Matterlightblooming Phenomenon

Using George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* to Theorise the Literariness of Western Death

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Introduction

Tokyo, 2019

A Tokyo hotel room in the middle of the night, and the call came in. My father, whom I adored and despised, had died in Uganda. Lungs stiffened by COPD, body eroded by near-constant malaria, prostate cancer running wild – his heart had given out. Flights would need to be booked. Money borrowed. I felt strange.

I got a can of coffee from the vending machine (hot – extraordinary!) and went up to the roof, where I sat and looked out over a bus depot and smoked a cigarette. By then, my father and I had not spoken for many years. I felt strange. The end of a chapter, I thought. A twee thought, but there it was. The end of a chapter, I thought, and I cried.

I was 30 years old. My father's passing was the first time Big Death had erupted into my life, and what unfolded as I grieved both him and our broken relationship was a process that, looking back now, I can only describe as literary. From that first repetitive thought as the news broke through me – the metaphor of the chapter ending – I found myself conjuring and dispatching a range of literary mechanisms to help me understand, process and make sensible this major life event. It was the beginning of my interest in the relationship between death and the literary – an idea that has followed me for many years, and one that I myself have lived and leveraged to cope.

I do not know where my father is now (if he is anywhere), but I catch glimpses of him through the veil now and then. Lighting a cigarette in a dim bar, he shakes out the match and turns to me. On the front patio of his home, beer in hand, waiting for the rest of us to arrive. Sometimes I ask him for help. It is in these kinds of images (or, rather, my need for them) that this project begins.

Death's Withdrawal

The fact that death is unknowable is, as Richard A. Cohen points out, quite simply "common sense" (29). But death – that is, what it is like to really die and what happens to us after we are dead – is what Jaspers calls "a very special unknown… the unknown which by its very nature cannot be known" (Edwards 42). As Cohen explains, Levinas goes further, insisting that saying that death is unknowable is not enough. "Its inscrutability goes beyond the known and the unknown," Cohen writes, "It is not known, to be sure, but it also not simply

unknown, as if it were somehow within the realm of knowledge" (29). For Levinas, death cannot even be contained within the epistemological realm because "knowledge is not its proper medium" (Cohen 29). So comprehensive is death's denial, it evades all forms of knowing, to the extent that it is beyond unknown. Instead, Levinas classifies death as a "mystery" – something that is not an object of knowledge, outside of all grasp, and "refractory to all light" (*Time and the Other* 75).

This special type of unknowability is what Heidegger calls "death's withdrawal", and it is total and unnegotiable (R. Smith 185). As a result, death – as a concept, so far as it can even be considered a concept – has some peculiar characteristics for something so prominent in our daily lives.

The first is that it is unexperienceable. While we will all die, we can never experience a personal death. In *Language, Metaphysics and Death*, John Donnelly writes that in the same way that we can consider the limits of the visual field as unseeable, we can also consider death as "unexperienceable" (3). Of course, we experience death in the world. It is all around us, but it enters the world via the deaths of those we know and those we do not (Critchley, "Being and Time"). We can only ever glance death askew, because an experience of death infers a living subject to have the experience and that is exactly what death precludes. As Jaspers asserts, "Death cannot be an experience. Whoeever has an experience is still alive" (Edwards 78). This paradox is what Nagel calls one of death's "special difficulties" (4). Levinas argues that personal death is always deferred, always in a state of futurity, because "when death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothing, but because I am unable to grasp" (Levinas, *Time and the Other* 72). In other words, death is the loss of life, but in the moment of death, that loss loses its subject, at the same moment the world loses that subject (Nagel 4). As Nagel puts it, "So long as a person exists, he has not yet died, and once he has died, he no longer exists; so there seems to be no time when death…can be ascribed to its unfortunate subject" (4). As a result, death is "never now" (Levinas in Cohen 31). We are always "absent from our death" (Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* 9). As Jaspers puts it, death cannot be an experience because "whoever has an experience is still alive" (477). Death is an "unhappening" and in this sense, "death cannot…be experienced" (R. Smith 38).

The second unique characteristic of death is that it *will never be empirically observable.* Robert Roland Smith argues, "When we see death happen, we never see death as such" (185). While a thread of mathematics can be followed all the way back to the origin of the universe, mathematics cannot follow us beyond the death line. Science takes us only so far, observing and measuring the processes and effects of biological death, but only from the living side.

Anecdotal accounts of Near Death Experiences (NDEs) could be said to take us closer, but as these observations are unrepeatable and essentially subjective, they provide no reliable empirical evidence as to the nature, quality or experience of death either.

The third unique characteristic of death is that it is essentially unthinkable. Freud is one of the many to make this argument, writing,

> It is impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence, the psychoanalytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. (289)

As James A. Godly explains, this position is not meant to intimate that death does not exist, or that it is denied, but rather that it is "literally unthinkable as such", as there is no experience in the world that refers to it from which we can draw to conjure the content of a mental representation (96).

Critchley agrees, arguing that "death is ungraspable and exceeds both intentionality and the correlative structures of phenomenology… the representation of death is always a mask – *a memento mori* – behind which nothing stands…" (26). Intentionality, in this instance, refers to the theory of intentionality initially presented by Brentano which, in simple terms, describes the state of consciousness directed toward something or specific objects within the framework of phenomenology (Moustakas 2). The theory of intentionality was further developed by Husserl with the addition of the concepts of noema and noesis, in which neosis encompasses the act of consciousness – the mediums of mind and spirit that activate or facilitate the generation of sense or meaning of a perception – and noema, the content or objects toward which consciousness is directed (Moustakas 2). As a noema, Critchley is arguing, death's blank space provides no object toward which consciousness can be directed, only a mask-like representation behind which nothing stands. In this way, death robs consciousness of a true noema, and in so doing, the article which generates meaning. The process of directing consciousness toward it (intentionality, the *thinking-aboutness*) breaks down. In short, when considering death, there is nothing to think about, and thus it becomes unthinkable.

The fourth unique characteristic of death is that it is unspeakable. Critchley writes that "death is radically resistant to the order of representation…representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence" (26). Lacan writes that death is

"possibly beyond discourse, and certainly not contained within it" (K. Smith 65). Alenka Zupančič asks, "How do we say death?", pointing to an interesting paradox:

> …to be able to say death, you have to bring death to life, you have to make it part of life, give it a symbolic existence to which you can relate; you have to resurrect death from death, so to speak. To say death, you have to make 'symbolically alive', alive in the symbolic.
>
> (26)

Zupančič goes on to explain that, in the same way that Hegel insisted "the word is the murder of the thing", so exists a similar process she calls "murder by resurrection", in which saying death kills death by bringing it to a different, symbolic life (27). In this way, a certain short-circuit occurs, in which life and death coincide, and thus appear to cancel one another out, introducing an impossibility, or absurdity. Once again, this is not to say that death is denied. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone writes, death is an instance that shows that we can "be compelled to recognize the existence of…facts without being about to state or comprehend them" (36). But it is true that death cannot be alive in the symbolic – not in any real sense – because the thread of meaning attached to any symbol that attempts to represent it has nothing to attach to on the other end. The symbolic becomes untethered. If we consider this paradox alongside the strange way death robs loss of its subject, we start to get an early sense of the ways in which it undermines and disrupts the symbolic order.

How are we expected to live around this profound void that underwrites our lives and, indeed, our reality – this fundamental truth that we cannot experience, observe, think or speak? In the light of death's total withdrawal, we can only ever approach it from oblique angles, apprehending it through mediating frameworks that never reveal it for what it really is. Zupančič quotes the following from Pope, "At the instant we call death, everything seems to dissolve… but this death is only imaginary, it exists figuratively but in no other way…" (27). James Lawson posits that "some truths are only available through narrative" (392). To apprehend death in any meaningful way, we have only the figurative and the narrative available to us. These are the materials of Critchley's "mask behind which nothing lies", and they are all we have to work with. To fill the gap where knowing fails, we rely on what Robert Roland Smith calls "transliterations of death" (189). We fill the void beyond the death-line with powerful literary material: metaphors, stories, myths, narratives and oral traditions, all of which "stand in" for death. In order to make the truth of death even remotely available to us, we must deploy the literary. This is a fundamental yet oddly under-theorised feature of death: we cannot apprehend death without deploying the creative imagination, so death and the literary are inextricably tangled, always paired, and, I

would argue, possibly one and the same. As far as death can be real to us in the world, death is produced via literary mechanisms, and this points towards an intimate entanglement between death, literature, imagination and creativity.

The aim of this dissertation is to explore this entanglement and, in so doing, present an argument for the literariness of death, using George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* to theorise some of the most common ways that death's literariness may manifest in the day-to-day handling of death, both at an individual and societal level.

In Chapter One, I examine some of the peculiar effects of death's withdrawal, arguing that death has an "extra-generative" effect in that, whatever it is and however it is approached, it induces a kind of additional productivity within us. I go on to examine some of the ways literature is deployed to comprehend death, and how afterlife narratives perform a kind of double-work, standing as both works of creativity while simultaneously performing a strenuous resistance to the ultimate unknown as transliterations of death.

In Chapter Two, I explore the relationship between death, language and creativity, drawing from the work of Maurice Blanchot and Simon Critchley to determine the ways in which death is located at the heart of the creative process before building upon these ideas to present a more comprehensive picture of why the creative act may be considered a kind of pseudo-death.

In Chapter Three, I introduce my primary text, George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, pairing it with Foucault's conception of heterotopia to theorise death as a heterotopia for what appears to be the first time.

Chapter Four brings the enquiry down to the language level, examining the utility of euphemism and metaphor in both *Lincoln in the Bardo* and our daily management and comprehension of death, and applying Hans Blumenberg's concept of the absolute metaphor to death for what appears to be the first time. I then use Derrida to examine death's effect on the operations of the proper name as an example of death's strange effects on the order of representation. I go on to theorise a framework of death understood as "The Other in Us".

The final chapter theorises death as a multi-voiced narrative, drawing on the work of Trudi Buck and Stavroula Pipyrou to show how the dead become caught "in-story", reconstructed of literary materials by survivors. Lastly, I present a theorisation of death as "Story Interrupted".

A note on terminology

The scope of this enquiry is limited to death systems of the West, and as such, any reference to “death” should be taken to mean “Western death”, unless otherwise explicitly stated.

The word ‘bardo’ is taken from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Literally translated, it means “intermediate state”, “transitional state” or “between state” (Simmonds 268). Furthermore, it refers not only to the intermediate state after death, but also to “different states of consciousness of life” (Govinda xi). As Chogyam Trungpa writes, “Bardo means gap; it is not only the interval of suspension after we die but also suspension in the living situation as well” (Simmonds 268). While the word ‘bardo’ has been appropriated into the English language, appearing in English dictionaries along with a notably incorrect definition, I acknowledge its origin in Tibetan tradition and the sacred Tibetan *Book of the Dead*.

Furthermore, any general reference to ‘language’ in this proposal refers to the English language, unless otherwise specified.

A note on scope

Initially, the scope of the enquiry included death systems of both the West and the Global South. However, it quickly became apparent that such an undertaking was far too vast for this format. Early research suggested that an argument for the literariness of death may not apply, or may only apply differently, to African, Asian and Southern American death systems, as most of these death systems consider death to be a simple continuation of life or a different phase of living – one that overlaps significantly with the world of the survivor. As a result, the decision was made to narrow the scope of enquiry to Western death only, with recommendations for further potential lines of enquiry into how this argument may apply to death systems of the Global South presented in the Conclusion.

Literature Review

Of death, more has been written than could possibly be traversed here. Some notable works in the context of this enquiry include Jonathan Dollimore's *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, in which Dollimore examines the relationship between death and desire as it operates in the Western imagination. Dollimore makes a connection between literature, death and desire, writing that our desire for a reality in which we can transcend death is a driving force for literary work (xiii). He writes, "Some of the greatest literature in the West derives from the tension between the desire for that ultimate reality to exist, and thereby redeem loss, and the conviction that, in reality, it does not" (xiii). This notion that death is an engine of creative production contributes to an argument for the extra-generative effects of death, which I attempt to make in Chapter One.

John Donnelly's *Language, Metaphysics and Death* also stands as a remarkable thanatological resource. First published in 1978, the anthology presents a thorough overview of the primary theories operating in the field of thanatology at the time, including essays by Thomas Nagel, Paul Edwards, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and others covering everything from the meaning of death, to whether or not death is inherently evil. A number of important concepts regarding death's inherent qualities and its total withdrawal were drawn from this work, as expanded upon in Chapter One.

The closest arguments to an argument for the literariness of death appear in the fields of rhetoric culture theory and communication theory, where connections between death and rhetoric are made by a number of authors. The most relevant may be Robert Roland Smith's assertion in *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings of Literature and Art* that "the metaphors do help us think about (death) – or at least, they help us think we can think about it, even though we can't… Death can only ever play upon us at a rhetorical (and to that extent, aesthetic) level" (188-205). This assertion represents a possible origin of an argument for the literariness of death, but Smith does not expand too far upon it. In a 2024 article, Brent Yergensen argues that death and communication (specifically, rhetoric) are "permanently intertwined" through storytelling (236). Death, he argues, is a "culminated rhetorical situation" in which rhetoric is used to "swivel" us away from our fear of death and toward comfort and acceptance (234-235). Through words in the form of rhetoric and narrative, we both assign meaning to death and prepare for our inevitable ends, thereby protecting ourselves from the fear death invokes (235). "The mortal condition," he argues, "is a rhetorical condition" (249). Though Yergensen does create a connection between death and the literary by positioning death as a rhetorical situation, he does not go as far as arguing, as I will attempt to do, that death (as far as we can comprehend or handle it in the world) is a literary construct, but

rather that the literary mechanisms of rhetoric help us understand and interpret death, assign it meaning, and manage our terror of it. In short, his notion of death's literary connection has more to do with death's effects upon the living than the qualities or characteristics of death itself, as it moves in the world.

Yergensen's argument appears to be a development of an idea presented and expanded upon by Michael Carrithers and others in Carrither's 2009 anthology of rhetoric culture theory, *Culture, Rhetoric and the Vicissitudes of Life*. In it, Carrithers argues that human beings deploy the rhetorical edge of culture to cope with and make sense of unexpected vicissitudes, such as death. "Human beings," he writes, "are constantly vulnerable to accident and the unforseen, and wield rhetoric and culture against those accidents in order to render intelligible and operable what may at first seem incomprehensible and incomprehensibly disastrous" (10). Death is one of life's inevitable vicissitudes, and Carrither's assertion that it requires us to marshal extensive imaginative resources to help interpret it and render it operable has been helpful in the development of an argument for the literariness of death (10).

