where I'm at at all.[122]

The above quotations from Moody and Ford are in a sense a defence of the *absence* of labels, and argue for a non-dichotomous literature strikingly similar to that advocated by Eggers in the *Better of McSweeney's* anthology:

> Both the random, the experimental, and the straightforward-and-gut-twisting can coexist, can inform each other, can cross-pollinate even, and we are all the better for it. Too often, the world of books goes through hand-wringing and then extermination, when the powers-that-be decide either that a) All books should be form-busting and structurally brave; or else the opposite, that all books that attempt in any way to move the medium of fiction in any new direction are practicing "gimmacry" or even "gimcrackery." […] If we can only remember— oh lord if only!—that we should be allowed to innovate, that the traditional can exist side-by-

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[121] Catherine Lacey, 'Vicarious MFA: Home stretch', *HTMLGIANT*, May 6 2009, http://htmlgiant.com/uncategorized/vicarious-mfa-home-stretch/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[122] Steve Kistulentz, 'from "Windows in the House of Fiction: An Interview with Rick Moody"', *Southeast Review*, 2007, http://southeastreview.org/2007/10/rick-moody.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).

side with the experimental, then we will all foster a far more healthy environment for the creation of great books.[123]

With the right evidence, Ford and Moody can both be represented as advocating the non-dichotomous approach to literature that I interpret the first *McSweeney's* as performing. Though I have just suggested the possibility of contradicting fixed binary positions such as experimental or realist, my overall contention is that writers like Ford and Moody are most frequently represented in one position—their literary identities are stable, I would argue. Binary positions are positions that are performed and constructed, both by critics and writers. *McSweeney's* seems to illustrate the possibility of something more fluid: contradictions in its identity suggest the unusual position it occupies. Focusing on Ford and Moody's personas allows a fuller understanding of separate binary poles; to look at *McSweeney's* and its position demands interrogating the idea of the binary itself.

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[123] Eggers (2005), pp.4,362.

Case study 3: "I seek a direct personal relationship with art."

Jonathan Franzen's literary identity is, unusually among contemporary writers, often framed in the context of the binary framework itself, rather than by locating his position at one end of its spectrum. His identity is figured as a writer concerned with the function of writing and literaturel this manifests in the types of interactions his work has with literary culture, and in the representations others make of him. He has written two essays that discuss the dichotomous nature of literary culture: 'Perchance to Dream: In the age of images, a reason to write novels' and 'Mr Difficult: William Gaddis and the problem of hard-to-read books' (both published in establishment periodicals, *Harper's* and the *New Yorker*).[124] His novel *The Corrections* (2001) won several awards upon its publication and was selected for Oprah Winfrey's book club. Winfrey regularly selected books to be discussed on her TV show, and any book selected would usually receive a massive boost in sales. Franzen publicly commented on his discomfort with Winfrey's approval, leading to the book being removed from the TV show. Without digressing into consideration of this incident, it is useful to indicate that his literary identity is often ambigious, straddling or crossing binary positions. To further illustrate this: in 2010, upon the release of his novel *Freedom*, Franzen appeared on the cover of *Time*, had his book selected Winfrey's book club again (this time accepting the offer), and had a story published in *McSweeney's* 37. My intention with this case study is not to position Franzen as a representative of a particular pole, but rather to use his identity as the basis of a discussion of literary binaries.

In 'Mr Difficult', Franzen sets forth his dichotomous view of literature:

> It turns out that I subscribe to two wildly different models of how fiction relates to its audience. In one model, which was championed by Flaubert, the best novels are great works of art, the people who manage to write them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it's because the average reader is a philistine; the value of any novel, even a mediocre one, exists independent of how many people are able to appreciate it. We can call this the Status model. It invites a discourse of genius and art-historical importance.

> In the opposing model, a novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience. Writing thus entails a balancing of self-expression within a group, whether the group consists of "Finnegans Wake" enthusiasts or fans of Barbara Cartland. Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust. This is the Contract model. The discourse here is one of pleasure and connection.[125]

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[124] Jonathan Franzen, 'Perchance to Dream', *Harper's Magazine*, April 1996, 35-54; (2002).
[125] Franzen (2002), p.100.

Franzen's categories of Status and Contract institute a clear binary division of literary culture. His categories are defined by the type of relationship they imagine between author and audience, and, pertinently for my purposes, the writing style they adopt to achieve this. Franzen seems to align two binaries in parallel: cultural position and literary technique.[126] He associates Status with mainstream/realism and Contract with peripheral/experimental. In Franzen's view, Status writers are experimental writers: writers whose work is valued for its difficulty (and occasionally for its rejection of Contract writing). Contract writers are practitioners of realism whose stylistic choice indicates a desire for their work to directly connect with readers in the most unobtrusive way possible. Franzen supports my interpretation of literary culture in highlighting that these approaches are constructs—that they emerge from shared values within a "community of readers", or involve attributions of "credit" in "discourse". Franzen's article itself is a continuation of the process through which the binary framework is constantly rearticulated and reaffirmed. If Franzen argues that the Contract model is a discourse of "pleasure and connection", I would turn the lens back onto Franzen and suggest that the discourse surrounding his work is one of debate and anxiety over position. Eggers's lamentation of the "hand-wringing" in literary circles cited above could describe Franzen's essays. His approach to literature seems to obfuscate some of its pleasures, a point I will return to later.

Franzen's article makes the experimental style of Gaddis its central concern; this topic is used by Franzen as fuel for Franzen discussing his own style and position. He discusses what he does not want his writing to be, via a lengthy discussion of his own experience of literature. According to his interpretation of the binary framework, Status writers do not necessarily intend to make their work difficult or hard to understand, but crucially do not prioritise the reader's comprehension of their work. Franzen's subtitle ('the problem of hard-to-read books') makes the ease of reading a book a crucial part of his evaluative criteria. Gaddis is criticized based on his writing being hard to understand. Franzen does not completely dismiss Gaddis's work, but it is the unpleasant experience he had in trying to read Gaddis's *J.R.* that is the basis for his discussion of the binary framework. Contract writing exists to meet a reader's demands. Literature is primarily judged not by any artistic merit, but by if a reader enjoys it. Contract writers aim for 'pleasure and connection'— dedicated to a broad, communicative function of reading.[127] Contract novels are easy to read,

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[126] Though the reference to *Finnegan's Wake* may appear to suggest that Contract writers can be experimental writers, Franzen's main argument with reference to experimental writing is its privileging of method over an audience's interest, as I will go on to demonstrate. *Finnegan's Wake*, with its reputation for being unreadable due to Joyce's dense style, seems a poor choice of reference.
[127] Ibid.

in other words. This attitude towards the function of literature is held to be the typical interpretation of literary realism, a label frequently placed on Franzen's work in the wake of *The Corrections*.[128] Realism involves reader and writer sharing a world, one that both feel can be represented and discussed through the medium of writing. Textuality, or the way a story is told, therefore exists primarily to facilitate communication with the reader. Considering the alternative, Franzen explores the function of the Status writer's style by way of explaining various critiques of this approach:

> To wrest the novel away from its original owner, the bourgeois reader, requires strenuous effort from theoreticians. And once literature and its criticism become co-dependent, the fallacies set in.
>
> The Fallacy of Capture, as in the frequent praise of "Finnegans Wake" for its "capturing" of human consciousness […] The Fallacy of the Symphonic, in which a book's motifs and voices are described as "washing over" the reader in orchestral fashion […] The Fallacy of Art Historicism […] where a work's value substantially depends on its novelty […] Or the epidemic Fallacy of the Stupid Reader, implicit in every modern "aesthetics of difficulty", wherein difficulty is a "strategy" to protect art from cooptation and the purpose of this art is to "upset" or "compel" or "challenge" or "subvert" or "scar" the unsuspecting reader.[129]

Franzen's attack on the Status model seems directed against the *response* to texts considered Status, not on the texts themselves; he is writing about literary culture rather than literature. He objects to the tendency for critics to valorize literary texts for their relation to social and cultural themes, rather than for their connection to a reader or community. The Contract model privilege's the text's relationship to the reader rather than its own context.

Franzen asserts that, though he began his writing career more under the sway of the Status model, he has recently converted to thinking of himself as a Contract writer. Franzen devotes much of the article to defining his own position. This appears to identify the motivation behind this article: that it is a self-interrogation rather than a theory of literary production. He is concerned with understanding the direction of his literary career, and in doing so imagines fixed categories that writers must be firmly located in. Franzen's anxiety over his own position may have led to his literary identity being considered in light of his theory: he is often discussed with reference to literary binaries. Ben Marcus's *Harper's* article imagines Franzen as a figure desirous of a place at the centre of literary culture:

> If not the best novelist of his generation, then certainly the most anxious—eager for fame, but hostile to the people who confer it—Jonathan Franzen has excelled most conspicuously at

[128] Paul Charles Griffin, 'Freedom by Jonathan Franzen', *Bookslut*, September 2010, http://www.bookslut.com/fiction/2010_09_016581.php (Consulted 22 October 2013); Blake Morrison, 'Freedom by Jonathan Franzen', *Guardian*, 18 September 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/sep/18/jonathan-franzen-freedom-blake-morrison (Consulted 22 October 2013); Joel Achenbach, 'Microreview: Freedom', *Washington Post* 22 September 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/achenblog/2010/09/microreview_jonathan_franzens.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[129] Franzen (2002), p.108.

worrying about literature's potential for mass entertainment. It's a fair worry to have, if vain, but he's been a strange and angry contender for the role, and the results have been spectacular, depressing, and confusing all at once. In reviews, essays, and lately even a short story, he has taken wild swings at some unlikely culprits in literature's decreasing dominance. In the process he has also managed to gaslight writing's alien artisans, those poorly named experimental writers with no sales, little review coverage, a small readership, and the collective cultural pull of an ant.[130]

Marcus in particular focuses on an article by Franzen in the *New York Times* on Alice Munro.[131] The primary conceit of Franzen's article is that Munro is not as successful as he believes her writing entitles her to be. Marcus's response points out that Munro is already successful by most writers' standards, and goes on to interrogate Franzen's conception of literary 'fame'. He challenges Franzen's view that to be a commercially successful writer somehow necessitates not being an experimental writer. Marcus argues against Franzen's connection of commercial success and literary prowess. My intention is not to take sides with either Franzen or Marcus, but to explore the implications of their disagreement. It is useful to note that I have traced this argument (and the terms of the argument) through texts published by periodicals. The *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and the *New York Times* have recurred in my investigation of this issue. These organs of the establishment literary culture provide stability for certain representations—repeated features on Richard Ford and Jonathan Franzen in the *New Yorker*, for example. In this way, periodicals aggregate the representations that comprise literary identity, that form the foundation of the division of literary production into centre/periphery.

David Shields, author of *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (a 'novel' that argues for a particular conception of reality and of writing's relationship to it[132]) has argued that these periodicals align themselves with a style associated with the literary centre.[133] In an interview with Caleb Powell on *HTMLGIANT*, Shields discusses the ideas of 'conventional fiction' and the 'traditional novel':

> CP: In their reviews…James Woods [*New Yorker* critic] defended the traditional novel, and Michiko Kakutuni [*New York Times* reviewer] attacked [*Reality Hunger*].
>
> DS: Neither of them talked about the book, they just mention it in passing. They are total spear carriers for conventional fiction…neither remotely engage with the argument. They mulch in a kind of drive by…Woods said something like…it's good to be reminded of these arguments but Shields needs to define his terms better. Michiko called it "deeply nihilistic," that's so…
>
> CP: It's not the sharpest comment…it reads as hyperbole. I mean, you say the novel is worthless, but you praise a lot of art.

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[130] Marcus (2005), p.39.

[131] Jonathan Franzen, 'Runaway: Alice's Wonderland', *The New York Times*, 14 November 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/books/review/14COVERFR.html?_r=1 (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[132] 'Novel' placed in scare quotes because Shields tries to enact his vision of the experimental work of literature in tandem with the manifesto itself, mixing fiction and non-fiction.

[133] David Shields, *Reality Hunger*, New York: Knopf (2010).

Powell clearly invites Shields to discuss the association of the *New Yorker* and the *Times* with conventional fiction; he is participating with Shields in the construction of the periodicals as having a specific literary agenda. Shields' description of the periodicals as 'megaphones' suggests he wants them to be considered as agents of propaganda rather than literature. That Shields brings the discussion round to the subject of Jonathan Franzen is a neat proof of his position in contemporary culture as an advocate of realism. Shields strengthens this representation by deploying it within his criticism of the periodicals: Franzen is mentioned in the same breath as two powerful institutions. Again, this is not to indicate that these periodicals are intrinsically 'conventional'—what I mean to illustrate is the way they can become *predominantly* constructed as conventional or as central institutions of literary culture, through repeated representations as such.

This kind of role is both imposed and adopted, however. One way to consider the *New Yorker*'s performance of a central literary position is in the types of writers it profiles. For example, if I was looking to reinforce this construction of the *New Yorker*, I could refer to Richard Ford's article 'Good Raymond' in the magazine. Ford uses the pages of one literary institution (the *New Yorker*) to canonise another—Carver, a key figure in American minimalism/dirty realism. One characteristic of mature literary institutions seems to be this overt advertising of and self-identification with their patrons/influences. This is not to say that the *New Yorker* is totally resistant to the inclusion of new writers, but that an inevitable stagnancy is produced when periodicals focus on a group of writers as representative of their style or tone. In the early 1990s the magazine began to reduce its fiction content, limiting itself to just one story per week outside of biannual fiction specials. Though they did publish some less-established writers in 1998, they also published (from fifty stories) three writers on three separate occasions, and another four writers twice. Of fifty stories, then, 35% were by writers who published more than once in the magazine, in the space of a year.[135] Ben Yagoda has claimed that the magazine can launch a young writer's career—it is because of this intense insularity that this is possible.[136] A small number of aspiring writers can benefit from an appearance in the *New Yorker*, but it does not function as a staging ground, a place for writers to develop. It may be apt that Stephen King's representation of the magazine was

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[134] Caleb Powell, 'The David Shields Interview (Paperback Edition)', *HTMLGIANT*, 8 March 2011, http://htmlgiant.com/author-spotlight/the-david-shields-interview-paperback-edition (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[135] Statistics author's own.
[136] Yagoda (2000), p.215.

as a 'Holy Grail'—an elusive, probably unattainable, and automatic route to one's goal.[137] Again, this is not a criticism of the *New Yorker*; rather, it illustrates the power its representations have in constructing literary identities.

My next case study will consider what kind of literary culture is constructed by the early *McSweeney's* through a discussion of David Foster Wallace's persona. Jonathan Franzen's literary identity manifests a persona closely involved with the boundary between literary positions. Franzen uses this unusual position to speak out for his favoured approach: Contract/realism. David Foster Wallace is also closely linked to literary dichotomies, but I argue that his writing advocates a non-dichotomous approach, demolishing rather than validating the binary. The rest of this chapter will be concerned with how this approach influences the founding myth of *McSweeney's* 1.

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[137] Stephen King, 'What Ails the Short Story', *New York Times*, 30 September 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/books/review/King2-t.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).

Case study 4: Looking for a Garde of Which to be Avant.

In a 2005 interview, Rick Moody issues the following rallying call to aspiring authors:

> I hope there are some obsessive, would-be experimentalist writers out there who are producing 1,500-page manuscripts as their first novels.[138]

With this statement, Moody makes an association between experimentation and length: a book is more likely to be experimental if it is long. The most famous contemporary text that is both experimental and long is David Foster Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest*, a 1000+ page novel that is regarded as one of the key works of late 20th century literature. I have already discussed the significance of Wallace for *McSweeney's*—this case study will explore more fully how Wallace and the early issues of the periodical advocate for a non-dichotomous literature. To draw upon the binary that Franzen outlined, Wallace and *McSweeney's* strive for a literature of Status and Contract, of pleasure and connection *through* experimentation. Difficulty is not shied away from, but can be considered a route to a reader's greater enjoyment of a text.

Wallace had a short story published in the first issue of *McSweeney's* called 'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (VIII)'. The story is a first-person account of a possibly autistic individual (who is also possibly sociopathic) narrating a bus journey taken with his mother to a plastic surgery clinic that she is currently in litigation with, while simultaneously recounting some of his own experiences with litigation in relation to his ownership of (possibly) venomous spiders. Its narratorial structure (unsignalled switching between multiple narrative threads), lack of resolution and dense, complex linguistic style could be used to make a representation of Wallace as a Status/experimental writer. 'Porousness' is undeniably a work of experimental literature. For the purpose of this chapter it would be convenient to use it as an example of Wallace's non-dichotomous writing—as a story that uses avant-garde techniques in service of an agenda of sentiment, of a return to feeling: values that bring the reader closer, rather than estrange them. Lee Konstaninou has argued that a characteristic strategy of Wallace's is to use experimental techniques to involve the reader more closely in the production of meaning, thereby inculcating an ethos of sincerity through this closer communication (if a reader works to achieve meaning, they trust it more or it has more resonance, this theory holds).[139] Both the opening sentence and the title of the story indicate the responsibility Wallace's fiction places upon the reader. The

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[138] Kistulentz (2007).

[139] Lee Konstaninou, 'Wipe that smirk off your face: Postironic Literature and the politics of character', Stanford University doctoral dissertation (2009), p.190.

story opens with 'Then just as I was being released…'; this in media res beginning forces the reader to orient themselves immediately in the narrative environment with no introductory material. Similarly, the title's inclusion of the words 'Yet Another' implies a larger context to this story that is not supplied. The reader is shown but denied the possibility of exposition. The narrative also places demands on the reader. The entire story is one unbroken paragraph, and the narrator switches between three plot threads in apparently arbitrary fashion: 1) describing his mother's medical history 2) recounting an incident with spiders and a young boy in/around his (the narrator's) garage 3) an account of a bus journey with his mother. A representative extract:

> And the long and perpendicular seats in the front comprise a good vantage point from which to watch the driver wrestle with the bus. Nor did I have anything against the boy in any way.[140]

Here, plot 3) in the first sentence suddenly switches to plot 2) in the second; that Wallace uses 'Nor' to imply a non-existent link between these sentences furthers the possibility for confusion. The reader is led to expect some kind of connection that is simply not there— Wallace lays a trap for the reader that must be overcome. This approach to plot is a more direct example of Wallace requiring the reader to participate in the production of meaning— separating and then resolving these plot threads requires overcoming Wallace's difficulties.

To what effect does Wallace direct his avant-garde writing? 'Porousness' tells the story of an unusual individual interacting with a society that he is not quite in sync with—his style of narration suggests deeper psychological problems. The story contains esoteric subject matter (spider-collecting) and hints at malevolent incidents (boy being bitten by said spiders) that further the unusual tone of this story. The 'misfit' narrator nevertheless has a positive relationship with his mother, escorting her to her medical and legal appointments and gaining satisfaction from this role:

> It is ironically for just such a case that I am her public escort, with my imposing size and goggles one can tell beneath the face's insane rictus she believes I can protect her which is good.[141]

The protagonist's difference could be considered analogous to literary experimentation: rendering its subject outside of an establishment, ostracized. The conclusion to the story suggests rehabilitation: of both the narrator's unusual personality traits within a family environment, and of an experimental approach to literature reconciled with an (attempted)

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[140] David Foster Wallace, 'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders', *McSweeney's* 1 (1998), 27-32 (28).
[141] Wallace (1998), 32.

attention to its readers entertainment. Wallace's story reflects the fact of his inclusion in the first issue of *McSweeney's*: that his presence signals their intention to advocate a non-dichotomous literature.

In the introduction to this chapter I have already sketched Wallace's proposed model of literature: that an experimental aesthetic can be combined with a thematic sincerity akin to that achieved by realism. I also cited Eggers's statement that 'we could not start the [*McSweeney's*] journal without him'.[142] What are the key components of Wallace's approach, that were so desirable for the early *McSweeney's*? Wallace has an overriding commitment to the reader's experience; his ultimate goal being a pleasurable connection with the reader. He described the experimental structure and style of *Infinite Jest* as designed to equip the reader for understanding the book and therefore its themes.[143] The novel's central plot (of an avant-garde film so addictive/entertaining one cannot stop watching it) has a parallel in the avant-garde style of the novel: once the reader gets to grip with the latter, it arguably becomes difficult to stop reading. The avant-garde becomes a vehicle for Wallace's writing about addiction and empathy. The film so-good-you-die-watching-it in the novel is viewed via a television-like technology (*Infinite Jest* being set in the near future sees television replaced with cartridges viewed through teleputers). That this addictive film is viewed through a successor of television resonates with Wallace's non-fiction writing on late-20th-century literature: he argued that it was influenced by the impact of television on society, in particular its adoption and repurposing of the techniques of 1960s postmodernism. Adam Kirsch describes Wallace's essay 'E Unibus Pluram: television and U.S. fiction' as explaining how television 'encourages intelligent viewers to develop a defensive irony' in response to passive conception of banal content.[144] Kirsch argues that Wallace connects this kind of irony to the ironic self-reflexivity of modern American fiction; that both, in Wallace's words, make 'displays of emotion look ridiculous'.[145] Experimental literature, in Wallace's view, had become empty, too concerned with displaying its own technical brilliance at the expense of making this interesting for the reader. He associates both the writers of this kind of fiction and late-20th century television culture with 'cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist post-WWII literature'; both these groups have absorbed lessons and techniques from the work of writers considered postmodern like John Barth, Robert

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[142] Eggers (2009), 38.

[143] Lipsky (2010), p.36.

[144] Adam Kirsch, 'The importance of being earnest', *New Republic*, 28 July 2011, http://www.tnr.com/article/books/magazine/92794/david-lipsky-foster-wallace-pale-king (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[145] Wallace (1997 [1993]), p.37.

Coover, and Thomas Pynchon.[146] Both fiction and television have become increasingly self-referential, Wallace argues, with the aim of positioning the reader/viewer as an observer impressed with the skill with which self-referentiality is displayed. He refers to adverts that mock their status as adverts, television shows about the making of television shows, and fiction that foregrounds its own fictionality as examples of this phenomenon. In this practice, the reader/viewer is invited to appreciate the creator's use of irony, through which they distance themselves from the conventions of their form: the possibility of genuine communication (an advert that says what is good about a product, for example) is rendered ridiculous. This irony engenders a cynical approach to the world. Wallace's conclusion to 'Unibus', already cited earlier, expresses a desire to recuperate traditional values: 'To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama'. This is what readers come to read fiction for, he argues. He does not reject postmodernism completely, however, but expresses a desire to combine the tools of literary experimentation with the pleasures of realism. Jonathan Franzen, speaking about his friendship with Wallace after the latter's death, has said that one of their few shared literary principles was that 'fiction is a particularly effective way for strangers to connect across time and distance'.[147] Franzen pursues this aim through realist methods; Wallace through experimental. I want to explore the possibility of considering *McSweeney's* as a literary movement attempting to follow Wallace's lead.

Frequent reference is made in response to *McSweeney's* to a writer's decision to embrace sentiment: this tendency seems to highlight Wallace's influence on the project. Marshall Boswell, in his book on Wallace, calls *McSweeney's* an 'imprint specializing in funny, heartbreaking "post-postmodern" works'.[148] Though his use of 'post-postmodern' is satisfying for my desire to connect the strategies of Wallace and *McSweeney's* (given the prevalence of the term in response to Wallace's work), his use of 'heartbreaking' is more relevant, suggesting as it does the critical tendency to characterize *McSweeney's* as a sentimental movement.[149] Maud Newton refers to 'post-ironic sincerity' as a key feature of the *McSweeney's* project.[150] Melvin Jules uses 'wonder' as a unifying term for writers of the movement.[151] Garth Risk Hallberg references 'irony and sincerity' as part of the periodical's 'whimsical' aesthetic.[152] These terms are generally positive or neutral ways of representing

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[146] ibid.

[147] Stephen Burn, 'Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No.207', *Paris Review*, 195 (2010), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6054/the-art-of-fiction-no-207-jonathan-franzen (Consulted 22 October 2013).

[148] Boswell (2003), p.20.

[149] 'Heartbreaking' is also a reference to Eggers's first novel, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.

[150] Newton (2011).

[151] Bukiet (2010).

[152] Garth Risk Hallberg, 'Draft Dave: Why Eggers Should Edit the Paris Review', *The Millions*, 17 February 2010, http://www.themillions.com/2010/02/draft-dave-why-eggers-should-edit-the-paris-review.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).

the periodical's work. When confronted by the amassed textuality of the periodical, writers often respond with generalisations about the tone of the publication. Firstly, by virtue of choosing to make generalisations, critics are automatically or unconsciously aggregating the work of *McSweeney's* writers, finding that something that is present in a relatively significant level in the writing it publishes. This is not a guarantee or proof of a concrete influence of Wallace; it demonstrates affinities, a similarity in motives and execution.

There is another trend in *McSweeney's* response that Hallberg hints at by his use of 'whimsical': critics referencing emotion/sentiment, but doing so with more negative connotations. Kirsch suggests in jest that the *McSweeney's* writers believe 'goodness is part of aesthetic achievement'.[153] This translates sincerity into something less substantial; less of a literary ambition than a pose, the kind of detached performance Wallace critiques in 'Unibus'. Similar views on the *McSweeney's* set include: 'semi-precious', 'insufferably precious', 'true-heartedness', 'possessing an orientation to childhood', 'winsome', and, an adjective I suggest as crucial to understanding the project's reception, 'quirky'.[154] 'Quirky' as an adjective indicates an off-beat difference from a norm, but it is a loose term that does not provide much information on what precisely is unusual or different about *McSweeney's*. It indicates, I suggest, a perceived lack, an emptiness. The quality of these generalisations point to a difference in response to the work of *McSweeney's* and that of Wallace. It is perhaps the demands of describing a group of writers that inculcates a more modest form of description; however, where Wallace is almost universally discussed as an innovator, *McSweeney's* writers are often imagined via an agglomeration of references to their approach as driven by sentiment or characterized by a light-hearted emptiness. The discourse surrounding Wallace is one of genius and interrogation of the function of literature. The discourse surrounding *McSweeney's* is more moderate than this. There appears to be something less radical in the perception of the work of *McSweeney's* writers, in comparison to that of Wallace; the ways in which critics think about *McSweeney's* may not accommodate such thoughts as 'groundbreaking' or 'revolutionary'. My suggestion is that Wallace's literary methods have been translated, or to some extent diluted, into less challenging forms by the writers of *McSweeney's*. One way to understand this is to consider

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[153] Kirsch (2011).

[154] Sheila, 'McSweeney's is looking for Senryu and Pantoums *Only*', *Gawker*, 3 March 2008, http://gawker.com/363124/mcsweeneys-is-looking-for-senryu-and-pantoums-only (Consulted 22 October 2013); Matt Cornell, 'Comment on 'This is bullsht'', *Lindsayism.com*, 6 April 2007, http://www.lindsayism.com/2007/03/this_is_bullsht.html (Consulted 22 October 2013); Lee Siegel, 'The niceness racket', *New Republic*, 23 April 2007, http://www.tnr.com/print/article/the-niceness-racket (Consulted 20 September 2010); Mark Grief cited in A.O. Scott, 'Among the believers', *New York Times*, 11 September 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/magazine/11BELIEVERS.html (Consulted 22 October 2013); Burn (2004); Charles McGrath, 'Does the Paris Review get a second act?', *New York* Times, 6 February 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/06/weekinrevie/06mgr.html (Consulted 21 August 2010).

Wallace's techniques utilized with less commitment or skill; this is not meant as a criticism of these writers as Wallace's achievements are difficult to match. However, it could help my investigation to consider the content of *McSweeney's* as expressing Wallace's ambitions in a refracted fashion—not trying to replicate his work but influenced by its aims and strategies.

How does Wallace's approach manifest in *McSweeney's* 1, then? The periodical form allows for several ways in which this could be detected. I will look first at voice and tone for a consideration of how the periodical 'speaks', as it were. I will then look at the issue's literary content, to more closely interrogate its performance of a non-dichotomous literary method: does it uses innovative form to enhance a reader's experience of the text? The first issue establishes the voice that many of the above descriptions of the periodical respond to. The cover contains several sections of centred text, with one small line illustration of a boat. This cover is a kind of editorial page, providing various humourous descriptions of the issue's content and objectives. The first words on the cover are 'Because there is still so much mis-understanding'. This suggests *McSweeney's* as a publication able or at least proposing to clear up said misunderstanding, to conquer difficulty and divisions. The issue's cover presents an immediate statement of the periodical's tone, a performance that plays with the issues of irony and sincerity: one section of the cover provides a list of principles apparently important to the *McSweeney's* project:

> *Believing in:* Indulgence as its own sticky, strong-smelling reward;
> *Trusting in:* The time-honored bread sauce of the happy ending;
> *Eschewing:* The recent work of Saul Bellow;
> *Waiting for:* The likely second coming of Olaf Palme;
> *Still thinking about:* How the lockout will affect the NBA's long-term fan base;
> *Relying on:* Strength in numbers, provided those numbers are very, very small;
> *Hoping for:* Redemption through futility;
> *Dedicated to:* Stamping out Sans Serif fonts.[155]

This piece of writing creates irony through a juxtaposition of a serious tone and less serious content. The seriousness of the verbs that introduce each principle is undercut by, for example, the reference to a basketball strike in the fifth principle, describing a happy ending as 'bread sauce', or the grandiloquence of 'eschewing'. There is also a rejection of Saul Bellow, whose late writing is important for American literary realism, followed a few lines later by a critique of the popularity of certain fonts in contemporary publishing. The network of cultural references is wide, and could be used to construct *McSweeney's* as a high-low postmodern enterprise. The tendency for critics to gloss the periodical's tone as whimsical

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[155] *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), cover.

or quirky may derive from performances like this. My analysis of this section of the cover is not meant to carry the weight of Wallace's influence alone; obviously this unusual blend of sincerity and irony is reflected in other elements of the *McSweeney's* editorial voice.

