Irony, Postirony, and the Internet in the Contemporary American Novel

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Abstract (English)

This thesis investigates interactions between the internet and irony in five contemporary American novels – Jordan Castro's *The Novelist* (2022), Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021), Jarett Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* (2016), and Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021). Taken together, this set of novels brings to an end many years of uncertainty as to whether the internet was worthy material for the literary novel, as well as the prolonged attempt associated with New Sincerity to renounce postmodernist irony. The internet and irony emerge and re-emerge respectively as troublingly entangled throughlines of the contemporary American novel. This thesis maps the consequences of such entanglement across theme, style, position-taking in the field of literary production, and narrative, covered by a chapter each in turn. This set of novels thematise a persistent, twenty-first century "crisis of irony" aggravated by the discursive practices of Web 2.0, as well as engage fraught attempts to repair such a crisis as its consequences take stylistic effect on the level of the sentence. Through the literary-sociological lens of Pierre Bourdieu, they negotiate an anxiety inherent in their possible status as "internet novels" with continued investments in the literary highbrow. Finally, each of these novels explores the possibility of inhabiting a position of postirony by constructing narrative arcs that conclude with attempted disconnection from the allures of Web 2.0. In sum, the four chapters of this thesis give shape to the triangulation, by turns fraught and energising, of the internet, irony, and the novel in our present moment.

Résumé (Français)

Ce mémoire étudie les relations entre l'internet et l'ironie dans cinq romans américains contemporains : *The Novelist* (2022) de Jordan Castro, *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) de Patricia Lockwood, *Several People Are Typing* (2021) de Calvin Kasulke, *I Hate The Internet* (2016) de Jarett Kobek, and *Fake Accounts* (2021) de Lauren Oyler. Considérés ensemble, ces romans mettent fin à plusieurs années de réticence à considérer l'internet comme un sujet digne du roman littéraire, ainsi qu'aux tentatives du mouvement « New Sincerity » de renoncer à l'ironie du postmodernisme. L'internet apparaît et l'ironie réapparaît dans ces romans et les deux s'entremêlent d'une façon troublante. Ce mémoire cartographie les conséquences de cet enchevêtrement à travers les thématiques, styles, prises de position dans le champ littéraire, et intrigues de ces romans, chacun de ces sujets étant traité dans un chapitre dédié. Ces cinq romans illustrent tous une « crise d'ironie » persistante du vingt-et-unième siècle, accentuée par les pratiques discursives du Web 2.0, ainsi que les tâtonnements pour réparer cette crise quand ses effets stylistiques s'expriment au niveau du langage du roman. À travers le spectre de la sociologie littéraire de Pierre Bourdieu, ces romans compensent une angoisse inhérente à leur possible statut d' « internet novel » par des élans continus en direction de la grande littérature américaine. Pour conclure, chacun de ces romans tente d'occuper une position de « postirony » en construisant des récits s'achevant tous par un effort de déconnexion des tentations du Web 2.0. Les quatre chapitres de ce mémoire donnent forme à la triangulation, tour à tour tendue et stimulante, entre l'internet, l'ironie et le roman dans l'ère contemporaine.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

"At the beginning of the twentieth century, people debated whether the plane, the automobile, the telephone were noble enough to appear in literature. Those empty quarrels were swept away by obvious successes."

– Maël Renouard, *Fragments of An Infinite Memory: My Life With The Internet*

"Every time she passed the model train store she clenched her fist and said, 'You did this …' And it was true, it was true, life as we knew it was coming to an end because 160 years ago or whatever, some old weirdo who was obsessed with trains had to invent trains because trains didn't exist yet. Choo-choo, motherfucker, are you happy now?"

– Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking About This*

French essayist Maël Renouard writes that "the invention of a fictional plot … that unfolds realistically in the contemporary world can no longer neglect to represent the internet's total intrusion into the slightest acts of our existence" (73). Indeed, after many years of marked apprehension towards the internet among literary novelists, critics now rush to proclaim the generic formation of the "internet novel" (Webster; West-Knights) or "very online novel" (Chayka). The novels speculatively given this title engage directly and systematically with the formal and discursive practices of the contemporary internet: with Twitter feeds, with Slack channels, and with Wikipedia pages. These practices bring with them the multivalent irony seen to circulate, often troublingly, through social media (Lewis). From their very premises onwards, therefore, these novels become entangled in debates that "persist around irony and sincerity as they jostle for prominence as defining epithets for our age" (James 87), as defining characteristics for an ill-defined post-postmodernism troubled by a pervasive sense of crisis.