Anthropologists Trudi Buck and Stavroula Pipyrou argue for a "narrative approach to death" as a productive analytical approach to the study of Western death (261-262). They argue that narrative is implicated in the "production" of death, that death "invites a story", that the dead are caught "in story" in the sense that narrative recreates, re-enacts and re-claims them after death, and that death is a "multiply constructed" experience (263-265). These ideas form some of the groundwork for my theorisation of the literariness of death in later chapters. Additionally, Buck and Pipyrou argue that death is a dynamic thing, constantly re-enacted and re-produced, caught in a relation between the dead and the living that "unfolds in story" (278). Their argument is for a narrative approach to death, not that death is, essentially, made of narrative, as I attempt to argue in this thesis.

The notion of death's total withdrawal, which I examine in Chapter One, is well developed across a range of authors and eras, a sample of which I have reviewed here. Levinas wrote extensively about death's mystery – an inscrutability that goes "beyond the known and unknown" to the extent that "knowledge is not its proper medium" (Cohen 29). Donnelly, Nagel, Blanchot, Cohen and Roland Smith all reference death as "unexperienceable" (Donnelly 3; Nagel 4; Blanchot *Work of Fire* 9; Cohen 31; R. Smith 38). Freud, Godly, Critchley and Moustakas argue that death is unthinkable (Freud 289; Godly 96; Critchley 26; Moustakas 2). Edwards, however, disagrees, arguing that death is simply the absence of life, and thus "no more inconceivable than other absences e.g.: the absence of sound or clothes" (76). I synthesise the arguments of these authors and others to build a more complete

exploration of death's withdrawal and its peculiar effects as a basis for an argument for the literariness of death in the Introduction and Chapter One.

With the exception of Gordon, Zupančič, R. Smith and Lawson, the authors surveyed regarding death's withdrawal do not make an explicit connection between death's inscrutability and the literary. Pope writes that "death…exists figuratively but in no other way" (Zupančič 27). Lawson argues that "some truths are only available through narrative" (392). R. Smith agrees, arguing for what he calls "transliterations of death", which we rely on when all other forms of knowing fail (189). Gordon writes "None of us, in this life, can know what death is really like. But it does not follow that the psyche may not have symbols and mental representations of it – whether accurate or false is beside the point, and anyway not verifiable" (113). Gordon goes on to assert that each of us develops a certain "iconography of death" over the course of a lifetime, exploring the connection between death, creativity and symbolisation, as well as the connection between the ability to die well and the ability to create well through the lens of a Jungian framework (123). The latter argument – the connection between the ability to die well and the ability to create well – may originally have been alluded to by Kafka in his letters, as surfaced and expanded upon by Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*. Blanchot's writing here forms the basis of my exploration of the relationship between death, language and creativity in Chapter Two.

Derrida offers possibly the most thematically cohesive exploration of death's specific, peculiar effects on language (which he calls death's "strange syntax") and some of its inherent entanglements with literature across his range of extraordinary eulogies for some of the biggest Western thinkers of his age, as collated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas in *The Work of Mourning* (34). For example, in his eulogy for Roland Barthes, Derrida interrogates the "law of the name", in which the proper name itself "says death, all deaths in one", as it represents the "unique disappearance of the unique" (34). It is an idea he will later develop in his eulogy for Joseph N. Riddel, stating that the proper name "races toward death even more quickly than we do" as it is "in advance the name of a dead person" (130). Across this collection of eulogies, Derrida develops a number of ideas which I deploy in my arguments below, namely the notion of our interiorisation of the dead (42, 159, 161) and the connection between the *corpus* and the corpse as it pertains to the link between creativity and death (169, 175), both of which I apply to *Lincoln in the Bardo* to further theorise the literariness of Western Death in later chapters. *The Work of Mourning* was a foundational text inspiring my thinking about the link between death and the literary. Derrida's almost throwaway reference to Roland Barthes as a "spectral referent" (54) was particularly significant, as it opened up an important line of questioning around representation and

death and the limits of representation relative to death, which stand as the originary ideas upon which my line of enquiry was based.

Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* is a key text as regards the connection between death and creativity, which I explore further in Chapter Two. In it, he leverages Kafka, Mallarmé and Rilke to theorise the complex and often paradoxical relationship between death and creative work, which he connects directly with "death's impossibility" or death's withdrawal, as referenced above. Creative work, Blanchot argues, is a type of pseudo-death in which the writer is able to rehearse an experience of death that would otherwise be inaccessible due to death's total withdrawal. Jock Abra agrees, writing that in order to dominate death through creativity, the artist must "willingly undergo a facsimile of death itself" (214), and in so doing, we access a "periodic exhilaration…during which one feels most alive, but which paradoxically may stem from the encounter or simulation of death" (214). Hayes further theorises Blanchot's notion of creativity as death, writing that creativity is a form of dying that "rejects personal existence in favor of a limitless dissipation of existence" (14). He writes that Blanchot's position intimates that the creative act results in a "negation of personal coherence" (14). According to Critchley, Blanchot may even go further, invoking the well-circulated idea that "the word is the murder of the thing" (53). "Human speech," he writes, "is thus the annihilation of things qua things, and their articulation through language is truly their death-rattle" (Critchley 53). Blanchot, Abra, Hayes and Critchley do not, however, further elaborate on the ways in which creative work may be like a form of dying. I place their work in conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of the annihilating effects of directing attention and Charalampos Mainemelis' theory of the relationship between time and creativity in order to attempt to do so.

When considering the connection between death and creative work, the concept of symbolic immortality is relevant. It has been most widely circulated in the context of Terror Management Theory, which posits that human beings deploy culture and creativity to invest in a form of symbolic immortality that transcends death. Terror Management Theory finds its roots in the work of Ernest Becker and Otto Rank. Becker argued in his 1973 book, *The Denial of Death*, that death "haunts the human animal like nothing else", and that it is the driving force behind a range of activities designed to help us avoid the reality of our imminent deaths (27). The theory was fully developed and formalised by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon and Tom Pyszczynski (*Psychology Today*), and its primary premise is that, in order to protect themselves from mortality salience (present feelings of terror related to death), human beings invest in cultural worldviews that promise some kind of death transcendence (religion, for example), then invest in living up to the values that align with those cultural worldviews in order to generate and maintain a robust self-esteem that

operates as a buffer against existential anxieties (Perach and Wisman 194). Perach and Wisman build upon Terror Management Theory to offer the first empirical investigation into the anxiety-buffering effects of creative achievement. Their study found that at higher levels of creative operation, participants who believed themselves to have engaged in creative achievement demonstrated a lower "death-thought accessibility" under mortality salience than that demonstrated by control groups (193). This contradicts Blanchot and Abra's position that creative production, particularly that of the writer, is a process of actively seeking out a facsimile experience of death (Abra 214), whilst aligning with Blanchot's assertion that the production of creative work may be driven by the desire to produce a creative artefact that will outlive the artist and thus secure their symbolic immortality (*Writing the Disaster* 9). This is an idea echoed by Derrida, who discusses the writer's desire to be transfigured "into a corpus", that will be kept in their memory, in place of their living body (169).

In his introduction to *Imagining the Medieval Afterlife*, Richard Matthew Pollard writes of the robust afterlife vision tradition in the Western canon (II). However, the notion of voyaging beyond death and returning to tell the tale is essentially universal. As Pollard writes, "across cultures and across the centuries, humans have been telling stories of those who breached the barrier between the living and the dead, and reported back on the latter" (i). Each of these stories stands as an example of how the literary is deployed to attempt to transcend, comprehend and manage death, and their universal ubiquity points to a general need to conquer and comprehend death that appears to be seated at the very core of the human condition.

In the Global South, conceptualisations of the afterlife are premised on a more permeable border between the living and the dead (Hawley 1). As Jock Agai writes, in most, if not all, African traditions, "Death is a stage of life", a continuation of our existence on earth, making death and immortality "inseparable concepts" (3). A. K. Opoku explains:

> The terms 'this life', 'next life', 'afterlife', 'eternal life' are terms borrowed from European Christian philosophies, which are foreign to the African system of thought. Life is one continuous stretch of existence and is not split up into 'this life' and 'the next life'. What happens after death is not the terminal, definitive stage of a man's life; it is only a phase in the continuing round of human existence…the spirit land is not a place of eternal repose and happiness. It is rather a transit camp for those awaiting reincarnation to continue the life cycle (22)

In African metaphysics, life on earth, death and the afterlife are all transitional states or bardos – temporary stops along the "continuing round" of existence (Opoku 22). In the

Yoruba tradition, for example, there are three realms of existence: "the realm of the living, the realm of the dead and the realm of the unborn" (Selin and Rakoff 194). To cross into the next world, or "supersensible world" as Agai calls it (4), the dead are required to traverse a border of some kind, often conceptualised as a mountain or river, by climbing or crossing (Agai 5). In this way, the borderland to the afterlife lies beyond the physical death.

In the death systems of the Global South, the world of the living and the world of the dead overlap. The dead move among survivors as ancestors – a living, immediate presence in their lives. These facts represent a fundamental experiential and conceptual difference between the death systems of the Global South and the monolithic Western death system. As a result, a further, separate enquiry into the potential literariness of death in the context of African and Asian death systems is necessary. Such a project would be expansive, and, as such, may fall beyond the scope of this enquiry.

In theorising the literariness of death, Foucault's notion of the heterotopia is useful in order to conceptualise death as a spatial field, as I have attempted to do in Chapter Three. Heterotopias, or "counter-sites", are places defined as "outside the norm" (Barnes 573). Foucault's concept of heterotopia includes only man-made spaces in our world, such as prisons and barracks – spaces which are "outside all places" where "all other real sites that can be found within a culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (*Of Other Spaces* 24). Like a mirror, a heterotopia is a "placeless place", an "unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface" (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 24). In a heterotopia, there is a break with traditional time, with some linked to the "indefinite accumulation of time" (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 26). Most importantly, Foucault writes that heterotopias "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes the penetrable" (*Of Other Spaces* 26). Considering Foucault's definition and later redefinition of heterotopia, it follows that the concept may logically be applied to death, but I was unable to find an example of this application. I attempt to achieve it in Chapter Three.

In our handling of death, euphemism and metaphor are what I characterise in Chapter Four as "death's favourite devices". The application of euphemism to the death subject has been fairly widely studied, particularly in the context of death as taboo. Louise Pound published an anthology of American euphemisms for dying, death and burial as early as 1936, stating that human beings deploy "every ingenuity" to "shroud the idea of death" (195). Keith Allan and Kate Burridge's *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon* is a comprehensive examination of how euphemism and dysphemism are used to manage taboos within a society. They argue that death taboos are motivated by five primary fears:

> (1) Fear of the loss of loved ones; (2) Fear of the corruption and disintegration of the body — the body with which one has so long been familiar in life is suddenly to become abhorrent; (3) Death is the end of life, and there is a fear of what follows — there can be no first-hand experience of death for the living; (4) Fear of malevolent spirits, or of the souls of the dead and (fear of a meaningless death).
>
> (153)

In a 2010 paper, Denis Jamet builds upon Allan and Burridge's work to determine whether the use of euphemisms to refer to death is truly intended as a way to respect the dead, or a way to reinvent reality (1), arguing that metaphor is based on a "highlighting-hiding process" which risks a reinvention of reality that may be dangerous, as it marks a certain dishonesty that may represent a biased version of reality (13). Richard Kalfus delivers a poignant example of this process through his interpretation of a primary source document of the Holocaust, in which it becomes apparent how euphemism can be deployed to turn "an entire caste of civil servants (into) active participants of the extermination process" (87). The document is a nazi operational memorandum outlining the technicalities of transporting human beings in a transport truck. The human beings in question are, of course, Jews, but they are not referred to as such. Rather, they are called "pieces", "merchandise", and "load", and their systematic murder in the truck chamber is referred to as "operating time" or "operation" (89). In the context of the death of a loved one, euphemism can have a comforting, protective effect. In another context, as Kalfus reveals so effectively, euphemism has a different relationship to death, becoming in and of itself entirely lethal.

Nancy L. McCallum and Matthew S. McGlone's study of the connection between euphemism use and mortality salience in the context of Terror Management Theory found that participants were more likely to deploy euphemistic language when mortality was made salient, indicating that a process of psychological distancing occurs when thoughts of death and mortality are brought into focus (565). This indicates a certain utility to euphemism use relative to death, which I explore further in Chapter Four.

As regards the relationship between death and metaphor, most works surveyed examined specific metaphors used as a stand-in for concepts of death, for example, Skirmantė Šarkauskienė, Saulutė Juzelėnienė and Viktorija Seredžiūtė's examination of the mega-metaphor of "death as a living being" in 16th and 17th Century Lithuanian mourning poetry, or Ha T. X. Pham and Ha T. Trinh's contrastive study of the conceptual metaphor "death is rest" in both Vietnamese and English. Timo Airaksinen examines the metaphoric account of death as travel or transition as it relates to desire, arguing that death, metaphor and desire

share a structure in that they all "transfer a rich set of meanings from one field of discourse to another", and that death and desire are both essentially metaphoric in nature (125-127). Fabian Horn examines death metaphors and figurative language in the Iliad, arguing that Homeric metaphors of death in battle endure in modern metaphor usage, but that metaphors for death must be examined within their cultural and temporal contexts, as they are not necessarily universal (380). Most relevant to this enquiry is Hans Blumenberg's theory of the absolute metaphor – a metaphor in which the figurative side of the metaphorical pairing is known and comprehensible, but the target concept of the metaphor is unknown or difficult to understand (Carrithers 9). Blumenberg dedicated his career to the study and theorisation of absolute metaphors, arguing that conceptual and philosophical thought is impossible without them, and that our relationship to reality is, above all, "metaphorical" (Adams 159). In *Paradigms For A Metaphorology*, Blumenberg defines the absolute metaphor as "the transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond" (4). This definition opens up the opportunity to apply the concept of the absolute metaphor to death, which I attempt to do in Chapter Four.