The journal uses the copyright page at the front of the issue for a paratextual editorial column introducing the new publication—each subsequent issue of *McSweeney's* also does this. This page is conventionally used by periodicals to provide details on where/how a text has been published, staff information, contact details, submission policy, and other related information. The copyright pages of the first four issue feature increasingly elaborate submission guidelines that illustrate the complex irony of its editorial tone. Most literary journals have brief statements of what types of material they will consider (e.g. prose, poetry, etc), and will usually impose a word-limit on writers, in line with the length of typical features the journal publishes. In Issue 1 the *McSweeney's* guidelines include this statement:

> The standard length for articles is 785 words. Deviation from the standard length of 785 words must be accompanied by a compelling note of explanation.[156]

It may seem obvious that *McSweeney's* is not actually asking writers to submit only articles of 785 words. Given the unusual literary forms present in the first issue, it may be that they are setting a semi-serious challenge for writers. It could also be a signal of their interest in literary experimentation, by making a ridiculous stipulation to be rebelled against. The conventional function of submission guidelines is to impose limits on writers, to highlight what a periodical will not accept. By setting an obviously ridiculous word-limit, they implicitly suggest that they are open to all kinds of submissions; this self-referential irony brings the reader closer to the text, rather than distancing them.

This approach is partly what has led commentators to critique *McSweeney's* as 'whimsical' or 'precious'—if one does not align with the irony behind the statement, the voice comes off as empty, showy performance. These criticisms seem to be directed against the use of stylistic experimentation, that it is innovation without purpose—Wallace's aesthetic reused with less proficiency, perhaps. Much of this criticism seems directed against the editorial voice of *McSweeney's*, rather than the literary content it publishes. This has two implications: to validate the editorial material of *McSweeney's* as a literary (para)text of import and to occlude the content of the periodical, the short stories and non-fiction the periodical was established to disseminate. There is a certain logic to focusing on the editorial

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[156] *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 2.

voice of *McSweeney's*: it is something that it is possible to identify as unique to the periodical, and provides a semblance of a consistent narrative through which a critic can discuss the periodical's activities. To write about its fiction and non-fiction is a more challenging prospect, a problem discussed earlier. The content of the first issue is mixed. It has some conventional features that one expects in a periodical: an editorial, a contents page, a letters page, contributor notes. None of these, however, function in a conventional way: they all practice some kind of self-referential irony, being periodical features *about* periodical features.

The editorial is contained in a peritextual space usually reserved for copyright information, as discussed above. The contents page does not simply list the title of a story or article and its author, but instead provides a more subjective gloss on each item's value:

> Section one: "Earth"
>
> I.—In which Neal Pollack examines important things, in four parts, using his words like beautiful bombs…19.
> II.—A chart that in short order makes clear certain things about the overall state of contemporary affairs…26.
> III.—In which David Foster Wallace, who recently bought his father's car for $1, weaves his spell, in this case with a host of grammatical horrors, which a reader should assume to be outside the control of this journal's editorial staff, which could not necessarily be counted on to notice and fix them, even had they been charged with the task of doing so…27.
> IV.—A writer, unable to sit silently by, speaks out. By Zev Borow…33.[157]

The letters page is a regular feature of many periodicals, but it is unusual for a letters page to appear in the first issue of a periodical—the letters cannot be responding to anything regarding previous issues of *McSweeney's*, but are instead fictional letters (from real contributors). Some of the letters are in conventional letter-to-a-journal form, but others seem like short stories or monologues transplanted into the format of a letter. A letter from Morgan Phillips discusses a short film script that is published in full later in the issue. Tish O'Mara's letter contains two ideas for jokes, but not jokes. John Hodgman's letter is ostensibly to his cousin Josh, and doesn't address *McSweeney's* in any way. The contributors notes contained at the rear of the issue further this unconventional use of conventions; the notes are:

> Accompanied by notes about the inspiration behind the pieces in question, written not by the authors themselves but instead by Adrienne Miller, before she read the stories in question or knew the authors responsible.[158]

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[157] *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 4.
[158] *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 138.

All of these features resist the function periodicals traditionally use them for. Issue 1's peritexts all provide an unconventional periodical frame for the reader. These are playful experiments with the form of the periodical; a formal playfulness that reflects the light-hearted editorial voice. These pieces involve a similar use of irony, creating distance between the form of the text and what its form is used for; using a letters page to publish a short story, for example. Whether this type of irony is inclusive, persuading a reader of the value of *McSweeney's*, or whether it is exclusive, alienating them, is to some degree dependent on the approach of each reader.

The remaining content of Issue 1 of *McSweeney's* features five short stories, four non-fiction articles, approximately twenty-nine pieces of humour writing, and one miscellaneous piece.[159] The humour pieces are short (a couple of pages or less) which partly explains their high number. The early issues of *McSweeney's*, however, featured significantly more humour content than later issues, when the *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency* website became the forum for this. The fiction content of *McSweeney's* 1 provides a useful corpus for considering the manifestation of Wallace's non-dichotomous ethos.

The majority of the stories in Issue 1 utilise first-person narration. This means an absence of third-person omniscient narration, a tool associated with realist fiction (though not exclusively). Omniscient narrators allow various effects and realist writers often use this device to create distance between narrator and character, to facilitate authorial comment on a text's events. In the stories of Issue 1, first-person narration is generally used to elide distance between the reader and a story's protagonist. This is designed to enhance the unusual or esoteric character of each narrator, I contend. The reader is confronted with the strangeness of the narrator, without being given someone else's perspective on them. The work necessary to resolve this strangeness is the reader's responsibility. Neil Pollack's piece 'Man's Fate---98: Learning to Love Again, A Story in Three Parts' has four (sic) stories from the same narrator.[160] The stories describe, retrospectively, an encounter with a horse trainer which ends wiith the reporter taming a wild horse; a visit to Albania to investigate the hardships of a 23-person family; the narrator's experience with internet celebrity; and the difficulties involved with him being irresistible to women sexually. The first person narrative voice allows Pollock to write statements like:

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[159] This is an approximate description because of the unconventional nature of certain pieces such as Tom Junod's short piece 'J.H.C.' (43-45) about Jesus Christ joining a circus, which could be considered a short story or a humour piece (I have classified it as humour owing to its short length and lack of character development); the miscellaneous piece is Mary R. Gallagher's 'Have You Ever *Been* to Portland, Maine?' (79-81), which tells a story through blueprints, and is thus difficult to categorise.
[160] Neil Pollack, 'Man's Fate—98: Learning to Love Again, A Story in Three Parts', *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 19-25.

> The tragic last years of a centuries-old way of life are nothing compared to my wine-dark soul's screaming need for redemption.

> Later, a man is impaled on a stake in the town square. I want to ask: For what crime? But I do not speak Albanian.

> For a few brief minutes every day, somewhere in the world, my little web page was helping to ease the pain of genocide.

> One grows tired of having an opera singer grinding on one's face while a conceptual artist sucks mightily between one's legs.[161]

The absurd voice of Pollack's narrator carries much of the humour in this story. The ridiculous statements made by the narrator engage the reader with trying to appreciate Pollack's intention. Out of all the fiction published in the first issue, Pollack's comes closest to being the 'empty' contemporary fiction Wallace discusses in 'E Unibus Plurum'. It strays towards performing the narrator's absurd persona for its own sake, though perhaps the layering of the four narratives mitigates this. As discussed earlier, it is not the responsibility of an individual story to carry the burden of being an exemplar of non-dichotomous literature; *McSweeney's* aims to achieve this through the collective effect of the issue's content.

Other stories in the issue demonstrate unusual narrative voices. Wallace's socially difficult protagonist in 'Porousness', as discussed above, demonstrates a similar absurd persona amplified by first-person narration. Arthur Bradford's story 'Mollusks' uses the first-person to juxtapose a straight-talking narrator with the unusual event described (finding a giant slug in an abandoned car). The narrator speaks in a style that appears both simplistic and naive:

> Under the seat of an old Ford I found myself a silver cup. Solid silver, imagine that.

> Who are we to decide the fate of the earth's creatures? It was the Mollusks, after all, who first inhabited this earth. They roamed the land for millions and millions of years before any of us were born.[162]

The qualities of Bradford's narrator are not there to demonstrate the writer's skills at rendering an unusual voice, but to contrast with their ordinary behaviour. The narrator is in love with his best friend's girlfriend; this is not there for the writer or reader to pity, but to empathise with. Bradford's story seems to enact Wallace's desire for writers to 'risk accusations of sentimentality'; the narrator is earnest and could be subject to mockery, but Bradford holds back from this, allowing the reader to make their own judgement. 'Young

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[161] Pollack (1998), 21, 22, 24, 25.
[162] Arthur Bradford, 'Mollusks', *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), (55-59) 55, 59.

Professionals' by Courtney Eldridge has a narrator whose neurotic nature is communicated in the first person:

> But after I moved to my own apartment, I realized that if something happened to Jessica, and she died, I would inherit her cats, and I just don't have enough room for her cats and my cat, when I finally adopt Roy, if I'm accepted as a responsible owner. Besides which, the cats might not get along, and because I gave Jessica my word, I would have no choice but to carry out her dying wishes. Really, I would have no choice but to move, after she died—although I wouldn't mind an extra room—like a one-bedroom with a bedroom would be nice. So I simply asked her, Will you provide for the care of the cats in your will, so I can move to a larger apartment? and she said I would be the sole benefactor of her estate, on the condition that I cared for her cats, and then we agreed.[163]

Eldridge's story is little more than a monologue that displays her narrator's difficulty adjusting to everyday life. As with 'Mollusks', this story does not represent an unusual character to encourage the reader's disdain or pity towards them. This dominance of first-person narrative, in combination with unusual but sympathetic characters, suggests the possibility of describing the first issue of *McSweeney's* as possessing or manifesting Wallace's aims. Its writers seem concerned with bringing readers closer to their characters, rather than distancing them through irony or judgement.

This approach to fiction, combined with the presence of Wallace (and the knowledge of Eggers's valorisation of Wallace) allow for a reading of Issue 1 as a performance of the ethos of *McSweeney's*: alerting readers to the periodical's intention to become a forum for a non-dichotomous literature. *McSweeney's* 1 sets forth a founding myth for the early stages of the periodical, but does not define its overall output. I have already discussed the difficulty involved in representing serial text; it is possible to observe the early identity of *McSweeney's* being deployed inaccurately by critics. In a 2011 article, Ruth Franklin makes the following description of the early periodical to portray it negatively:

> ...a certain type of experimental short story that was on the rise in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Pioneeered by the literary magazine McSweeney's, which Dave Eggers created in 1998, this type of story substituted a generic nihilism for the kind of epiphany that had characterised the traditional American "New Yorker short story." Closely associated with Eggers and his literary model, David Foster Wallace, these stories typically included a catalogue of puns, typographical quirks, and other linguistic cutenesses that quickly turned distracting. They rejected traditional notions of structure, character, or coherence for a lugubrious fictional haze in which ideas and images seemed to float free, unhindered by structure. Sentences followed upon each other apparently at random; characters would appear without intorduction and disappear without warning. (A set of facetious manuscript guidelines published in an early issue of McSweeney's warned that "material possessing beginnings, middles, or ends will be read with suspicion.") These stories could be as whimsical as elementary-school compositions—and about as meaningful.[164]

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[163] Courtney Eldridge, 'Young Professionals', *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 63-76 (70).
[164] Ruth Franklin, 'What a difference a decade makes', *Prospect*, 14 December 2011, http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/american-short-story-21st-century-new-yorker-mcsweeneys/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).

This attack can function as a coda to this chapter: it references several of the features I have been discussing (innovative style, editorial voice, 'whimsical' as a gloss for esoteric) and uses them to construct a specific identity of *McSweeney's* as a champion of a narrow form of literature. Franklin uses this evidence to argue that the periodical inculcated a style of fiction that was meaningless. This seems a reductive perspective that fails to engage with the periodical's content, preferring to represent the early McSweeney's as an empty text to draw a comparison with what she views as its more mature later work. Franklin fails to achieve a satisfactory representation of *McSweeney's*: her approach to interpreting the periodical comes at the expense of understanding the project in its entirety.

My next chapter tries to address the problem of narrow representations of *McSweeney's* by exploring how the periodical itself attempts to represent its entire output. Where this chapter has focused on how a single issue performs an identity for the periodical, my next chapter will try to understand how *McSweeney's* makes representations of its publication spectrum. This chapter has looked at the first issue as establishing the myth of *McSweeney's* as an advocate of a non-dichotomous literature, a periodical that tries to avoid entrenched positions. The periodical is more than its first issue, however, and its identity is constructed of multiple texts. As discussed in my introduction, I am aware of the difficulties involved in defining something characterized by resisting a stable position. In my third chapter, I explore the strategies that *McSweeney's* uses to deal with this problem, looking at representations that attempt to describe the ethos of the project, such as anthologies and editorial statements.

Chapter 3: Performing the idea of McSweeney's.

Given the diversity of texts published by the *McSweeney's* periodical, there are multiple answers to the question: 'What is *McSweeney's*?'. Is *McSweeney's* a journal that only publishes articles that a group of friends had rejected from other periodicals? Is it a literary organ specialising in quirky humour? Is it an advocate of experimental fiction? *McSweeney's* is a text which is taken to mean many things to many people; each of the preceding perspectives were argued for in some form in my previous chapter. There are competing versions of the periodical's identity, and this phenomenon is encouraged by its shape-shifting activities. In this chapter I explore the various ways that *McSweeney's* performs its own identity. I have discussed its founding manifestoes as constructing an identity as a champion of non-dichotomous literature, and I will now look at other identities that are imagined by *McSweeney's* texts. These identities take the raw material of its textual activity and distil an overall identity from it. The resulting representations situate specific elements and themes as key centres of meaning for the project; these will be interrogated for the motivations of those making the representations, and for understanding more about how *McSweeney's* functions.

The type of performed representation that I devote most time to in this chapter is the periodical anthology. An anthology is a strategy for mediating the serial textuality of a periodical: they are single texts that distill the published contents of several texts, self-conscious attempts to represent a periodical's spirit, to fix in place a certain identity. At the centre of any periodical anthology is an implicit construct: a conception of the significant themes and motivations of a periodical, as shaped by its editors. These texts therefore invite us to think about how these identities are constructed, and to what degree they provide a faithful representation of the periodical experience. Anthologies are key texts for interrogating the concept of representativeness. This chapter looks at how *McSweeney's* use anthologies, and how these texts represent the periodical's spirit. Anthologies are useful as discursive elements: they provide periodicals with discrete identities, deliberately occluding the majority of their published work to create a streamlined single text. They allow the entire periodical to have a concrete existence in a published object; if the complete textuality is not accommodated by an anthology, they at least allow an attempted construction of this to be a participant in literary culture.

My first section considers more broadly the notion of representativeness to understand what strategies and decisions are involved in making a representation of a periodical, and what function these have. I will look at paratexts that provide a representation of the spectrum of *McSweeney's*. This section establishes a framework for thinking about the ways that periodicals are mediated, and how these representations select/frame periodical content. Any way that periodicals make representations of themselves can be considered with reference to the questions 'what is it representative of, and how?' As discussed in my introduction, their serial textuality means that any representation of a periodical is an imaginative construction of some sort—my focus is on this process of performance.

My second section considers the uses *McSweeney's* make of the anthology form to understand how they perform their own identity. I want to analyse the anthology as a literary tool by looking at the distilled identities of *McSweeney's*, or, more specifically, the factors involved in constructing these identities. It has released several collections of material during its publication history, and each of these construct discrete versions of what *McSweeney's* stands for. When considering what is representative of *McSweeney's*, my intention is to explore how a non-dichotomous literary agenda functions for an ongoing, serially produced text. The problem I want to investigate is how a coherent identity can be extracted from or mapped onto the massive volume of text produced by a periodical predicated on indeterminacy, resisting any fixed positions. Since there is no such thing as a typical issue of *McSweeney's*, the strategies used to synthesise its output into an ostensibly typical form deserve analysis. The shape-shifting form of the periodical, for example, is impossible to accommodate in a single anthology text. By representing the vast amount of work published by the periodical according to a limited sample, these anthologies create a representation of *McSweeney's* that fixes it in place and obscures its heterogeneity. I argue that these anthologies perform a different *McSweeney's* to the identity established in its early issues. There is no fixed idea of what *McSweeney's* is or is not; the representations that these anthologies make will be analysed to understand what functions their creators intended them to have, and how they interact with other *McSweeney's* texts.

The final part of my chapter develops my focus on the anthology by looking at Issue 10 of *McSweeney's*. This issue has a double life as a number of the periodical and as an anthology co-published with the large press Vintage. This production fact creates two identities for the same collection of stories: Issue 10 is the tenth iteration in the serial text that is all the issues of *McSweeney's* to date, but it also has an existence that I argue is separate from the

periodical, as an anthology of (ostensibly) genre fiction. This is one of the most widely read and widely available of all *McSweeney's* issues, and serves an important function in constructing the periodical's identity as a result.[165] The interaction between these identities is productive for considering the periodical's performance of its own identity: Issue 10 plays with static representations, resisting being confined to a single position. By the end of the chapter I will consider how this functions as a representation of the identity of *McSweeney's*: if it is appropriate to consider a playful mixture of contradictory approaches as representative of a heterogenous serial text. Issue 10 is a pseudo-anthology that encourages thinking about how identities are formed and what is representative of specific literary movements.

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[165] As a rough indication of this, the *Treasury* has over 2,000 ratings on the book-review sharing website *GoodReads*, compared to 562 for Issue 13, 335 for Issue 20 or 253 for Issue 23. (http://www.goodreads.com/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&query=mcsweeney%27s, consulted 18 August 2013).

Performed identities.

I detailed earlier in my thesis some of the paratextual strategies that periodicals can use to represent themselves. This section explores the function of these strategies to understand the decisions involved in such representations. I look at how *McSweeney's* and other periodicals use editorials and websites to perform their identity, considering the elements rendered crucial to the periodical's identity, and what has been omitted.

To take a brief sampling of literary periodicals which have some kind of editorial presence: *Tin House* provide an 'Editor's Note' that gives a combination of subjective assessment of the contents and process notes (e.g. 'As surprising as this last convincing feat of imagination was to us, we were more surprised to find that this story—pulled out of the nearly thousand submissions we receive each month—was written by a sixteen-year-old'); *n+1* have a letters page which features replies from editors; *Fence*'s editorials often interrogate the publishing climate (e.g. 'Clearly, the task of highlighting the absurdity of the industry's marketing practices while testing the rigidity of conventions present in literary journal publishing is a difficult task').[166] These features seem appropriate for their respective periodicals: for example, *Fence*'s engaged editorials reflect its origins as a publication set up to explore and push the potential of literary journals; *Tin House* create an intimate tone that connects it with its small community of readers; *n+1* is a title keen to open up dialogue and debate, and an interactive letters page bolsters this aim. The periodicals select editorial strategies that perform the apparent aims of the periodical.

Literary periodicals often do not use editorial columns, perhaps because their editors prefer their identity to emerge from the work they publish. Notable periodicals that do not feature an editorial include *Granta*, the *Paris Review*, *Poetry Review*, and the *New Yorker*. The effect of this on their identity is to shift responsibility for articulating the periodical's identity onto the imagined spectrum constructed by its content and form. The absence of visible editorial features in the *New Yorker* is a strategy for establishing a strong identity for the magazine's creative staff. The *New Yorker* resists the features that would provide evidence of direct editorial intervention: editorial opinion pages or an editorial masthead. The magazine does feature contributors notes and a letters page (albeit without editorial response), but these are all relatively recent additions, and it did not have a contents page for the first forty years of its existence. Article bylines were for a long time placed at the end

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[166] Rob Spillman, 'Editor's Note', *Tin House*, 7.4 (2006), 5; e.g. *n+1*, Fall 2009, 211-215; Charles Valle, 'Editor's Note', *Fence*, 9.1 (2006), vi-vii (vii).

rather than the start of a piece. This reluctant approach to foregrounding the periodical's creation is a legacy from its origins in 1925: according to Ben Yagoda, its founder Harold Ross expressed the opinion in letters and memos that the magazine did not need a voice discrete from that represented by the sum of its contents.[167] The *New Yorker* does not talk about itself because it exists to provide a perspective on American culture, and its content provides sufficient material for discussion. What can be considered its voice is rendered *passim*, absorbed and rearticulated by its creators so that it permeates their work in the magazine. The absence of an editorial voice, or the framework of an editorial presence, constructs a representation of the magazine's ethos by default: as focused on its content rather than itself. Ross was the director of the *New Yorker* machine, but was insistent that evidence of his involvement never appear in the magazine text. Similarly, in film texts, the involvement of a controlling director (especially in the case of auteurs) is rarely signalled, but rather implicit in the structure and unity of a film's communicative act. Periodical 'directing' involves coordinating and assembling the work of many towards a unified goal. We can discern the work of the editor in the structure and coherence of the magazine, how it articulates a consistent identity. The *New Yorker* became successful due to the combined efforts of dozens of writers, artists and editors, by articulating a style that is the product of many but which can be expressed by an individual.

McSweeney's creates its editorial identity by giving the periodical a direct voice: each issue features an editorial column which utilises the collective 'we'. That this is a collective voice suggests an affinity with the *New Yorker*'s approach, reducing the presence of a single editor in favour of a unified identity. I have already discussed the editorial page of the first issue of *McSweeney's*: the periodical regularly repurposes its copyright page as a location of their editorial column. Where *McSweeney's* use periodical features they do so to play with or destabilise their conventional function. The editorial voice created is one that foregrounds the periodical's unpredictable nature. This voice develops over the course of the *McSweeney's* publication, and a narrative can be read from this voice of performing the periodical's preferred identity, of its avoidance of fixed positions. The first editorial counters the professional production of the issue with an expression of a DIY sentiment:

> This journal was typeset using a small group of fonts that you already have on your computer, with software you already own.[168]

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[167] Yagoda (2000), p.43.

[168] *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 2.

The suggestion to the reader is that this periodical is not a sophisticated project, that it could be made by the reader too. It alludes to a homemade aesthetic that is at odds with the issue's form. This seems to collide the fields of professional publishing and zine/DIY publishing—zines being mainly produced by a small number of individuals with limited/no access to large-scale printing equipment. Most zines are single-purpose, i.e. they have one topic, usually one which its creators feel is not covered by mainstream media; these vary from political or social issues to local bands, artists and writers.[169] By juxtaposing the aesthetics of zines and professional publishing, the *McSweeney's* editorial performs the project's distance from both fields, articulating a space outside of traditional literary confines for itself. Though this approach to editorial voice is not conventional, it does provide an anchor for regular readers: it is one of the few predictable features of *McSweeney's*, something that contributes to an overall identity for the periodical.

Having an unusual editorial voice becomes one of the conventions of the first dozen or so issues of *McSweeney's*. The voice could be described as having a tone of amateur professionalism: expressing a bashful incompetence that is contradicted by the high-quality product the reader holds. The tone expresses confidence in their endeavour while communicating a kind of astonishment at this confidence. The editorial-copyright pages of the periodical's issues frequently offer this to the reader as an interpretation of its ethos. Each editorial incrementally constructs this voice: the important elements are present to varying degrees in each editorial, and no single text carries the responsibility of defining the voice, much like the way an overall identity is constructed for the periodical. The spectrum of the *McSweeney's* editorials begins with a periodical labouring to articulate its place in literary culture. Its early editorials are long documents, up to three or four pages that provide a variety of production information (including the costs of printing and disseminating the current issue or submission guidelines), in addition to anecdotes of the staff's activities (such as purchasing stamps to label envelopes, the personal significance of the periodical's name to Eggers), comments on the contents of the issue (through unusual methods like pie charts or subjective labelling of how funny a story is; discussions of differences between solicited and non-solicited material) and consideration of shifts in the type of content the periodical is publishing. The maximalist early copyright pages illustrate a periodical seeking to establish an identity. The editorials erect a scaffold of the non-dichotomous agenda I have associated with the early *McSweeney's*.

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[169] The first issue of *McSweeney's* arguably meets this criteria, with its main feature being material that had been rejected by other periodicals. Its forms of dissemination also resonate with zine production: word-of-mouth marketing and being sold in independent bookstores and by mail.

By the time *McSweeney's* enters double figures, its editorial pages become smaller, as the editors appear to find it less important to inform its readers quite so expansively as in its early issues. Several issues in the latter part of the *McSweeney's* spectrum do not feature any editorial content, with the masthead only providing editorial credits.[170] This suggests a shift in the type of identity the periodical is performing: where the early *McSweeney's* made concerted efforts to distinguish its identity as different from other periodicals, the later *McSweeney's* seems to be more assured. The later issues which feature editorials provide different types of information, to further illustrate this maturity: Issue 37 focuses on the health of book publishing and literary rates; Issue 35 has a nostalgic revival of the letters page; 31 is a valorisation of their internship programme.

Where editorials provide a peritextual space for periodicals to perform their identity, a more common first encounter with texts comes in epitextual fashion—through texts that exist separate from and external to a primary text like the *McSweeney's* periodical. This kind of representation can be constructed by observers/critics/readers, in terms of reviews or word-of-mouth recommendations; it can also be constructed by the periodical's creators to attract readers, in the form of advertising. Websites provide the most common form of contemporary advertising for periodicals, replacing print advertising. A presence online is now so expected from cultural institutions that to not have a website or social media presence would be a bold statement of intent. Websites offer periodicals the possibility of reaching potential readers and persuading them to buy their print editions. The methods that periodicals use to pursue this can be instructive for considering their identity-construction. The *New Yorker* launched its website in 2001, with significant redesigns in 2007 and 2010. Prior to 2010, all content from the current issue of the periodical could be found online. The website erected a paywall in 2010: some content is available for free on the site, but the exact replication of the print issue is gone. Users wanting to read the entirety of the magazine must subscribe to the print edition, even if they only want to read it online. This suggests an emphasis on the print periodical as the primary text; the *New Yorker*'s web editor, Blake Eskin, has said that the goal of its website is to 'generate print subscriptions' as these are essential to the magazine's longevity.[171] To prevent readers from accessing the entire content of a periodical online is to assign a value judgement to the protected material. The *New Yorker* imply their content is of sufficient quality that readers should pay to access it. This strategy is in contrast to one of the mottos associated with the expansion of the

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[170] Issues 25, 29, 38, 39, 40, 41 feature no editorial, for example.

[171] Dan Levy, 'The *New Yorker* on Brand: Q&A with Web Editor Blake Eskin', *Sparksheet*, 3 March 2010, http://sparksheet.com/the-new-yorker-on-brand-qa-with-web-editor-blake-eskin/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).

internet: information should be free. In adopting the use of a paywall the *New Yorker* is asserting the primacy of the print periodical over its web existence. The website exists as a companion to, not a replacement for, the serial issues of the *New Yorker* published weekly.

The website features additional content that is designed to supplement the material produced by the physical periodical. The *New Yorker* has in recent years expanded its website to include a variety of free features to enrich the reader's experience of the print periodical, or to encourage non-readers to subscribe. The website has several blogs devoted to topics presumed relevant to its readers: 'Daily Comment', 'News Desk', 'Culture Desk', 'Sporting Scene', 'Photo Booth', 'Back Issues', and the 'Political Scene', among others. The writers of these blogs highlight content from the print issues of the magazine, generate their own material, and link to relevant items from other sources. These blogs allow for more editorial visibility than the format of the print issue does, as editors and writers use the format to give insight into their process. A Photo Booth blog post, for example, provides more information on the photographer Martin Roemers, one of whose pictures accompanied a short story in a September issue of the *New Yorker*.[172]

The magazine has also branched into social media, using Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr to highlight content from its website and print issues. One recent use of this technology saw the magazine's Facebook page allow access to an article behind its paywall in return for 'Liking' the *New Yorker* on Facebook.[173] This increases the audience for the *New Yorker*'s posts on Facebook. The article was written by Jonathan Franzen, somewhat fittingly for my purposes: Alexa Cassanos, media spokeswoman for the magazine, said that this article was chosen because Franzen's style represents the type of writing the staff believe is characteristic of the *New Yorker*.[174] Eskin has discussed the *New Yorker*'s use of the web as designed to foreground its 'brand' values: 'excellence, polish, depth'. He describes the intention behind the *New Yorker*'s online presence as attempting to reach audiences that may or may not have encountered the magazine before, something now made easier by the internet.[175] The print periodical remains the primary text in this case, but its staff seem to have been directed to distill its essence into how they use new media. This is reflected in the focus of the web content being the process of creating the print issue, or continuing the style and perspectives argued for by the print periodical.