Death has rarely – if ever – been conceptualised as a multi-voiced narrative. Buck and Pipyrou's work, as mentioned above, is relevant here. In his eulogy for Roland Barthes, Derrida gestures in the direction of such a theorisation as he thinks about the purpose of the eulogy (50). He asks, "What are we doing when we exchange these discourses? … How many voices intersect, observe and correct one another… are trying to seek some final evaluation? … Or are we trying to make the dead our ally… to finish him off by exacting him, to reduce him in any case to what can still be contained by a literary or rhetorical performance…?" (50). The idea that the dead may be reduced to and contained within a "literary or rhetorical performance" may contribute toward and argument for the literariness of death.

Lincoln in the Bardo, the primary text I use to theorise the literariness of death, appears to be generally underexamined. Of the relatively small number of articles dealing with the novel, the most relevant may be Shaimaa Gohar's "Taming the Terror of Death in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*" in which Gohar looks at the ways in which the dead characters in the novel attempt to manage their fear of death through various coping mechanisms, deploying terror management theory as the framework through which to build the argument. Gohar writes that human worldviews, including notions of afterlife, are a means of taking control of the inevitable death of the body by creating a sense of "personal value" which ensures the transcendence of death (183).

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh reads *Lincoln in the Bardo* along with Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* to examine liminal spaces as a vehicle for social critique, arguing that they "facilitate the construction of alternative perspectives" (66). Susan Strehle reads the text as a historical novel, contextualising it relative to the American Civil War through a close reading. Donald E. Morse examines the literary device of 'conversations in a cemetery' in Ó Cadhain's Irish language novel *Cré na Cille* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Hiltrop and Polak present a semiotic analysis of Lincoln's role as a figure in American cultural memory, using the novel to examine the relationship between Lincoln's roles as a "larger than life persona" and a "relatable common man" (551). Eric Anderson situates *Lincoln in the Bardo* within the new field of EcoGothic criticism, arguing that the novel presents "ecologies of the undead" that operate as a staging ground for a particular vision of American democracy while incorporating elements that qualify the novel as an EcoGothic work, including "racial hauntings", the "queer undead", "body horror", and "plant horror", amongst others (165-168). Merrit Moseley argues that while *Lincoln in the Bardo* may contain many of the typical characteristics of a traditional historical novel, its approach to verisimilitude, its unusual narrative approach and its extensive fragmentation position it as a neo-historical novel (96).

In conclusion, from the literature surveyed, it appears that there is very little, if any, work making an explicit argument for the literariness of Western death and no published work that utilises *Lincoln in the Bardo* to theorise the literariness of death.

Chapter One: Death's Effects, Literature's Utility

The Peculiar Effects of Death's Withdrawal

Relative to language and the literary, death's withdrawal has a number of peculiar and interesting effects. The first is that death, or the assumed space beyond the death line, presents us with the purest imaginative field available to us. Due to its total withdrawal, death (or rather the space where death would be, if we could think, speak, see or experience it) is a completely blank spot in our collective experience and conceptual framework. To set a story beyond the death line – or indeed to even begin to imagine what that place, space, state, (?), may be like – we must begin from nothing. An example: Perhaps you were to think up a story set in a cemetery, much like Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo,* which I will examine later. A cemetery as a space, a setting – as ground for the narrative – stands at the centre of a dense constellation of established meaning, symbols, concepts, connections and context from which to draw. Bone dust. Moss. Grass growing between split paving stones. Indeed, sky. Grief. Bodies and air and bacteria and tears. The colour yellow. All of these signifiers and symbols exist in the living world, are known to us, are hooked by some thread to the setting of "cemetery", and are set up and ready to use. We would deploy the cemetery constellation of meaning as it hangs in our understanding of the world as the basic ingredients for our narrative, as they have formed the basic ingredients for many other narratives, plucking and threading the imagery, concepts and symbols we need to create our picture or compose our narrative. They are known and available to anyone who needs them. The "setting" of death provides none of this. No light returns from death's void to illuminate the terrain. When entering that blank's space, you will not find any existing or associated material with which to work. Anything is possible "there" – beyond the death line is pure creative possibility. In this way, death is the only space left that presents the opportunity to generate something truly original – to build a scaffolding of representation that is entirely, completely new. As a result, death is what I am calling "extra-generative". To turn one's intentionality or attention toward death as noema, (i.e. the content or object toward which consciousness is directed) is to start from scratch, constructing the object of our attention from nothing. Always, the object of death is tacked together using existing concepts extracted and transplanted from the world of life. These are the "transliterations of death" mentioned above (R. Smith 189), and they represent an extra step required in the imaginative or creative process, one not required when imagining, say, what would happen if a dodo appeared in your shopping cart, as both dodos and shopping carts have been experienced and encountered in the world. In this way, to think, imagine, speak or write death requires an additional degree of creativity and generative energy, and death demands us to be extra-generative when we look toward it. Death, whatever it is and however it is

approached, induces a kind of additional creative productivity within us. This movement is automatic, and required.

This extra-generative effect appears to operate in a broader way, too, beyond the instant we turn toward where death would be in order to think about it. The idea that death is an engine for creative production is one that has been widely circulated. In the West, Jonathan Dollimore writes, the idea of some kind of transcendent reality beyond the death line, an absolute truth, and its accompanying possibility of eternal life has been the engine behind some of the West's greatest literature (xiii). This literature is generated as a result of "the tension between the desire for that ultimate reality to exist, and thereby redeem loss, and the conviction that, in reality, it does not… In fact without death there would be nothing – least of all books" (xiii-xxxii). As the known and unknown of life and afterlife rub up against one another at the heart of this tension, a kind of compulsive creative energy is released and marshalled into service. To what end? To attempt, as Kathy Smith proposes, to contain and represent death. She writes,

> It is perhaps the indescribable and incomprehensible nature of (death) which drives (us) to generate so many attempts at representations and containment, in a futile attempt at mastery, through repetition and description (65).

Important to note here is that Smith attributes this extra-generative effect to qualities inherent to death itself, namely its withdrawal. Death's withdrawal "drives" us to "generate" means of representing and containing death, but these attempts are futile. By trying to know death, we attempt to master it, but this attempt is futile. Yet we persevere. Visions of afterlife are pervasive in every society, all of which have been strenuously rendered from scratch on the vacant imaginative field that is death.

This compulsive, pervasive repetition and description of visions of afterlife, Kathy Smith argues, is a human response to a "troubled" relationship between lived experience and the Symbolic that is foregrounded by death and afterlife, because certain moments in human experience, such as death and what happens after it, are "beyond words", and our symbolic system does not leave us equipped with the "tools to reveal the nature or content of these moments" (64). Death as subject matter puts extraordinary strain on language. Wherever it moves through the order of representation, language begins to behave strangely. Signs cannot point to death or the afterlife, and so language breaks there. As Lacan writes, death is "possibly beyond discourse, and certainly not contained within it" (K. Smith 65). As a result, any discourse, writing or speech which attempts to describe death or the afterlife handles a subject matter that actively undermines its own medium of transmission. We are left to build visions of afterlife and understandings of death with faulty tools, and yet we persist,

because death – the foundational truth of our lives, and arguably the source of life's meaning – must be managed within a life, and literary strategies play a critical role in this management process in a number of ways, which I will now explore further.

Deploying Literature to Manage and Comprehend Death

In *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings of Literature and Art*, Robert Roland Smith writes that "the metaphors do help us think about (death) – or at least, they help us think we can think about it, even though we can't… Death can only ever play upon us at a rhetorical (and to that extent, aesthetic) level" (188-205). Here, Smith isolates the primary function of the literary as regards death – to *help us* manage and comprehend it in the face of its total occlusion. Michael Carrithers argues that life's vicissitudes, which he defines as "difficulties or hardships erupting into a life…usually beyond one's control", require us to marshal extensive emotional, moral and *imaginative* resources to "understand and interpret the event" (3). He names death as one of life's primary vicissitudes, and argues that as societies, we mobilise culture and rhetoric, specifically the "rhetorical edge of culture", to deal with it (6). He writes,

> …human beings are constantly vulnerable to accident and the unforeseen, and wield rhetoric and culture against those accidents in order to render intelligible and operable what may at first seem incomprehensible and incomprehensibly disastrous…the creation of a narrative across events and people is one of humanity's most powerful means for interpreting chaotic events" (10).

If Freud, as quoted earlier, is correct and we find it impossible to believe in our own deaths, or, to some extent, the deaths of those we love, then every death is experienced as unforeseen. Rhetoric and culture must be wielded to make these events operable – scrutable, workable, acceptable – to us. To assimilate death into our modes of life, we must transmute it into narrative in order to interpret its chaos. This is, to a large extent, achieved through figurative thought, which, he argues, "extends the horizons of human experience" (Carrithers 9). Through figurative thought we are able to venture beyond the hard limits of accessible experience and over the untraversable boundary into death and the afterlife. Rhetoric, in Carrithers' usage, is a more capacious term, referring not necessarily to the rhetorical techniques and practices of the Greeks and Romans, but rather to language and its content designed and intended to "move" or "bend" and audience's actions, responses or feelings in some directed way, so as to "(effect) a change in the addressee's mind" (6-7). Whose mind, then, do we intend to influence when we are deploying rhetoric against death? Carrithers suggests that in deploying rhetoric against death, we endeavour not only to convince others, but also ourselves (1). But of what? What is it that we need help to manage?

In order to continue to live, we must convince ourselves that death is not only scrutable, workable and acceptable, but that we are safe from it and its effects. Terror Management Theory states that human beings live amidst a terrible paradox (McCallum and McGlone 566). Underpinning our entire existence – and, indeed, its continuation – is a powerful impulse toward self-preservation (McCallum and McGlone 567). Everything we do is geared toward survival. But we are also conscious, and, as such, we are burdened with the awareness that we will die (McCallum and McGlone 566). The dissonance created when the will to live meets a present awareness that we will die (known as "mortality salience") has significant negative psychological effects (McCallum and McGlone 567). Terror management theory states that one of the ways we cope with this problem is to invest in some form of symbolic or literal immortality by adopting various narratives and cultural worldviews that promise this immortality (Jonas and Fischer 553). Narratives of afterlife and the metaphors we deploy to apprehend death serve a defensive function, allowing us to continue to live and thrive around the untenable paradox at the centre of our being. In this way, even fictional depictions of life after death, such as *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which will be examined later in this thesis, are performing a very specific kind of double-work. They stand as works of creative fiction, but they also offer us options – imaginative renderings of what may be possible after death which help soothe the terror caused by the epistemological void beyond the death line.

Our own deaths are not, of course, the only cause for concern. The deaths of others must also be survived. There is the grief of loss to work through, to be sure, but there are also more personal implications relating to the self that result from the death of someone we love. Referencing Freud, Godley writes that a relationship with a loved one is intersubjective and dialectic (96). In losing a loved one, the one who loves becomes "other to himself", either by moving on, or by continuing to love someone who no longer exists, except as an abstraction, and even then, one cannot be sure that that abstraction is true to the person who was/is loved (96). Referencing Landsberg, Edwards writes that the death of a loved one represents the end of a "we", and this rupture is isolating for both for the survivor, and the dying person, who must die alone and only alone, as death is "untransferable and isolates the individual" (45-50). Our community with that person is destroyed, and as we are a part of that community, the part that lent itself to the creation of that community is also shattered (Edwards 46). "To this degree," Edwards writes, "I experienced death in the very core of my existence" (46).

The deaths of others are frightening in ways beyond the prospect of inevitable, irreversible loss or damage to the self. The first is the counterintuitive notion of the undead, or, as

Alenka Zupančič puts it, "the possible persistence and recurrence of something undead and indestructible that pertains to us; not necessarily as our ally, but rather as our enemy" (26). Drawing from the thinking of Lacan and others, Zupančič makes the point that, because natural death is part of a greater cycle of life and death dictated by Nature, human beings suffer a condition of "indestructible life, which death alone cannot really interrupt" (26). Zupančič goes on to explain,

> All things that die are involved in a new form of life through their corruption; we could say that nature amounts to an absolute "tyranny" of life, the fact that life cannot really be destroyed by death, since death is its immanent moment, itself involved in regeneration, and not the opposite of life or its final end. Death is not enough. (26)

As a result of this tyranny – this indestructible life – death never really coincides with itself. Death is not enough to put a stop to someone. Instead, there is a disturbing coincidence of life and death, one containing the other in an infinite Ouroborus. We are perpetually undead "in the real" (Zupančič 33). We cannot ever die completely, as to die is simply to transmute into a different form of life. It is only in the symbolic that we can live and die, for in the real we are eternally both undead and immortal (Zupančič 33). Funeral rites, Zupančič argues, are intended to mitigate this "disturbing, undead excess of life" – to release the subject by making a symbolic cut that separates life from death and providing a frame with which to hold the undead excess of life, with its notion of "blind persistence" that haunts us so (Zupančič 33). As Friedman writes, "fear results, not from belief that the spirit dies, but from the conviction that it survives, remains near, and becomes the source of (ills)" (66). Narrative and ritual are deployed to defend against the possibility of the return of the dead in the form of the undead, and to soothe the anxiety that we might end up among them.

Close enmeshed with this anxiety around the disturbing notion of tyrannical life and the perpetual continuation of others is what Derrida calls the "infinite alterity" of the dead. In his eulogy for Louis Marin, he writes, "He is completely other, infinitely other, as he has always been, and death has more than ever entrusted him, given him over, distanced him, in this infinite alterity" (161). The dead become something we cannot know – the Ultimate Other – and this in and of itself is the antithesis of community – a severance of one from the group which contains within itself the inevitability of becoming the one severed from the group. As Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas write in their introduction to Derrida's *The Work of Mourning,* "…death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a *me* and an *us*…" (11-12). Citing Landsberg, Edwards writes that when a loved one dies, "this community, this we, is destroyed" (45-46). To the other we say, You are Dead and I am Alive, and we are no

longer the same, and we will never again be the same. In this way, death represents an extreme alienation where once there was love and community, and through these things, safety. The dead cannot be more different from the living. Through narratives that conjure the dead as they were in life – both physically and in temperament – we are able to mask this alterity and soothe our anxiety around the radical exclusionary effects of death. The stories we tell about the dead (in eulogy, for example) work to reinscribe them in the symbolic, so that they may be remembered as familiar.

Loss, mortality salience, the notion of the undead and the infinite alterity of the dead – these are some of the threats against which the literary is deployed. Through literary strategies, we can soothe our anxieties and convince ourselves that we, and those we love, are safe and sound in the face of the unknown. One of the most effective of these literary strategies is the development and dissemination of afterlife narratives.

The Double-Work of Afterlife Narratives

Richard Matthew Pollard writes that "across cultures and across centuries…ideas about the other world are among the most prominent features of any religion or society" (1-2). For as long as we have had language, we have been preoccupied with imagining what life after death may be. So powerful have some of these creative productions been (take, for example, the myths, allegories and metaphors of religion) that they have had profound impacts on the lives of the living, shaping the course of human history itself.

Stephen Burt's article "Science Fiction and Life After Death" provides an excellent initial exploration of the role of fiction in helping us apprehend death and the afterlife. In it, he argues that Science Fiction (SF) is consistently concerned with presenting visions of some kind of afterlife, in the form of survival beyond the death of the biological body. So consistent is SF in its concern with visions of the afterlife, that Burt is able to isolate a typology of afterlives in SF, which includes four main kinds: "As heaven in space, as a historical future, as a realm for intangible spirits or souls, (and) as a point of view outside secular, one-way time" (182). While his enquiry is limited to the genre of science fiction, he argues that SF's preoccupation with visions of the afterlife speaks to a greater need, writing that "SF's intimate relationship with notions of the afterlife shows what we seem to need either fiction or faith to give; and one of those gifts is a sense of life after death" (184). In this way, Burt argues, SF provides a secular alternative to religion in helping us manage our terror of death by supplying metaphors with which to apprehend it. With this assertion, Burt adds his voice to the consensus that fiction set after death is performing a kind of double-work, fulfilling a particular, singular need in the human experience. He writes,

> I have been arguing that much SF provides both a rival and a replacement for the afterlife as described in revealed religion; that versions of the afterlife in SF echo versions of the afterlife constructed outside SF; that SF provides, through versions of the afterlife, metaphors for the experience of reading it; and that in doing so, SF reflects the persistence in empirically and secular-minded readers of a strong desire for life after death, a desire that for such readers cannot be satisfied by nonfictional means. (185-186)

Burt's reference to the "persistence" of readers to access visions of the afterlife echoes Kathy Smith's reference to our human compulsion to attempt to master death through "repetition and description" (65). There is a doggedness to our repetitive imagining of afterlives which is notable, with all fiction dealing with the subject forming a link in what Burt calls the "long chain" of afterlife depictions (185).

The prevalence of fiction set after death speaks to the way in which it performs a kind of double-work. It stands alone as a work of creativity, but it is also performing a strenuous resistance to the ultimate unknown as a transliteration of death, functioning as a simulacrum for a reality which cannot be discovered. These works of fiction carry the additional important responsibility of helping us manage our terror of death, by presenting ways to imagine what it might be like, and they also help us manage our grief by creating locations or narratives in which we can imagine and locate those who have died.

So far, I have attempted to make an argument for the literariness of death, exploring death's withdrawal, its peculiar effects, and the ways in which literary strategies enable us to approach and manage death in our day-to-day lives. But the mutual entanglement between death, creativity and language goes beyond these processes. As I will now attempt to show, death may sit at the heart of the creative process itself, particularly as it relates to literary production.

Chapter Two: Death, Language and Creativity

[NOTE: This chapter contains references to suicide]

An attempt to theorise the literariness of death using *Lincoln in the Bardo* begins with the novel-object itself. What did death have to do with its creation? In Chapter IV of *The Space of Literature*, "The Work and Death's Space", Maurice Blanchot leverages Kafka, Mallarmé and Rilke to theorise the complex and often paradoxical relationship between death and creative work. In it, Blanchot argues that creators – writers and poets specifically – are engaged in a "profound relation with death" (*The Space of Literature* 94).

The essential issue at the heart of Blanchot's argument is what I have been referring to as "death's withdrawal", which he refers to as "death's impossibility" (*The Space of Literature* 99). In his insistence on death's impossibility, Blanchot is apprehending the problem I have expanded upon in the Introduction – we cannot be inside death, we cannot think it, or imagine it. According to Blanchot, you cannot even want to die, as "whoever wants to die can only want the borders of death, the utilitarian death which is in the world and which one reaches through the precision of a workman's tools" (*The Space of Literature* 104). With this he invokes a razor-thin line beyond which a true death lies, but it is one we can never experience, for, in Epicurus's words, "if you are, death is not; if it is, you are not" (Blanchot 100). We are never present for our deaths, and in this way, death is an impossibility. The suicide, Blanchot argues, attempts to master death, but he is only grasping at or wanting a type of death that is active in the world, not the true death, and this will and want for a simulacrum of death neglects the true death (*The Space of Literature* 107). This doubling of death has something to do with the life force of creative work. He writes:

> …when I kill myself, perhaps it is "I" who does the killing, but it is not done to me. Nor is it my death — the one I dealt — that I have now to die, but rather the death which I refused, which I neglected, and which is this very negligence — perpetual flight and inertia.
>
> The work wants, so to speak, to install itself, to dwell in this negligence. A call from there reaches it. That is where, in spite of itself, it is drawn, by something that puts it absolutely to the test. (*The Space of Literature* 106)

This negligence is the "refusal to see the other death, the death one cannot grasp, which one never reaches" (*The Space of Literature* 106). Here, Blanchot draws parallels between art and suicide, "two movements testing a singular form of possibility" – the possibility of experiencing death – both attempting to exert some kind of power "even in the region of the ungraspable, where the domain of goals ends" (*The Space of Literature* 105). This negligence,

the above passage suggests, has two different effects. For the suicide, it is "perpetual flight and inertia". For the artist, some kind of challenge – a "call" that "puts (the work) absolutely to the test" (*The Space of Literature* 106).

This challenge or call, and indeed the writer's task, is to make death possible, or, as Blanchot explains it, to be "conscious of disappearing and not consciousness disappearing" (*The Space of Literature* 98). "To die well", he writes, "is to die in one's own life, turned toward one's life and away from death" (*The Space of Literature* 99), and in so doing, to achieve a death that one comprehends because one experiences it – one that does not require the abandonment of oneself to complete. This is how we make death possible. How does one achieve this? Shortly after the passage cited above, Blanchot presents the answer, quoting Mallarmé describing the experience of writing *Igitur*, which is worth citing here:

> Unfortunately, by digging this thoroughly into verse, I have encountered two abysses which make me despair. One is Nothingness…The other void which I have found is the one in my breast…And now, having reached the horrible vision of pure work, I have almost lost my reason and the meaning of the most familiar words…Everything which, as a result, my being has suffered during this long agony is indescribable, but fortunately I am perfectly dead…Which is to convey to you that I am now impersonal, and no longer Stephané whom you know. (Mallarmé in *The Space of Literature* 107).

Blanchot uses this passage to describe Mallarmé's poetic endeavour as "an essentially hazardous experience" involving a "risk" that

> …affects his normal relationship to the world, his habitual use of language; it destroys all ideal certainties, deprives the poet of the physical assurance of living. It exposes him finally to death — the death of truth, the death of his person; it yields him up to the impersonality of death. (*The Space of Literature* 107-109)

Creative work, he suggests, is like dying – a form of dying that an artist can experience, one that has the same effects as the true death that occurs beyond the borders of death that we can only approach "with the precision of a workman's tools"(*The Space of Literature* 104). It is a death that marks the death of truth and of the person. Through the creative process, the creator is "exposed" to death, and can know something of it. He writes, "Death is thus from the start linked to the movement, so difficult to bring to light, of the artistic experience" (The *Space of Literature* 123) and "it is correct to say that the artist's experience is an ecstatic experience and that it is… an experience of death" (*The Space of Literature* 150). Death

becomes possible through the work, and in this way, Blanchot fashions artistic work as "the task of dying" – the only means of comprehending death, a conscious end, not an end of consciousness, through a rehearsal of an experience that we cannot have (*The Space of Literature* 123). Abra agrees, writing that in order to dominate death through creativity, the artist must "willingly undergo a facsimile of death itself" (214), and in so doing, we access a "periodic exhilaration…during which one feels most alive, but which paradoxically may stem from the encounter or simulation of death" (214). In attempting to write, one risks a "mortal de-personalisation of the artistic act" (Hayes 14). Blanchot leverages the figure of Orpheus to make the point:

> Through Orpheus we are reminded that speaking poetically and disappearing belong to the profundity of a single movement, that he who sings must jeopardize himself entirely and, in the end, perish, for he speaks only when the anticipated approach toward death, the premature separation, the *adieu* given in advance obliterate in him the false certitude of being, dissipate protective safeguards, deliver him to limitless insecurity.
>
> (*Space of Literature* 154)

It is always good to bring a friend when approaching Blanchot, and to this end, we turn to Simon Critchley's *Very Little…Almost Nothing*. In it, he presents a reading of Blanchot that seeks to answer the question, "how is literature possible?". For Blanchot, at the heart of literature's possibility is its impossibility, that is, the impossibility of creating a complete work (Critchley 36). The condition of the writer is solitude and silence, with silence's essence being equated, in Blanchot's view, with nothingness (Critchley 37). As a result, as Critchely interprets it, "Nothing, then, is the material of the writer, and the writer has nothing to express" (37). What, then, is the writer's desire? According to Blanchot, it is a desire not for a work (for that is impossible), but for an encounter with the source or origin of the work (silence, nothingness), and this desire is driven firmly by dread (Critchley 38). This desire exceeds the desire for the work, and as a result, the work – which will always fail due to its inherent impossibility – is sacrificed in service of it (Critchley 38).

As Critchley writes:

> ...the writer must sacrifice himself and his wish for a work out of a fidelity to the source from which the work comes…the artwork is sacrificed because of the desire for the origin of the artwork, and the origin of the artwork is not a work, it is the betrayal, failure, and scattering of the Work before its origin in worklessness. The source of the artwork, its workless origin, is the experience of the other night – 'the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death and the night all seem to lead'. (39-44)

This implies that death (or at least a facsimile of death) is not only the fate of the artist, who, as we recall, Blanchot considers as locked in a "profound relation with death", but also the very source of literature itself. According to Critchley, Blanchot may even go further, invoking the well-circulated idea that "the word is the murder of the thing" (53). "Human speech," he writes, "is thus the annihilation of things qua things, and their articulation through language is truly their death-rattle" (Critchley 53). Death, then, is the fibrous substrate of language itself, because "the condition of possibility for the magical power of understanding to grasp things as such entails that those things must be dead on arrival in the understanding" (Critchley 54). As a result, Blanchot writes, "when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world" (In Critchley 54).

In what ways does the creative act deliver a pseudo-death? It appears, at least partly, to involve the impact of creative production on the self. Blanchot describes the profound transformation that visits the writer as a result of creative work. "Writing changes us. We do not write according to what we are; we are according to what we write." (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 88). Referencing Clemens Brentano, Blanchot writes of "'the nullification of oneself' which is effected by the work" (*The Space of Literature* 89). In this way, he seems to suggest that with each creative production, a version of the self is annihilated, replaced by a new version, transformed and refashioned by the very act of creation itself.

It is not only the self that is annihilated in the pursuit of creative work. When one directs the fullness of one's attention toward a creative task, the whole world is effectively obliterated. We remember Jean-Paul Sartre's story of meeting Pierre in the café (41). He arrives on time to find that Pierre is not there (Sartre 41). In directing his full attention toward something that is not there (Pierre), Sartre notes how the entirety of being packed into the café – "its customers, its seats, its mirrors, its lights, its smoke-filled atmosphere" – dissolves into "ground", a kind of homogenous mass that is only subject to the author's marginal attention (41). What is ground and what is the "principle figure" is determined simply by the direction of Sartre's attention (Sartre 41). He writes:

> I am witness to the successive dissolution of every object I look at, especially the faces, which detain me for a moment ('Could that be Pierre?') and immediately disperse, precisely because they 'are not' Pierre's face… In fact, Pierre is absent from the whole café: his absence freezes the café in its evanescence; the café remains as ground; it continues to present itself to my merely marginal attention as an undifferentiated totality; it slides away, in pursuit of its nihilation (41-42).

The creative process is also concerned with an absence – the void where the work will be once one has found the work that will fill that void. It is also concerned with seeking and recognising the creation one seeks to create as it emerges from the "ground" it comes from. In directing attention to the nothingness that precedes a creative work, the rest of the world and everything in it becomes ground, nihilated by the ambivalence of our attention. To create is to kill the world.

The creative act may also mimic death by producing experiences of timelessness. Charalampos Mainemelis theorises the relationship between time and creativity, linking timelessness to the "deep immersion states" of the creative process (227). Mainemelis focuses on three kinds of time. Time's cycle refers to the cyclical, recurring and predictable experience of time as seasons, years, or epochs, for example (Mainemelis 228). Time's arrow refers to the experience of time as linear and irreversible, for example, the experience of one's life as a linear process running from birth to death (Mainemelis 228). The third category is timelessness, which is "the experience of transcending one's self and socio-temporal reality by becoming immersed in a captivating present-moment-activity" (Mainemelis 228). The creative act is one such "captivating present-moment-activity", and through the resulting sense of timelessness, we drop out of time's arrow and exist in a "continuously unfolding present moment" that may be likened to infinity (Mainemelis 228). While we do not know whether a continuously unfolding present moment exists after death, we can assume that to die is to drop out of time's arrow as it relates to the living for infinity.

While creativity may be a form of dying, it also stands, paradoxically, as a means for achieving a form of immortal life. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot writes, "by producing a work, I renounce the idea of my producing and formulating myself; I fulfil myself in something exterior and inscribe myself in the anonymous continuity of humanity..." (9). Derrida presents a similar idea in his eulogy text for Sarah Kofman. Taking Kofman's text on *The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolaes Tulp 1632* by Rembrandt, Derrida considers what takes place between the body and the book, or the corpse and the corpus. The body of work one leaves behind, he argues, inevitably takes the place of the physical body proper:

> … As if the dying wish of the so-called proper, or lived, or living body…the supreme affirmation of this headstrong living being were this testament, the oldest and the newest: "this is my body," "keep it in memory of me," and so, "replace it, in memory of me, with a book or discourse to be bound in hide or put into digital memory. Transfigure me into a corpus." (169)

Derrida's use of the first-person perspective here indicates that this transfiguration is a conscious process, one that aligns with the notion that humans actively invest in forms of

symbolic immortality to persevere beyond death. He goes on to draw a comparison between creative work and the Eucharist, in which a process of transfiguration turns the body of work produced by the deceased into a replacement for the deceased – the corpus for the corpse. "The book," he writes, "comes to occupy the place of the dead, of the body-cadaver" (175). Our creative legacy, which can outlive us, becomes an extension of our bodily remains. This figuring of creative work as connected to, or an extension of, the body is reinforced in Derrida's mention that Kofman's thinking and work comes "from her body" (172), referring to the book at the foot of the anatomy lesson cutting table in Rembrandt's painting as "detached from the body, this quasi organ, this corpus" (176). The idea that creative work is of the body, or emerging from it (as a by-product of electricity running through brain matter, hands and eyes, or vocal cords, etc.) further embeds death at the heart of the creative process, because the body and death are inevitably one and the same, the body's breakdown is what carries us toward death, and the body is what can die. When the body stops, so does the work, which can also be understood inversely as the work being the by-product of life – death's antithesis. If we hold this idea up against Blanchot's proposition that the creative process is mimetic of death, it appears both life and death are present at the heart of the creative process. Perhaps it is from this tension that creative energy flows.