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[172] James Pomerantz, 'Martin Roemers's Swirling Megacities', *New Yorker*: *Photo Booth*, 18 September 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/photobooth/2012/09/martin-roemers-metropolis.html (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[173] 'Liking' is a function for users to indicate a favourable opinion of a post or page on Facebook.
[174] Todd Wasserman, 'The *New Yorker* Puts Jonathan Franzen Story Behind a Paywall', *Mashable Business*, 11 April 2011, http://mashable.com/2011/04/11/new-yorker-jonathan-franzen/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[175] Levy (2010).

Eskin's reference to the *New Yorker*'s 'brand' indicates the incorporation of marketing principles into the operation of a cultural institution. In this instance, Eskin is making a representation of the publication history of the *New Yorker* by highlighting elements of its style and its approach to journalism and fiction (by describing it as possessing 'excellent, polish and depth'). This strategy blurs the line between representations of and by a periodical: as he is a *New Yorker* staff member it counts as a representation 'by' the periodical, but it illustrates a strategy that is more commonly practiced by those external to the magazine, i.e. writing *about* the *New Yorker* necessitates choosing certain features to define the magazine by, at the expense of others.

Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency, much like the *New Yorker*'s site, began as a companion to the print periodical. It began by publishing humour content similar to that featured in the first few issues of the periodical. The *Tendency* could be considered as an ongoing advertisement for the entire *McSweeney's* literary project, much like I will argue its anthologies are. It is connected to the *McSweeney's* online store and regularly promotes its periodicals, books and other items. One way to consider the *Tendency*'s content would be to view it as a strategy to draw visitors to the site to make purchases. While this would be a cynical perspective, it is nonetheless worth observing that announcements of new *McSweeney's* books are frequently situated at the top of the *Tendency*'s homepage. The site features no paid advertising, and its survival is dependent on the financial health of *McSweeney's*. The site attracts visitors to the *Tendency* and has the potential to introduce them to the periodical and other project. However, there is not a strong correspondence between the periodical and the *Tendency*'s content: the latter does not reflect what is featured in the print periodical, and this seems to be part of a determined strategy on the part of the *McSweeney's* editors.

The *Tendency*'s focus on humour content could be considered an extension of the first issue of *McSweeney's*. As well as several pieces of fiction and non-fiction, Issue 1 of the periodical contained a large selection of humour writing. The first issue's 'Television Advertisements, Reviewed with Great Passion' feature, for example, practices a similar strategy to the *Tendency*'s 'Reviews of New Food' section.[176] Issue 1 also featured verbal cartoons, a playful take on the *New Yorker*'s cartoon tradition—a paragraph of text in the centre of the page describes a visual image, and a caption is featured beneath. This format is

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[176] Ted Rall and Paul Tullis, 'Television Advertisements, Reviewed with Great Passion', *McSweeney's*, 1 (1998), 135-137; 'Reviews of New Food', *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, http://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/reviews-of-new-food (Consulted 22 October 2013).

adapted for the *Tendency* in the Dan Liebert series 'Verbal Cartoonist'.[177] The website, launched soon after the publication of Issue 1, took on the role of *McSweeney's* forum for humour, and the periodical began to focus more on fiction and non-fiction. As the periodical began to publish less humour content, so the website came to develop a fuller set of categories in which to publish the great variety of writing it was receiving—from the umbrella category 'Lists' (e.g. 'Important Instructions for the Babysitters of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Children', 'Literary Symbols I Fear I Over-Use', 'Types of People and Things That Have Been Shot By Charles Bronson') to more specific sections like 'Non-Essential Mnemonics' and 'Dispatches from the Napoleonic Wars at the Met'. Their use of the short form flourished online, and the website is now an extensive archive of over a decade's worth of humour content. *McSweeney's* have published several collections of humour content collected from material published on the *Tendency*. The *Tendency* represents something that was a key part of the identity of the *McSweeney's* periodical, but it has taken over the role of humour publisher, disconnecting it in a sense. It has taken on a parallel position where it is part of the wider *McSweeney's* project, rather than a companion to the periodical.

The *Tendency* is a literary publication in its own right, with a readership and identity distinct (if not totally separate) from that of the periodical. It has a larger readership than the periodical, and has published the writing of hundreds of writers, compared to a more modest estimate of dozens in the issues of the periodical.[178] The *Tendency* was an interactive website from its inception—it accepted submissions of content allowing anyone to be published by *McSweeney's*. They also hold contests to award small financial remuneration in exchange for regular columns on the site. This openness to a two-way relationship with readers would seem to make *McSweeney's* ideally suited to taking advantage of social media tools like Twitter and Facebook to enhance their reading community. However, their use of these methods to date has been tentative and mostly unilateral. A typical sample of messages posted on their Twitter feed would include links to recent *Tendency* features, promotion of new books released by *McSweeney's*, mention of events featuring *McSweeney's* writers, or retweets of coverage of their work by other outlets. They have not taken advantage of the possibility for responding directly to readers or soliciting ideas for new features. Their social media presence seems to exist as a notional extension of the *Tendency*. It functions to allow

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[177] Dan Liebert, 'Verbal Cartoonist', *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency* (2006-2009), http://www.mcsweeneys.net/columns/dan-liebert-verbal-cartoonist (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[178] Rough figures of respective readerships provided by Eli Horowitz (then-Managing Editor of the Quarterly), Letter to author, 31 December 2008.

readers and internet users to easily share and disseminate the work of the *Tendency*. The use of social media by *McSweeney's* attests to the influence and status of the *Tendency*—they do not use Twitter and Facebook to actively increase the visibility of the material on the site, but rather to facilitate and allow sharing of this content. This manifests the confidence of the *McSweeney's* team in what they are publishing, and suggest their latter status as a mature literary institution, rather than a publication keen to attract new readers.

While the content of the website is markedly different to that of the periodical, they share an aesthetic sensibility. The design of the website takes its cue from the text-heavy covers of the early issues of the periodical. The *Tendency* to this day publishes its content in Garamond 3 centred on a white background. This minimalism is not forged from necessity, but a deliberate attempt to focus the reader's attention on its content; the website has been redesigned to incorporate more advanced coding, but the designers retained the simple layout despite the opportunity to make this more complex. This formal affinity should not be underestimated—as my next chapter will cover, a considered approach to design is one of the small number of characteristics that can be reliably used to describe the entire spectrum of the periodical. That the *Tendency* uses a design that can be located in the early issues of the periodical is a formal cue to suggest unity between the different content featured in both media.

Anthologies.

Anthologies are determined performances of the identity of a periodical. They distill the immense variety of dozens of texts into a single, ostensibly representative text. They provide the opportunity for periodical editors to construct a type of fixed identity that is not otherwise possible—serial texts, as discussed, resisting this. My focus in this section will be on how periodical anthologies perform an identity for their parent texts. Most anthologies can be considered as gateway texts, acting as an introduction to the serial experience of a periodical, with the potential to attract new readers. An important factor in how this is achieved is how the anthologies represent their parent periodical: if the stories within accurately summarise the type of fiction it typically publishes (if this is even possible is another question I will consider); if the design of the anthology is similar to the design of the periodical; if it is framed in a way that encourages further engagement with its source text. Anthologies act as envoys of a periodical into literary culture, and therefore must provide an experience to a potential reader that is not dissonant with the actual experience of the periodical.

The *New Yorker* has published several anthologies during its history. In the mid-20th century it published selections of its short stories at the end of each decade; these anthologies featured stories the magazine's editors decided were most representative of its literary agenda. The implicit logic of this approach is that of an archive: curating the most valuable items from its collection, the *New Yorker* distills its output into only that of the highest quality. Ben Yagoda argues that the early anthologies were designed to articulate an identity for the magazine as a home for serious fiction; letters between Harold Ross (editor) and Katharine White (fiction editor) see the latter describe her pride in their fiction content, and a desire to raise the profile of this.[179] These anthologies advertise the excellence of the periodical's content. They are not embellished with introductions or elaborated with notes from the writers, as some contemporary anthologies are. They also have a practical function: published at a time when access to back issues of the *New Yorker* would be difficult, they provided a service for readers wishing to read old stories, or perhaps to consider the development of their approach to fiction. The anthologies shape this potential reading strategy: by creating the possibility of reading its content historically they presume the demand for this. As a commercial strategy, it is a way to aid the long-term survival of the periodical, by contributing to an identity for the *New Yorker* as a publisher of quality fiction,

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[179] Yagoda (2000), p.5.

attracting readers to the magazine via the anthologies. The *New Yorker* has more recently started to publish different types of anthology, which I will discuss in comparison with the *McSweeney's* anthologies below.

The first *McSweeney's* anthology, *The Better of McSweeney's*, is a relatively conventional example of a gateway anthology, designed to provide an introduction to the periodical.[180] This anthology, despite the deliberately 'off-beat' title, is conventional in that it makes an attempt to represent the spirit of its parent periodical both in terms of form and content. Anthologies are not obligated to take on similar form to their periodical—the *New Yorker*'s collections are immediately divorced from the magazine because they are released in book form. However, these anthologies attempt to replicate some of the *New Yorker*'s native style, through typesetting and design decisions. Anthologies should remind readers of their parent periodical. The obvious difficulty with *McSweeney's*, then, is the absence of a consistent form to mimic. The *Better* adopts several formal quirks that have been present in some of the early issues of the *McSweeney's* periodical: perfect binding, heavy cardstock cover, embossed text, unusual illustration on cover. These provide a suitably *McSweeney's* 'feel' to the book, but by default the anthology cannot mimic the form of the periodical.

One aspect of *McSweeney's* that an anthology cannot represent is the ever-changing form of the periodical. The nature of a single anthology negates any possibility of representing a reader's experience of the physical form of *McSweeney's*. It is possible to imagine a physical text that would achieve this: a sutured cut-up of sections of the first ten issues, each story extracted from its native number and reassembled into a Frankenstein anthology. This type of collection would be both expensive and unwieldy, but would represent the issues of *McSweeney's* with more accurate resemblance. Another possibility would be to release multiple anthologies with different forms, but this disperses the intended function of a single anthology: to attract readers to the periodical via a single text. To place responsibility on anthologies for representing the fluctuating form of *McSweeney's* would, in effect, create a replica *McSweeney's*. The *Better* seems designed to attract readers rather than replicate the periodical; this is why the second volume of the *Better* does not take a different physical form to the first anthology. To publish a book using the same physical form as a previous iteration seems anathema to the ethos of *McSweeney's*, but is deemed appropriate for its anthology series. It is not necessary for its anthology series to adopt the same formal practice as the periodical; the periodical's formal innovation is a response to the repetitive

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[180] Dave Eggers (ed.), *The Better of McSweeney's*: *Volume One – Issues 1-10*, San Francisco: McSweeney's Books (2005).

form of the conventional periodical. The anthology does not have to respond to the periodical paradigm, and has its own function and responsibility separate from this.

The *Better* tries to provide an experience that evokes a reader's encounter with a single issue of the *McSweeney's* periodical. It has the lush production values of all *McSweeney's* issues; it has an introduction 'hidden' in the copyright page at the front of the book, like the editorials from all *McSweeney's* issues. The creators of the anthology have clearly tried to create an unusual book, one that reflects the periodical's attention to form. This does not come with the attendant implications that the periodical's formal practice does, as it does not participate in a spectrum of shape-shifting form. It is simply a well-made book. It does, however, function as an advert for the interest of *McSweeney's* in creating texts valued for their physical form. It provides a gateway introduction to the world of beautiful *McSweeney's* books, and therefore utilises a synthesis of the periodical's form.

The form of the *Better* argues that it is a representative *McSweeney's* text, borrowing and recycling formal devices from the first ten issues of the periodical. In the introduction to the anthology (contained within the copyright page, again to fit with a *McSweeney's* tradition), Eggers makes the statement that I use in my introduction as an illustration of their non-dichotomous agenda:

> The random, the experimental, and the straightforward-and-gut-twisting can coexist, can inform each other, can cross-pollinate even, and we are all the better for it.[181]

Eggers uses the occasion of a retrospective anthology to try and summarise the periodical's agenda. The *Better*, therefore, invites being judged by this standard. It makes a claim for the diversity and innovation of *McSweeney's*; a claim that I will go on to argue the anthology itself does not live up to. This is not a flaw: the *Better* is designed to attract readers to the periodical, and has no mandate to copy the activities of the periodical. It does, however, bear some responsibility to provide a relatively accurate representation of what the periodical does, and my investigation of its content will consider how a reader's experience of the anthology compares to an encounter with the periodical.

The list of writers that are featured in the *Better* is a paratext that represents the periodical's activities: it suggests what writers are perceived by *McSweeney's* to best represent *McSweeney's*. The contributor list is one possible text used by potential readers to decide on whether or not to read the anthology; "big-name" writers like Lydia Davis and David Foster

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[181] Eggers (2005), p.4.

Wallace thus function as symbols of the periodical. The selection of stories in the *Better* affords the periodical the opportunity to represent its own history. It is not a completist survey but rather a selection of what its editors believe are the best stories it has published, or, if not solely this, perhaps a collection of material that represents the spirit of the first ten issues. The writers chosen are thus a statement of this ethos—readers encountering the anthology experience the periodical's spirit through those selected.

One way to consider the roster of the *Better* is to cross-reference it with the first anthology produced for the UK market, *The Best of McSweeney's Volume 1*.[182] The UK *Best of* does not exactly replicate the *Better*, with different writers selected for different literary tastes (presumably). Of the eighteen stories included in the UK collection, twelve appear in the *Better*. This doubling provides a powerful validation of these stories's writers as crucial figures in the *McSweeney's* project. The writers who appear in both anthologies are:

Amanda Davis	Paul La Farge	David Foster Wallace
Arthur Bradford	William T Vollman	Zadie Smith
Ann Cummins	George Saunders	Rick Moody
Kelly Feeney	Rebecca Curtis	Jim Shepard

There are some interesting points to note about this list: Dave Eggers does not feature, though one of his stories is collected in the *Best of*; though stories are included from the 'genre' collection of Issue 10, arguably none of those included would be classed as classic genre texts (this will be developed in my next section). The presence of David Foster Wallace and Rick Moody supports my use of them as key *McSweeney's* writers in my second chapter. The repetition of these twelve writers between the two anthologies creates a static field of writers who are imbued with the quality of being 'a *McSweeney's* writer'. The anthologies combine to construct a fixed representation of what the periodical is and what type of writing it publishes. This is something also contributed to by, for example, writers appearing in multiple issues of *McSweeney's*, but anthologies have a more significant role in performing a fixed image of a periodical.

The editors of the anthologies chose to represent the periodical by selecting from a small pool of writers, omitting a large number of others and implying that these writers more strongly embody the ethos of the periodical. It is not that these anthologies provide an experience that is distinctly un-*McSweeney's* in quality; the stories contained within introduce readers to the type of writing that has been featured in the periodical and is likely to be featured again. My claim is not, furthermore, that readers encountering the *Better* are

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[182] Dave Eggers (ed.), *The Best of McSweeney's Volume 1*, London: Hamish Hamilton (2004).

going to be dissatisfied if they subsequently read the periodical. It provides a version of an encounter with *McSweeney's*, but one that is unchallenging when compared to an encounter with the spectrum of the entire periodical.

I interpret the *Better* as creating a representation of *McSweeney's* that does not replicate the experience of the periodical. It is not that the *Better* is flawed—it contains stories whose content could motivate readers to seek similar work in the periodical—but that the essence of experiencing *McSweeney's* is missing from the text. If anthologies provide examples of periodicals representing their identities, what it means to experience their texts, then all anthologies will always be in some sense failures, because they are single texts that cannot accommodate the multiplicity of a serial periodical. Anthologies serve other important functions for periodicals, but they become problematic when considered as a periodical's envoy into a wider literary culture. That anthologies are by their nature unrepresentative of their parent periodicals is a problem amplified by *McSweeney's*. A static anthology, the *Better* is antithetical to the performed ethos of *McSweeney's*, i.e. its non-dichotomous agenda. It is a static anthology that offers little experimentation with the format of the anthology. It does not capture what is held to be essential about *McSweeney's*, instead creating a fixed individual text. The anthology serves a function as a potential introduction to *McSweeney's*, but it cannot replicate the experience of the periodical as a serial, shape-shifting text. All representations of a periodical involve sacrifice, and in the case of the *Better* what is lost is the experience of encountering multiple different texts, of experiencing the diversity of reading the periodical 'naturally'.

Anthologies serve to attract readers to a periodical, and if their purpose is not to replicate the experience of the serial periodical text, they nonetheless have other functions in literary culture. They can be used to target more specific niche reading (or purchasing) groups. These type of collections disperse the periodical's spirit, fragmenting it into multiple identities; these partial identities can still be useful for thinking about how the periodical editors conceive its function. Recently the *New Yorker* has modified their approach to anthologies and moved towards publishing thematic collections: stories or articles that are focused on a specific type of content. Some examples: *Wonderful Town: New York Stories from the New Yorker* (2000); *Christmas at the New Yorker: Stories, Poems, Humor and Art* (2005); *Fierce Pajamas: An Anthology of Humor Writing from the New Yorker* (2001); *The Only Game in Town: Sports Writing from the New Yorker* (2010); *Life Stories: Profiles from the New Yorker* (2000); *Secret Ingredients: the New Yorker Book of Food and Drink* (2007);

Nothing But You: Love Stories from the New Yorker (1997); *20 Under 40: Stories from the New Yorker* (2010). This approach alters the function of the *New Yorker* anthologies: rather than encourage engagement through the quality of its short stories, they fragment the magazine, suggesting multiple entry points.

Given the greater ease with which a reader can now access back issues of the *New Yorker* (as well as DVDs/hard drive there is now online access), this anthologising strategy suggests a desire to make a connection with niche markets, or at least test a broader strategy. This could be considered both an editorial and a commercial decision. Dispersing the magazine's best work into several anthologies allows more financial return on its content, and produces several texts that can be marketed to specific consumer groups (sports fans, Christmas shoppers, Valentine's gift-buyers). From an editorial point of view, it foregrounds the periodical's diversity of content, the existence of several anthologies for separate aspects of the magazine a testament to the wide range of writing it publishes. Taken collectively, they reflect the fragmented and diverse textuality of periodicals. Taken separately, however, these anthologies do not communicate a coherent identity for the *New Yorker*. By choosing a specific feature to highlight as an important element of a periodical's identity, something is inevitably omitted from its amassed textuality. These *New Yorker* anthologies turn this situation into a productive problem, focusing exclusively on a single element. A further effect of the multiple anthologies is to complement the *New Yorker*'s wide range of writing with an implicit depth of quality: if the magazine can support several different anthologies, then its content must be of high quality.

The *New Yorker*'s various anthologies represent the periodical's identity in differing ways. The collections of food, sports, Christmas and romantic content are more obviously commercially motivated than some of the other titles, targeted as they are at niche purchasing groups or opportunities. The other anthologies, which focus on the *New Yorker*'s fiction, profiles and humour content, provide gateway representations, texts that are designed to encourage readers to purchase the magazine. These types of content form a strong part of the periodical's identity. The anthologies like *Wonderful Town* and *Life Stories* provide readers with a microcosmic version and summary of certain aspects of the magazine's ethos. Considered in relation to a primary text of the entire textuality of the *New Yorker*, these anthologies are paratexts that prepare readers for an encounter with the magazine. As discussed above, these representations can only ever be incomplete. *Wonderful Town* makes a certain representation of the *New Yorker*'s style of fiction that

necessarily occludes a great deal of what it actually publishes. Specifically, the anthology's selection criteria of only including stories about New York reinforces a bias occasionally discussed of the magazine mainly publishing material about its titular city. The magazine publishes both stories and articles about locations beyond New York, but this anthology plays on the stereotype to some extent, with the potential effect of falsely advertising the periodical.

McSweeney's have also published several types of anthology—though not as many as the *New Yorker*, presumably because it does not have as much material to draw on. In addition to two *Better* collections, *McSweeney's* has published three anthologies specifically targeted at the British market, several books of humour material, a cartoon book, a collection of poetry, and a monograph on the subject of the periodical's design. These perform a similar effect of fragmenting its overall identity. The British anthologies—the *Best of McSweeney's* volumes 1 and 2, and the *United States of McSweeney's*—serve a similar function to the *Better*s, in representing the periodical's work for an audience that has likely not encountered it before.[183] Going further, however, they represent the periodical to British readers who may never have the possibility of encountering the periodical. They feature several stories extracted from the periodical and utilise design principles similar to those that inform the periodical. The two *Best Of*s are small-format hardbacks with vibrant colours and Victorian-inspired design (though neither book has much in the way of formal innovation). The large-format *UsoM*, on the other hand could be mistaken for an issue of *McSweeney's*, with embossed gold text, raised ink illustration, and a land/water motif on the cover that continues inside on two-tone endpapers. These anthologies differ from the *Better*s because they are targeted at a British audience: they are gateway texts for British readers to encounter and/or subscribe to the periodical. They also represent potentially the only encounter a British reader will have with *McSweeney's*, due to the varied publishing fortunes of the periodical in the UK. *McSweeney's* was published in periodical form by Penguin for a number of years but this arrangement recently ceased. Copies of the periodical are still available to purchase on certain bookstores as imports, though these are more expensive than if one were to buy them in America. Similarly, it is possible to subscribe directly to *McSweeney's* as an international reader, but the shipping costs and exchange rate make this less convenient for British than for American readers. The British anthologies therefore have an extra responsibility: to potentially be the only encounter that a reader has

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[183] Eggers (2004); Dave Eggers (ed.), *The Best of McSweeney's Volume 1*, London: Hamish Hamilton (2005b); Nick Hornby and Eli Horowitz (eds.), *The United States of McSweeney's*, London: Hamish Hamilton (2009).

with the *McSweeney's* project. These anthologies have the chance (or responsibility) to highlight the ethos of the periodical.

The *United States of McSweeney's* plays with this concept, its title imagining a literary nation as an analogy for the *McSweeney's* project, conjuring ideas of isolation and the ideological drive of nationalist forces. In his introduction to the anthology, Nick Hornby focuses on the British experience of *McSweeney's*. An Englishman who is a regular contributor to the *Believer*, and occasional contributor to *McSweeney's*, he adopts a position that masks this familiarity, describing his initial encounter with the periodical:

> I was in Los Angeles when I first came across *McSweeney's*. I'd just bought, maybe even read, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, and something or somebody had told me, in a way I had only dimly understood, that this had something to do with that. [...] It came in, or it was, a box; the box contained lots of beautifully designed pamphlets. I wanted it and I bought it, and when I got back to London and showed it to friends they wanted one too.[184]

Hornby literally brings a copy to London, mimicking the transatlantic journey taken by the material of this anthology. He displays a kind of self-deprecation when he explains that he was initially more of a supporter of the periodical than a reader:

> I'm not sure any of us read much of it, though. (You'd have to have been insane to pick up one of those exquisite little booklets and take it with you in to the bathroom or on a tube.)[185]

This downplays the need to read all of the periodical's content, making a reader comfortable with whatever reading strategy they adopt. Hornby provides a gloss on the reputation of *McSweeney's*: referencing the tendency to represent it via reductive language ('You can never read a reference to the magazine without seeing the word 'ironic', or 'quirky', or 'zany').[186] He ends his introduction with the sentence: 'Here's what you missed'; the *UsoM* is made into an event, a staged encounter between a deprived reader and the *McSweeney's* periodical.

The other two *Best of*s, released before *UsoM*, are framed for British readers by Dave Eggers. Where Hornby adopts a pseudo-outsider position to attract readers, Eggers's introductions come from the project and represent the project. His introduction to the first *Best of* explains the foundation of the periodical, providing readers with a frame to think about the anthology's content. In the second volume, his introduction reads like a performance of the editorial voice of *McSweeney's*: he discusses his dislike of writing introductions, continuing this self-reflexive approach by providing drawings and anecdotes

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[184] Nick Hornby, 'Introduction', in Hornby and Horowitz (2009), pp.vi-xi (vi).
[185] Ibid.
[186] Hornby (2009), p.vii.

largely unrelated to *McSweeney's* in place of a traditional introduction. Topics for introductions usually include descriptions of the stories within or the writers, an articulation of a periodical's style or tone, or a discussion of contemporary literary culture. This introduction seems to aim to communicate an experience comparable to that provided by issues of *McSweeney's*.

Much like the *Better* anthologies, however, these targeted collections do not represent the challenging textuality of the *McSweeney's* periodical. They provide echoes of the experimental physical form of *McSweeneys*, but without the experience of consecutively different texts this has less impact. Similarly, the presence of the same writers and stories across multiple anthologies undermines the heterogeny of *McSweeney's*, highlighting the obvious fact that anthologies are not the best way to read the content of a periodical. Periodicals are an unusual textual form, and periodicals can only ever offer a partial representation of this.

An alternative approach to anthologies is illustrated by the most recent anthology of *New Yorker* fiction: *20 Under 40: Stories from the New Yorker* contains twenty short stories by young writers.[187] Rather than sample material from multiple issues, however, this anthology simply contains the entire fiction content of a single issue collected in book form. The only other time the magazine has done something similar was when with John Hersey's 1946 'Hiroshima' essay. His account of the aftermath of the atomic bomb took up an entire issue of the magazine, and was subsequently published in book form to allow it to be read by a greater number of people. A similar tactic is at work with *20 Under 40*: the magazine published work that seemed relevant to a wider audience than that which would encounter it by reading the issue of the periodical, so they chose to publish it in book form as well. *20 Under 40* gives concrete form to an event (or series of incidents) in the magazine's recent history. The text contains twenty stories by writers under the age of forty that the magazine believes are important. The original list was published in the 14 June 2010 issue of the *New Yorker*. The publication of this list generated a lot of publicity for the *New Yorker*: numerous periodicals discussed the list in print and online. The list was a significant literary event of 2010, generating debate and discussion about the suitablity of the writers for this accolade, or suggesting alternative candidates. The list makes the statement that the literary opinion of the magazine's editors is something important to its readers; the publication of the book amplifies this. The *New Yorker* has a reputation as an important literary institution; with *20*

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187 Debotah Triesman (ed.), *20 Under 40: Stories from the New Yorker*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2010).

Under 40 the editors seem to be using this position to assert their continued importance. The interest in the process of selecting the best young writers in America is taken to transcend the limits of the periodical issue, necessitating a book version to preserve the choices made by the editors of the magazine as worthy of record.

McSweeney's have also published individual issues as books separate from the periodical: *The McSweeney's Book of Poets Picking Poets* collects one-third of Issue 23; *More Things Like This* and *Be A Nose!* are two of the three constituent parts of Issue 27; the *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales* is also Issue 10, as discussed above; and Issue 13 (known informally as 'the comics issue') was published and is available separate from its existence as a number in the periodical run.[188] I label these collections 'issue-anthologies': individual periodical numbers released as texts discrete from their parent periodical. To publish a periodical issue as a separate anthology is in one sense simply to alter its binding or where it is shelved in a bookstore. Its primary content is unaltered. It may be questioned whether these are genuine anthologies or simply marketing devices. There may be slight peritextual differences between the texts (e.g. different cover, the inclusion of an introduction) but the stories/content inside remain the same. This looseness is highlighted by the fact that many bookstores shelve issues of periodicals that publish in book format (rather than magazine) alongside short story anthologies; titles like *Paris Review*, *McSweeney's*, and *Granta* are often found in the anthology section of bookstores rather than a magazine section. This is perhaps because these bookstores do not have a section specifically for literary journals, but nonetheless suggests the thin boundary between what makes a text a periodical or an anthology. This difference in dissemination is key to the function of the issue-anthologies: by publishing them independent of the periodical, the editors hope to achieve a wider readership than that which encounters the periodical. In particular the potential for periodicals to review an anthology provides a way for collections to garner attention—it is rare to see a periodical review an issue of a contemporary periodical. Reviews provide the opportunity for critics to discuss an anthology's coherence or diversity, or how it relates to wider literary forces, not just its parent periodical. The publication of a new book is frequently used by periodicals as justification for long-form criticism on the book's topic.

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[188] Dominic Luxford (ed.), *The McSweeney's Book of Poets Picking Poets*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2007); Dave Eggers (ed.), *More Things Like This*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books (2009b); Art Spiegelman, *Be a Nose!*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2009); Michael Chabon (ed.), *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, New York: Vintage Books, (2003 [2002]) ; Chris Ware (ed.), *McSweeney's*, 13 (2004).