Interestingly, the inverse can be true – the corpse can become the corpus. The discipline of osteobiography stands as an example of narrative flowing directly from the body. In osteobiography, the story of a person is told by their bones and teeth, meaning that the body can hold and deliver narrative long after a person has died (Pfeiffer 2).

So far, I have argued that death's withdrawal means it is only accessible through creative, imaginative and, indeed, literary processes and materials. The notion of the literariness of death and its troubled relationship with language warrant further theorisation, and to do so, I will use George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* to examine some of the most common ways this literariness manifests in our day-to-day handling of death.

Chapter Three: Death as a Spatial Field

Published in 2017, Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* presents a fictional telling of the events of the night of the 22nd of February 1862, in Oak Hill Cemetery, Georgetown, USA. Young Willie Lincoln has died of typhoid fever, waking up as a ghost in a borrowed crypt in the cemetery Bardo. His fellow ghostly cemetery residents are all trapped in the Bardo, engaged in deep denial of their situation, and locked in a fervent resistance of the matterlightblooming phenomenon which would transport them beyond its bounds, of which they are universally terrified. When a grief-stricken Abraham Lincoln returns to the crypt in the middle of the night, opens Willie's coffin and lifts the little body into his arms, he causes a sensation across the ghostly community, the members of which have all been long forgotten by their own people, and certainly never touched.

The novel has three primary narrators: the ghosts roger bevins iii, hans vollman and the reverend everly thomas. It is composed entirely of historical and fictional fragments and citations that pull the reader back and forth between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Chapter LVII presents a series of 14 "historical" fragments describing Mary Lincoln's response to her son's death (181), the last of which reads:

> Where was her boy? she kept asking. Where was he? Couldn't someone find him, bring him to her at once? Mustn't he yet be somewhere?
>
> Hilyard, op.cit., account of Sophie Lenox, maid. (182)

Mary Lincoln's question, "Mustn't he yet be somewhere?" reflects possibly one of the most common concerns of the Western bereaved – the location of a person after they have died. We "lose" people, as if they have been simply misplaced, because we do not know where the essence of a person goes after the body has died, and like Mary Lincoln, we have trouble imagining the total loss of this essence. It must go somewhere. They must be somewhere. A very specific, very literary, process unfolds in which locations for the dead are imagined, constructed and distributed as functional frameworks through which to understand what has happened to our loved ones. Where are these people? They are certainly no longer here. But as an extension of the logic of life (in life, a person must, at all times, be somewhere), we imagine ways in which to locate them elsewhere. In Mary Lincoln's plea, we are invited to think about an important conceptual framework of Western death: a geography of death, in which death is imaginatively conceptualised as place, site, location or spatial field.

In the case of Willie Lincoln in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, our privileged position as reader allows us insight into this somewhere: while his mother is "collapsed into her bed" under the

ineffective mist of laudanum (182), he is in the Bardo, tarrying dangerously, fighting off winding, binding "tendrils" which threaten to encase him and transform him into something beyond description. This Bardo, which appears to correspond with the borders of the Georgetown cemetery in which Willie's "worm" body is laid to rest in a borrowed tomb, is the setting for all the events described in *Lincoln in the Bardo*. The ghostly occupants of the cemetery-Bardo cannot leave these bounds, able to travel only as far as the "dreaded iron fence…the noxious limit beyond which (they) could not venture" (36). For the inhabitants of the Bardo, the cemetery is their spatial field of death.

Cemeteries are one of the primary illustrative examples Foucault put forward when sketching out his notion of the heterotopia (*Of Other Spaces* 25). Foucault's concept was initially intended to apply to real-world spaces, including cemeteries. However, I aim to show that the literary cemetery in *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which operates only in the imaginary of the textual space, operates according to the same heterotopic rules and principles, and this fact, along with Foucault's own later redefinition of the heterotopia in which it is implicated in discourse and language, allows us to make a jump from heterotopias as real-world sites to heterotopias as literary sites, and from there, to death as a heterotopia, when it is conceptualised as a site, location or spatial field.

Heterotopias, by Foucault's description, are counter-spaces, "spaces that are absolutely other" (Vidler et al. 20). Constructed in contrast to utopias, Foucault initially describes heterotopias as "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality...at once absolutely real, connected with all other space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal" (*Of Other Spaces* 24). As Julian Whitney Bonierbale describes them, heterotopias are "real places that can be discerned within a culture…with utilitarian functions, which are, however, also imbued with certain qualities of an imagined world – perhaps a space of imaginative involvement – where the mind is allowed to indulge in alternate impressions of existence" (Bonierbale 112). Brothels, barracks, hospitals, theatres, cemeteries and museums are all examples of heterotopias. Within them, an "alternative social ordering" is performed which unsettles the existing social order within a society (Hetherington 40).

Foucault made two primary references to heterotopias, first in *Of Other Spaces* and the second in *The Order of Things* (Genocchio 37). In his first rendering, Foucault describes heterotopias as real places, locatable within the world and within cultures. He proposes a set of principles to govern the "science of heterotopology", as he describes it, outlining the key characteristics of the heterotopia, the most relevant of which I will summarise here, and which, I argue, can be applied to non-real places (Vidler et al. 21). Firstly, heterotopias are

sites with the ability to juxtapose within a single located place "several spaces that would normally be incompatible" (Vidler et al. 21). A theatre stage is a good example of a heterotopia that foregrounds this quality, as the stage can stand in for any, or multiple simultaneous, locations. In the Bardo, two incompatible spaces – specifically the world or spatial dimension of the living and the world or spatial dimension of the dead – are juxtaposed, coinciding simultaneously, one overlaid upon the other. Both share the same geography – the paths and landmarks, tombs and trees of the real world are navigated by the ghosts in the same way they are navigated by living visitors, and in some instances, like when the ghosts enter Lincoln at various points, the living and the dead can exist in exactly the same point in space and time simultaneously. At the level of the physical text, the inclusion of historical fragments in the form of excerpts quoting people who actually lived in the real (non-fiction) world, outside of the world of the novel, juxtaposes the real and the imaginary, fiction and non-fiction, into a single cohesive narrative, introducing another world – the world the reader lives in – into the spatial bounds of the physical novel.

Heterotopias also have strange and undermining effects on time, or our perception thereof, as they are linked, as Foucault describes it, to "excisions cut out of time" (Vidler et al. 21). The heterotopia "begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 26). A museum or a library, for example, are heterotopias in that they allow for the perpetual deposit and accumulation of time in a single space in the form of the archive, whereas in a cemetery, "time no longer elapses" (Vidler et al. 69). All of this points to a certain temporal disruption characteristic of heterotopic space, and this unsettlement of time can be seen in *Lincoln in the Bardo*. In the Bardo the ghosts are locked in a kind of double-time, stuck both in the moments of their deaths, which they are compelled to narrate over and over again, and in the eternity of their imprisonment in the in-between. In one of his compulsive death-tellings, roger bevins iii, one of the novel's primary narrators, describes the circumstances of his death by suicide:

> Knowing that my only hope was to be found by one of the servants, I stumbled to the stairs and threw myself down. From there, I managed to crawl into the kitchen——
>
> Which is where I remain.
>
> I am waiting to be discovered…so that I may be revived, and rise, and clean up the awful mess I have made…"
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> (26-27)

bevins occupies not only the eternal present of the Bardo, but also a present (to him) moment in the past, in which he is still lying on the kitchen floor, bleeding out, waiting to be discovered. Additional temporal excision is created by the fact that the novel's events unfold over the course of a single night – the night of the 22nd of February 1862 (Maughan par 1). The book can be read in a single night, meaning that the narrative's internal temporality can match the reader's temporality in the real world. In this way, the book stands as an almost literal slice of time, with the night of the 22nd of February 1862 theoretically excised from time's arrow and stored neatly between two covers on a bookshelf. We can enter this night at any moment, and live it along with its narrators in real-time. In this way, the characters exist in at least four temporal containers – the night of the 22nd, the present moment of their death, the eternity of the Bardo, and the reader's time – all at once.

In Foucault's rendering, there are also heterotopias connected with notions of transition, transformation and regeneration, for example, military barracks and prisons where "men are made" (Vidler et al. 21). Entry into the Bardo involves profound transformation, firstly from living to dead – a transformation which is represented most clearly in the novel by the ghosts' physical appearances. The ghosts' Bardo-forms appear to reflect some essential truth about who they were in life. bevins, for example – filled with regret and longing for the world he left behind – is described as having several sets of eyes, noses and hands, which appear to multiply as he recounts his story, as if stretching to see, smell and touch as much as possible in reflection of his desire to grasp and experience the sensory wonders of living:

> "Bevins" had several sets of eyes All darting to and fro Several noses All sniffing His hands (he had multiple sets of hands, or else his hands were so quick they seemed to be many) struck this way and that, picking things up, bringing them to his face with a most inquisitive Little bit scary
> In telling his story he had grown so many extra eyes and noses and hands that his body all but vanished Eyes like grapes on a vine Hands feeling the eyes Noses smelling the hands Slashes on every one of the wrists.
> willie lincoln (27)

Through their transition into the Bardo, the inhabitants are completely transformed, matching Foucault's definitive requirement of a heterotopia.

The Bardo is, by definition, a liminal space, intended as a transitory space between life and what lies beyond the matterlightblooming phenomenon via which the ghosts exit the cemetery, and in this way, it aligns with the notion of a heterotopia as a space of transition. As for regeneration, we have the notion of the decaying body nourishing the soil to feed

new life, as well as the fact that the dead are in some way reanimated, albeit into shadows of their living counterparts, able to cogitate, speak, move and observe once more.

Lastly, as mentioned above, all heterotopias "presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable…either entry is compulsory or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications" (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 26). The Bardo graveyard has its system of opening and closing. Death is the compulsory condition of entry, along with burial in the graveyard or the mass grave just beyond the dreaded iron fence. To exit, the inhabitants must allow themselves to succumb to the matterlightblooming phenomenon, after which the Bardo closes behind them (for all, that is, except the reverend everly thomas, the only survivor of the matterlightblooming phenomenon).

By his second rendering in *The Order of Things*, Foucault's conception of the heterotopia appears to evolve from seeing them as real, locatable sites, such as brothels or prisons, to something more radical and abstract, "an unlocatable discursivity within language…which remain unrepresentable as a site" (Hetherington 46). The concept of the heterotopia's application shifts from place to language, and its primary effect, as Gennochio describes it, is "a subversive function (that) runs against the grain of the order/language that both defines it and limits it" (41). "Heterotopias are disturbing", Foucault writes, "probably because they secretly undermine language…" (*The Order of Things* xix). He clarifies this with the following redefinition:

> [Heterotopias] make it impossible to name this and that…because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to but opposite to one another) to 'hold together'…heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of language at its sources; they dissolve our myths, sterilize the lyricism of sentences (*The Order of Things* xix)

Here, Foucault fashions the heterotopia as intimately linked (and possibly responsible for) a breakdown of language, signification, and representation. In the Bardo, this breakdown is represented most prominently by the ghosts' extensive use of metaphor and euphemism, which will be explored in Chapter Four, but this breakdown of language is also performed clearly in the internal monologue (or speech, it is difficult to say) of willie lincoln:

> If Father puts his knees on Stairstep Number 2 and stretches he can reach with his fingers to Stairstep Number 12   He is that long   Has done it   Many times
>
> No more pile-ups   Unless I am strong
>
> Therefore I know what I must   Must stay   Is not easy   But I know honor   Fix bayonets   How to be brave   Is not easy   Remember Col. Ellis   Killed by Rebs   For bravely tearing down the Rev flag from a private   I must stay   If I wish to get   Home   When will I   When may I
>
> Never if weak
>
> Maybe if strong.
>
> willie Lincoln
>
> (115-116)

Fragmented, stuttering, riven with incomplete thoughts, willie's narrative appears to degrade the longer he spends in death. In accord with Foucault's description of the heterotopia, words and things do not "hold together"; his sentences are stopped in their tracks (*The Order of Things* xix).

As Genocchia argues, Foucault's two renderings of the notion of heterotopia – heterotopia as concrete site (which I am calling rendering one), and heterotopia as radical, abstract discursive space (which I am calling rendering two) – are incongruent and, as they were introduced shortly before his death, may be assumed to be incomplete (39). As such, there may be space to extend them, albeit, in this case, in a small way. As the cemetery in *Lincoln in the Bardo* demonstrates, literary spaces can operate by the same principles and demonstrate the same qualities as Foucault's heterotopias. If death is taken as a literary construct, as argued above, and the literary form it takes is that of a spatial field, location, or site, then it follows that we can apply Foucault's concept here and theorise death as a heterotopia. I argue that the second rendering specifically supports an attempt to theorise death, when conceptualised as both a spatial field and a literary construct, as a heterotopia, as it gives us permission to move the concept from the realm of the physical to the realms of the intangible and the literary. As such, we can now deploy both renderings to theorise death as heterotopia. In terms of heterotopic principles of rendering one, death has its system of opening and closing, in that it opens for those who die and closes against the living. The spatial field of death not only allows for, but generates, the juxtaposition of world upon world of inconsistent, contradictory, incompatible imaginative and discursive renderings of space, one on top of the other – from the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven to the

Catholic purgatory, to the Yoruba notion that death is simply a continuation of life, amongst uncountable others. Death represents an “absolute break with…traditional time”, which is where the heterotopia “begins to function at full capacity” – the ultimate “excision(s) cut out of time” (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 26). More than anything, death is associated with notions of transition, transformation and regeneration – another characteristic of a particular type of heterotopia.