Issues 10 and 13 of *McSweeney's* are still widely available in bookstores; Issue 13 normally in the comics (or, to use the more commercially friendly term, 'graphic novel') section. Issue 13, guest-edited by the cartoonist Chris Ware, is an anthology of intelligent, literate comics. *Poets Picking Poets* collects an issue of poetry arranged by a unique method, while *Be A Nose!* and *More Things Like This* are about comics (again) and graphic art, respectively. *McSweeney's* issue-anthologies make a claim for the issues in question being relevant beyond the limits of the regular periodical. The content shows *McSweeney's* reaching outside of what is seen as its typical remit, a hypothesis verified by the act of publishing the issue separately from the periodical. Issue-anthologies have a double life, engaging with their periodical's history and with a wider literary culture. Published separate from the periodical, they have the capacity to present an image of the periodical to those who have not encountered it. The potential for tension in this doubling will be the focus of my next section, through an investigation of Issue 10/*McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*.

The *Treasury*/Issue 10.

Issue 10 of *McSweeney's* is a text that plays with the idea of representativeness. It is an issue of *McSweeney's* that performs a pastiche of the pulp-fiction anthology and, via this process, interrogates the strategies involved in creating a periodical. The complex production life of this issue allows the discussion of how the performed identity of the *McSweeney's* periodical interacts with literary culture. This issue of *McSweeney's* is more commonly known by the title on its cover: 'McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales'. It is guest-edited by Michael Chabon and contains short stories that he commissioned to meet specific criteria that mostly reject contemporary approaches to the short story in favour of a mode inspired by pulp or genre fiction. Chabon's introduction ameliorates his status as an outsider, however, by detailing intimate discussions with Dave Eggers over dinner that led to the creation of this issue. He is a guest who is an envoy of Eggers, designating Issue 10's contents as approved *McSweeney's* fare.

McSweeney's reached an agreement with the publishing house Vintage that led to a mass-market paperback version of Issue 10 being released; this made Issue 10 the most widely available issue of the periodical at its time of publishing. Another effect of this deal is that Issue 10 has two identities: as the tenth number in the periodical's publication history, and as an anthology of genre fiction. I imagine these separate identities using the method of cultural biographies used throughout my thesis: they are differentiated by key facts about their production, physical form, and dissemination. When referring to these identities, I will label the periodical-identity as 'Issue 10' and the anthology-identity as 'the *Treasury*'. The text has two cultural lives: as Issue 10, it was received by subscribers through the post, or purchased from an independent bookstore that stocked first-run issues of the periodical; as the *Treasury*, it was purchased from the short story section of larger bookstores. The two iterations of this text have different physical forms: while sharing fundamentally the same primary cover element (a 1940 illustration of a circus ringleader whipping an anthropomorphised tiger), Issue 10 is a hardback with a green title, while the *Treasury* is a paperback with a red title. The *Treasury* also lacks some of the interior design features of Issue 10: text typeset in columns and vintage advertisements (both homages to pulp magazines). Issue 10 and the *Treasury* are primarily distinguishable by physical characteristics, and this chapter will elaborate further differences between their identities as a way of exploring how the issue plays with representativeness.

One effect of co-publishing with Vintage was that, for the first time, an issue of *McSweeney's* was widely available in bookstores, as anthologies have wider reach than periodical numbers. The *Treasury* thus had the potential to represent the first point of contact for many readers with *McSweeneys*—taking on one traditional function of an anthology, even if it is not a traditional anthology text. The *Treasury* therefore bears the responsibility of being interrogated for its representativeness, and how it summarises the spirit of *McSweeney's*. As the focus for many readers' primary encounter with the periodical, a logical assumption is that the *Treasury* would be assumed to communicate something intrinsic about *McSweeney's*. Readers are justified in interpreting the anthology for how it represents the periodical.

Issue 10 does not have this responsibility because its readership is already familiar with the periodical, in my interpretation. Issue 10 engages with the trajectory of the periodical's publication history, the nine issues preceding this text. Its identity as Issue 10 is linked to an identity of the *McSweeney's* periodical as a whole. It connects to what has come before (and forms part of what comes after). Readers of the *Treasury* have less of a connection with *McSweeney's*, I argue, and so the collection comes to represent the periodical and publishing project to them. The tension between Issue 10 and the *Treasury* centres on the question of what each text argues for as representative of the periodical.

Chabon uses the issue to stage a debate between two approaches to short fiction. He constructs a binary pitching genre fiction against a loose conception of the contemporary short story. Issue 10 contains short stories commissioned by Chabon in response to problems he has perceived in the American short story. In his introduction, he frames Issue 10 as a counterpoint to a certain approach to short fiction; specifically, he argues against the proliferation of the 'contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story', which he sees as dominating American fiction at the turn of the century.[189] This approach to the short story is associated by Chabon with the *New Yorker*, among other institutions. Chabon laments the decline of the genre short story, which includes categories like 'the ghost story; the horror story; detective story' and others; he advocates a return to 'stories, in other words, with plots'. 'Stories with plots' is made by Chabon into an important feature of Issue 10. Correspondingly, its antagonist would be the approach that privileges 'stories without plots'.

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[189] Michael Chabon, 'The Editor's Notebook : A Confidential Chat with the Editor' in Chabon (2003 [2002]), pp.5-8 (p.6).

This opponent to 'stories with plots' is loosely imagined by Chabon, and could be read as glossing several separate institutions, such as New Yorker fiction, dirty realism, the literature produced or encouraged by MFA programs, and *McSweeney's* itself. 'Stories without plots' or 'moment of truth' stories are important in the early issues of *McSweeney's*, I would argue; an alternative conception would be that the early periodical did not emphasise conventional plotting as a priority, as this issue does. Issue 10 is consequently an atypical issue of the periodical, because of this focus. Ruth Franklin describes Issue 10 as a 'true departure' from what she perceives as its dominant style because it does not feature 'rambling letters-to-the-editor and quirky short fiction.' She goes on to argue that, rather than the *New Yorker*, the type of story that Chabon describes is more commonly associated in the 21st century with *McSweeney's*.[190] This would further complicate Chabon's agenda, as he is commissioning stories to appear in *McSweeney's* that reject the style of *McSweeney's*. The precise source of Chabon's 'moment of truth' fiction is not relevant for my purpose. This fuzziness evokes the loose definitions of literary categories, which I have already discussed as useful primarily for understanding the motivations of those constructing the categories.

Chabon views genre fiction as a neglected field, and his introduction to the issue makes a case for its revival. He depicts genre fiction as a marginal element of literary culture, and argues for the pleasures it can offer the reader as justification for this issue's existence. This aim in itself is an immediate engagement with the concept of representativeness: Chabon conceives of the spirit of genre fiction in a specific way, which he tries to communicate to both the writers that he commissions and the readers that his introduction is read by, and the *Treasury* overall is an indirect representation of this spirit. Chabon's conception of genre fiction is at the centre of the text, but it is a diffuse conception, fragmented by how it is interpreted by both writers and readers.

Chabon's editorship of Issue 10 does not simply argue for the primacy of 'stories with plots': he attempts to address the binary by commissioning stories from a diverse range of writers, both those considered genre and non-genre. In his introduction he describes the pitch that convinced Eggers to let him guest-edit the periodical:

> I would publish works both by 'non-genre' writers who, like me, found themselves chafing under the strictures of the Ban, and by recognized masters of the genre novel who, fifty years ago, would have regularly worked and published in the short story form but who now have no wide or ready market for shorter work.[191]

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[190] Franklin (2003).
[191] Chabon (2003 [2002]), p.7.

The stated purpose behind the *Treasury*, then, is to open the short story up to more writers, to encourage them to take up the form. Chabon sets the anthology up as resisting his perceived 'ban' on writing short stories. The validity of this 'ban' would seem to be contradicted by the existence of periodicals like *McSweeney's* as potential forums, but Chabon is referring to an unfavourable publishing climate for 'stories with plots', as discussed above. His argument is that a traditional approach to storytelling has been abandoned by writers more interested in ambiguity and uncertainty—the writers he selects for this issue are those he believes can recuperate the genre approach in a modern style.

The issue has a complex network of representativeness, featuring several institutions and movements: it is an issue of *McSweeney's*; it is a pastiche of pulp fiction; it pays homage to a marginal form of short story writing; it features successful genre novelists as well as young and lesser-known contemporary writers. There are several competing elements at work constructing Issue 10, and the question of its function in literary culture is complicated by these several representations. It is an exploratory text, Chabon setting its agenda as a text that can take on different identities. The two identities that I detail above for Issue 10 and the *Treasury* demonstrate this possibility. It is not a didactic text, imposing an interpretation on a reader, but one that allows and encourages multiple readings.

Issue 10 is a collection of what its editor claims to be plot-driven fiction; as discussed above, this is atypical of *McSweeney's*. The *Treasury*, similarly, is a collection of plot-driven fiction; as an anthology, it makes a claim to represent *McSweeney's*. These representations of the text lead to a helpful paradox: it has two functions, as a representation of *McSweeney's* (*Treasury*) and as a departure from the periodical's trajectory of experimentation (Issue 10). The Treasury is a representation of *McSweeney's* that diverges from the spectrum of to-date *McSweeney's* activities. It uses a format that is unlike what would be expected of *McSweeney's*; testing the boundaries or limits of the periodical's experimentation. It continues the periodical's practice of innovation by choosing a format that seems incompatible with its ethos. How *McSweeney's* can accommodate such a decision will be the driving concern of the rest of this chapter. In choosing a form that is not typical of *McSweeney's*, the tenth issue tests the limits of the periodical.

The *Treasury*'s marketing strategy illustrates *McSweeney's* playing with this problem. The cover lines use what could be argued to be the most successful writers in the anthology to advertise the collection. The writers it foregrounds have strong identities—both in terms of

recognition and coherence, by which I mean that they are widely known in literary culture (recognition) and that their identities are generally represented in similar ways (coherence). The *Treasury* features writers who would not usually have been included in *McSweeney's*; Chabon's genre writers. The writers the cover previews that fall into this category are Stephen King, Michael Crichton, Elmore Leonard and Neil Gaiman. King, Crichton and Leonard are atypical of *McSweeney's*. However, they are included in this issue of *McSweeney's*, and indeed are used as elements to create its advertising appeal. The text advertises this unrepresentative feature, making it central to the *Treasury*: it incorporates the non-*McSweeney's* as essential to *McSweeney's*. With this strategy, *McSweeney's* tests what it can accommodate, if it can be represented by what seems unrepresentative of its activities thus far.

If we consider that the dual identities of Issue 10 and the *Treasury* originate from a single text, then imagining an identity for this text that incorporates both identities could help with considering the paradox. What would this paradox-issue be representative of? It is simultaneously not-*McSweeney's* and of-*McSweeney's*. It is antithetically faithful. The paradox-issue plays with the idea of being representative. It represents an experiment with what it means for an anthology to represent a periodical, and, further, what it means for a text to attempt to represent a tradition, an institution, or a style of fiction. This can be thought about as a concept that the *McSweeney's* project as a whole is interested in exploring: how fixed positions are imagined by literary participants, and how these positions are helpful (or otherwise). The paradox-issue interrogates *McSweeney's* own processes to this point.

By thinking about the issue as a text that explores representativeness, I look at its form and content for how these related themes are manifest: inclusion/exclusion, constancy/change, the processes of compilation and experimentation, reliability/innovation, performance. One way to think about the text is that it demonstrates the problems involved in trying to distil an identity from a text composed of multiple elements. The decisions involved in this process necessitate the creators of the anthology grappling with the attendant difficulties of synthesis, translation and compromise. As discussed above, there can be no single text that replicates the experience of encountering a serial periodical, and any attempt to do so involves loss and sacrifice. Any resultant anthology text is a performance of the possibility of replicating this experience, an experience that is by default not the experience of reading a periodical. I contend that *McSweeney's* 10 is an interrogation of this process. It is a fake

anthology, an issue of the *McSweeney's* periodical that performs as an alternative periodical. The logic of its creation is not to begin a new periodical but to mimic the process of assembling a periodical—and through mimicry it explores and challenge *McSweeney's* own processes (if unintentionally). It can be used to interrogate the process of representation.

The text's physical form manifests a design strategy that can be found in other *McSweeney's* texts: a re-use of historical elements to create new forms. The issues design features mimic (and directly recycle) early 20th century pulp magazines, as mentioned above. It is a text formed from nostalgia, shaped by fragments of older magazines and its content is also influenced by considerations of a 'lost' conventional approach to storytelling. The purpose of its aesthetic homage is to provide a frame for the stories that call back to a neglected form of storytelling. This aesthetic recycling creates a diffuse representativeness—the periodical's design does not present a *McSweeney's* style, but rather refers to multiple points of origin. Its form is the sum of fragments, a false periodical formed out of pieces of others. The *Treasury* makes a performance of being a periodical, and we can think about a gap between this constructed periodical text, independent of the *McSweeney's* spectrum, and the *McSweeney's* number; the latter is the text that makes the performance, as a way to play with and explore what it means to make a periodical text.

Issue 10 is a collection of stories that have been commissioned by a periodical that has made subverting conventions its dominant practice (up til now). Furthermore, this particular issue is a subversion of this subversion—its particular innovation is to explore a conventional approach to short fiction, i.e. plot-driven. To look at the stories it contains is to think about how their authors reflected on this situation: disrupting innovation with convention, and the complex network of performances involved in assembling a periodical. Several of the stories feature situations that reflect on performance, and characters making decisions to conform to an expected position. These stories explore anxiety over the role characters adopt in relation to a larger group or society. This identity anxiety resonates with the themes I describe for *McSweeney's* 10, raising problems of belonging and connection, doubled lives, and constructed expectations.

Rick Moody's story 'The Albertine Notes' in the issue deals with a form of uncertainty, as the narrator attempts to write an article about a drug that allows users to revisit past memories.[192] Several versions of events are thrown together in the narrator's account of life

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[192] Rick Moody, 'The Albertine Notes', in *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, ed. by Michael Chabon, New York: Vintage Books (2003 [2002]), pp.380-446.

in a bomb-devastated New York, as he revisits his own memories and is witness to the memories of others. The article he tries to write represents an attempt at the ideal, objectively true account of the drug, Albertine. He struggles to write the article because Albertine confuses his own memory and provides the means for others to 'infect' his memories with theirs—he loses any certitude he has over what in his past is true or false. The article (and his attempts to decipher his memory) can function as an analogue for the difficulty in imposing a coherent identity on an anthology, i.e. that it is difficult to claim a single interpretation of an anthology text which is composed of several texts by several authors. The article is a failure of representation—it is never written because its sources are too fragmented to create a coherent interpretation from them.

Moody's story is a hybrid tale that suggests Chabon's desire for non-genre writers to play with the possibilities of genre fiction. Moody writes what could be called science fiction collided with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the contemporary short story. The allusion to Proust's *The Fugitive* (occasionally translated as 'Albertine Gone') is an immediate indicator of Moody's intent; he suggests his story explores similar themes to a high modernist writer. This motivation bristles against the sci-fi story elements: a near-future time period, an apocalyptic or in some way devasted setting (New York after an explosion has destroyed much of Manhattan Island), and a fantastical plot device that the story revolves around (Albertine). Moody's story takes advantage of these features of genre to play with narrative structure and certainty.

The narrator is given an assignment to investigate a rumour that Albertine allows users to not only revisit past memories, but see into the future. This previews the problems that the narrator will undergo, as his sense of time is disrupted. However, the beginning of the story does provide the narrator with a straightforward objective, and this positions the reader in the role of the narrator's companion:

> This is what Tara told me when she assigned me the 2500 words. "Find out if it's true. Find out if we can get to the future on it."[193]

The narrator has a task, and we follow his attempts to complete this task. What the narrator learns, we learn. Gradually, however, Moody distorts the flow of chronological time, and the narrative is harder to keep track of. The narrator expresses doubt over his own perceptions and memory, for example over whether he has met certain individuals before. The narrator

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[193] Moody, (2003 [2002]), p.399.

becomes enmeshed in the history of the Albertine drug that he is writing, and by the end of the narrative we discover that his mother was actually the first 'dealer' of Albertine. From a narrative standpoint he proceeds from a distanced observer to an integral part of the history of Albertine: the reader's initial impression of him is inverted. The constantly evolving mystery of the plot challenges the reader and refuses us the possibility of being absorbed in its action—we are made to work to interpret Moody's text.

Chabon's desire for stories with plots is satisfied by Moody's narrative, but in a more complex way than other stories in the issue. The climax of the story happens inside what is one of the narrator's memories or a memory belonging to another character—it is impossible to tell which. Setting aside the specifics of this, the fact that the resolution takes place as all of the major characters attempt to influence the future by changing the past via someone's memories provides Moody with the justification for an unconventional narrative structure. The story is difficult to fully comprehend because the narrator is unsure of exactly what has happened—the creation of the drug Albertine changes the narrator's understanding of his own past. Near the end of the story, the narrator cannot pin down the identity of one of the main characters:

> I didn't want to open my eyes. I didn't want to know. Didn't want to look across the desk at Cassandra, who may or may not have been my mother, may or may not have been the chief chemist for the Cortez syndicate, may or may not have been an informer for the Resistance, may or may not have been a young woman, may or may not have been home in Newton, refusing to come to the phone, may or may not have been an older Chinese woman with those sad eyes.[194]

While the plot does resolve in a way that satisfies Chabon's criteria (i.e. it has a clear ending that makes sense of what has come before), this is achieved through an experimental literary method. The story could be read as a response to Chabon's introduction, synthesising the genre and non-genre: that it is possible for experimental literature to co-exist and indeed accommodate important elements of traditional fiction, in this case 'stories with plots'. Moody's ambiguous literary identity—he can variously be identified as a successful mainstream or peripheral indie writer—reflects his proficiency with straddling different positions.

Elmore Leonard's story provides an example of conventional genre fiction to pitch against Moody's story. 'How Carlos Webster Changed his Name to Carl and Became a Famous Oklahoma Lawman' is a straightforward narrative about a young boy witnessing a murder, growing up to become a US Marshal, and, as an adult US Marshal, arresting the same

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[194] Moody (2003 [2002]), p.460.

murderer, Frank Miller.[195] Leonard is known as a writer of crime fiction—unlike Moody, he had no involvement with *McSweeney's* before this issue. He is one of the writers Chabon selected for their reputation as genre writers. The difference between Leonard and Moody is suggested by the titles of their stories, with Moody incorporating a Proust allusion, and Leonard providing a kind of plot precis; Leonard's story is a highly concentrated example of genre fiction, devoted to communicating Carlos's narrative. It does not use any experimental structures or techniques, focusing on developing the character of Carlos through dialogue and description.

It does, however, serve a similar function to Moody's story, in that its treatment of the theme of identity anxiety can help understand Issue 10. The character of Carlos/Carl performs the role of a moral citizen and a supporter of the law throughout the story. As Carl, he is a US Marshal and his performance is justified by his occupation. As Carlos, in the aftermath of the murder he acts with a confidence and certitude more fitting his later occupation as a US Marshal:

> "They drove away from the drugstore in a LaSalle," Carlos said, and gave Bud Maddox the license number.[196]

Carlos from an early age adopts the mannerisms and attitude that will serve him well as an actual Oklahoma lawman. He adopts his future role, interrogating his own performance for how he could improve his authority. Leonard's story is about Carl perfecting his identity as a lawman; a separate anecdote about Carl apprehending a cattle-rustler includes a marshal asking his father what Carl intends to do when he grows up. As an adult, Carl becomes a successful marshal and decides to apprehend Frank Miller when he returns to town. Carl persuades Miller's girlfriend that he is a friend from home, gaining her trust to obtain a leg-up on Miller before he comes home. Similarly, when confronting Miller, he convinces him he has his gun trained on him when it is inside Carl's holster the whole time. Carl projects his desired identity successfully, a skill the story shows him developing.

Carl's desire to control his identity is a productive form of anxiety—intended to provide him with the authority he needs to deal with the world on his own terms. Issue 10 of *McSweeney's* engages with this idea, of how to construct and present an identity to the world. Leonard's story is an example of someone exercising agency, performing a specific role by, among other things, relying on detail and authenticity. *McSweeney's* 10 uses several

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[195] Elmore Leonard, 'How Carlos Webster Changed his Name to Carl and became a Famous Oklahoma Lawman', in *McSweeney's Mammoth Treasury of Thrilling Tales*, ed. by Michael Chabon, New York: Vintage Books, (2003 [2002]), pp.101-124.
[196] Leonard (2003 [2002]), p.104.

details to evoke the spirit of authenticity in its homage to genre periodicals: pulp-style illustrations by Howard Chaykin, text laid out in columns, vintage advertisements from Chabon's ephemera collection. The issue performs an identity as a pulp magazine. Leonard's story is one element that contributes to a strong performance of this identity. Using the story to read further into the activities of Issue 10, however, we can think about the constructedness of Carl's chosen identity. We see how he has strived for the authority of a lawman since a child, and that he has worked at achieving it as an adult. It is not necessarily something innate or unassailable: at all times we are aware of the decisions Carl makes to reach his desired goal. Issue 10 foregrounds the decisions made to achieve its identity, for example through Chabon's introduction.

Leonard's story is of a type not featured before in *McSweeney's*—this un-Mcsweeney's quality, however, is what makes it an interesting text for *McSweeney's* to publish. It is a story with a conventional plot and execution. This issue of *McSweeney's* deploys conventional plots along with stories with unconventional plots; these elements combine to create a text that can take on several identities. There is no single feature or text that defines its identity. It is composed of stories with plots (Leonard, Gaiman, King, Ellison) and unconventional stories (Moody, Eggers, Bender, Hornby), all of these framed in a text that is a pastiche of early 20th-century pulp magazines. The *Treasury*'s popularity as an anthology likely stems from the identities of its big-name writers coalescing into confidence that the stories within will be satisfying for readers. The *Treasury* incorporates the high brand-recognition of Leonard, King et al. These writers are more popular and recognisable than *McSweeney's*, and they have an impact on the text when considered as a number of the periodical.

These successful genre writers demonstate an inclusiveness to *McSweeney's* that had not been seen before. They are examples of the periodical being more open in terms of the type of fiction it publishes. They show *McSweeney's* accommodating that which would previously have been considered antithetical to its activities. The mass-appeal generated by the *Treasury* shows *McSweeney's* performing an identity as something it has not practiced before. This can be interpreted as a continuation of its innovative practice, with Issue 10 representing a more strenuous test of what the periodical's overall identity can accommodate. The majority of their experimentation up to this point had been with form, but incorporating the genre writers diverges from the type of content published in issues 1-9.

Their embrace of innovation and diversity makes it difficult for a single issue to summarise or describe *McSweeney's*; equally, it is difficult to argue that an issue is unrepresentative of the periodical. The overall practice of *McSweeney's* refuses the importance of a single text taking on the significance of defining an entire movement. Issue 10 unintentionally explores some of the processes involved in this, by creating a fake anthology that has no real source other than the desire to create an anthology. It is a text about the process of assembling an anthology, and the problems that come with this. The text explores this mainly through the inclusion of the alien (to the *McSweeney's* periodical spectrum) element of conventional fiction. By including it, however, *McSweeney's* strips the alien element of its alienness—it becomes part of the *McSweeney's* spectrum. The logic of its innovation accommodates even that which its innovation is perceived to react against—anything published in *McSweeney's* is by default part of *McSweeney's*, and cannot be considered alien.

This incorporation of the unexpected is crucial to the identity *McSweeney's* constructs for itself: it is the myth of *McSweeney's*. This myth places unpredictability and innovation as key elements in the appeal of the periodical. Its identity should never achieve strong coherence—it is more faithful to its mandate of non-dichotomy by consistently failing to be consistent. It offers readers constant variety, and its defining feature is its unpredictable nature, its refusal to stay in one place. The periodical's activities perform this identity mainly through its shape-shifting form and its statements of its non-dichotomy. The myth of *McSweeney's* is a gloss on the stability paradoxically generated by the shape-shifting form. If each issue is different from the last, then theoretically anything can be accommodated under the masthead of the periodical.

What my next chapter explores then, is how an periodical that allows anything practically functions. What is the aesthetic of *McSweeney's*, as manifest by the periodical's entire publication spectrum? Up to this point, I have allowed *McSweeney's* a conceptual freedom, permitting their non-dichotomous agenda as their primary identity. In Chapter 4 I investigate the tension between this myth and what statement its published issues make of the *McSweeney's* ethos. I will look at the entirety of the *McSweeney's* text and describe it, exploring the attendant difficulties of this act in the process.

Chapter 4: The abstracted *McSweeney's*; an attempt at a faithful reading.

The various identities performed by *McSweeney's* explored in my previous chapter do not accurately describe its activities. They are instructive for considering the motivations of those making the representations; in this chapter, however, I aim to provide an attempt at a faithful reading of the entire spectrum of the periodical. I want to define an identity for the periodical that does not simply mirror its own pronouncements of indeterminacy and shape-shifting, but provides an analysis that identifies how *McSweeney's* interacts with its context: I describe its design decisions to locate them in a history of the literary object, and discuss the style of its fiction content as a response to 21st-century debates on the function and purpose of literature.

Looking at anthologies and reviews has provided me with tangible abstractions to focus on, but this method produced insight into the motivations of those making the representations, rather than the function of the periodical itself. In attempting to produce a reading of the periodical spectrum, this chapter uses the casual interpretive activity of readers discussing *McSweeney's* as a methodological base. Readers describe *McSweeney's* as an experimental journal, or a quirky magazine to suit their purposes, and to allow them to discuss and share their experience with others. They treat *McSweeney's* as having a coherent identity, even if its representations do not match precisely with its actual activities. The conventions of regular periodicals encourage the deployment of such coherent representations by using a consistent format and publishing similar types of content. Though *McSweeney's* does not function like regular periodicals, I contend that it is interpreted using the same conceptual framework by readers. They give the periodical an identity through necessity and interpretive force, and it is this act which I hope to mimic.

In abstracting an identity for the periodical, readers draw upon their knowledge of the texts they have encountered: someone who has only read the first three issues of *McSweeney's* (plain paperback editions) will have a different conception of the periodical than a reader whose experience involves the formally innovative issues 17, 19 and 33 (junk mail, cigar box and newspaper). In this chapter I intend to take advantage of my own reading: I assume that my experience of *McSweeney's* is, if not total, wider than that of most readers.[197] The representation I make of the periodical draws upon an extensive knowledge of its activities. My chapter imagines a complete description of *McSweeney's*, and strives towards this while acknowledging the inevitable failure of such completist aspirations. My intention is to

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[197] Certain early issues of the periodical are simply inaccessible in Britain.

imagine what form an overall representation of *McSweeney's* might take: a text that encompasses everything it has published, a text that I can conceive, approach, read, and describe. Following this route, I will pursue an abstraction of the identity of *McSweeney's* by describing the aesthetic and literary strategies of this imagined complete text.

I will account for my reading with enough evidence to allow it to be judged as fair or otherwise. In describing their methodology for *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari discuss how different starting points in a project forge different connections that lead toward neither a unified system nor a complete understanding. The map constructed by a project changes when the starting point does.[198] I acknowledge that my abstraction of *McSweeney's* is not going to be a definitive description of the periodical, but an attempt that shows what a map of it could look like, with my strategies for constructing said map visible and open to critique.

I imagine a coherent, limited identity for *McSweeney's*. This is an alternative to the identity that is constructed by the periodical of its own activities: of an unpredictable, shape-shifting text. This myth of *McSweeney's* is performed by its editors in paratextual material: my previous chapters argued for the following as key motivations of *McSweeney's*: of resisting fixed positions, of an unpredictable aesthetic, of accommodating many different approaches to literature. My abstraction of *McSweeney's* argues for an identity which describes a relatively fixed identity. This chapter studies how the editorship of *McSweeney's* creates this identity through the repetition of certain formal and stylistic decisions, as opposed to manifesto statements. It is possible to read patterns into what it has published: it tends to favour a limited number of approaches to fiction writing, and to replicate similar design formats. Reading several issues of *McSweeney's* does not present the reader with such variety that they would identify them as originating from different periodicals. The periodical's approach allows for occasional interruptions (i.e. that there can be an issue devoted to comics, or an issue that replicates a Sunday newspaper), but I argue that there is a dominant type of issue that *McSweeney's* reverts to, a well-designed book with high production values featuring short stories by a combination of new and established writers, that respond to the debate over the function of 21st-century literature. Exploring these strategies is my way of understanding its periodical spectrum.

This chapter will proceed by investigating the form and style of my abstracted *McSweeney's* separately. I will articulate a definition of these while considering both how they respond to

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[198] Jeffrey Karnicky, *Contemporary Fiction and the Ethics of Modern Culture*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2007), pp.92-93.

and shape the context of *McSweeney's* in literary culture. *McSweeney's* is designed to be unpredictable. The performed identity of *McSweeney's* claims that the periodical can accommodate anything, that it can take any form and include any type of writing. A text without limits could not be described, to begin with. An unlimited *McSweeney's* would not be a useful participant in its literary culture, being too wide and diverse to offer anything consistent to readers. This chapter attempts to describe what a periodical predicated on indeterminacy and resisting the conventions of periodicals actually does: how to read or understand it as a coherent and discrete literary institution. I do not argue for *McSweeney's* as predictable to imply a critique of their strategies; rather I intend to demonstrate that it is describable, and that it is possible to look past the myth constructed by its own and others' words to observe a *McSweeney's* that conforms to relatively defined limits.

I will consider how its performed identity can be connected to the abstracted identity I describe: if there a connection between the aesthetic and stylistic decisions of the editors and the motif 'unpredictable'. That *McSweeney's* is a periodical with a relatively regular release schedule and format imposes constraints on it—constraints which it pushes against and undermines, but constraints that nonetheless restrict it to certain behaviours and functions. The periodical format demands that *McSweeney's* be recognisable to its readers, and this entails the repetition of specific traits. A periodical without some degree of repetition would not be a periodical. The interplay between innovation and repetition is key to understanding the activities of the periodical. The periodical cultivates an image or illusion as an unpredictable text but manifests a different identity, a more definite and fixed approach to literature. This chapter will explore the gap between the performed identity of *McSweeney's* and its actual activities, and consider the implications of these for the periodical's function in literary culture.

The form of McSweeney's.

Each issue of the *McSweeney's* periodical utilises a different physical format from its previous number. This constant change permits the editors to claim for the periodical an identity as unpredictable and shape-shifting, as already explored. My intention is to identify the recurring characteristics of the periodical and provide a description of the aesthetic of *McSweeney's*. Periodicals conventionally generate their identity through repetition, and I will locate an identity for the form of *McSweeney's* in its recurring strategies. New issues of a periodical are generated from the paradoxical motivations of stability and newness. A periodical issue must have familiar traits to resonate with past/future experiences of the publication, but also provide something new to differentiate from these. Conventional periodicals achieve a balance between these by having a template format with variations in cover images/text. Every issue of *McSweeney's* is substantially different in physical form, relative to this convention. However, I will argue that it creates stability and familiarity through a particular use of aesthetic maximalism and formal recycling; these strategies will be elaborated on below.[199]

The various formats that *McSweeney's* adopts can be categorised into three main types: paperback books, hardback books, and a collection of loose or stacked items. The form of the *McSweeney's* periodical can be broken down as follows:

Paperback book	Hardcover book	Loose items
1, 2, 3, 9, 12, 14, 18, 21, 30, 34, 35, 38, 42, 43 (14 total)	5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 31, 32, 37, 39, 41, 44 (20 total)	4, 7, 17, 19, 26, 27, 28, 33, 36, 40 (10 total)

There is some overlap between these approaches: several of the 'stacks' are paperback books enclosed in slipcases, for example, and Issue 22 is three loose books attached by magnets inside a hardcover spine. This hints at the shared aesthetic that I will argue for. My reading of the form of *McSweeney's* is of the periodical as practising maximalism. The issues that merge different approaches demonstrate the interest of their creators in playing with the possibilities of the book object, in pushing the boundaries of what can be accepted within the definition of a literary periodical. The guiding principle of the design of the

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[199] I use the term 'maximalism' for its connection to the work of David Foster Wallace; it is used in reference to his work in Boswell (2003), p.207; Stefano Ercolino 'The Maximalist Novel', *Comparative Literature*, 64.3 (2012), 241-256; Laura Miller, 'The war for the soul of literature', *Salon*, 15 July 2004, http://www.salon.com/2004/07/15/peck_wood/ (Consulted 22 October 2013).

McSweeney's periodical is maximalist form, and each of the above categories can be reconciled with this—the loose items manifest multiple ways to approach book design; the hardcover books experiment with innovative bindings and inks; the paperback books, while ostensibly the most conventional format for the periodical, often display further experimentation such as gatefold covers and embossed text. The aesthetic manifest by the spectrum of published issues is maximalist. *McSweeney's* issues are texts that have a lot of attention paid to their design; texts that have a high level of exploration of the possibilities of design. A *McSweeney's* text is one that argues for its own status as 'ownable', for readers to 'hold them, save them, lay them on the floor and look at them', to appropriate some of the language Eggers uses to describe the periodical.[200] Amidst a serial text that constantly changes its form, the attribute of innovative, attractive book design comes to be a characteristic trait.

Everything *McSweeney's* publishes has considered design. This extends beyond the periodical into its other projects like the *Believer* (high-quality cardstock magazine with cover illustrations by comic artist Charles Burns), *Grantland* (sports periodical the first issue of which was designed with a cover replicating the texture of a basketball), and 826 National (series of shops/literacy centres featuring novelty products, e.g pirate- or spy-themed designed by local artists). Most obviously, the fiction imprint *McSweeney's* Rectangulars uses similar design principles: the cloth spine of Issues 7 and 20 can be found in John Brandon's *Arkansas*, Robert Coover's *A Child Again*, Salvador Plasencia's *The People of Paper*, Yannick Murphy's *Here They Come*, Dustin Long's *Icelander*, and more; two- or three-colour stamping forms the main design element of Issues 8, 15, 24, 25 and 29, and can also be seen on *A Child Again*, *The People of Paper*, *Here They Come*, and others.[201]

The periodical's attention to design provides an anchor for readers in lieu of a consistent format. Maximalism is the periodical's response to this need; it is what is required to inculcate in the reader a desire to continue their experience with the periodical, to subscribe. The attention paid to the design of the issue is expected to be matched with attention from the reader, with the reader viewing the issue as something 'you want to buy, hold, bring to bed or the tub or the beach'.[202] The maximalist form of *McSweeney's* is a response to the need for constant innovation. To fill up a text, to design it to maximise its format is an

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[200] Eggers (2004), p.xi.
[201] John Brandon, *Arkansas*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2008); Robert Coover, *A Child Again*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2005); Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2005); Yannick Murphy, *Here They* Come, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2006); Dustin Long, *Icelander*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2006).
[202] Dave Eggers, 'This book is being published...', in Editors of McSweeney's (2010), p.5.

expression of the possibility of a text taking on multiple forms. It is a formal manifestation of the performed identity of the periodical, of a non-dichotomous literary text. Instead of an issue of *McSweeney's* possessing one straightforward format, its issues often utilise several different formats in one text. One issue can offer several perspectives on how to present content to readers. *McSweeney's* tests out methods for disseminating content. Not all of these formats will be successful; it is a flexible periodical, and its formula allows dips or failures in its experimentation: no single issue alone has to bear the responsibility of describing the periodical's activities.

Subscribers participate in the continuum of the periodical, rather than with the single issue alone. Its approach to design allows the periodical to be identified as innovative. *McSweeney's* invites a regular rather than occasional reader: it has an underlying approach to design that provides a coherent identity for itself in lieu of a regular format. This allows readers to develop a more fixed conception of what *McSweeney's* does. This encourages the development of a regular audience for the periodical, one that subscribes with the knowledge that *McSweeney's* make beautiful books. Though single issues do not have to represent the spectrum of the periodical, we can nonetheless analyse certain issues for how their strategies demonstrate their approach to maximalism. This is an example of my transparent methodology: while I acknowledge the potential limitations and gaps involved in analysing single issues to describe the periodical's overall form, my reading across the history of *McSweeney's* has identified common features and enabled me to identify representative numbers. Issue 5 illustrates several strategies that I consider representative of their maximalism.

Issue 5 is a hardcover book with an expansive design concept: the book arrived with subscribers and bookstores in one of several possible configurations of cover and dustjacket. It has three possible dustjackets and three possible cloth covers.[203] The interior of the book is similar to the design of Issues 1-3, with the inclusion of several colour fold-outs illustrating Lawrence Weschler's 'Convergences' articles. The design innovations of Issue 5 are restricted to the form. The text inside remains constant between all the editions. Issue 5 plays with the reader's peritextual experience, how their encounter with the text is framed. The several possible formats of *McSweeney's* 5 provide not only an individual reader with a less-fixed reading experience, but also provide all readers with the impression that everyone is receiving a more individual experience. The effect of multiple possible configurations is

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[203] A text-heavy cover like Issues 1-3 (cover a), an illustration of a man with a facial lesion (b), a plain red cover (c); a mirrored variation of the first cloth cover (d), 'outtakes' from Susan Minot's article (e), a photograph of Ted Koppel (f).

to create a loose impression of uniqueness. Most texts that a reader encounters are mass-produced and come with the assumption that others encounter the text in the same edition. With *McSweeney's* 5 this assumption is disrupted, and the reader's experience is not guaranteed to be the same as that of others.

This situation is a microcosm of how the periodical as a whole functions: the form of the issue suggests a more expansive text than is actually present. The experiments that *McSweeney's* perform with the physical form of their issues provide readers with an impression of a text that can accommodate any format, while in reality operating with a limited set of possibilities. This is a good strategy for constructing the periodical's identity as expansive, instilling the reader with curiousity and excitement about what other experiments it might perform. The physical form of the periodical is an epitext for how readers encounter the content. The form of each issue prepares potential readers for what types of activities the periodical might undertake, and further constructs the periodical's reputation for innovative form for regular readers. Each issue is a map to the identity of the periodical, and the more issues a reader encounters, the more accurate this map becomes. I argue, however, that most readers do not encounter every issue of the periodical, and therefore the gaps in their conception of the periodical's history are filled in by their imagination. The periodical encourages its own identity to be imagined as taking on endless forms: as shape-shifting and constantly in flux.

The composition of the periodical as a stack of books or pamphlets is a complementary counterpoint to the other main format it adopts, as a beautiful hardcover or paperback book. The stacks are held together by either a band or contained within a box. This is a counterpoint to the well-made book because it deconstructs the book object, splitting it into component parts. The reader is given interpretive responsibility to imagine a unified text from the several elements of the issue. The stack format literarilises the desire to incorporate multiple formats, interpreting the periodical's maximalist approach in a different way to filling a single text up with design features.

The book is the traditional vehicle of modern literary form. The magazine and the pamphlet are the main alternatives to book publication—excluding, for the moment, electronic forms. The pamphlet is more or less a shorter version of a book without a spine, while the magazine is structured differently to a book internally, as well using an alternative form of binding. That *McSweeney's* mainly uses the book form connects them to a tradition of small press periodicals and facilitates their aim for the periodical to be 'ownable'; books being more

permanent and shelvable than pamphlets. Their interruptions to the book format allow us to consider the validity of the book, and question what benefits are gained from use of a pamphlet form. The stack format disrupts any consistency that would be produced by the periodical regularly using a single-book format. There is no reliable single issue of *McSweeney's*, and the stack issues insert enough randomness into the periodical's spectrum to achieve this, while still exemplifying an innovative maximalist aesthetic.

The repetition of the maximalist approach across the periodical's spectrum constructs a publication devoted to good design and ownable books. The periodical reuses design strategies across different issues; this is an example of formal recycling, and allows the identity of *McSweeney's* to be imagined with some consistency. To give some brief examples, recurring tactics include packaging loose contents in a box (4, 19, 28, 36), all-text covers (1, 2, 3, 9, 11, 30), gatefold/unfoldable dustjackets (5, 13, 23), and foil-stamped hardcovers (8, 11, 13, 15, 22, 24, 25, 29, 31, 32, 37). It recycles its methods, if not a specific, individual design. While the look of individual issues designed according to these strategies may differ, they share a common approach to book design: making the individual issue ownable, and taking advantage of decorative techniques to achieve this. That I can describe the aesthetic of *McSweeney's* as one of maximalism comes from the repetition of these formal decisions, from the editors deciding what kind of design approach has been successful and choosing to apply it to subsequent issues.

McSweeney's recycles its own design to achieve the illusion of a fixed identity. This is, in effect, how periodicals conventionally construct their identity (by recycling the periodical's form and layout from issue to issue). *McSweeney's* create an identity through the regular (though not successive) application of certain principles, rather than through specific formal features, like book size or the location of the title on the cover. They recycle the *idea* of what *McSweeney's* is, not an exact formal specification. Each issue of *McSweeney's* does not necessarily look alike, but they are all shaped with the same aesthetic as their predecessors. There are certain key features which are repeated, such as the use of Garamond 3 and the location of the editorial in the copyright page. These internal peritexts provide a degree of formal stability, but more important is the external variation in physical form.

Recycling is the other key component of the aesthetic of *McSweeney's*. As well as reusing its own form, *McSweeney's* recycles several different approaches to construct the form of the periodical issues: these include DIY zines, Victorian book design, university reviews,

experimental literature, and cigar boxes. Each issue of the periodical contains references to design influences and predecessors. The *McSweeney's* text is not an isolated, discrete unit, but expansive, making connections with other texts. While it is obviously not an original practice to reuse design principles, *McSweeney's* recycle in a determined and deliberate fashion that makes its practice worth investigating. Recycling is a motif that is related to maximalism, as the interest of the *McSweeney's* creators in maximising the design of their periodical numbers leads them to explore alternative design methods, and incorporate these into *McSweeney's*. Recycling also indicates *McSweeney's* playing with the periodical paradox: recycling is a form of repetition that suggests continuity and stability, while the use that they put their appropriations to is often unexpected and innovative. Recycling manifests their interest in the tension between achieving consistency and doing something new.

To look at Issue 5 as an example of the recycling strategy of *McSweeney's*, there are two types of recycling evident: internal and external, i.e. that which cannibalises the design of previous issues of *McSweeney's*, or recycling that borrows from texts that are not *McSweeney's*. The text-based cover is an example of internal recycling, replicating the cover design of Issues 1-3; this also entails that Issue 2 recycled the design of Issue 1, and that Issue 3 recycled Issues 1 and 2. The cover that features a facial-lesion illustration is a double instance of recycling: it uses off-beat illustration as a design feature, as in the taxidermy-bird illustration on the front of Issue 4's box; it also demonstrates the tendency for *McSweeney's* designs to mimic or replicate vintage ephemera: the *Art of McSweeney's* monograph provides medical photographs from the early 20th century that inspired the lesion illustration.[204] The Ted Koppel cover is an imitation of news periodicals, though exaggerated with a close-up focus on Koppel's face.

McSweeney's recycle a diverse range of design influences to construct their issues, from 19th-century book design and war ephemera to junk mail and school notebooks. The majority of the appropriations that *McSweeney's* make do not use these influences for a reason directly tied to the function of the issue's contents. This is not to say that there is no connection, but that their recycling does not necessarily have significance in relation to the original text. The war ephemera of Issue 19 is more connected to the issue's function than other examples of the periodical's recycling: certain articles contained in the cigar box comment on America's contemporary military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The pulp pastiche of Issue 10 has significance for signaling Michael Chabon's desire for short

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[204] Editors of McSweeney's (2010), p.53.

fiction to perform a role not seen since the days of pulp periodicals, and the Chris Ware-designed Issue 13 has a fold-out jacket intended to evoke Sunday newspaper comics, and thereby to demonstrate the significance of the comic in American culture. However, a contrary example would be to look at Issue 17's form: it replicates junk mail, and the content within varies from short stories to photography projects, and the meaning of much of its content does not relate to this form. There is a possible risk involved in this that the form of the periodical is privileged over the content. Though Eggers and other creators emphasise that their attention to form is geared towards 'ensuring the survival of the words within [a] book's covers', there is the possibility of readers collecting *McSweeney's* without engaging with its contents.[205] One narrative evident from anecdotes from subscribers is the tendency for issues of *McSweeney's* to pile up without being read. This is a phenomenon that is involved in all periodical subscription, but seems to be more dangerous with *McSweeney's* because of the weight given to its form in its own identity-construction. A *McSweeney's* subscriber could potentially possess an attractive bookshelf and little else from their engagement with the periodical.

While the forms recycled occasionally have meaning for the content of the issues, the specifics of each appropriation are not my concern here. The fact of their recycling is what I consider as a crucial part of the *McSweeney's* aesthetic. The design philosophy underlying *McSweeney's* is to use influences as a means to creating a beautiful book, as one component in their aesthetic maximalism. One of the most prominent parts of the *McSweeney's* aesthetic is the re-use of design principles inspired by what the *Art of McSweeney's* editors call 'older books'.[206] One manifestation of this is the use of serif fonts, all-caps typography and centred text as the primary design elements of the covers of certain issues, evoking 18th and 19th century book design. The basic text format of the internal pages of McSweeney's issues also takes inspiration from this era: the majority of the periodical is typeset in the same font, Garamond 3, and uses narrow borders to frame its text. This forms a crucial part of the 'vintage' feel of the *McSweeney's* identity, a tendency which I explore below.

The *Art of McSweeney's* features a page from an old religious text as an example of the type of design that inspired the first *McSweeney's* cover.[207] It is notable that the *Art of McSweeney's* does not cite the source of this text: the aesthetic pastiche is surface, and its precise date of publication is irrelevant. One motivation behind the appropriation of this

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[205] Eggers (2010), p.5.
[206] Editors of McSweeney's (2010), p.9.
[207] Editors of McSweeney's (2010), p.11.

design principle is to separate their text from other literary periodicals that used illustration or photography on their covers. The design is not recycled to indicate any kind of strong affinity between the creators of *McSweeney's* and those of the original text. The connection is based on liking how the design looks. Any affinity is based around a mutual respect for the book as object; this is true of the majority of the appropriations made by the designers of *McSweeney's*. Eggers's statement of how the periodical will look from his manifesto is as follows:

> The quarterly won't be ziney-looking. It will look beautiful, actually, with a restrained, antiquey sort of feel.[208]

The gloss 'antiquey' for a description of the periodical's imagined form resonates with the loose term 'older books' used to describe influences on the design of *McSweeney's* in the *Art of McSweeney's*. 'Older' is a non-specific and almost glib denotation of age—why not simply 'old'? Eggers's email signifies that he intends to use design principles from old books to achieve a certain appearance. The *Art of McSweeney's* monograph, which gives examples of design influences and anecdotes from the creators of various *McSweeney's* texts, communicates that this approach to form is Eggers's reinterpretation of the design of old books. The *McSweeney's* design aesthetic is inspired by Eggers's interest in collecting well-designed old books, and this mongraph provides several examples from his library. The phrasing of 'antiquey' resonates with the casual gloss of *McSweeney's* as 'quirky'; it does not identify a specific aesthetic strategy, instead providing a term that loosely describes a tendency.

'Antiquey' is not a useful critical term for describing the form of *McSweeney's*. It is useful, however, as an example of the casual interpretive generalisations that are crucial to the way periodicals function in literary culture. The complete textuality of a periodical is indescribable, and so loose descriptions like 'quirky' and 'antiquey' are necessary to be able to discuss the periodical in any reasonable way. They identify fields of meaning that are present in the periodical's published work, and point in the direction of more specific explorations of these fields. This overlaps with the problem of how an identity is imagined for a periodical: it cannot construct a comprehensive identity, but a return to my map/territory analogy could help explain how periodicals function. If the territory is the comprehensive identity of the periodical, a total description of everything the periodical publishes, then a map would be an identity that describes some key features of this territory.

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[208] Ibid.

The attempt by *McSweeney's* to construct its own identity (a process I refer to as its myth) focuses on its shape-shifting form as a map to its identity. I view the recurring formal traits of maximalism and recycling as a more accurate map to understanding the identity of *McSweeney's*.

The *McSweeney's* design also appropriates the language of 'older books'; not the content as much as a marked tendency towards verbose language (another manifestation of maximalism). *McSweeney's* use verbosity as a peritextual feature to frame a reader's encounter with their texts. This is a design principle recycled from older books. In the *Art of McSweeney's*, we are provided with the title page of the religious text referred to above as a design influence:

> A comprehensive and illustrated history of the Books of the Old and New Testaments, containing a concise account of all the books of the Bible, giving the origin and meaning of the name of each book, the purpose for which, and the circumstances under which, they were written, the names of the writers, the extent of time covered, and a short synopsis of the prominent events recorded in each book, and contemporaneous authors; with other Interesting Narratives relating to the Chronology of the Books of the Bible and the Lives and Histories of the Writers.[209]

Genette discusses that what we understand as a text's title is a relatively modern development; what we understand as the titles of older books are traditionally key, short phrases extracted from longer titles.[210] Genette views titles as crucial participants in the life of a text. Titles frame texts for readers, setting up expectations and activating fields of meaning before interpretation of the content has begun. *McSweeney's* play on this, labelling the periodical 'for short say *McSweeney's*' while experimenting for the first few issues with verbose longer titles.[211] The first several issues retitle the periodical in various ways:

> Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern
> Timothy McSweeney's Blues/Jazz Odyssey
> Timothy McSweeney's Windfall Republic
> Timothy McSweeney's Trying, Trying, Trying, Trying, Trying
> Timothy McSweeney's Yes Projectile Shot Towards the No People
> Timothy McSweeney is Staring Like That Why Does He Keep Staring?
> Timothy McSweeney's Huddled Back Here with the Others because in the Front it is Dangerous Now
> Timothy McSweeney's Simple Red Cover for Issue 5
> Timothy McSweeney's Very Intense Heated Passionate Battle/Embrace with They Might Be Giants Resulting in this, Issue 6, which contains a CD Soundtrack [...] [212]

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[209] Editors of McSweeney's (2010), p.11.
[210] Genette (1986), pp.55-6.
[211] McSweeney's, 1 (1998), cover.
[212] These titles come from issues 1-7; Issue 5's multiple covers also entailed multiple titles.

Issue 7 marked the departure from this strategy (though it was later reprised in Issues 14 ('...at War for the Forseeable Future') and 30 ('... Only Thinking of One Word and that is Rejoice')), with subsequent issues generally referencing the periodical's title by the presence of the name '*McSweeney's*' somewhere on the cover.

The verbosity of the titles of the first issues of the periodical form another feature of the maximalist/recycling strategy of *McSweeney's*. The titles of these issues play with the tendency that Genette describes: elaborate titles are shortened for convenience to their most recognisable element. The material outside of this key element provides extra information on a text; in Genette's typology, the function of this space is to provide information on a text's genre, themes and to promote the text.[213] *McSweeney's* use the subtitle space of their title in an unconventional way: periodicals traditionally retain the same name from issue to issue. This deviation is mitigated by the obvious focus on '*McSweeney's*' as the periodical's regular title, but what they do with the subtitle space is interesting as another manifestation of maximalism. They play with the form of the book, understanding that '*McSweeney's*' is sufficient to carry the responsibility of familiarity for readers, and taking this freedom as license to deploy some extra humour content in the surface design of the text. A title's only essential function is to identify the text.[214] This is typically reinforced by the design of periodicals: titles appear in the same place in the same typeface in each issue. The changing title over the first six issues of the periodical communicates the disregard of *McSweeney's* towards such repetitive practice. They recycle an 18th/19th century approach to title the periodical, but use this design element to create space for their editorial voice: they use the space for further play with language outside of the copyright page, such as 'Very Intense Heated Passionate Battle/Embrace' to describe a collaboration, or the faux-naivete of 'Trying, Trying, Trying, Trying, Trying'. These subtitles play with Genette's functions of identifying the genre or theme of texts. The effect is of postmodern collage, illustrating the periodical's appropriation of the formal tools of its literary context (more on this context in my section on style below).

The common element in the titles of the first issues is '*Timothy McSweeney's*'. This is an evocation of an 'antiquey' approach to titling a periodical—naming a periodical after a significant person involved in its creation, usually its publisher or editor. 18th and 19th century periodicals occasionally used editors' or publishers' names as part of their title. Though this practice was not widespread, there are a few notable examples: *Harper's*

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[213] Genette (1986), p.56, 76.
[214] Genette (1986), p.93.

Magazine (founded 1850), named for the brothers who formed the Harper & Brothers publishing house; *Scribner's* (1870), after one of its founding editors/publishers Charles Scribner; *Collier's* (1888), for Peter Collier. The periodical text is informally known as '*McSweeney's*' in literary culture; 'Timothy' is dropped. This approach to titling the periodical is recycled from predecessors, but is given a twist in the unusual origin of the name in Eggers's personal history (discussed above).

The design of each *McSweeney's* issue incorporates the word '*McSweeney's*' into the cover. Genette lists the conventional places a text's title appears: on the spine, cover, title and half-title page of a text, and occasionally on the running heads of pages.[215] Periodicals work slightly differently to the types of text Genette discusses—they do not usually have half-title pages, for example—but function in similar ways. There are indeed further conventions for periodical titles: the periodical title should regularly appear in the same typeface and position on a cover. *McSweeney's* consistently vary the way it uses its title as a design element. While the first few issues used the title '*McSweeney's*' centred near the top of the cover formatted in Garamond 3, this tendency was diluted as the design of each issue became more complex. Issue 11's cover reduces the title to a small line among a dense ornate pattern. Issue 10 totally changes the typeface to suit the Treasury's pastiche format; similarly with Issue 13's 'broadsheet newspaper' font. Issues 17 and 28 have no cover and thus no title on their cover. Issues 19, 23, 25, 27, 34, 35, and 37-40 all create new typefaces to present the title. The overall effect is that the title of *McSweeney's* does not carry the responsibility to attract readers to the periodical. Its creators do not assume that readers will only find the journal if it looks the same each issue, and has the title in the same place in the same format. This is partly due to the periodical relying heavily on its subscription base, but it also demonstrates the dispersal of its design principles: readers are expected to recognise the periodical not just through its name, but through it being one of the few periodicals that will consistently look beautiful and/or unusual every issue.

Another manifestation of the maximalist interest in formal experimentation is in the use of the exploded book as a format for several periodical numbers. It is also a continuation of recycling, as it connects *McSweeney's* to a larger tradition of experimental literary form. Appropriation becomes a theme uniting issues of *McSweeney's* adopting different forms; a common element in the maps they construct of its identity. The exploded book is not a concept pioneered by *McSweeney's*. It has a precedent in experimental literature, with the

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[215] Genette (1986), p.65.

significant difference between its use in this field and its use in *McSweeney's* issues being that *McSweeney's* do not use it to execute a radical literary strategy. The physical experimentation performed by issues of *McSweeney's* is a pastiche of earlier experiments. Issue 4 of *McSweeney's*, for example, which presents its stories as loose pamphlets contained in a box, only changes the presentation of its content, rather than the narrative content. BS Johnson's novel *The Unfortunates*, by contrast, is a challenge to how readers encounter his work, by presenting a story in a series of sheets that can be read in any order, framed by an opening and closing section.[216]

The exploded book expresses maximalism. It increases the number of possible experiences the reader can have with a text. With BS Johnson's novel, readers are given several ways to construct a narrative; chance is encouraged as a structuring principle. With a periodical, the reader's control over their encounter with the text is increased by exploding the format. While periodicals encourage a linear reading order, their textuality does not demand it and allows readers to choose their reading order. An exploded periodical number such as Issue 4 of *McSweeney's* encourages readers to determine their own experience with the text. In this way, though the stories themselves do not undergo a radical change due to the format, the reader is given an interpretive freedom in how they approach the issue. This is a manifestation of maximalism, increasing the complexity of the periodical text by providing it with a dense network of possible readings. It increases the referents involved in the map that *McSweeney's* issues construct of its overall identity. The actual form of the issues (i.e. maximalism/recycling) facilitates the myth of *McSweeney's*: it suggests the identity of the periodical as constantly changing, as never being fixed. While it does change its format frequently in consecutive issues, I argue that it changes between a fixed number of forms. The form of the periodical provides a map to an imagined *McSweeney's*, and this imagined territory is bigger than the map.

The focus on maximalism and recycling as key elements of the design of *McSweeney's* is a response to a perceived failing in late 20th century design. Eggers has written about wanting to 'simplify the look of a magazine', to form a new approach to counter 'the aggressive design systems of many magazines'; a periodical page often sees text competing for a reader's attention with illustrations, pull quotes, and advertisements.[217] The internal design of *McSweeney's* is intended to privilege the text contained within: for all the experimentation with the exterior form of the periodical, its internal design remains more or

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[216] BS Johnson, *The Unfortunates*, London: Panther (1969).
[217] Eggers (2004), p.ix.

less constant, using a plain format in combination with the typeface Garamond 3. This format, borne from Eggers's experiments with appropriations of older books, arguably becomes the periodical's own kind of 'aggressive design system'. Through innovation, a stable periodical format emerged.