The second rendering, which points more toward the discursive effects of heterotopias, makes direct reference to the way in which death undermines the order of representation, rendering itself unspeakable, unsayable and unknowable, as argued in the Introduction to this dissertation. This implies a coincidence between death and the heterotopia. Gennochio writes that, while these two renderings are theoretically flawed, Foucault’s descriptions – specifically his redefinition of the notion of heterotopia in his second rendering – “suggest that we scrutinize and question the implications and possibilities of the slips, exceptions, oddities lurking at the very limits of the system that defines for us what is thinkable, sayable, knowable” (43). Death, as shown above, challenges the possibilities of what is thinkable, sayable and knowable, as it cannot be thought, said or known. As it relates to language, death is full of slips, exceptions and oddities. Due to its total withdrawal, death “secretly undermines language” in a way that coincides with the described mechanisms of heterotopia (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xix). Foucault’s assertion that heterotopias “destroy syntax in advance” and “stop words in their tracks” is aligned with the kind of aphasia, desperate loss of language or eternal silence Derrida, referencing Levinas, refers to as “non-response” (Derrida 203). “Death:”, he writes, “not, first of all, annihilation, non-being, or nothingness, but a certain experience of the survivor of the ‘without-response’” (Derrida 203). Within the heterotopia of death, where words are stopped in their tracks and the very possibility of language is contested at its sources, the dead cannot answer us.

Chapter Four: Death's Favourite Devices, The Proper Name, The Other in Us

Death's Favourite Devices

The ghosts of the Bardo constitute an established society with a dynamic culture of its own, including what Robert Kastenbaum and Christopher M. Moreman describe in *Death, Society, and Human Experience* as a "death system" – a "complex web of elements that mediate individual deaths in society and manage personal expectations related to death and dying" (72). Kastenbaum and Moreman argue that death symbols – the language, imagery and objects we deploy in relation to death – tell us a lot about a particular culture's approach and attitude towards death (81). The Bardo's particular death system is characterised by an almost universal denial and resistance of death mimetic of Western death systems. Kastenbaum and Moreman argue that language, images and symbols play a major role in any death system (81). In the Western death system, euphemism and metaphor are death's favourite devices, standing in for where death should be, but cannot be, within our scope of comprehension. In the Bardo, the deployment of euphemism and metaphor is extensive:

> Sinking his head into the place between chin and neck, the gentleman sobbed, raggedly at first, then unreservedly, giving full vent to his emotions.
>
> the reverend everly thomas
>
> While the lad darted back and forth nearby, in an apparent agony of frustration.
>
> hans vollman
>
> For nearly ten minutes the man held the—
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Sick-form.
>
> hans vollman
>
> The boy, frustrated at being denied the attention he felt he deserved, moved in and leaned against his father, as his father continued to hold and gently rock the—
>
> the reverend everly thomas
>
> Sick-form.
>
> hans vollman

(58)

The ghosts of the Bardo deploy an extensive arsenal of intricate euphemisms to avoid directly referencing or acknowledging that they are dead. Many of these euphemisms are medical in nature. Corpses are referred to as “sick-forms” (58). To be alive is to be “healthy” (70). The coffin is a “sick-box” (58). The mass grave just beyond the iron fence is the “disreputed common sick-pit” (87). The world of the living from whence they came is “that previous place” (88). The cemetery is referred to as “the premises” (89), and willie’s crypt is called his “white stone home” (41). Within the ghost community, direct references to death are unacceptable. In the excerpt above, vollman is anxious to ensure that this taboo remains intact, interjecting to supply the appropriate euphemism before the sentence is even finished.

McCallum and McGlone write that euphemism is a form of indirect address that allows us to “representationally displace topics that evoke negative affect by avoiding direct reference to them” (McCallum and McGlone 570). Euphemism has a range of utility within a social system. Relative to bodily functions or other topics a particular society concludes are unsavoury, euphemisms assist in the execution of “face-work” – the process of “saving face” (impression management) for both the speaker and the audience through the avoidance of dispreferred language (McCallum and McGlone 570). Relative to death, however, the deployment of euphemism has a deeper, more complex function. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge write that euphemisms are deployed “as a shield against the disapprobation of our fellows or at worst death” (ix). Through the representational displacement figured by McCallum and McGlone, we can mitigate the horror and fear of death. In this way, euphemism has a protective function.

McCallum and McGlone position euphemism as a form of indirect address (570), but this figuring relates to the “face-saving” function of euphemism (a way to circumvent taboo topics that may cause distress or poor impressions). I argue that, as another peculiar effect of death’s total withdrawal, there are additional mechanics at play when euphemism is deployed relative to death. In light of death’s total withdrawal, we can only ever approach it from oblique angles, apprehending it through mediating frameworks that never reveal it for what it really is. Euphemism is a device that helps us do this, bending light away from the truth of death and allowing us to glimpse it askew, its horror mediated by a set of culturally created concepts. As Pound writes, in Western culture, “Every ingenuity is practised to find words which will shroud the idea of death” (Pound 195). In this way, euphemism serves as a means of approach for a subject or concept that is unthinkable, unspeakable, unknowable

and inexperienceable. But at the same time – in the very same movement – euphemism diverts us from death, employing its protective, shielding function by redirecting both speaker and audience from the reality of death. We are able to circumvent the range of distressing affect death invokes. In this way, euphemism allows us to get further away from and closer to death, at the very same time.

While euphemism is commonly understood as a means of indirect address (McCallum and McGlone 570), I argue that understanding euphemistic address as "indirect" reveals only a partial picture of its full mechanism. To deploy a euphemism, I argue, has a reality-splitting effect. The moment a euphemism is deployed, our perception of reality begins to operate on two simultaneous layers: the layer of the actual truth ("my loved one has died") in its extremity, discomfort and horror, and the layer of the euphemistic reality ("my loved one has passed") – a layer applied on top of the truth that works to filter and soften it. In this way, I would characterise euphemism as a form of "additive address", in which certain language "adds a layer" of meaning, and these layers of meaning are set in motion simultaneously. We see this at play in the Bardo, where the ghosts build a reality in which the cemetery's occupants are merely sick, not dead. Their anxiety to ensure that the taboo on more direct language around dying, death, corpses and crypts is universally upheld reveals that they are aware of both the truth of the matter, and the careful cultivation of an alternative reality which occludes that reality. For the ghosts, the consequence of breaking this taboo is the acknowledgement of death, which makes them vulnerable to the matterlightblooming phenomenon in which they progress to the next phase of their afterlives – a phase of which they are universally afraid. It is willie who breaks the spell, dismantling the careful euphemistic constructions that had so far kept the ghosts secured in place in the Bardo:

> May I tell you something? he said.
> How I loved him in that moment. Such an odd little fellow: his long swoop of forelock, roundish protruding belly, rather adult manner.
> You are not sick, he said.
>
> hans vollman
>
> Suddenly all was nervousness and agitation.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> That thing in my box? he said. Has nothing to do with me.
>
> hans vollman
>
> Individuals began edging toward the door.
>
> roger bevins iii

> I mean it does, he said. Or did. But now I am— I am something quite apart. I cannot explain.
>
> hans vollman
>
> Stop talking, Mr. Vollman said. You will kindly stop talking at once.
> There is a name for what ails us, the boy said. Do you not know it? Do you really not know it?
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Many were now attempting to flee, causing a bit of a jam at the door.
>
> hans vollman
>
> It is quite amazing, the boy said.
> Stop, Mr. Vollman said. Please stop. For the good of all.
> Dead, the boy said. Everyone, we are dead!
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Suddenly, from behind us, there occurred, like lightning-cracks, three rapid-fire repetitions of the familiar, yet always bone-chilling, fire-sound associated with the matterlightblooming phenomenon.
>
> hans vollman
>
> (295-296)

In this scene, we are reminded of the fragility of the euphemistic mechanism – how easily the protective powers of its double-layering can be unpicked to reveal the terror, or denial, or distress that forms the basis of its delicate construction. There is a fragility to euphemism, and that fragility lies in the fact that it relies on collective agreement and assent to reach its full function. In this way, a euphemism operating at full power is cooperatively and collectively created. This means the deployment of euphemistic references to death is a creative act premised not only on empathy, but also kindness and community, adding yet another dimension to the device — that of comfort, and humanity. In a linguistic study of 33 family meetings about critically ill infants, for example, of the 406 references to death identified, the words "death", "dying", "die" and "stillborn" were only used 8% of the time (Pitt et al. *[no page numbers supplied]).* 92% of death references in this context were replaced with euphemisms – an almost universal effort to help parents and families cope with life-altering news (Pitt et al. *[no page numbers supplied]*).

Another literary device intimately entwined with death is metaphor. In the Bardo, the ghosts are periodically subjected to an onslaught from beyond. Beings flood the cemetery, appearing differently to each ghost, and attempt to "speed them along" to the other side

(wherever that may be) (99). To do so, the beings, "light-blobs" in different guises, try various strategies to convince the ghosts to succumb to the matterlightblooming phenomenon, one of which is an attempt to break through the ghosts' protective mechanisms of denial and convince them that they are really dead. "You are a wave that has crashed against the shore", they say (93, 96, 97, 100). This is a rich metaphor for death, speaking to a forward momentum towards an inevitable end, the dissipation of self into a bigger unity, and the continuous, sublime rhythm of life and death. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the essence of metaphor can be defined as "understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another" (5). Here, we are asked to conceptualise death in terms of a breaking wave. But this metaphor is not a standard metaphor. It stands as an example of what Hans Blumenberg called an "absolute metaphor" (Carrithers 9).

An absolute metaphor is a metaphor in which the figurative side of the metaphorical pairing is known and comprehensible, but the target concept of the metaphor is unknown or difficult to understand (Carrithers 9). For example, "death is rest" is an absolute metaphor, because we understand what rest is, but we cannot know what death is. An absolute metaphor, by Blumenberg's fashioning, is a way to "give structure to a world, representing the nonexperienceable, nonapprehensible totality of the real" (Blumenberg, 14). The world which metaphor gives structure to in this instance is whatever world awaits us after death.

Blumenberg dedicated his career to the study and theorisation of absolute metaphors, arguing that conceptual and philosophical thought is impossible without them, and our relationship to reality is above all "metaphorical" (Adams 159). While he does not appear to explicitly name death as a target concept for absolute metaphor (unlike his focus on the concept of "truth" for example), he writes:

> Absolute metaphors 'answer' the supposedly naive, in principle unanswerable questions whose relevance lies quite simply in the fact that they cannot be brushed aside, since we do not pose them ourselves but find them already posed in the ground of our existence. (14)

Additionally, Blumenberg states that an absolute metaphor is "the transportation of reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond" (4). The true nature of death certainly qualifies as an unanswerable question posed in the ground of our very existence to which no intuition can ever directly correspond, and as such, we can comfortably apply the concept here. According to David Adams, metaphor allows us to connect with "phenomena beyond (our) experience…transcendental, infinite or absolute truths" that allow us to approach "intuitions of eternity" (153). Carrithers writes that figurative thought "extends the horizons of human experience" (Carrithers 9). Through it, we can fashion a simulacrum of what death

may be like. Through metaphor, we can attempt to connect with the "phenomenon" (or "anti-phenomenon") of death, no matter how far beyond the realm of our experience it may lie. Adams' interpretation takes this further, arguing that absolutes such as death are "always mediated, if not *created*, by metaphor" (emphasis my own) (155). With this assertion, Adams suggests that death is made of literary material, supporting an argument for the literariness of death. Due to death's total withdrawal, it must be produced through a literary process (absolute metaphor), or it cannot be apprehended at all. To attempt to think about death, we must reach for absolute metaphor.

If we accept the above, we can also move to conclude that all conceptualisations of death, even that of a "nothingness" qualify as absolute metaphors, thereby installing literary mechanisms at the heart of the human relation to death itself, as far as death can be handled, thought about, or approached by the human consciousness. Furthermore, this process is inherently creative, and the connection between death, metaphor and euphemism further reinforces the entanglement of death and creativity. Lakoff and Johnson assert that metaphorical thought is inherently imaginative – an important "tool" for "trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally" (193). Keith Allan and Kate Burridge write that euphemism demonstrates the "poetic inventiveness" of ordinary people (ix). Through figurative thought, euphemism and absolute metaphors, we are able to fashion a workable notion of death.

The Proper Name

Lincoln in the Bardo's form is striking in its construction. There are no quotation marks to indicate speech, and dialogue is attributed to a speaker via citations, in the same way a play might be structured on a page:

> We had reached the edge of an uninhabited wilderness of some several hundred yards that ended in the dreaded iron fence.
>
> hans vollman
>
> That noxious limit beyond which we could not venture.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> How we hated that thing.
>
> hans vollman
>
> The Traynor girl lay as usual, trapped against, and part of, the fence, manifesting at that moment as a sort of horrid blackened furnace.
>
> roger bevins iii

The names of the dead are notated without capital letters, as if, in death, they have somehow forfeited the properness of their names and become sublimated, a reduced version of their former selves. In "The Deaths of Roland Barthes", Derrida writes, "When I say Roland Barthes it is certainly him I name, him beyond his name" (46). In death, Derrida seems to suggest, we move beyond the Proper Name which has, until that moment, encapsulated the essence of everything we have been in life. We can no longer hear those who address us. The name remains behind, after the consciousness has moved beyond. In some way, the Proper Name is sheared off and left behind to move among survivors. As Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas explain in their introduction to *The Work of Mourning*, death "appears to sever the name from the bearer of it; it is the event or operation that lifts or peels the name off the body that once bore it" (14). We leave the world, but leave our names behind us to move without us. We move "beyond the name" but remain "still within it" (Derrida 45). This process begins, Derrida argues, even in life, in every instance when "a name can be cited or used without or in place of the body" (Brault and Naas 14). Citations can circulate the name after death even after there is no body-referent available in the world to which those names can be threaded to. The use of lowercase for the names of the ghosts in the Bardo indicates that they have moved "beyond" their names, and as they have no physical body-referents, the prolific use of citation is appropriate – they are disembodied voices, with their names used "without or in place of the body" (Brault and Naas 14).

Furthermore, Derrida argues that the proper name itself contains death, from the very moment it is given. "Death", he writes, "inscribes itself right in the name" (34), because "it is in advance the name of a dead person" (130). As I have written previously:

> The proper name is the sign that catches and latches our essence, collecting around itself a constellation of meaning, both known and secret: a life, entirely unique. The singularity of being is what Derrida is concerned with here. When that being dies, it cannot be replaced, as its singularity dictates there be no possible replacement in the world. The referent is unique, unrepeatable, beyond true mimesis, and the sign that contains it also contains the announcement of an ending, a discontinuation of something that will cease, and cannot be resurrected, coded into the proper name. (*My Father's Funeral*)

In this way, "the proper name alone and by itself forcefully declares the unique disappearance of the unique – I mean the singularity of an unqualifiable death" (Derrida 34). As a result, Derrida writes, 'The name races toward death even more quickly than we do, we who naively believe that we bear it. It bears us with infinite speed toward the end" (130). As Brault and Naas explain, "the name is always related to death, to the structural possibility

that the one who gives, receives, or bears the name will be absent from it" (13). The ghosts in the Bardo, of course, have already met the end. The deaths that their proper names carried within them have come to pass, and as such, the proper name's death-possibility is realised, the trap is sprung, and the referent moves from Proper to common status, replaced by diminished, lower-case versions of their living selves.

Death's ability to loose the proper name from the one who bears it, leaving it to wander the world alone, unpicking the hermetic enmeshment between the name and the person who bears it gives yet another indication of the ways in which death disrupts our order of representation.

Death as The Other in Us

According to the strange physics of the Bardo, one of the only mechanisms the dead have at their disposal to attempt to reach or influence the living is to enter their bodies. Many important moments in the plot depend on this mechanism. The first is when Abraham Lincoln, bereft, re-enters his son's borrowed tomb, opens the small coffin and lifts the child's body into his arms. Frustrated that his father cannot hear or see him, willie enters his old body in order to be held by his father again:

> In there, held so tight, I was now partly also in Father
> And I could know exactly what he was
> Could feel the way his long legs lay   How it is to have a beard   Taste
> coffee in the mouth and, though not thinking in words exactly, knew that
> the feel of him in my arms has done me good. It has. Is this wrong? Unholy?
> No, no, he is mine, he is ours... I remember him. Again. Who he was.
>
> willie lincoln
>
> (61)

willie hears his father promise to return, and as a result, he refuses to succumb to the matterlightblooming phenomenon that will carry him beyond the Bardo, choosing to wait for his father to come back for him instead. This puts him in danger. The young are not meant to "tarry" in the Bardo, and if they do, they face the fate of the unfortunate traynor girl: to be rapidly cocooned in vines made out of the damned, then trapped in a rage-filled pattern of rapid transformation:

> The Traynor girl lay as usual, trapped against, and part of, the fence, manifesting at that moment as a sort of horrid blackened furnace.
>
> roger begins iii

…

She rapidly transmuted into the fallen bridge, the vulture, the large dog, the terrible hag gorging on black cake, the stand of flood ravaged cord, the umbrella ripped open by a wind we could not feel.

the reverend everly thomas

(36-37)

In this rapid presentation of unsettling imagery, Saunders produces a sense of deep disquiet, managing to provoke a range of unpleasant human emotions: thwarted progress, death, fear, horror, defeat, and irritation evoked with each image respectively. Saunders' rendering of the traynor girl is interesting, as it creates a character made entirely of metaphor. In this way, the traynor girl is, of all the dead, the one most mimetic of death. Her fate is, of course, is the fate that awaits willie lincoln, whose insistence on tarrying to wait for his father is the engine which drives the plot.

bevins and vollman remember the traynor girl and her fate and set out to find Lincoln Senior and convince him to return to the borrowed tomb so that his son may see him again, be at peace, and move on. They find him "sitting cross-legged and defeated in a tall patch of grass" (145), and they proceed to overlay, or rather underlay, themselves within him:

In order to occupy the greatest percentage of the gentleman's volume, I lowered myself into his lap and sat cross-legged, just as he was sitting.

hans vollman

The two now comprised one sitting man, Mr. Vollman's greater girth somewhat overflowing the gentleman, his massive member existing wholly outside the gentleman, pointing up at the moon.

roger bevins iii

It was quite something.
Quite something in there.
Bevins, come in! I called out. This is not to be missed.

hans vollman

I went in, assuming the same cross-legged posture.

roger bevins iii

And the three of us were one.

hans vollman

> So to speak.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> (146)

Once they are inside Lincoln Snr., they attempt to influence him to return to the crypt where willie is waiting for him. They become aware of the tomb's lock, still in the man's pocket, which he'd forgotten to rehang.

> An opportunity to simplify our argument.
>
> hans vollman
>
> We focused out attention upon the lock.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Upon the perils of an unlocked door.
>
> hans vollman

(168-170)

Inside Lincoln, the two ghosts focus on conjuring images of grave robbers and wolves desecrating willie's body, until Lincoln puts his hand in his pocket, closing it around the cold metal lock. He gets ups and starts making his way back to the tomb.

> Had we—had we done it?
>
> hans vollman
>
> It seemed that perhaps we had.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> (168-170)

These scenes invite us to consider another imaginative framework of death: death as "the other in us", as presented by Derrida. As mentioned above, in his eulogy for Roland Barthes, Derrida writes the following;

> When I say Roland Barthes it is certainly him whom I name, him beyond his name. But since he himself is now inaccessible to this appellation, since this nomination cannot become a vocation, address, or apostrophe...it is him in me that I name, toward him in me, in you, in us that I pass through his name. (46)

Once the dead have passed and can no longer be found or reached in the world, the living are left to do the work of a kind of faithful interiorisation, in which the "spectral referent" to which the proper name attaches is transformed into "images", which exist only "in us" (Derrida 10, 54). This, Derrida suggests, is the work of the living in the face of death – the point where mourning starts – a process of "idealizing incorporation, introjection, consumption of the other" (159). There is no other way for the dead to continue, as "the friend can no longer be but in us" (46, 159). This is the only way the dead can speak – "in us". By speaking "of them and as them", we can keep them alive (9). We consume the loved one, and make them a part of our interior life, and in so doing they become entirely constituted of concepts, narrative and imagery, and are resurrected as story, in us. This is the work of mourning, and if mourning is "the phenomenon of death…the only phenomenon behind which there is nothing", then it follows that death can be understood as "the other" – as narrative and image – "in us" (Derrida 148). "Ghosts:", Derrida writes, "the concept of the other in the same…the completely other, dead, living in me" (42).

This fairly complex idea is prevalent in common English language usage, and traces of it circulate through death metaphorics. When a loved one dies, we speak of them as "living on in our hearts" or "carried in our hearts". They are often understood to be "always with us". In these terms, the notion of interiorisation is intended to bring comfort to survivors. There is a certain strange intimacy involved in this process. On entering Lincoln Snr., bevins and vollman find themselves intermingled within him, each taking the other into himself:

> Because we were as yet intermingled with one another, traces of Mr. Vollman naturally began arising in my mind and traces of me naturally began arising in his.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Never having found ourselves in that configuration before —
>
> hans vollman
>
> This effect was an astonishment. … I knew the printing press, loved operating it. (Knew platen, roller-hook, gripper-bar, chase-bed.) Recalled my disbelief, as the familiar center-beam came down. That fading final panicked instant! I have smashed through the desk with my chin;
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> …
>
> The stove ticks. In my thrashing panic I have upended a chair. The blood, channelled within the floorboard interstices, pools against the margins of the next-room rug. I may yet be revived…
>
> hans vollman

…

So many years I had known this fellow and yet had never really known him at all…
Dear Mr. Vollman!
I looked at him; he looked at me.

roger bevins iii

We would be infused with some trace of one another forevermore.

hans vollman

(171-173)

Here bevins and vollman describe a deep intimacy associated with this process of consumption and interiorisation of the dead – the imprint of the image of the other in us. But Derrida is clear: we are not to mistake this for a faithful intimacy. To keep them alive within us by speaking of and as them is the "best sign of fidelity" (36). However, when we speak to or respond to the other in us, we must remember that they are "gone forever… irremediably absent…for it would be unfaithful to delude oneself into believing that the other living in us is living in himself" (Derrida 9). The interiorised image of the other that lives on in us is a shadow. There is always the "deathly silence" of the other in us, the non-response, that reminds us coldly of the "limits of a speaking interiority" (Derrida 47). As Levinas writes, death is defined as "the no-response" (*God, Death and Time* 11). The image of the dead that lives within us looks back at us, in us, but it is a silent gaze.

Chapter Five: Death as Multi-Voiced Narrative, Death as Story Interrupted

Death as Multi-Voiced Narrative

The novel is narrated via citations only, meaning it is constructed entirely from voices. There are the obviously fictional citations attributed to the Bardo ghosts – a sprawling cast of characters, who, with roger bevins iii, hans vollman and the reverend everly thomas as primaries, collectively narrate the events of the night of the 22nd of February 1862:

> Presently, we found ourselves joined by the Reverend Everly Thomas.
>
> hans vollman
>
> Who arrived, as he always arrives, at a hobbling sprint, eyebrows arched high, looking behind himself anxiously, hair sticking straight up, mouth in a perfect O of terror. And yet spoke, as he always speaks, with the utmost calmness and good sense.
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> A newcomer? said the Reverend.
> I believe we have the honor of addressing a Mr. Carrol, Mr. Bevins said.
> The lad only looked at us blankly.
>
> hans vollman
>
> The newcomer was a boy of some ten or eleven years. A handsome little fellow, blinking and gazing cautiously about him.
>
> the reverend everly thomas

Then there are the supposedly non-fictional citations in the form of excerpts from non-fiction historical texts, which Saunders deploys to narrate and give historical context to events that occur outside the bounds of the cemetery. Chapter V, for example, is comprised of 11 different historical excerpts describing what the moon was like the night of the Lincolns' lavish party — the same night Willie becomes seriously ill:

> Many guests especially recalled the beautiful moon that shone that evening.
>
> In "A Season of War and Loss,"
> by Ann Brighney.
>
> In several accounts of the evening, the brilliance of the moon is remarked upon.
>
> In "Long Road to Glory," by Edward Holt.

> A common feature of these narratives is the golden moon, hanging quaintly above the scene.
> In "White House Soirees: An Anthology,"
> by Bernadette Evon.

> There was no moon that night and the sky was heavy with clouds.
> Wickett, op. cit.

These non-fictional historical fragments channel voices from hundreds of years ago – voices which belong(ed) to real people who are long since dead – and in this way, Saunders summons a second cast of ghosts to build and deliver his story, juxtaposing ghosts against ghosts, the real dead against the fictional dead. But the voices of the non-fiction excerpts are only ghosts relative to the reader's present. In novel-time, they are very much the voices of the living. The historical fragments and the voices of the Bardo ghosts are always grouped together respectively and contained within their own chapters, and as the reader moves through the novel, she crosses easily and often the hard death line as she moves from the world of the living to the world of the dead and back again. In this way, Saunders creates the impression of a porousness between the living world and the afterlife which mimics the conceptual logic of the novel (i.e.: that the two worlds sit in palimpsest).

Furthermore, the extensive inclusion of historical fragments results in a text that constantly turns the reader away. As we move from fragment to fragment, we are sent into entirely new texts, which stand alone and apart from the core text, if only for a few lines at a time. When this happens, the core text withdraws in a way that is mimetic of death's withdrawal – the novel about death, like death itself, insists that we look away.

The non-fiction excerpts are cited almost academically, in a way that creates a sense of unquestionable legitimacy. However, Slaymaker estimates that around half of this primary and secondary material is likely completely made up (par 4). This choice works to undermine the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, reality and fantasy, in a way that echoes a characteristic of the novel as a whole relative to death, that is, that it may well be non-fictional. When made subject matter, death has an interesting effect on notions of genre. A work of fiction set beyond the death-line, for example, cannot be called with any degree of certainty, a work of fiction. Because our lack of knowledge of what happens after death is so absolute, any vision of an afterlife presented could, within the realm of possibility, be true, right, accurate, real. In this way, creative representations of life after death, no matter what form they take, disrupt the certainty of the fiction-claim, and carry with them a staggering potential revelation that cannot be proven true, but cannot be proven wrong, either.

Similarly, it is not possible to write a word of non-fiction about life after death – the only instance I can think of where this specific genre is impossible to apply.

The many-voicedness of the novel can be extended to theorise another framework for apprehending death: death as a multi-voiced narrative. In "You Can Die But Once: Creativity, Narrative and Epistemology in Western Death", Trudi Buck and Stavroula Pipyrou argue for a narrative approach to death within the realms of forensic science and anthropology, stating that both scientific data and narrative are closely entwined in the "production of death" (262). They write that death is a "multiply constructed and intersubjective emotional experience through which social and scientific configurations are exposed and expressed" (265). At a family level, at a community level, and at a societal level, death "invites a discussion" (Buck and Pipyrou 264) – it is produced or constructed through "multi-textual stories" (Buck and Pipyrou 263). Alan W. Friedman agrees, writing that "The history of mankind is the story of death, or rather, the stories of death…death (is) as much narrative as it is experience, as much an ordering of events performed by survivors as one which defines the dying process" (65). The narrative construction of *Lincoln in the Bardo* demonstrates this notion in a literal way. It took 166 actors to complete the audiobook – a testament to the sheer number of voices pressed into service to tell a version of the story of Willie's death (Maughan par 1).

According to Buck and Pipyrou, the multiplicity of the stories that construct a single death works upon the dead subject:

> Dead subjects in the narrations are re-enacted, re-created, and in the end re-claimed as they are 'pulled' by the narrative forces in different and perhaps opposing directions – that of pastness and futureness, objectivism and subjectivism. We see this pulling as prosthesis; it does not only multiply a dead person, but changes its nature. (263)

In this way, the dead become caught "in-story", and become a product of "imagination and literary production" (Buck and Pipyrou 265). In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, Willie Lincoln, a real historical figure, is caught in-story. The novel itself centres around – in fact exists because of – a fictional reproduction of Willie Lincoln. Within the text itself, Willie is replicated in the historical fragments at the level of the narrative, in which multiple voices from the past remember and describe him:

A sunny child, dear & direct, abundantly open to the charms of the world.

In "They Knew the Lincoln Boys," by Carol Dreiser, account of Simon Weber.