The first decade of the 21st century has featured a marked increase in the quality of literary design. To what extent this can be attributed to *McSweeney's* is not a topic to explore at length, but there is evidence to suggest the design principles of *McSweeney's* have had an influence on the design of literary texts. Some features of 21st century design that I would attribute to being inspired by *McSweeney's* include: typographic covers, jacketless hardcovers with graphics printed directly onto the bookboard, foil-stamping, and a relative rise in the use of illustration over photography (photography being the dominant trend in book cover design in the latter half of the 20th century). The influence of *McSweeney's* on 21st century has become part of the discourse surrounding the periodical:

> Most of the publishers experimenting with jacketless hardcovers, including Viking, FSG, and Graywolf, are consciously taking their cues from the folks at *McSweeney's*, who have been putting out beautiful books designed in this style for years.[218]

> Simultaneously intricate and restrained, the dense-packed all-Garamond pages of the Quarterly refracted Victorian foppishness through a prism of ironic cool, and provoked Andrew Blauvelt to take to the pages of *Eye* to proclaim the arrival of a new movement: Complex Simplicity.[219]

> I'm sure other literary magazines have fun, it's just that they don't look like it. I love literary magazines and I read them all the time, and there are some exceptions out there, most obviously *McSweeney's*, which has garnered a new design ethos -- what they call in the States a 'complicated simplicity'.[220]

> McSweeneys continues to experiment with formats and materials. The attributes that ebooks don't do well or at all—heavy paper stocks, bookmark ribbons, book plates, artful typography, metallic foils, and stunning, colorful covers—are being implemented in what many see a new flourishing of the mass-produced book arts.[221]

> *McSweeney's* is perhaps the best known for innovative packaging of their literary magazines — and has *inspired imitators*.[222]

[218] Leon Neyfakh, 'The New Thing: Books Without Jackets', *New York Observer*, 24 August 2009, http://observer.com/2009/08/the-new-thing-books-without-jackets/ (Consulted 23 October 2013).

[219] Michael Bierut, 'McSweeney's No. 13 and the Revenge of the Nerds, *Observatory*, 29 May 2004, http://observatory.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=2247 (Consulted 23 October 2013).

[220] Richard Marshall, '3am Interview: Writing for all', *3:AM Magazine*, 2005, http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2005/feb/interview_dan_crowe.html (Consulted 23 October 2013).

[221] Andrew Losowsky, 'The Fetishization of the Printed Page', *Huffington Post*, 7 November 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/07/the-fetishization-of-the-_n_2089810.html (Consulted 23 October 2013).

[222] Edward Nawotka, 'Can Experimentation Help Print Compete With Digital', *Publishing Perspectives*, 3 January 2012, http://publishingperspectives.com/2012/01/can-experimentation-help-print-compete-with-digital/ (Consulted 23 October 2013).

The recycled aesthetic of *McSweeney's* is recycled by others. The periodical is credited with inculcating a new approach to design, one based on old values. This meets some of Eggers's expressed aims for the periodical, to foster a culture of appreciation for book design and therefore the content inside the books.

The style of *McSweeney's*.

The style of *McSweeney's* is more difficult to represent than its form: there are forty-four issues of the periodical and there are over two hundred short stories published in these issues. (While it also publishes other types of content, a majority of its output is short fiction.) The periodical's first issue and its paratexts perform an identity of an advocate of a non-dichotomous literary culture, as being above taking sides in a debate between realism and experimental literature. The myth of *McSweeney's*, as articulated by Eggers in his *Better of McSweeney's* introduction, is that it does not restrict itself to a militant publication agenda; it claims to allow space for different types of writing, without setting limits on what it can and cannot publish. The first few editorial pages of *McSweeney's* imply a similar openness, with markedly ridiculous submission criteria that encourage writers to disregard traditional limits.

In reality, the editors do not practice this openness, but develop a tendency towards certain types of writing, which I describe below. Just as there is a coherent editorship evident in the patterns of the periodical's form, so is there a consistency manifest in the fiction that it publishes. I have argued that the form of *McSweeney's* functions as a map that sketches the overall form of the periodical for readers; the implications of its style are more complex than this, and an understanding of this can only emerge by considering the literary context that *McSweeney's* engages with. While not every issue features the same type of story, there are techniques and motifs that tend to recur more often than others. I argue that the editors of the periodical curate its fiction content according to specific criteria that are closely tied to contemporary debates over the function of literature.

One strategy that I used to understand the form of *McSweeney's* was to consider the context evoked by Eggers's claims for the periodical's 'antiquey' design. This reductive phrase has meaning for understanding how the form of McSweeney's is constructed; similarly, it is possible to gloss the style of *McSweeney's*, via 'quirky'. This is a loaded term that has already been used for this purpose by critics, as discussed in my second chapter. It is a term that carries a number of useful meanings that approximate a label of the periodical's style: 'quirky' is too loose for critical purposes, but it does provide a sketch of the fields of meaning the style interacts with. It implies a rejection of or difference from some convention or norm; it suggests the offbeat, or the unusual. These characteristics provide a starting point for thinking about the fiction of *McSweeney's*: how is it unusual, and what is it different from?

Though it performs an identity of avoiding fixed positions, it operates within a specific field of contemporary American literature, participating in a continuum that connects the periodical to a tradition of postmodern and realist writing. The claims that its editors make for moving beyond a binary approach to literature are proof of this connection; the debates and disagreements evoked are contexts for how the periodical's approach to literature has been formed. Eggers's manifesto statements construct the context of the periodical as the dichotomy of literary realism and experimental literature, as discussed in my second chapter. I argue that realism and postmodernism more accurately describe the fields that *McSweeney's* is engaged with.

Above, I made connections between the early *McSweeney's* and the writing of Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace, both of whom were involved in debating the role of literature in American culture, and in particular the competing claims of realism and experimental literature. In this section I consider how the style of *McSweeney's* connects to the themes of 21st-century literature and use appropriate critical support to achieve this; my earlier consideration of its manifestos used Franzen and Wallace as immediate contexts, to understand the logic of its identity-performance. Rather than accept its own myth and an identity as separate and non-dichotomous, I aim to locate it as a literary actor connected to its culture. I argue that it can be described as a text engaged with realism and the postmodern, and my analysis of its style will explicate the origins of the strategies that allow this description.

This is not a simple categorisation to make, due in part to the multiple possible definitions of what constitutes the postmodern. The physical form of *McSweeney's* can be read as a manifestation of postmodern strategies—eclectic form, pastiche and recycling, mixing high/low culture—but to locate the style of its fiction content is a more complex task. Bran Nicol has argued for the difficulty of defining what exactly constitutes 'postmodern fiction', and pursues a consideration of the topic by analysing twenty novels under eight different categories, from metaphysical detective fiction to fiction about living under postmodernity; these are not fixed categories, also, and could be expanded. He argues for the postmodern as an aesthetic mode, rather than a particular style of fiction: it is 'a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century'. This aesthetic manifests in the following features being present in

combination: self-reflexivity; awareness of text as constructed; critique of realist approach to narrative; foregrounding the interpretive process.[223]

Nicol discusses a possible starting point for thinking about postmodern literature as 'to compare it chiefly to realism—or at least, the kind of "ideal", "straw-target" version of the 19th-century realist novel'.[224] This allows the strategies of postmodernism to be compared to a fixed set of goals that a critic constructs for realism. Realism describes a category of texts that share a desire to faithfully represent the world, often with the purpose of reflecting the world so as to learn from it. The methods of realism aim to achieve a smooth imitation of the real world, using literary techniques to represent an author's view of reality in an unobtrusive fashion. By contrast, postmodernism could then be considered as disrupting this kind of mimetic representation.[225] A similar critical method is evident in Jonathan Franzen's model of the 'Contract novel', which uses experimental literature/Status writing as a straw-target for his ideas. Franzen's Contract model argues that writers must consider the experience of their potential readers while writing; the implication of this model is that Status writers totally disregard their readers, which is an unhelpful assumption. His model describes a reading situation where a text provides pleasure to its reader in a clear and comprehensible manner, an arguably realist approach. In advocating realism, Franzen uses a version of experimental literature that is designed to provide an opposing pole in a binary construction. Franzen uses the argument structure that Nicol discusses: Franzen uses Contract as a counterpoint to his disagreements with experimental writing; Nicol uses realism to illustrate the goals that postmodern literature does not aspire to. In the literary culture that *McSweeney's* engage with, the categories of realism and postmodernism do not function in such straightforward ways as these binary constructions imply. Rather than locate *McSweeney's* in either category, I will look at what themes and strategies are involved in these fields, and how these can be connected with the work published in *McSweeney's*.

To define the style of *McSweeney's* requires understanding how it relates to its literary contexts. *McSweeney's* is a text immersed in late 20th and early 21st century literary culture: it was founded by a writer whose first book merged memoir and fiction, selling millions; its early issues had as a key participant the most lauded young experimental writer of their era, David Foster Wallace; its first issue was composed of texts that were rejected by other periodicals. It would be simplistic to label it as 'a postmodern text': it should more

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[223] Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2009), p.xvi.
[224] Nicol (2009), p.xvii.
[225] Nicol (2009), pp.18-19.

accurately be described as a periodical engaged with the themes of late postmodernism. One of the difficulties involved in writing about 21st-century literature is the desire to write about postmodern literature as taking place in a discrete time period, roughly between the 1960s and 1990s. Nicol has argued for 'a welcome sense of retrospectivity' that such an approach can bring; it becomes easier to write about the literature of postmodernism if it is considered to be a limited set of works, rather than one subject to revision.[226] *McSweeney's* and other 21st-century literature is therefore often located in a period 'after' postmodernism, and this affects how critics label this time period: Paul Giles discusses 'sentimental posthumanism'; 'post-postmodern' is the favoured term of Nicoline Timmer and Stephen Burn; Maud Newton uses 'post-ironic sincerity'; 'new sincerity' is a popular term applied in response to several fields including writing published by *McSweeney's*. I do not wish to assign another label to this period, but it is clear that the culture that *McSweeney's* participates involves assessing the themes of postmodernism and realism: reconciling experimentation and irony with sentiment, storytelling, and entertainment. It is a publication whose fiction agenda provides space for writers to explore the competing motivations of realism and postmodernism.

The fields of realism and postmodernism inform the approach to style the editors of *McSweeney's* follow. Robert Rebein has argued for realism as the dominant mode of American fiction since the mid-twentieth century, setting forth an interest in what it means to be a human being as the uniting motif of the majority of literature produced in this time. Acknowledging as an exception to this the 'high postmodernism' of writers from the 1960s and 1970s like Donald Barthelme, Rebein nonetheless contends that fiction labelled 'innovative' can often be identified as pursuing realist aims (representing the world to understand it better) with some mild recycling of postmodern techniques.[227] The postmodern interrogation of the representative function of fiction is not a primary motivation for most contemporary writers. Rebein argues that American literature is a field made up of several different types of realism, with a 'common core of techniques [that] exhibit the same belief in the power of language to represent life "as it really is"'.[228]

This is a useful frame within which to consider the *McSweeney's* style. I argue that its issues generally consist of slightly unconventional short stories, written in a realist style. There is obviously no uniform style that can be used to describe the hundreds of stories published by

[226] Nicol (2009), p.xv.
[227] Robert Rebein, 'Contemporary Realism' in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. by John N Duvall, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2012), pp.30-43 (pp.30-31).
[228] Rebein (2012), p.30

McSweeney's, but I will address the intention to represent 'life as it really is' as a uniting motivation. The content of *McSweeney's* is not produced by authors to a formula, but is rather selected and shaped by editors who have internalised these ideas (without the need for this to be explicitly articulated). This conception of the editorship of the periodical allows me to argue for the existence of a house style without having to rigorously apply the same criteria to every story it has published.

McSweeney's publish fiction that pursues a realist aim of considering what it means to be human in contemporary society, while exploring the postmodern themes of irony, sincerity and self-consciousness. These are important concepts, and their continued significance in literary culture could be considered the legacy of the high postmodern writers like Barthelme and Coover. These writers and others used metafictional techniques like irony to 'defamliarize a repressive everyday reality'.[229] Irony is one manifestation of the suspicion towards realism and the mimetic function of literature: it questions the possibility of fiction communicating truth, by, for example, exposing the derivative nature of language and the stereotypes that deny us the chance to say anything original.[230] Writing about postmodern method as 'anti-realist', Pam Morris states that 'discourses or textuality constitute the only sense of reality' that can be accepted under postmodern theory.[231] Realism provides a reader with a guarantee that there is a world beyond the text that the text attempts to faithfully represent. A realist text communicates a sincere belief in the capacity for fiction to achieve this. The tension between realism and postmodernism is often seen as centering on this issue, on how a text makes manifest its author's assumptions about the ability of fiction to accurately represent the world.

One of the tenets of postmodern fiction is to challenge the authenticity of the act of representation. Postmodern theory holds that any representation like a fiction text is a construct, and can only represent a version of a world, and not the world itself; Hutcheon has argued that the postmodern is in part characterized by 'its challenges to the classic realist system of representation'.[232] Postmodern literature has had an observable influence on the methods of contemporary literature, but has not supplanted realism, which is still the dominant mode of fiction in America. Postmodern metafiction offered an alternative to realism, but has been argued to have arrived at a 'dead end, reached because of

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[229] Amy J Elias, 'Postmodern Metafiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. by John N Duvall, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2012), pp.15-29 (p.27).
[230] Nicol (2009), p.15.
[231] Pam Morris, *Realism*, London: Routledge (2003), p.142 (The New Critical Idiom).
[232] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge (1989), p.15 (New Accents).

postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language'.[233] One aim of realism is to (re-)assert the possibility for authentic representations of the world to a reader; that:

> Realism can and does rationally refer to a material domain beyond representation and can and does communicate knowledge of that extra-textual reality.[234]

This seems to be the type of literary practise Franzen advocates in his essays. The early 1990s saw debate shift away from questioning the techniques and forms of literature towards discussing its purpose; it is with this debate that Franzen and Wallace should be associated.

The literary context of *McSweeney's*, then, is a culture coming to terms with the legacy of postmodernism while exploring how best to represent contemporary life. The lessons of irony and suspicion towards totalizing representations have not been forgotten, but the task of contemporary writers is to find a way to balance these concerns with a drive towards understanding how to find meaning in everyday life. Burn argues for Wallace's 'E Unibus Plurum' as a representative text of this era, seeking to 'reestablish the idea of writing as a symbiotic exchange between reader and writer'.[235] Wallace and Franzen's most significant novels, *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *The Corrections* (2001) are attempts to achieve this goal through different strategies. Franzen and Wallace do not represent discrete approaches to writing fiction, but share similar goals and influences, chiefly the importance of communication with a reader as a function of a text. It would be unhelpful for me to characterise *McSweeney's* as aligned with either writer; the periodical's identity is constructed from the work of hundreds of writers, and should be thought of as the product of its culture, rather than as a publication which follows a militant literary agenda.

It is useful to consider several issues of the periodical as 'typical', with its fiction content representing a diverse mixture of writers that the editors have considered appropriate to speak for *McSweeney's*. A typical issue of the periodical that features fiction content will feature between seven and ten short stories.[236] In a sense, any of these issues provides a display of the values imagined as crucial to *McSweeney's* by its editors. To tackle the mass of stories that the *McSweeney's* spectrum contains I will analyse one of these typical issues in depth to explore how its fiction manifests the realism/postmodernism tension. This follows the methodology I describe above: in a situation where it is impossible to produce an

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[233] Robert L McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symploke* 12.1-2, 2004, 53-68 (55).
[234] Morris (2009), p.141.
[235] Stephen Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, London: Continuum (2008), p.10 (Continuum Literary Studies Series).
[236] Issues that conform to this typical issue pattern: 2-7, 9, 10, 14-16, 18, 20, 21, 23-26, 29-32, 34, 37-39, 41 (totalling 27 of 43 issues)

interpretation of the entire fiction output of the periodical, I make clear that my reading is delimited and foreground its start and end points. There is no overarching *McSweeney's* style towards which its editors shape the fiction it publishes, but to talk about its style is to talk about affinities in the strategies and motivations of the writers they select. I want to demonstrate the shared qualities of the fiction of one issue of *McSweeney's* as a vehicle for discussing the possibility of a *McSweeney's* style.

Issue 32 of *McSweeney's* is a hardcover book with cover art by visual artist Robyn O'Neil and features ten short stories. These stories manifest an interest in several themes that can be connected to the network of themes relevant to contemporary culture that I describe above. The stories are about loss, transition, and change, and how individuals find meaning in difficult or upsetting circumstances. There are different focal points for this search for meaning featured—memory (Doerr), sexual impulses (Tower), terraforming (Tower, Shepard), familial or romantic relations (Doerr, Tower, Adrian, Sweeney, Julavits, Shepard, Plascencia), the death (Doerr, Adrian, Heti, Julavits, Shepard), technology (Doerr, Bachelder, Heti, Shepard, Plascencia). Several of the stories set up the central element of their plot as a means of testing how individuals respond to an unusual development: Bachelder's community living under a dome after an apocalyptic event; Adrian's black hole that welcomes both rubbish-dumping and suicide; Sweeney juxtaposing the relocation of political orphans and endangered seals; Heti and a device that claims to be able to direct its user towards their destiny by answering any question posed it; Shepard and his protagonist faced with an extreme escalation in environment brought on by climate change; Plascencia and a character whose future is derailed by his father's social security fraud. These authors pitch their characters against difficult circumstances to explore coping strategies and what readers can learn from these events. They explore human response ('life as it really is') paradoxically through unusual circumstances. One of the motivations of this fiction is to be instructional, to be useful for its reader.

I mention above a renewed focus on the reader's experience of fiction as one of the priorities of contemporary American literature. This involves the themes of pleasure and entertainment, the role of the reader and reader comprehension, irony and sincerity, snark and genuine feeling. To read *McSweeney's* with Wallace's essays in mind, his advocacy of sincerity over the aloof voice of postmodernism (as he interprets it) is a key concept. This situates a connection with a reader as an important goal for a writer, as well as the assumption that readers are seeking this connection; Wallace considers this to have been

neglected by 1990s postmodern writing. One strategy for understanding how the reader is treated by *McSweeney's* is to think about realist devices like character and plot resolution in its fiction. I discussed the issue of closure and resolution in the periodical's work in my previous chapter: Franklin critiques the early periodical for publishing stories that 'reject the very idea of revelation'. For Franklin, revelation is a characteristic of a story that has a clear and satisfactory resolution, something she argues is not present in *McSweeney's*. She also discusses the absence of other characteristics of realism: 'structure, character, coherence'.[237] Narrative closure is cited by Stefan Hirt as one of the hallmarks of realism.[238] One trait of a realist story is a neat and resolved plot; an ideal postmodern story may leave a plot open to expose the fictionality of the text to a reader. The fiction published in *McSweeney's* illustrates several approaches to closure and resolution; it is a concept connected to the tension of realism/postmodernism, a legacy of realism which was not displaced by postmodern literature.

The stories in Issue 32 play with the idea of closure; the writers featured provide a complex response to the problem of plot resolution. Generally, any 'happy' endings are undercut by complicating factors. Anthony Doerr's story 'Memory Wall' provides an example of this unstraightforward approach to resolution.[239] There are two central characters in the story: Alma and Luvo. Alma is a wealthy widow whose memories contain clues to the location of a valuable fossil her husband discovered before his death; Luvo accesses Alma's memories through a technology that is designed to allow the elderly Alma remember her youth. As a result, Luvo becomes fused with Alma's consciousness through the memories of her life, and by the end of the story seems to act according to her motivations. After discovering the fossil, Luvo takes a small portion of a museum's fee for himself and allocates the rest (a substantial amount) to Alma's servant, Pheko, whose son is gravely ill. Luvo met Temba (Pheko's son) while breaking in to Alma's house, and it is unclear whether his desire to help Temba comes from his own sympathies or a memory of Alma's appreciation of Pheko. Both Alma and Luvo are close to death at the end of the story (Alma through old age, and Luvo through severe illness brought on by abuse of the memory technology); neither character is in control of their own life. Nevertheless, the story has a positive ending in the reward given to Pheko and Temba; Alma and Luvo are beyond help at this point, and Temba receives the hope of medical aid and a future. The displacement of the happy ending from Alma (ostensibly the protagonist as it is her memories that drive Luvo) onto Pheko is indicative of

[237] Franklin (2003).
[238] Hirt (2008), p.142.
[239] Anthony Doerr, 'Memory Wall', *McSweeney's*, 32 (2009), 1-56

Doerr's contemporary treatment of resolution. This is not a straightforward story but one which has a matrix of responsibility of sorts, challenging the reader to consider who is worthy of their sympathy in the story.

This tendency can be observed in other stories in Issue 32: in 'The Black Square', Henry's decision to continue with his life and possibly reconcile with his ex-lover is couched against his realisation that he can commit suicide via the black hole at any point; the successful release of the seals in 'Oblast' is qualified by the presence of a motionless poacher boat and the unresolved political status of the orphans Niko and Gevy; Zalo's fraudulent tax rebate that allows him to finish his degree is nonetheless fraudulent and comes to him despite an administrative error, with the underlying message being of his continued struggle with an unwelcoming system; in 'Raw Water', Rodney's offer of comfort to a soon-to-be-widow (whose young daughter he has tried to seduce) comes as a false rain cloud emerges on the horizon (the story is set around a flawed man-made lake); Sunni's reclamation of control over life in 'There is no Time in Waterloo' comes as a natural disaster strikes her town; the narrator of 'The Netherlands Lives with Water' has a revelation about his relationship with his wife as his office is demolished by flood waters.[240] There is no uncomplicated resolution in Issue 32. This is not to say that clear resolution is impossible in contemporary fiction, or that realist fiction cannot accommodate such ambiguity in narrative closure. Rather, I argue that the prevalence of this phenomenon in *McSweeney's* is illustrative of the periodical's connections to its literary context. This is literature produced in a period that sees writers explore the connection between reader and text; the stories in Issue 32 provide readers with explorations of the individual and their role in contemporary society.

The stories in Issue 32 demonstrate writers juggling the strategies of realism and postmodernism. This phenomenon is evident in other typical issues of *McSweeney's*. What can be made of this? By virtue of recurring in most issues of *McSweeney's*, this is a strategy that can be considered a characteristic of the periodical. This tendency situates reader enjoyment as an important element in the periodical's composition, a reasonable motivation given the necessity of ensuring readers continue to purchase the periodical or subscribe. By their criteria for fiction the editors generate an identity for the periodical of producing regular and satisfying stories: stories that do not produce clear and basic interpretations, but fiction that challenges its reader to consider its purpose. The fiction that tends to recur in *McSweeney's* could be considered a kind of guidebook, a compilation of advice on living in

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[240] All references to *McSweeney's*, 32 (2009): Chris Adrian, 'The Black Square', 103-122; J Erin Sweeney, 'Oblast', 123-146; Wells Tower, 'Raw Water', 57-84; Sheila Heti, 'There is no Time in Waterloo', 147-158; Jim Shepard, 'The Netherlands Lives with Water', 189-212.

the contemporary world. *McSweeney's* fiction is consolatory. If the consistent thread uniting the form of *McSweeney's* is its evocation of a unified and coherent periodical spectrum, then its fiction provides a similar construct in its consolatory tone— readers are provided with strategies and coping mechanisms, shown comforting examples of difficult situations resolving in (relatively) satisfactory ways. This approach, which has evolved over the course of the periodical's publication history, is an expression of part of the myth of *McSweeney's*: to combine the gut-wrenching and the experimental, but balanced more towards the former.

While the message expressed by its fiction can be traced to the legacy of realism, the subject matter of *McSweeney's* seems more influenced by the absurdist content of high postmodern writing. Literary movements are often associated with specific subject matter: science fiction with alternative worlds or realities, 1970s dirty realism with the everyday American realities of supermarkets, condominiums and office-cubicles, for example. These are broad generalizations that are used by critics for illustrating characteristics that the writers involved in these movements share.[241] The subjects explored throughout the *McSweeney's* periodical do not have such a consistent thread, but some consideration of these can help understand why its approach has relevance for the tension of realism/postmodernism.

The editorial voice of *McSweeney's* foregrounds the unusual subjects of its content, performing an identity for the periodical that encourages it to be labelled as 'quirky'. The cover lines of issue 1 offer readers a description of some of the stories inside: 'soldiers dying; gold mining; spiders; Hawaii; kissing; Romania; television; sunken treasure; fire'. The act of describing each story's content in a short phrase encourages viewing them as unusual by foregrounding the subject. The unusual subjects covered in *McSweeney's* stories are used by the editors to market its issues—this is evident in cover-lines, contents pages and in material promoting the issues. This peritextual material prepares the reader for the (expected) strangeness of certain stories within an issue. The copyright page of Issue 4 goes further than this, providing a ridiculously specific (and humourous) list of subject matter 'encouraged for submitters':

> Caves; balloons; balloons stuck in caves, and unhappy about it; balloons living in caves, and feeling good about it; large trees with people living in them; wind; gold; talking animals who only speak Spanish; men who live in caves; women who live in caves; chairs that are too big; houses that are too big; holes that people fall into; geysers; holes that are deep but are too narrow for people to fall into; volcanoes; things that are round and flat; things that are small but emit loud noises; clouds that appear in bedrooms, over beds, during sleep; waterfoxes, landwhales and riverkittens; planets covered with yellow water; old men who run very fast; old men with two-by-fours for feet; birds with arms instead of wings; people with very long

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241 Rebein (2012), p.34.

fingers, the bones of which are too brittle to use; how things are made in factories; how things are made in factories in Africa; how things were made in factories in Africa between 1939 and 1945; giant people who carry small purses; small people who drag from place to place large knapsacks full of pillows; anything at all about the ocean monkeys of the former Upper Volta; anything at all about the Hand People of Franz Josefland; anything about the furry, self-propelling rocks of the Dakotas; anything at all about anyone named Lucy, Isabbel, Paulina, Geoffrey, or Will; anything mentioning the pre-1990 Jonathan Pryce or (tastefully) incorporating former Congressman Fred Grandy; and anything at all about the Swamp Women of Lourdes.[242]

This kind of off-beat performance is a clear strategy to appeal to readers by illustrating that *McSweeney's* publish fiction on topics that are considered interesting by virtue of their unexpected qualities. This assumption involves some element of risk: there is potential for this kind of strategy to be misunderstood or misdirected, to be seen as superficial or ironic. The listing of obscure, unusual ideas is a particulary postmodern technique, reminiscent, for example, of the empty and superficial Image-Fiction that Wallace critiques in 'E Unibus Plurum'. This type of foregrounding act is undoubtedly one factor in negative perceptions of the activities of *McSweeney's*: the assumption that they publish indulgent writing which is quirky and unusual without purpose.

The fiction of the entire *McSweeney's* spectrum displays a use of unusual subject matter for a different purpose to that of the performed identity, however. *McSweeney's* writers combine this approach to subject with a writing style influenced by the principles of realism, i.e. sincerity, mimetic representation, closure. While some of its content can be categorised as something akin to postmodern Image-Fiction, the majority of its published fiction pursues this realism-influenced agenda, I argue. Issue 32, for example, combines a determined interest in individual experience and realistic resolution with stories that have unusual subjects: from mobile phones that deliver advice to users on achieving their destinies and black holes in the middle of Nantucket, to a microcosm of society trapped inside a disused baseball stadium and a micro-economy driven by cartridges that capture people's memories. *McSweeney's* fiction does not use an unusual subject matter for the purpose of play or to display an experimental method. Unconventional topics are used by writers in stories that are executed with the tenets of realism in mind. They explore what could be considered an 'ironic' topic with a desire to explore the human condition through their fiction. As alluded to above, the experimental or innovative tones of its public identities are in part derived from this tendency towards unusual subject matter. The recurring interest of the *McSweeney's* editors in fiction of this type is the second key component of the periodical's house style, alongside its engagement with the approaches of realism and postmodernism.

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[242] Dave Eggers, 'Notes and Background', *McSweeney's*, 4 (2000), i-xii (ii,iv).

This house style that I describe can be used as a filter to interpret and reconcile the other activities of *McSweeney's*. For example, the periodical's spectrum features a substantial portion of non-fiction content which I argue can be considered an extension of the ethos behind its fiction. *McSweeney's* has participated in reviving the long-form essay, through its periodical content and also through its side-projects like *The Believer*, *Lucky Peach* and *Grantland*. Much like the form of its spectrum can be interpreted as expressing a maximalist aesthetic, its fiction and non-fiction content can be considered as influenced by the same approach to style. The first few issues of *McSweeney's* feature several non-fiction articles, and the periodical regularly featured non-fiction during its early years; this tendency lessened when the companion magazine the *Believer* was launched. Later issues of *McSweeney's* reprised the non-fiction approach with a particular focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a shift I will discuss below.

Issue 3 of *McSweeney's* features four pieces of non-fiction, and is therefore a useful text to analyse: Paul Collins on the obscure painter John Banvard, Gary Greenberg on his correspondence with the Unabomber, David Steinhardt interviewing the mathematician Brian Greene, and Brent Hoff writing about the possible uses of spider silk. These articles provide a brief sketch of the kind of non-fiction *McSweeney's* tends to publish: earnest or serious investigations of unusual or marginal subjects. In describing the non-fiction content in the editorial page, the *McSweeney's* editors address the potential for it to be confused with fiction or parody. Collins's piece on Banvard is highlighted, with the reader informed the intern who proofed the article thought it was fiction—Banvard is situated by Collins as an unknown artist who was once the most famous painter in America. This unusual situation would be a plausible subject for a work of fiction. These articles are a continuation of the work undertaken by the fiction of *McSweeney's*. They explore unusual subjects with sensitivity, and illustrate their arguments with technical competence and panache. Greenberg's article 'In the Kingdom of the Unabomber' is central to the early non-fiction publishing of the periodical.[243] It was extracted on the *Tendency* website, presumably to drive sales of the issue, and was included in the non-US *Best of McSweeney's Volume 1* anthology, indicating that to some measure it was considered a piece representative of the activities of the project.