A sweet little muffin of a fellow, round and pale, a long shock of bangs often falling before his eyes, who would, when he found himself moved or shy, involuntarily perform a rapid opening and closing of the eyes: blink, blink, blink.

In "The President's Little Man", by Opal Stragner.

When confronted with some little unfairness, his face would darken with concern, and his eyes well up with tears, as if, in that unfortunate particular, he had intuited the injustice of the larger enterprise. Once, a playmate brought along a dead robin he had just killed with a stone, held tong-like between two sticks. Willie spoke brusquely to the boy, seized the bird away, took it off to bury it, was low and quiet for the rest of the day.

In "Lincoln's Lost Angel," by Simon Iverness.

(52-53)

With every fragment, Willie Lincoln is replicated, rising up before us, endowed – accurately or not – with various qualities and characteristics bestowed upon him by each disparate narrative voice. In *Lincoln in the Bardo* the careful curation and arrangement of these fragments creates a single death-story:

The rich notes of the Marine Band in the apartments below came to the sick-room in soft, subdued murmurs, like the wild, faint sobbing of far-off spirits.

Keckly, op. cit.

Willie lay in the "Prince of Wales" bedroom with its dark purple wall hangings and golden tassels.

Epstein, op. cit.

The cheeks of his handsome round face were inflamed with fever. His feet moved restlessly beneath the maroon coverlet.

In "History Close at Hand," edited by Renard Kent, account of Mrs. Kate O'Brien.

…

The night passed slowly; morning came, and Willie was worse.

Keckely, op. cit.

(16-21)

Considered as a whole, the novel stands, too, as a story that joins the vast canon of stories (a sense of which we can glean from the sheer number of separate historical fragments curated in the text) narrating, and in so doing constructing, producing, and multiplying the death of Willie Lincoln — this story rendered in Saunders' voice.

What is the ultimate objective of this collective project? Derrida asks this exact question in his eulogy for Roland Barthes. He writes:

> What are we doing when we exchange these discourses? Over what are we keeping watch? Are we trying to negate death or retain it...How many voices intersect, observe, and correct one another, argue with one another, passionately embrace or pass one another in silence? Are we going to seek some final evaluation? For example, to convince ourselves that the death never took place, or that it is irreversible and we are protected from the return of the dead? Or are we trying to make the dead our ally…to finish him off by exacting him, to reduce him in any case to what can still be contained by a literary or rhetorical performance...? (50).

The arrangement of fragments in *Lincoln in the Bardo* gives us a sense of these voices that "intersect, observe, and correct one another" or "pass one another in silence". Here, Derrida seems to support Buck and Pipyrou's idea that the dead are caught "in-story", proposing that one of the motives of the multi-voiced construction of a death is to contain the dead in a "literary or rhetorical performance" (50). Derrida's questions and the range of potential motivations of multi-voiced death construction they highlight show how death understood as a multi-voiced narrative helps surface some important emotional, social and psychological needs. Friedman argues that humanity's compulsion toward narratives of death attempts to "tame death" and make it "comprehensible, socially acceptable (and) necessary" (65). A death in a community marks a severe rupture in its fabric, and narrative can be used to sew together and mend this tear, offering the promise of communal continuity in the face of loss (Friedman 67). The narrative patterns of eulogy, in particular, help to both celebrate and complete the life of the dead (Friedman 70). Buck and Pipyrou argue that deploying narrative and persuasive rhetoric can be an attempt to "transform the circumstances of death" in instances where a particular death results in extreme dissonance, because it invokes either shame or excessive trauma (264). To survivors, the dead can only continue to exist in narrative, and as a result, it works to redeem loss by recreating the one who is lost (Buck and Pipyrou 263). In this way, it is not only death that is constructed from narrative, but the dead, too.

The logic of the Bardo presents an effective mimesis of this idea. Where, in real life, the many voices that construct death out of narrative can only be the voices of survivors, in the

Bardo, the dead can narrate and construct death, too — the deaths of Willie Lincoln and sometimes their fellow ghosts, but also, and often with obsessive repetition, their own individual death-stories. roger bevins iii is particularly susceptible to this:

> Which is where I remain.
> I am waiting to be discovered (having come to rest on the floor, head against the stove, upended chair nearby, sliver of an orange peel against my cheek), so I may be revived, and rise, and clean up the awful mess I have made… and go outside…touching, tasting, standing very still among the beautiful things of this world such as, for example: a sleeping dog dream-kicking in a tree-shade triangle; a sugar pyramid upon a blackwood tabletop being rearranged grain-by-grain by an indiscernible draft; a cloud passing ship-like above a rounded green hill, atop which a line of coloured shirts energetically dance in the wind, while down below in town, a purple-blue day unfolds… each moist-grassed, flower-pierced yard gone positively mad with–
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Friend.
> Bevins.
>
> hans vollman (27)

Typeset on the page, these stories loom above their cited names, heavy paragraphs bearing down upon their delicate lower-case monikers. The novel's unique dialogic structure means the ghosts only appear when they are speaking — whether that be to narrate their own lives and deaths, or to narrate the death of Willie Lincoln — flickering in and out of presence as we move from citation to citation. As a result, they are effectively constituted entirely of story – so much so that the stories of their lives and deaths are embedded in their Bardo-forms, their physicalities reflecting some essential truth about who they were in life and how they died. For example, vollman, struck down on the day he was to consummate his marriage, is described as such:

> The other man (the one hit by a beam) Quite naked Member swollen to the size of Could not take my eyes off It bounced as he
> Body like a dumpling Broad flat note like a sheep's
> Quite naked indeed
> Awful dent in the head How could he walk around and talk with such a nasty–
>
> willie lincoln
>
> (28)

And poor Mr. Collier, beset with a perpetual worry about his wealth, "was constantly compelled to float horizontally, like a human compass needle, the top of his head facing in the direction of whichever of his properties he found himself most worried about at that moment" (129). In this way, as the real dead can be thought to be, the fictional ghosts are both in-story and of-story.

Notable throughout the novel is how much time the dead are given to tell their stories. They are given a remarkable amount of space to materialise through monologue – in chapter LXI, the reverend everly thomas is given nine full pages to recount his experience of surviving the matterlightblooming phenomenon (187). And to whom are these monologues and urgent tellings directed? According to the logic of the Bardo, the dead cannot address the living. In this way, the multi-voiced narrative of *Lincoln in the Bardo* constructs the readers' death, too, re-constituting us as ghosts in the cemetery, embedded in narrative, in-story, of-story, and able to receive the story.

Death as Story Interrupted

At the end of the novel, once vollman and bevins have achieved their mission to move willie along, the two friends realise that they, too, are ready to succumb to the matterlightblooming phenomenon. As they move from a place of firm denial of their situation to something akin to acceptance, their Bardo forms begin to react, their skin becoming parchment-thin, their forms flickering first between the versions of their past selves, and then versions of their future selves – those which were never actualised:

> Shall we? Bevins said. Shall we go together?
> And assumed his various future-forms (forms he had never, alas, succeeded in attaining):
> A fine-looking young man on the prow of a ship, gazing off at a row of yellow and blue houses just coming into view upon a distant shoreline…
> The contented lover, for many years now, of a gentle, bearded pharmacist named Reardon;
> A prosperous, chubby, middle-aged fellow, nursing poor Reardon through his final illness;
> An old geezer of nearly a hundred, blessedly free of all desire (for man, food, breath) being driven to church in some sort of miracle vehicle, before which stood no horse, and which went about on rubber wheels, loud as some perpetually firing cannon.
> hans vollman
>
> Yes, all right, Mr. Vollman said. Let us go. Together.
> roger bevins iii
>
> (328-329)

They are held back a moment by unfinished business – the traynor girl, still suffering as a burning train derailed by hogs up against the dreaded cast iron fence:

> We are sorry, I shouted in. Sorry that we did not do more to convince you to go, back when we had the chance…
> We are sorry this happened to you, I said.
> You did not deserve it, Mr. Bevins said.
> And sorry, especially, that we did not stay to console you, as you went down, I said.
> You did rather slink away, said one of the hogs.
> hans vollman
>
> Mr. Vollman's face contorted with the memory. Then something changed, and he looked strong and vital… And sped through his various future-forms:
> A beaming fellow in a disordered bed, the morning after he and Anna would have consummated their marriage…
> A father of twin girls, who looked like paler, smaller Annas;
> A retired printer with bad knees, helped along a boardwalk by that same Anna, older now herself but still beautiful, and as they went along, they spoke confidentially back and forth, somewhat habitually, not always agreeing, in a code that seemed to have developed between them, about the twins, now mothers themselves.
> Mr. Vollman turned to me, smiling in a pained but kindly way.
> None of that ever was, he said. And it never will be.
> roger bevins iii
>
> (332-333)

Perhaps one of the most affecting frameworks of Western death is the notion of a story interrupted: death as the preclusion of potential, or, the preclusion of further narrative. As bevins and vollman move through their future-forms, we get a clear sense of what they missed in death – the lives they could have, but now will never, live. Death marks the end of the narrative-producing function of living – the end of all potential narrative progression. In this framework, a human life is understood as a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. If the end comes before it seems appropriate or fair, death is understood as a severing of narrative flow, and the rest of the story – the life that will remain unlived – gains significant weight and presence, particularly in the grief processes of survivors. This manifests in cliches, like "it wasn't her time", "he was so young", "gone too soon", "what a waste", etc. In these instances, the spectral unlived life assumes as much import as the life that was lived, and this framework is characterised by a particular kind of sadness directed not necessarily at the survivors, but at the deceased for all the things they will miss out on in death – the deep tragedy of life left unlived.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to make an argument for the literariness of Western death, using George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* to illustrate and expand upon this idea, before further theorising the ways in which this literariness manifests in the day-to-day handling of death. I began by introducing the reality of death's total withdrawal, showing how death can be considered to be unexperienceable, empirically unobservable, unthinkable and unspeakable. I argued that, because we cannot experience, see, think or say death, we cannot apprehend it without deploying the creative imagination. In this way, death and the literary are inextricably tangled, always paired, and possibly one and the same, because as far as death can be real to us in the world, death is produced via literary mechanisms. This points to an intimate entanglement between death, literature, imagination and creativity that remains, as the literature review shows, remarkably under-theorised.

In Chapter One, I examined some of the peculiar effects of death's withdrawal and literature's utility in the face of death, introducing two new concepts. The first is a figuring of death as "extra-generative". I argued that because death represents a blank spot in our collective experience and conceptual framework, it presents the purest imaginative field available to us. As a result, to set a story beyond the death line – or indeed to even begin to imagine what that place, space, or state may be like – we must begin from nothing, and this requires additional creative energy as we build from scratch. I went on to examine the ways in which death may be extra-generative in a broader sense, namely, as an engine for literature and as a driver for the compulsive, pervasive repetition and description of visions of afterlife characteristic of the Western canon. After examining the ways in which literature is deployed to manage and comprehend death, including the fears against which it is deployed to protect us, I introduced the second new concept – the notion of the double-work of afterlife narratives. I argued that fiction set after death performs a kind of double-work, standing alone as a work of creativity while also performing a strenuous resistance to the ultimate unknown as a transliteration of death, functioning as a simulacrum for a reality which cannot be discovered. These works of fiction carry the additional important responsibility of helping us manage our terror of death by presenting ways to imagine what it might be like, and they also help us manage our grief by creating locations or narratives in which we can imagine and locate those who have died.

In Chapter Two, I explored the relationship between death, language and creativity, drawing from the work of Maurice Blanchot and Simon Critchley to determine the ways in

which death is located at the heart of the creative process. I synthesised Sartre's writings on the world-annihilating effects of directing one's attention towards an absence and Mainemelis' theorisation of the relationship between creativity and timelessness to expand upon the ways in which creative production may be like a pseudo-death before drawing upon Derrida's *corpus*-corpse dialectic to conclude that both life and death are present at the heart of the creative process, speculating that it may be from the tension between them that creative energy flows.

Next, I introduced this dissertation's primary text, George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo.* I placed this text it into conversation with Foucault's notion of heterotopia, which I traced through its two primary iterations to theorise death as a spatial field. In so doing, I conceptualised death as a heterotopia for what appears to be the first time, showing how death meets Foucault's definitive requirements for a heterotopia, using the titular Bardo of *Lincoln in the Bardo* to illustrate the argument.

Chapter Four brought the enquiry down to the language level, examining the utility of euphemism and metaphor in both *Lincoln in the Bardo* and our daily management and comprehension of death. I examined the way that euphemism's representational displacement allows us to mitigate the horror and fear of death by providing a mediating framework of cultural concepts through which to glance at death askew. I showed how the use of euphemism allows us to get both closer to and further away from death simultaneously while arguing for an understanding of euphemism as a form of additive, rather than indirect, address – one which has a kind of reality-splitting effect. Next, I turned my attention to the role of metaphor in the apprehension of death, applying Hans Blumenberg's concept of the absolute metaphor to death for what appears to be the first time and using Derrida's eulogies to examine death's effect on the operations of the proper name as an example of death's strange effects on the order of representation. Lastly, I used Derrida to theorise a framework of death understood as "The Other in Us".

In the final chapter, I used *Lincoln in the Bardo*'s dialogic structure to theorise death as both a multi-voiced narrative and as story interrupted, drawing on the work of Derrida and Buck and Pipyrou to look at how it is not only death that is made of narrative, but the dead too, who become caught "in-story", products of "imagination and literary production", constantly re-enacted, re-claimed and re-created by survivors (Buck and Pipyrou 263-265).

The notion of the literariness of death may surface some interesting questions that warrant further examination, indicating productive potential for future research efforts. The first and most obvious would be an exploration of the ways in which a notion of the literariness of

death may apply to African, Asian and South American death systems. In the fields of linguistics and literary theory, there is potential to further examine and theorise death's impact on language and the order of representation in light of death's withdrawal. The application of Hans Blumenberg's absolute metaphor to death also warrants further theorisation.

Over the course of this project, I have spent a lot of time thinking about that Tokyo hotel room. It was, in its own way, a kind of personal Bardo. My father's death was the end of a world, and from the moment I stepped out of that hotel room and into something new, literary mechanisms have been producing both a death for my father and a way to live with it for me. I have read and written many things that have helped over the years, and I would like to conclude with one of my favourites. It was written by Henry Scott Holland, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University from 1910 to 1918:

> Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity. What is this death but a negligible accident? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner. All is well.

All is well.

[Word count: 25087 without works cited]

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