Greenberg's piece on his interactions with Ted Kaczynski, the criminal known as the Unabomber, displays an unusual level of interest from its writer in an ostensibly morbid

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[243] Gary Greenberg, 'In the Kingdom of the Unabomber', *McSweeney's* 3, 1999, 67-119.

subject. This exemplifies the *McSweeney's* approach to non-fiction: it is unusual and engaging. Greenberg exchanges letters with Kaczynski over the course of a few years discussing a potential book collaboration. The resultant correspondence covers subjects from political philosophy to the ethics of psychological assessment. The article is a portrait of Kaczynski, but it is also a portrait of Greenberg, and, more broadly, a reflection on the cultural interest in murderers and the societal issues raised by Kaczynski's activities. It is a potentially disturbing piece of non-fiction. In the copyright page, the editors write that they have published the story because of their interest in Greenberg's 'journey'. This distances *McSweeney's* from the assumption that the periodical itself has an interest in the Unabomber, suggesting they are publishing the story to explore why someone would take an interest in the Unabomber. This curiosity-once-removed connects with the periodical's early interest in an oppositional relation to periodical culture: Greenberg's article is a piece that he presumably found difficult to get published elsewhere. Periodicals may veer away from subjects like (relatively) sympathetic portraits of murderers for fear of alienating readers. The editors of *McSweeney's* do not seem afraid to publish the article, but they do qualify its appearance. This complicates interpretation of Greenberg's article, making readers question his motivations.

The article itself is about the process of creating a text, in several ways. The reader is presented with proposed texts, annotations and modifications of texts, drafts of texts, letters about the possibility of producing a text, letters about the possibility of editing a text, and other similar forms of discourse. Greenberg initially contacts Kaczynski to discuss his desire write his biography. Kaczynski is not opposed to the idea, but couches his interest with an acknowledgement that he plans to write his an autobiography. The correspondence between the two serves as an incipent draft of this never-to-be-produced book. During their relationship, Greenberg writes a number of reports on Kaczynski's experience. Additionally, Kaczynski is in contact with other writers who wish to produce books with him. Finally, the article ends by presenting a full facsimile of one of Kaczynski's letters to Greenberg, which addresses the breakdown of the pair's relationship; a breakdown which stems from Kaczynski's use of one of Greenberg's texts without his consent. Greenberg states early in the article that he believes he and Kaczynski share several qualities, among them a disinclination to engage with the full capabilities of modern technology, but also: 'Both of us wanted to get published'.[244] Greenberg attempts to discuss his relationship with Kaczynski honestly with the reader, foregrounding his motivations. In writing about

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[244] Greenberg (1999), 77.

Kaczynski's letters, he explains his fascination with Kaczynski's style: 'the letter conveyed a calm rationality, a sharp intellect, and a distinct courtliness'.[245] He does not excuse his crimes, but nor does he exclude the possibility that he can be an intelligent and engaging personality. Discourse and writing are for Greenberg routes for exploring Kaczynski's personality and motivations. Similarly, therefore, Greenberg's discourse becomes a means for the reader to explore Greenberg's personality and motivations.

Despite the slight reservation in *McSweeney's* presentation of it, the article makes a strong statement for the non-fiction arm of *McSweeney's*. It is a text that explores an unusual subject from a position that intends to explore why a reader should be interested in said subject. The long-form essay, with the attendant complexities and structure that this demands, has affinities with literary fiction; this allows it to seem a natural, rather than jarring, addition to an issue of *McSweeney's*. Greenberg's article is discussed by Keith Gessen in the first issue of n+1 as 'probably the best *McSweeney's* article to date'. This is in the same issue as the editorial piece by *n+1*'s editors that describes *McSweeney's* as a 'regressive avant-garde'.[246] Since *n+1* is predominately a non-fiction magazine, their opinion on the content of *McSweeney's* seems relevant at this point; it is a fellow participant in the revival of non-fiction in 21st-century American literature. The main criticism that the n+1 editors make of *McSweeney's* is that its creators have 'regressed' in ethical, technical and stylistic terms: driven by sentiment and an interest in pastiche over (what they consider to be) genuine intellectual endeavour. Selecting Greenberg's article as 'the best...to date' in the periodical is a veiled compliment, given that it predominately publishes fiction. It further suggests the suspicion of *n+1* towards *McSweeney's*, implicitly criticising the rest of the content for not pursuing an agenda like Greenberg's.

Contrary to this criticism, the early issues of *McSweeney's* feature similar examples of non-fiction that manifest the ethos of its style: Sean Wilsey's article on the Texas art commune-town Marfa; Paul Collins's profile of forgotten historical figures; Lawrence Weschler's illustrated articles on seemingly random artistic coincidences; multiple interviews with scientists. As mentioned above, the launch of the *Believer* curtailed the non-fiction published in *McSweeney's*. For much of the middle period in *McSweeney's* history-to-date (Issues 10 through 23, roughly) the *Believer* took up the mantle of the project's non-fiction outlet. It published a variety of types of non-fiction, from interviews and reviews to the type of long-form articles that the early issues of *McSweeney's* had published. It is possible to

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[245] Greenberg (1999), 69.
[246] n+1 editors (2004).

arbitrarily select some articles from various issues of the *Believer* whose titles suggest an immediate affinity with the early non-fiction agenda of *McSweeney's*:

Schema: When Basketball Imitates Melville (Issue 48)
How an English Dracula Revived the Romanian Tourist Industry (Issue 66)
Were the ghosts and demons described in a Japanese folklore classic real? (Issue 68)
Genetic Screening and Medical Narrative (Issue 32)

The *Believer* allowed *McSweeney's* to ignore or focus less on non-fiction for a long period. During this time, *McSweeney's* started another side-project, Voices of Witness, dedicated to publishing works of oral history, often related to victims of war. When *McSweeney's* began publishing non-fiction material again, it seemed to have developed more of a social conscience than its previous work in the field. The *Believer* continued to publish the esoteric articles on marginal topics, but *McSweeney's* non-fiction content moved towards writing about America's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Issue 26 featured overt coverage of war in a fully researched dossier hypothesising which region America might engage in pre-emptive war next, while the form of its fiction content mimicked WWII service literature. This return to non-fiction marked a more political phase of the *McSweeney's* project; for example, Issue 34 contained an entire book devoted to one journalist's experiences in Iraq, and Issue 40 an account of a week spent in Rwanda.

The political content of the late *McSweeney's* does not sit as comfortably with the style of its fiction as the rest of its non-fiction content. There are occasional thematic affinities, connected to an evident interest in other cultures and in topics like immigration. However, the war reportage often feels like the work of a different periodical—this is an interpretation provoked by the form of the issues, with 26, 34 and 40 separating their political content into discrete books. The diversions of the periodical into political reportage suggest an attempt to engage with its culture beyond the confines of literary concepts. In the latter part of its publication spectrum, *McSweeney's* seems to become dissatisfied with its typical issues predominately made up of fiction, and moved towards incorporating a substantive consideration of issues in the world. This downplaying of fiction as a mode of investigation will be the subject of my next chapter, considering how the identity of the periodical described in this chapter can be reconciled with such a major shift in approach.

Chapter 5: The politics of *McSweeney's*.

As discussed at the end of my last chapter, the activities of the *McSweeney's* periodical began to manifest a more explicit political direction in the latter part of its publication spectrum. This chapter considers the political significance of *McSweeney's* through an investigation of the thirtieth issue of *McSweeney's*, considering an anniversary as a suitable point for both the periodical and this thesis to reflect upon its impact. I use this issue to read *McSweeney's* in its American context, considering its exploration of the election of Barack Obama as a prism through which to interpret the periodical's politics and how these relate to conceptions of American identity.

Issue 30 of *McSweeney's* commemorates the tenth anniversary of the literary journal: the first issue was published in 1998; Issue 30 in autumn 2008. This averages out to three issues a year, betraying the looseness of the original title of the periodical (Timothy McSweeney's *Quarterly* Concern). Issue 30 serves a double function: celebrating a decade of the periodical being in print and commemorating the election of Barack Obama as the US President. Obama is abstractly figured on the cover of the issue as one object of the periodical's celebration. The *McSweeney's* project began in 1998 with Bill Clinton in power but developed under the presidency of George W. Bush (in office 2001-2008). This issue is a watershed moment, marking the end of nearly a decade of disagreement with the political direction of America. Issue 30 celebrates the end of Bush's tenure and the beginning of Obama's. The first decade of the *McSweeney's* project is balanced against the potential for the next decade; optimism for its own future is conflated with a consideration of 'hope' with reference to Obama's campaign.

McSweeney's 30 invokes the history and future of America; the periodical encourages a reading of its own history in conjunction with other interpretations of America. The title of the issue (provided on the book's spine) provides a frame to consider this, calling itself the 'Forge-ahead/throwback issue'. This references both retrospection and prospection, looking to the past and looking to the future. Issue 30 is retrospective in its evocation of and reference to its own past (throwback), but it is also prospective, in proclaiming optimism for the future (forge-ahead). The relationship between the past and future is framed by the entreaty 'Can we be forgiven?' and translations of this into various languages. One theme that can be drawn from the issue's cover is therefore 'forgiveness': I argue that forgiveness is a useful concept for thinking about the issue's stance on Obama's election and its own history.

It is useful to consider the overall intention of how the cover of *McSweeney's* represents Obama. Representations of presidents are bound together with considerations of the direction of America. For example, Sean McCann writes about Whitman's interest in the 'Redeemer President', exploring the significance of Lincoln's presidency through Whitman's writing.[247] McCann discusses the possibility of judging Lincoln against Whitman's model of a president that could redeem the problems of post-slavery America. Using a similar tactic, I investigate Obama's potential status as redeemer, as evoked by the messianic rhetoric on the cover of Issue 30. *McSweeney's* explores the myth constructed around Obama by both his campaign and the media; I think about the various issues constructed by the cover, linking them to a consideration of contemporary American politics.

The various semantic/iconographic fields of the cover of Issue 30 connects *McSweeney's* to the problem of race in the construction of an American national identity. The election of America's first black president is a highly significant moment in American history. Obama was represented as different from the typical presidential candidate; his candidacy was given many interpretations in the media. Obama was a black individual with a realistic chance of being elected president. His candidacy was interpreted through the history of racial relations in America. The evocation of forgiveness on the cover of *McSweeney's* suggests a collective, transgenerational guilt on the part of the American people at the treatment of blacks, Native Americans and other ethnic groups throughout the nation's history. One reading of Issue 30's celebration of Obama is as a redeemer president; his election as an event that reconciles contemporary America with its past: if the nation can elect a black president, then it must have progressed beyond its historical racist behaviour towards black people. While this is an over-simplified reading of the cover's various fields, it is useful at this point to raise the notion of redemption, linked as it is to the cover's key phrase: 'can we be forgiven'.

Forgiveness is a way of thinking about the past, an enactment of throwback/forge-ahead (the issue's title). Issue 30 engages with forgiveness as a principle that influences its form and content. Issue 30 is an object which refers to past versions of the periodical through its design; separately, the stories inside the issue reflect and inform this agenda of forgiveness, of both retrospection and prospection, looking back and looking forward. One reading of Issue 30 is as an exploration of the political issues evoked by its cover: how guilt, anxiety

[247] Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press (2008), pp.ix-x.

and reconciliation figure in American self-identity. Under this interpretation, 'can we be forgiven' becomes an entreaty for a collaborative effort to improve on the last eight years.

The cover of Issue 30 addresses both Obama's election and a decade of *McSweeney's*. *McSweeney's* have featured a president on their cover once before: Issue 14 featured an illustration of an amputee George W. Bush on its cover. These covers show *McSweeney's* taking advantage of the function that periodical covers possess for making a public representation of the periodical. Periodicals with a more regular schedule than *McSweeney's* often use their covers to attract readers with topical images; weekly magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek* feature images related to a feature story contained within. The *New Yorker*'s covers are usually unrelated to its contents—it uses illustration, an exception to the dominant norm of photographic periodical covers—but they do occasionally feature topical illustrations. The July 21 2008 *New Yorker* featured a cartoon of Barack and Michelle Obama doing a 'terrorist fist-bump' inside the Oval Office of the White House; this cover responded to and generated further debate around the extreme right-wing theory that Barack Obama was a Muslim terrorist with the secret aim to undermine the American government from within. Political covers serve to politicize the periodical even if its content does not address these issues overtly. The cover allows *McSweeney's* to explore the issues of forgiveness and anxiety in American society: it provides a frame for the exploration of these in the issue's content.

The other function of Issue 30's cover is to mark the tenth anniversary of *McSweeney's*. This issue returns to the design of the first three issues of *McSweeney's*: it is a 'throwback' to when the periodical was primarily a paperback with a text-heavy cover. Issue 30 uses the same text-heavy design principle that shaped Issues 1-3 of the periodical. The typographic design of these issues was already an example of 'throwback' when used at the start of the *McSweeney's* project: it recycled 'older books', as discussed in my previous chapter. Used in Issue 30, this aesthetic is doubly indicative of repetition—a reprisal of vintage design (i.e. like Issues 1-3 performed) and a reprisal of this reprisal (Issue 30 using the aesthetic of Issues 1-3). The design enacts a philosophy of throwback/forge-ahead: recycling and repurposing are affirmed as key strategies for the future of *McSweeney's*. Issue 30 marks its history with an allusion to its foundation. The visual strategy of the cover frames the issue's treatment of forge-ahead/throwback, of forgiveness.

McSweeney's do not directly represent Obama on the cover of Issue 30. The design of the cover resists a whole signification of Obama, preferring instead metonymic and allusive

representation. They avoid bodily figuration; I argue that they deliberately occlude the presidential body as a strategy to critique the way Obama was represented in the media. Obama was undoubtedly the biggest cover star of American periodicals in 2008. As has been the dominant tendency in periodical covers since the 1970s, the majority of the representation of Obama was photographic. *Time* magazine were at one point criticized for having featured Obama on their cover eight times, in contrast to only two cover appearances for John McCain, his Republican rival in the presidential campaign. What all of these cover appearances attest to is the fascination with Obama's visual identity, and how suitable it seems to be for repeated dissemination. This phenomenon of Obama's popular visual identity is one facet of the myth constructed around him by the media and by his campaign; this myth centres on Obama's special status, as the first black president of the United States (and before his election, as the first black candidate with the potential to be President).

Forge-ahead/throwback constructs the past as a key concept and this, combined with the focus on the election of a black president, makes America's race relations important to understanding the fields *McSweeney's* engages with. This past is both the context to why Obama's election is significant and a problem his presidency is tasked with resolving. Obama is figured as the focal point of this moment in American history. The myth surrounding Obama during his 2008 election campaign saw him constructed as a potential messiah or redeemer figure, and it is this role that the cover of Issue 30 interrogates. The rear cover of the collection *The Iconic Obama, 2007-2009: Essays on Media Representations of the Candidate and New President* provides a useful interpretation of his significance, referring to 'a brief historical moment in which "Obama" was synonymous with possibility'; by placing his name in scare quotes, this statement suggests the candidate's second life as myth, as text.[248] Robert Weiner and Shelley Barba have discussed his representation as 'superheroic' in the media landscape of 2008.[249]

The myth constructed around Obama is the context to the cover of *McSweeney's* 30, which both celebrates and qualifies Obama's victory. Obama is not explicitly named as the topic of the Issues 30 cover's many statements, but it is clear that he is the subject by interpreting the following elements: the date of its publication; the presence of his initials (B.O.); the dual reference to 'he can do it' and 'we can do it' plays on the Obama campaign slogan 'Yes we can; the 'O' of 'Rejoice' is framed within a larger circle, situating it as the central design

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[248] Nicholas A Yanes and Derrais Carter (eds.), *The Iconic Obama, 2007-2009: Essays on Media Representations of the Candidate and New President*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company (2012).

[249] Robert G Weiner and Shelley E Barba, 'Obama and Spider-Man: A Meta-Data Analysis of an Unlikely Pairing', in Yanes and Carter (2012), pp.113-127 (119).

element of the cover, and referencing the initial of Obama's surname. Though they traditionally avoid the representational strategies of mass-circulation magazines, Issue 14's illustration of George W. Bush, figuring the sitting president as a double amputee, was a not-so-oblique reference to the detrimental impact of the Afghan and Iraqi wars on the American military personnel. This use of iconic representation was intended as a way to bluntly criticise Bush's presidency, imagining a situation where he had the same experience (limb amputation) as the soldiers his administration decided to send to war. Issue 30's indirect figuration of Obama indicates a more complex critique. It is primarily a celebration of Obama's election, as indicated by its central line 'Rejoice!', but the fragmentation of the presidential body makes this a cautious representation.

The strategies that are used to represent Obama on the cover of Issue 30 indicate a consideration of the multiple texts that comprise the figure "Barack Obama" in the media. The only figuration of Obama's body on the cover is a line drawing of his hands; a horizontal plane of text boxes border and enclose the hands, and construct the following statement:

> He can't do it / with such small hands! / they really are quite small / we can maybe do some of it.

Like the 'O' of his surname, the hands function as a metonym for Obama. One implication of this representation is that the political future of America is at stake in late 2008; the focus on hands and giving America direction (the implicit referent of 'it') combine to suggest the expression 'the future is in his/her/your/their/out hands'. Responsibility for America's future is dispersed among the American population rather than concentrated solely on Obama; this mitigates the messianic representations of Obama discussed above. Obama should not be thought of as a redeemer of America's problems, as this places too much responsibility on one person. Hands suggest physical labour—combined with the cover's assertion of how much work there is to do, this stresses the hard work that lies ahead of both Obama and America. A rhetoric of collective action is used to diffuse the pressure on Obama. The repetition of how 'small' his hands are is part of a necessary acknowledgement of his fallibility.

Obama's humanity is used as a counterpoint to messianic media representations, and *McSweeney's* suggest a further counter in a collective, collaborative presence that represents the American people. The repeated entreaty of the cover is 'Can **we** be forgiven?'; 'we' has a special significance for the voice of *McSweeney's*, as I have already discussed. The Obama

campaign used the single-word concepts of 'Hope' and 'Change' to galvanise American voters, their campaign materials designed to foster optimism for the future. The slogan 'Yes we can' was an extension of these concepts; it was popularised by Obama after the New Hampshire Democratic primary on 8 January 2008. Obama's speech used this simple phrase as one which 'sums up the spirit of a people':

> It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation. Yes we can. It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights. Yes we can.[250]

Obama participates in what Ronald Sundstrom terms the 'browning' of America.[251] By juxtaposing the founding fathers and slaves he associates both white and black Americans as crucial to the identity of the nation. He imagines an America that combines the idealistic spirit of the Declaration of Independence with the emancipatory drive of black slaves. As a mixed-race candidate, Obama could be interpreted as a model of this browned America. Obama's slogan 'Yes we can' rhetorically unifies America; the 'we' implicitly enacts this agenda. *McSweeney's* interrogate this slogan by dispersing the collective voice across other text frames on the cover:

> Wash us clean please, sir.
> Help us prove that we are good.
> We can do it.
> We can maybe do some of it.
> It wasn't us. It was them—the warriors.

This illustrates the *McSweeney's* practice of using the collective voice as a strategy construct a sense of community through their editorial texts. 'We' could refer to the creators of *McSweeney's*, or a reading community, or, interpreted via Obama's campaign slogan, the American people. The creators and readers of *McSweeney's* are conflated with the American public, and a sense of community is imagined by implicating all in the project of remaking American society. Nicoline Timmer has argued for a 'structural need for a we' as a characteristic of writers associated *McSweeney's* movement; her theory of post-postmodernism incorporates a desire for community as a fundamental principle.[252] This desire for community is obviously present in Obama's campaign rhetoric, but *McSweeney's* qualifies this by modifying versions of 'Yes we can'. 'We can maybe do some of it', for example, is a timid response to Obama's bombastic tone; this undercuts the assumption that

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[250] Associated Press, 'Barack Obama's New Hampshire Primary Speech', *New York Times*, 8 January 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (Consulted 22 October 2013).
[251] Ronald R Sundstrom, *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice*, Albany: State University of New York (2008) (SUNY series, Philosophy and Race).
[252] Timmer (2010), p.45.

Obama's election will provide an immediate solution to America's problems. The most significant use of 'we' on the cover is in the repetition of 'Can we be forgiven?' across different languages. *McSweeney's* continues the imagined community of Obama's campaign rhetoric, adapting it to argue for a solution to America's problems rooted in an acknowledgement of the origins of these problems.

McSweeney's challenges the image of Obama as redeemer by installing an element of doubt into their figuration of him. One intention of Issue 30's cover is to acknowledge Obama's inevitable fallibility relative to the expectations being placed upon him. The emphasis on his hands is a reminder of his humanity; this connects how Timmer conceives David Foster Wallace's agenda: to identify the basic 'sameness' of all individuals, to attempt a connection based on what we have in common, our humanity and our vulnerability/limitations. Obama's rhetoric could be read to further support this: Patrick Oray argues for his 2004 convention speech, seen as the launchpad for his candidacy, as expressing the true American ideal of social and ethnic 'hybridity':

> There is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America.[253]

Obama and *McSweeney's* conceive of the American future as one which necessarily involves all Americans, not just the President, in the plan to solve the nation's problems.

The note of caution is justified by the reality of Obama's performance record and the evaluation of this while in office. Rather than a radical redeemer figure, Obama has turned out to be a more conservative figure than the hype and expectations surrounding his election campaign would have predicted. Analysis of his voting record and policy opinions by political commentators before his election had identified this as a likely possibility, but the swell of popular support led to this reality being obscured. His actual past was hidden under the optimistic (and unrealistic) projections of those who bought entirely into the change rhetoric of his campaign myth surrounding his candidacy. The reality of Obama's presidency contradicts the illusion/imagined figure of Obama.

If Obama is not a redeemer then he could be argued to be by necessity a minor reformer, taking elements of old approaches and subtly changing them to adapt to the demands of

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[253] Patrick Oray, 'Myth, Symbol, and the Branding of an American Presidency', in Yanes and Carter (2012), pp.28-42 (35); New York Times, 'Barack Obama's Remarks to the Democratic National Convention', *New York Times*, 27 July 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/27/politics/campaign/27TEXT-OBAMA.html?pagewanted=2 (Consulted 22 October 2013).

governing America. Wholesale political changes like those that came through Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation seem unlikely to be achieved in contemporary America (though with issues like gun control there is nonethless the opportunity), and so the space for Obama to have an effect is limited. What he inherited he must accept and tweak: Guantanamo Bay being gradually, not immediately, shut down, for example, or achieving modifications of the health care system, rather than a New Deal. Staggered withdrawal from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than immediately pulling forces out.

The critical approach of *McSweeney's* towards Obama's image and campaign materials suggests hesitancy amidst optimism. The reluctance of *McSweeney's* to provide a straightforward celebration of Obama's election qualifies its endorsement of his campaign message. 'Yes we can' becomes a moderated 'maybe'. Issue 30 of *McSweeney's* uses Obama's election as justification for an exploration of American progress, and how his election fits into a narrative of anxiety over race relations. The cover's emphasis on forgiveness signals that this issue considers what problems face America given its complex past, and how these can be reconciled. *McSweeney's* downplays the interpretation of Obama as a redeemer President: his election does not negate America's problems with race. Instead, they suggest his role is more pragmatic: to interpret and repurpose America's past, via the rhetoric of an imagined, unified community. *McSweeney's* interprets the activities of Obama as a pragmatic reformer; this political stance is expressed in the content of Issue 30.

The stories in Issue 30 make up a short story cycle on the theme of forgiveness. The editorship of this issue steered its contents towards interrogating some of the political issues raised by *McSweeney's*. The stories explore issues of anxiety and reconciliation, acting as case studies of a sort for the problems that the cover constructs as central to the future of America. The stories wrestle with the significance of the past and how to negotiate it; I argue that they enact a pragmatic approach, privileging community and cooperation. The politics of this content can be read in how these issues are translated into fiction: the implications of realist or postmodern stylistic choices; the treatment of irony and sincerity; and if the past is figured optimistically or pessimistically.

Finding methods to describe how periodicals communicate is a recurring challenge for my research. Describing a collection of short stories by different writers as a short story cycle provides a way to map the intentions of editors onto a diverse selection of texts. Reading Issue 30 as a short story cycle does not imply that there has been overt or solicited collaboration between writers, but rather acknowledges the potential for editorship to shape

a periodical number towards a certain theme. Nagel has detailed several ways to describe short story cycles: that they are 'self-sufficient and inter-related'; that when considered together, the components of a cycle add up to greater than the sum of their parts; that they must be linked in some way by one of several devices, such as protagonists, settings, or themes.[254] Of these, the latter method of categorisation is the most appropriate for Issue 30, as it allows stories by different authors to be considered as possessing some common element. Most investigations of short story cycles generally look at collections of stories by a single author. To investigate a collection of short stories by multiple authors is not a traditional form of short story cycle criticism, but will provide a framework to consider the strategies involved in Issue 30's treatment of forgiveness.

The theme of Issue 30 is forgiveness: progress achieved through a pragmatic approach to the problems of the past; this theme is translated into the content of the stories and the style these stories are written in. Issue 30 is entirely made up of fiction content. The style of Issue 30 broadly conforms to the default style I describe *McSweeney's* as possessing: the stories are examples of sincere metafiction, tending towards the 'slightly unusual subject' end of the spectrum rather than the experimental. Considered as an anniversary issue, representative of where *McSweeney's* has arrived at after thirty issues, this is an appropriately conservative number of the periodical. It provides a series of short stories which have unusual subject matter and varying degrees of slight formal experimentation. Below, I argue for this style as an interpretation of the politics of *McSweeney's*.

Forgiveness can be used as a motif to interpret Issue 30 and, more broadly, the style of *McSweeney's*; I will address the latter after a consideration of the content of the issue. A recurring topic in each story is the past. In all eleven stories the past is an important agent, either strongly influencing a character's behaviour or is directly involved with the plot. There are other themes that recur in several of the stories (creativity, family, repetition) but only the past suffuses the cycle. To gloss a thematic reading of the collected content of Issue 30, there is a hesitance or reluctance expressed towards the future, towards progress. In each of the stories the past is a key element; more important, however, is how the past is processed. The writers in Issue 30 are loosely engaged with the project of how to understand what has come before. The problematic past of the eight years of Bush's presidency provide the context of Issue 30. The strategies employed within the stories of Issue 30 are potential strategies for approaching life in a new political era. They are theories for how to live in a

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[254] James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press (2001), pp.15-16.

post-Bush world. One reading of the content of Issue 30 is as a guidebook for how to process the past. This hesitance is presented alongside potential solutions involving human connection and interaction; a pragmatic solution involving cooperation and placing the individual in the community. These are themes similar to those addressed by Obama's candidacy.

The stories enact or suggest ways to overcome problems, or ways to process past problems. The stories feature problematic pasts that become either obstacles or fuel for the protagonists. The past is the material that the protagonists work through to achieve progress in their endeavours (or that they fail to work through). The past is a foregrounded element: in some of the stories there are flashbacks, or the past exists in the thoughts or consciousness of the characters, their memories presented to us as justification or motivation for certain actions. In other stories, the past is made into almost an active participant, the presence of the past in various discernible forms rendered a central plot element. The *McSweeney's* stories communicate a view of the world that can be made compatible through interpretation, rather than a world that is alienating and seen as an adversary.

In Etgar Keret's 'Bad Karma', an accident from Oshri's past is used in the service of his livelihood; he uses the accident as a narrative to help him sell insurance policies to prospective customers. While meeting with a potential client, a man commits suicide by jumping off a building, landing on Oshri in the process. Oshri is in a coma for six weeks after the accident, and struggles with his medical bills as he did not have any insurance. Oshri struggles to readjust to life after his accident; he desires a return to a higher form of consciousness he believes he experienced while in his coma. This suggests a desire for a kind of stasis, an escape from all forms of time:

> He remembered the absence of memory, the sense of existing without a name and without a history, in the present.[255]

Oshri begins to retreat into this perception of time, trying to increase his periods of sleep. He can only remember his time in the coma while dreaming, and his waking life suffers as he cannot tell anyone about his positive feelings for this lost time. His dreaming becomes indulgent, a use of the past that only helps himself. His use of the past in his waking life is more pragmatic, as he uses the irony of an insurance salesman having an accident and no insurance to provide for his family. By the end of the story, Oshri has not explicitly reconciled his dreaming and waking lives, but he does manage to vocalise his experiences to

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[255] Etgar Keret, 'Bad Karma', *McSweeney's,* 30 (2009), 57-66 (59).

help his daughter. He applies the pragmatism of his use of the accident to his memories of the coma. Upon witnessing a car accident, his daughter asks what will happen to an unconscious victim as they are taken into an ambulance. Oshri responds with a description of his coma:

> A place filled with colors and smells and tastes that you couldn't even imagine. He told her about that place, about how your body becomes weightless there, and how even though you don't want anything, everything there comes true. How there's no fear there, so that even if something is going to hurt, when it happens it just turns into another kind of feeling, a feeling that you're grateful to be able to have.[256]

His daughter ends the story 'smiling and waving bye bye at the man on the stretcher'; Oshri has not fully processed his coma experience but this suggests a reintegration of his waking and dreaming lives, with the positive effect of his narrative on his daughter. Where previously only the reader has been privileged to receive an account of his coma, the use of it as a discursive device to pacify his daughter suggests a reconciliation with the waking world. Storytelling is portrayed as a solution to difficulties in communication; Oshri tries to help his daughter by interpreting his coma as a story.

Kevin Moffett's story 'Further Interpretations of Real-Life Events' sees both the narrator and his father (both called Frederick Moxley) use events from their shared history as the basis for the short stories that they write. Within the first two paragraphs, the narrator establishes that the fiction that he writes is based on his own past:

> The scene with the stepmom was an interpretation of an actual event. When I was ten years old my mother died. My father and I lived alone for five years, until he married Lara, a kind woman with a big laugh. [...] I liked her well enough but not in the story. In the story, "End of Summer," I begrudged Lara (changed to "Laura") for marrying my father so soon after my mother died (changed to five months).[257]

The narrator has had some stories published in literary journals and teaches in a local college. His father takes an interest in writing fiction, and the narrator has difficulty providing honest feedback on his father's work. His feelings are complicated by professional jealousy (he worries his father's stories are better than his) and a long-standing inability to communicate with his father. After reading one of his father's stories, he admits:

> I was no longer angry. I was a little jealous. Mostly I was sad.[258]

He recognises details from his childhood, acknowledging that his father 'fictionalized real-life events in surprising ways'.[259] The narrator provides us with his own memory of

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[256] Keret (2009), 65-6.
[257] Kevin Moffett, 'Further Interpretations of Real-Life Events', *McSweeney's,* 30 (2009), 29-56 (29).
[258] Moffett (2009), 34.

incidents that repurpose his history. 'Further Interpretations...' has twin motifs: the past and storytelling. Each story by both father and son reuses the past; they share the same material and rework it in different ways. They exert the same force of labour on the past, but their present problem stems from the narrator perceiving that his father is better at writing than he is. His father attempts to show his son that they are involved in the same effort. The death of the narrator's mother (and thereby his father's wife) is their main shared historical referent. Where the narrator views his relationship with a father as a competition, his father evidently does not. One of his father's stories involves a trip to a garbage dump after his mother has died; the narrator believed it was to educate him about where trash went, but the story adds another purpose: to look for two of his mother's dolls that his father has thrown out. When the narrator tells his father that he didn't know about this context, his father tells him: 'You should try writing about her, if you haven't already. You find yourself unearthing all sorts of things'.[260] Father and son do not discuss the memory of their wife/mother directly; it is instead dealt with through a discussion of craft, of labour.

Talking about their shared writing efforts is the closest they come to talking about her death; the implication being that perhaps his father took up writing in an attempt to get closer to his son. The narrator rejects this by maintaining feelings of animosity towards his father. He acknowledges that his stories are good but believes that the act of his father's writing is somehow condescending to him. There is no direct reconciliation within the story, but it is possible to read the existence of this short story as a form of resolution. I do not mean to read the narrator as an author-surrogate, but as the narrator explicitly mentions that he is telling a story we can read its plot as a processing of the narrator's problems. Following the advice of his writing mentor, he is determined not to end with a character realization. The story's ending sees him fail to emulate his father's knack for guessing the contents of Christmas presents: the long, flat object that the narrator thinks is chopsticks is presumably a back-scratcher, an object discussed twice in the story as possessing sentimental value for his mother. The narrator's inability or refusal to recognise this is presented to the reader as a failure. The reader's interpretation of the ending is based on this failure, allowing possible thematic readings of the story as critiquing the narrator's stubbornness, arguing for communication and sharing, or for empathy with the narrator for not recognising his flaws. Storytelling is offered as a potential solution to the narrator's problems in his father's attempts to help his son through writing advice.

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[259] Moffett (2009), 33.
[260] Moffett (2009), 51.

In 'Diamond Aces' the narrator's elderly father has a sketchy history with strip clubs and organised crime; this history is reenacted for the narrator as their visit to a club whose owner wants his father's advice descends into violence. In 'Pfaff II' the narrator is confined to a mental health ward and reenacts a troubled past relationship with a girl he meets on the ward. In 'The Beginning of a Plan' time is frozen by a woman with special abilities who is then taken advantage of by a man desiring power and wealth.[261] In these stories the past is manipulated and raised as an object to be interpreted and processed; each time an individual succeeds to a greater or lesser extent in adapting themselves to their world.

The most powerful manifestation of the theme of forgiveness within the cycle is Wells Tower's story 'Retreat'.[262] The title of this story implies a return, a backward movement, but one which can produce a positive (if not immediate) result. Retreat can be considered another expression of throwback/forge-ahead. In the story, two brothers spend time on a remote mountain, struggling to overcome their past grievances and recover some family sentiment. Tower's story is a revised version of his story with the same name from Issue 23 of *McSweeney's*. It is not common practice for writers of short fiction to reprise stories in journals in this manner, and it is the first time an author has done so in *McSweeney's*. This unusual act invites consideration of the resultant implications for the history of the periodical and of Tower's writing process. Tower was revising the story for inclusion in a collection of his stories, and the *McSweeney's* editors found the revised version interesting enough to include in Issue 30. Revision is obviously part of every writer's process, but in choosing to foreground Tower's revisiting his original story, *McSweeney's* make a serious contemplation of the past a central theme of this issue.

Tower's reprisal of 'Retreat' is a manifestation of this theme of coping with a problematic past. In his discussion of the story, he explains that he revised it because it seemed 'cheap and inadequate and shameful'.[263] He goes further to say that this realisation was like looking in a mirror and not recognising one's face. He describes the past as familiar yet repulsive; we recognise that which we do not want to see. This suggests the past as a version of ourselves; we construct the past as a subjective thing, and we actively reconstruct the past to examine it; in doing so we are examining our own interpretations and our imaginative processes. Tower's explication of his writing process suggests our own experience of the past as intimately connected to our perceptions and subjectivities. Tower's revisions to

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[261] All stories from *McSweeney's*, 30 (2009): Carson Mell, 'Diamond Aces', 103-116; Bill Cotter, 'Pfaff II', 1-20; Shelly Oria, 'The Beginning of a Plan', 67-84.
[262] Wells Tower, 'Retreat', *McSweeney's*, 30 (2010), 167-197.
[263] Wells Tower, [Untitled editorial], *McSweeney's*, 30 (2010b), copyright page.

'Retreat' seem less relevant to the issue's theme of forgiveness than the fact of the revisions. Tower has faced what he perceived as a problem of his past, and tried to fix it in a way that makes sense to him: by rewriting, by repurposing it.

A pragmatic approach to the past is a significant theme of Issue 30. This manifests in characters working through their problems, privileging sympathetic relations and an approach to problems that locates the individual inextricably within a family or community. The focus on sentiment and the individual in the community is representative of the style of *McSweeney's*, and, I argue, can be considered as a reading of the politics of the periodical.

This issue's content distils the approach to style that has developed over the periodical's past twenty-nine issues, as discussed in my previous chapter. Issue 30's editorship can be considered a reflection on what *McSweeney's* is at this point in its history. The issue, like the majority of fiction published in the periodical, demonstrates an engagement with the influence of realism and postmodernism. The writers featured in the issue wrestle with the problems of living in modern society, a theme already addressed earlier. The stories in Issue 30 are not drastically innovative, though some stories have unconventional features: Moffett's is a metafictional account of a writer writing about his father writing about their shared past; Oria uses a plot device to freeze time, necessitating narrative denotation of time periods; Tower's story reworking his story previously published in *McSweeney's* becomes a metafictional act with his accompanying note. These features are all in the service of the plot, rather than the focus. While these stories are not straight realist/conventional in style, they are not radical or disruptive in their use of form. They meet the criteria of light innovation set out in my previous chapter; the focus in the stories on sentiment, the individual and humanity demonstrate the writers creating work influenced by the concerns of realism and postmodernism. They create stories that perform what I have argued for as the typical style of *McSweeney's*.

This performance of the style of *McSweeney's* is pitched against the cover's interrogation of American identity and Obama's politics. Particularly because Issue 30 is an anniversary issue, this invites a consideration of the myth of the ideal *McSweeney's*, a text that I argue has affinities with the myth of Obama. I use the cover of Issue 30 and Obama's politics as a prism to consider the politics of *McSweeney's*: how the style of the periodical functions as an ambassador for the project's ethos.

The myth of the ideal *McSweeney's* represents the periodical as moving past the binary-oriented literary culture of the past. Interpreted via comparison with the myth of Obama-as-messiah, this ideal *McSweeney's* is an entirely new solution to the problems of literary culture. Much like Obama is figured as a redeemer of American identity, *McSweeney's* can be thought of as transformative. As I have argued above, my textual representation of the typical *McSweeney's* is a more accurate rendering of the periodical than its myth. This *McSweeney's* does not overcome the problems of realism and postmodernism, but repurposes its components into an approach that enacts a pragmatic politics: an approach focused on recuperating the role of the individual in the world, and stressing the importance of emotional response.

Forgiveness indicates a desire to repurpose the past, and the activities of *McSweeney's* aim to find a way to reconcile its past, its literary precedents: the twin poles of realist and postmodern style. This binary deals with approaches to fiction that argue for different conceptions of the role of the individual. Realism and postmodernism are concerned with how we interpret the world, and with conceptions of the role of the individual. These are political issues, issues that I argue touch on the same problems raised by the analysis of those surrounding Obama's election. Realist literature, by Morris's definition, 'refers to a material world beyond representation and communicates knowledge of that extra-textual reality'; it implies a coherent and comprehensible world, with a movement 'towards the resolution of mysteries and difficulties'.[264] Postmodernism depicts a world in which individuals are disconnected from traditional structures that supplied meaning—it is a literature that offers 'a radical challenge to any notion of verifiable truth' (Morris), and 'an increasing suspicion of narrative plot and its artifice' (Hutcheon).[265] These movements are political because they are concerned with how communities function and how we find meaning in the world.

The literary period that forms the context to the publication of *McSweeney's* responds to realism and postmodernism, as already discussed. This period has been described as even more isolating to the individual than postmodernism, because the postmodern approach has been exhausted and the possibility of obtaining the certitude that postmodernism denied is further distanced. This is the period which the contemporaries of *McSweeney's* respond to; the period that David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen write about in their essays on literary culture. The crises of this period are the crises that form the background to

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[264] Morris (2003), p.141; p.28.
[265] Morris (2003), p.29; Hutcheon (1989), p.49.

McSweeney's. One crisis often discussed as specific to this period is the individual feeling isolated and detached, yet nostalgic for a time when the world was ordered and logical. Obama's campaign could be considered a response to similar problems: 'Yes we can' as an appeal to unite isolated individuals via a community spirit thought lost.

Nicoline Timmer's book *Do You Feel it Too?* is an exploration of this period, and she quotes Philip Cushman's summary of the crisis of the postmodern individual:

> Individuals in the postmodern world, without a cohesive community, are struggling to find sense and meaning in a confusing world. There is little to guide them, and they stumble and feel despair.[266]

Cusher's 'postmodern world' is an example of the problems associated with the referent of 'postmodern'; I interpret this referent to mean the historical period after that in which the most well-known postmodern literature was produced. Timmer goes on to explore the crisis of the individual further, with specific focus on meaning as manifest in 'feelings':

> The friction, between certain cultural conceptions and values that can be labeled postmodern, and a cluster of feelings and needs that cannot be articulated within postmodern discursive communities, is what can trigger, I believe, a search for alternative ways of presenting the self.[267]

Timmer argues for 'a cluster of feelings and needs' that are incompatible with a postmodern approach; this evokes a pre-postmodern world that I associate with realism. Feeling and sentiment are conceived as incompatible with postmodernism; the individual has no outlet for this.

Part of Franzen's argument against postmodern literature in 'Mr Difficult' is that it 'wasn't supposed to be about sympathetic characters', leaving no room for these values of realism.[268] Sympathetic characters are, in Franzen's view of literature, a sign of a writer that desires a connection with his reader. Franzen's several essays describe the problems he perceives as the background to contemporary literature, centred around the issues of difficulty and entertainment:

> Both the moderns and the postmoderns resorted to a kind of literature of emergency. The moderns employed new, self-conscious methods to address the new reality and preserve the vanishing old one. The postmodern enterprise was even more radical: to resist absorption or cooptation by an all-absorbing, all-coopting System. Closure was the enemy, and the way to avoid it was to refuse to participate in the System. For Pynchon this meant flight and

[266] Philip Cushman 'Why the Self is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology', *American Psychologist*, 45.5 (1990), p.600 quoted in Timmer (2010), p.152.
[267] Timmer (2010), p.302
[268] Franzen (2002), 105.

paranoia; for Burroughs it meant transgression. For Gaddis it meant being very angry — so angry that, at a certain point, he stopped making sense.[269]

He discusses 'technological consumerism' as the cultural context which literature is tasked with responding to in his Harper's essay.[270] This context led to a response in postmodern techniques, and these are what he views as alienating the reader. Franzen equates the reader with the individual in an exaggerated political reading of postmodernism: 'If you're having a good time with a novel, you're a dupe of the postindustrial System; if you still identify with characters, you need to retake Postmodernism 101.'[271] Postmodernism is glossed by Franzen as privileging difficulty over entertainment; the individual reader's comprehension is less important than the author's performance of their intelligence. Literature, can, however, address these problems; his response to this world is to advocate what he calls the Contract model of writing, where the writer guarantees the reader will be rewarded by engagement with their text, i.e. they will be entertained and not alienated. For Franzen, the Contract model of literature is best embodied by the social novel, and the techniques of realism.

Like Franzen, Wallace argues that the postmodern period has seen sympathy, sentiment and feeling elided by the dominance of irony. In his McCaffery interview he describes irony as 'indispensable' for the 1950s and 1960s, but 'poisonous' for contemporary culture.[272] Irony estranges the individual because it denies the possibility of genuine expression, privileging mockery and insincerity. While desiring a return to sincere response/sentiment, he does not frame his response within a realist approach to literature as Franzen does. Wallace argues for an approach to literature that addresses both the apathy that infiltrates contemporary culture and the phenomena that have caused this disconnection. He argues for fiction's purpose as to provide the reader 'imaginative access to other selves'.[273] Emotional engagement is encouraged by reemphasising sentiment as a key component in fictional response, and by relocating the individual as necessarily involved in a society. This connects to Timmer's argument for the 'structural need for a we' in contemporary fiction; Wallace seeks to counter social disconnection with sentiment and a reminder of our common humanity. He tries to practice postmodern techniques while incorporating sympathy and sentiment. The techniques Wallace advocated repurpose postmodern methods to engage rather than estrange the reader, and to foster human interaction: 'to ask the reader to really feel something'.[274]

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[269] Franzen (2002), 107.
[270] Franzen (1996), 39.
[271] Franzen (2002), 108.
[272] McCaffery (1993), 144.
[273] McCaffery (1993), 127.
[274] McCaffery (1993), 149.

Wallace's model for literature is writing that responds formally to the isolation of the individual by encouraging reader engagement and community; he takes formal innovation from postmodernism and sentiment from realism. Where Franzen's response to these problems could be interpreted as retreating to the techniques of traditional realism, Wallace develops his model of literature to engage with the problems and move beyond them. Wallace aims to find a way to locate the humanity that is inextricably shaped by contemporary society, while Franzen would more accurately be considered to be locating humanity as something separate from this, something to be defended. Franzen sees reader engagement as incompatible with postmodern technique, but Wallace argues for repurposing these techniques towards meaningful entertainment. Rebein has claimed that Franzen's approach ignores postmodern technique in favour of 'a lighter, more honest and forgiving "Protestant"-style realism'.[275] Franzen's novels create worlds that operate according to pre-postmodern values; Wallace attempted to represent a world that dealt with the legacy of postmodernism in a productive way, by suggesting paths to rekindle human connections. When asked about fiction's role in solving societal problems by Larry McCaffery, Wallace responded:

> I don't think that I'm talking about conventionally political or social-action-type solutions. That's not what fiction's about. Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough.[276]

Wallace goes on to ask how 'we as human beings still have the capacity for joy' despite the 'grotesequely materialistic' nature of the after/during postmodern world.[277] It is 'still' that identifies Wallace as concerned with finding an outlet for sentiment and the individual in a complex world, and it this agenda that I choose to interpret the default style *McSweeney's* as perpetuating. Wallace frames his theories of literature as political.

This approach to literature, inspired by David Foster Wallace, bleeds into the editorship of the periodical. With Wallace as one of the movement's models, a reading of *McSweeney's* is as publishing fiction that tries to combine experimental technique with an emotional engagement with the world. Wallace's 'E Unibus Plurum' essay calls for 'the next real literary "rebels"' to 'treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with

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[275] Robert Rebein, 'Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said "No" to Po-Mo', *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi (2007), pp.201-222 (212) (Postmodern Studies 40).
[276] McCaffery (1993), 131.
[277] McCaffery (1993), 128.

reverence and conviction'.[278] One way to think about *McSweeney's* is that its writers want to become these rebels. In the style of *McSweeney's*, Wallace's approach has been translated into a particular form of sentiment that is expressed in stories that are not radically innovative but are more appropriately considered 'unusual'. This use of Wallace's model is perhaps responsible for the criticism of *McSweeney's* as childish and it being reductively labelled as 'quirky'. Wallace previewed this risk in 'E Unibus Plurum', acknowledging that the new rebels would 'risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs'.[279] *McSweeney's* writers attempt to practise sincere writing but this is a risky tactic in a culture where irony still prevails. The periodical practises a conservative version of his agenda, adapted to a periodical format that downplays experimentation in favour of securing a regular readership. Issue 30, then, enacts a conservative interpretation of Wallace's agenda.

I discussed above the gap between the myth of Obama as president and the reality. There is a useful parallel with what *McSweeney's* aspires to and how it is received, I argue. There is a similar 'downgrading' of expectations in the relation between Wallace's literary model and what *McSweeney's* practises. The typical *McSweeney's* is a more conservative version of the myth of *McSweeney's*. *McSweeney's* do not immediately impose a new literary approach, or radically change what periodicals have been used for. Though their use of periodical form is unconventional, the physical forms they experiment with recycle and repurpose previous techniques. Similarly, the content commissioned by the editors is not an entirely new way of writing, but generates a style with historical links to realist and postmodern approaches. They repurpose irony and sentiment, the respective tools of postmodernism and realism, for an approach to literature that tries to respond to the contemporary world in a way that avoids an adherence to one particular approach. Their use of their literary context is pragmatic, and this philosophy is echoed in the work published by the periodical. *McSweeney's* stories manifest an interest in relocating the modern individual as part of a society, focusing on sincerity and sentiment as vital tools for dealing with contemporary life.

These politics can be read in the recent non-fiction work that the periodical has published. The non-fiction work that has featured in its most recent fifteen or so issues demonstrates the concerns that I have discussed as manifesting the politics of the periodical: an emphasis on sincerity over snark; the importance of the individual; and locating the individual as inextricably connected to a larger social realm. The political content that McSweeney's

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[278] Wallace (1997 [1993]), p.81.
[279] Ibid.

publishes generates activity that allows it to be described as politically engaged; below, I consider how this can be reconciled with its literary activities.

This increase in political content has been supported by a determined approach to the physical presentation of this content. *McSweeney's* have developed a subset of their typical format, in which a substantial piece of non-fiction journalism is presented either separate from or at the end of a book of short fiction. Issues 26 and 34 physically separate their non-fiction; a book on potential targets for American 'invasion' and a 100+ page account of time spent with American soldiers in Iraq. Issue 40 appends a collection of pieces on the Egyptian Revolution to the end of the issue's short stories. Issue 36 features as one of its several booklets an oral narrative from a young Burmese activist in effective exile in Thailand. By literally separating the non-fiction of 26/34/40 from the periodical, this content is emphasised to the reader. This content, along with that of other recent issues of the periodical (37-41) highlight the periodical's political themes. The two non-fiction pieces that are totally separated from their periodical number are the dossier on American 'invasion' targets and Nick McDonell's account of his time with American troops in Iraq. These books represent the periodical's politics in different ways. 'Where to Invade Next' is a parodic critique of American foreign policy. It details the reasons why America might feasibly choose to engage in pre-emptive military action against countries like Iran, Syria and North Korea, detailing their ideologies, a threat overview, and possible methods of attack/sanction.[280] The report notes its sources at the rear of the book, but otherwise contains no editorial comment from *McSweeney's* on its purpose or composition. It presents the reader with an explanation for why the American government might choose to attack (or engage in military action towards) several other countries. The background to this book is obviously the military action taken by America and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq. The political implications of this book are left to the reader to interpret—it is a pragmatic assessment of possible actions that America might be engaged in. It could be considered an act of preparatory journalism, priming readers for possible future military acts. The implication of the text is a critical comment on the current direction of American foreign policy, assuming that the future will see the USA come into direct conflict with nations it sees as a threat to its hegemony.

Nick McDonell's 'The End of Major Combat Operations' is a more conventional form of reportage, but similarly adopts a pragmatic position on the Iraqi war, with his account

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[280] Stephen Elliott (ed.), 'Where to Invade Next', *McSweeney's*, 26 (2008).

focusing on how the individuals in both American and Iraqi camps have experienced the war.[281] He is embedded with a number of military units and spends time with soldiers, contractors, interpreters, and natives. McDonell's piece continually focuses on the human element in the stories that he recounts: Iraqi interpreters abandoned by the military tell stories of local dogs taken home by American soldiers (28); he delivers a suitcase of clothes from an ex-pat in New York in return for contacts (17); Iraqi police mimic the Boston accent of an American lieutenant (135-6). The text is composed of multiple vignettes with several only lasting a page or so; the effect of this is to provide a wide survey of the people and communities affected by the war. None of those interviewed by McDonell seem particularly happy with the ongoing situation in Iraq, and by featuring a large number of people he avoids focusing responsibility/guilt on one group more than another. The text communicates the basic sameness of all the participants, managing to argue for the need for more cooperation and shared goals without having to explicitly state this.

Other political content in the non-fiction of *McSweeney's* includes interest in political unrest and its consequences: a series of documents and narratives from participants in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (Issue 40), an essay on the IRA in Northern Ireland (37), a profile of the Iranian Shah in exile's right-hand man (39), an account of Arab soldiers working in the Israeli army (38), a first-person report from the Occupy Wall Street protests (40). Issue 39 features an essay on politics and conscience from Vaclav Havel.

The other significant type of political content found in *McSweeney's* is either profiles of or oral narratives from victims of human rights abuses—the Issue 36 booklet mentioned above is one example of this; Issue 38 features an oral narrative from a an Pakistani-American woman whose police cadet son was accused of involvement in 9/11; Issue 41 features an account of wrongful imprisonment and an oral history of the impact of the Columbian drug trade on a family. While early issues of the periodical featured interviews with and profiles of unusual figures this focus indicates a definite shift towards a politically active status for *McSweeney's*. The project's interest in profiling individuals has been shifted into the *Believer*, so a recurrence of this type of journalism is significant. It is overt political behaviour, looking at problems caused by political decisions (or indecision), functioning as advocacy against these problems, and often connecting with active campaigns.

One possible route for understanding the integration of this political direction into *McSweeney's* is the writing of Dave Eggers: his 2006 book *What is the What* was a

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[281] Nick McDonell, 'The End of Major Combat Operations', *McSweeney's*, 34 (2010).

collaborative novel about the experiences of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee, written in the first person.[282] Eggers published the book through *McSweeney's*, and the success of the book led to the establishment of the Valentino Achak Deng foundation, helping Sudanese refugees in America. This was followed by *McSweeney's* establishing the Voices of Witness charity: an organisation dedicated to using the oral narrative form to increase awareness of and combat human rights abuses. The Voices of Witness book series is one of the most direct political activities of the *McSweeney's* project.

The human rights content published in *McSweeney's* functions as publicity for the Voices of Witness series, but also serves to politicise the issues of the periodical. This content focuses on the individual but in several contexts: their family/local community, American/ governmental, and in a broader sense of arguing for universal human rights. The oral narrative form in particular manifests Timmer's 'structural need for a we'—by not filtering the account of the individuals involved, their experiences are communicated to the reader without obvious bias. It is an aesthetic decision to try and increase the impression of objectivity and sincerity. While the Voices of Witness series began outside of the *McSweeney's* project, it has featured prominently in the latter stages of its history, suggesting a desire to make a social conscience a prominent feature of the periodical. The latter *McSweeney's* reflects the wider activities of the creators involved in the project: translating the ethos of its literary origins into a practical engagement with the world through several publications, a literacy foundation (826), a college scholarship scheme (Scholar Match) and a human rights charity (Voices of Witness).

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[282] Dave Eggers, *What is the What*, San Francisco: McSweeney's (2006).

Conclusion.

What is *McSweeney's*? It is a periodical with unusual formal characteristics that has published a certain kind of 21st-century literature in a style influenced by the debate over the merits of realist and experimental approaches. This formulation is my response to the challenge of describing the identity of a publication that changes its physical form each issue and makes claims for its style as non-dichotomous. I have attempted with this thesis to describe the complexity of the *McSweeney's* periodical spectrum, to understand what identities it is given, and to provide my interpretation of one. I have tried to give my reading of the periodical's activities interpretive force by analysing them to the exclusion of certain topics. This thesis stands as my justification for pursuing this method, in arguing for the periodical's identity as a paradoxical synthesis of repetition/originality. Periodical identities balance consistency and newness; the *McSweeney's* periodical invites readers to imagine its identity as non-dichotomous, as constantly original. It makes a claim for its most reliable characteristic to be unpredictability; this is an illusory claim, as I have argued above, because its content is of a consistent and regular type.

The periodical was founded with three apparent principles: to provide a space for writers who did not fit with contemporary literary trends; to participate in pursuing a style of writing, inspired by David Foster Wallace, that strives for communicating to a reader a sympathetic understanding of the difficulties of life; and to create well-designed book objects. The first aim has become less of a priority given the long-term success of the periodical (though there is still a strong commitment to publishing new writers). The enduring motivation of the periodical has been a commitment to publishing content relevant to its readers in beautiful books. This combines experimentation and originality (formal) with regularity and a commitment to entertainment (content). The interaction of these elements produces the periodical's identity as I interpret it.

The *McSweeney's* periodical is an artifact of 21st-century culture, and the spectrum of its publication history documents several important aspects of this period. Its fondness for the book object is characteristic of a contemporary tendency to react against the spread of digital media with nostalgia for print. The agenda behind the fiction content that the periodical commissions is informed by its precise historical moment, balancing the merits of realist and postmodern approaches. It manifests a commitment to disseminate literature that privileges the reader's entertainment while acknowledging the influence of postmodern writers, by

incorporating metafictional techniques to enhance the potential for reader satisfaction; this is an approach borne of the 21st-century.

In approaching the periodical's overall identity, I chose not to focus on the potential ways in which readers interpret this, due to the innumerable possible ways one can read the spectrum of *McSweeney's* numbers. The periodical evokes a sense of unpredictability and newness through the identity it constructs for itself, while providing familiarity via its fiction content with offbeat subject matter that strives for a connection with the reader. Its constructed identity works in tandem with its activities to provide a possibly unique periodical experience: the feeling that one is experiencing something new while reading something familiar. If not unique, then this is a heightened manifestation of the periodical paradigm: balancing repetition and originality.

The periodical offers readers a guarantee of the sensation of encountering the new alongside a regular and satisfying provision of fiction content. The subscription model is especially fitting for *McSweeney's*, as the expectation of receiving a new issue is complemented in the possibility for the unexpected. The appeal of the periodical is in this balance, I argue. The combination of an evocation of 'quirkiness' and success evident in response to *McSweeney's* has its roots in this dual identity. It is not either repetitive or constantly new; it is both.

This paradoxical incorporation of repetition/the new is at the heart of the *McSweeney's* project. If there is such a thing as a *McSweeney's* brand, this would be its defining trait. To look at other projects from its creators is to see this brand characteristic refracted: the theme issues and changing internal design of *Lucky Peach*; the consistent variety of cover design in the McSweeney's Rectangulars; the several distinct formats for the 826 National stores which nonetheless suggest a unified project (from pirate supply shop to a 'secret' detective store). *McSweeney's* manages to forge a commercial strategy from this motif, creating a dependable and regular aesthetic that simultaneously evokes originality and unpredictability. The publication history of *McSweeney's* considered as a complete text is an example of sleight of hand: offering readers the unexpected while implicitly providing a reading experience that privileges their entertainment.

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