This study's points of departure are, firstly, that much literary fiction of the early twenty-first century, as part of the "significant wave" (198) of anti-irony cultural production named as New Sincerity by Adam Kelly, could renounce postmodern irony precisely because this fiction rarely concerned itself with the internet as emerging technological dominant. These two literary-historical refusals – the shunning of both irony and the internet – track together as mutually-dependent. Secondly and in view of this mutual-dependency, by engaging the formal and discursive practices of Web 2.0 within the literary novel, the contemporary "internet novel" must necessarily confront the irony entangled with such practices.[1]

In order to investigate these confrontations and entanglements, this study centres an exemplary set of contemporary American novels. Jordan Castro's *The Novelist* (2022), Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021), Jarett Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* (2016), and Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* (2021) all invite a level of tentative classification under the term "internet novel." They thematise writer-protagonists laconically scrolling Twitter, the curation of conspiracy Instagram pages, the in-jokes of workplace Slack channels, and a barbed critique of San Francisco's transformation by the tech industry. Crucially, they thus coalesce around two interrelated commonalities: they all engage thematically, stylistically, sociologically, and narratively with the contemporary internet and with the contemporary forms of irony so intimately bound up with it.

The "internet novel": on shaky literary-historical ground

Although these novels, by extension, appear as representative of the not-quite or not-quite-yet genre, none of their authors, within the novels or elsewhere, explicitly embrace the term

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[1] In equating the "contemporary internet" with "Web 2.0," I take my lead from other scholars of cultural theory in the digital age. Damon R. Young characterizes Web 2.0 as referring to "the early twenty-first century rise of web platforms that are customizable, crowd-sourced, and interactive, such as social media platforms and video sharing sites."

"internet novel." Indeed, there are good reasons to frame this study by levelling some suspicion at the prevailing narrative of the rise of the "internet novel."[2] The assumptions, firstly, that the "internet novel" represents a literary-historical "radical break" (1) of the kind Frederic Jameson has written against, and, secondly, that it gives shape to a stable set of generic conventions, both quickly appear precarious.

Although journalistic accounts of the "internet novel" are quick to assert the quasi-genre's novelty, the American novel has historically made significant efforts to imagine and understand the consequences of a hyper-connected world: from the speculative fiction of Isaac Asimov in the 1950s and 1960s, William Gibson in the 1980s, to early twenty-first-century fiction such as Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City* (2009) and Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013). That being said, in many of these instances the internet appears – as argued by Zara Dinnen – as "a banal sort of figure because it is neither a properly delineated subject nor entirely absent" (3). Even if it appears in passing, or with a certain flippancy, mystification, or abstraction, the internet can nonetheless thus be observed developing through American fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first century. In this vein the contemporary "internet novel" appears as the latest instalment in a broader literary-historical trend. Mark McGurl's refashioning of much literary postmodernism under the category of "technomodernism" (42) usefully describes this trend. The novels of this study extend a technomodernist tradition, a turning to technology to achieve a "systematic experimentation with narrative form" (McGurl 42), whilst often being more explicit about their status as troubled attempts to "properly delineate" the internet of social media and instant messaging, Web 2.0. Literary-historical continuities and discontinuities

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[2] Journalistic accounts of the "internet novel" are foremost among examples given by a 2021 n+1 editorial entitled "Critical Attrition" that names and castigates a contemporary genre of book review termed the Contemporary Themed Review. The "CTR" is said to over-emphasise terms and use these always in the singular, suggesting "both gravity and homogeneity." As a result, differences "between style, narrative, even genre disappear." Such are the risks of proceeding with the term "internet novel": as a result, I will favour a more diffuse framing for the novels of this study.

remain central to this study, as pertains to digital technologies but also to the competing legacies of postmodern irony and New Sincerity.

A healthy suspicion towards the catch-all "internet novel" is valid also because contemporary novels marketed or reviewed as "internet novels" represent a significant range of thematic interests, authorial positions, formal and stylistic particularities, as well as intersections with other literary genres. An inability to identity a set of clear generic conventions is perhaps unsurprising: now so ubiquitous in the daily lives of almost two thirds of the global population (Petrosyan), the sprawling reach of the contemporary internet itself resists any sense of singularity in its affordances, its discursive practices, its dominant forms, or its personal and societal effects. It follows that representations of such a technology would themselves defy straightforward categorisation, in contrast to comparable intersections between technology and literature, such as the eighteenth-century novel of letters or the nineteenth-century newspaper novel.

Indeed, Joseph R. Worthen's conception of "New Autofiction" demonstrates that even among contemporary American novels marked thematically by Web 2.0 stark distinctions emerge. The novels of New Autofiction, "a literary genre derived from the mono-media texture of the internet, specifically social media" and often published under the auspices of the alt lit movement, are characterised by an "emphasis on the personal minutiae of daily life, radical openness, tweet-like prose styling, brand awareness and identification, even self-publishing" (Worthen). In the context of the novels of Castro, Kasulke, Kobek, Lockwood, and Oyler, so far so similar: the protagonist's mundane morning routine dominates Castro's *The Novelist*, fragmentary "feed-like" prose figures on multiple occasions, and Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* was originally a self-published title. That Worthen groups his set of novels as an "apparently earnest strain of autofiction," begins, however, to reveal significant differences between the novels of "New Autofiction" and those of this study as a distinct subset of the contemporary

"internet novel" writ large. Not only do these novels shift a technomodernist dependency on social media away from questions of selfhood and towards the discursive and formal practices of Web 2.0 in and of themselves, they also do so in a way that troubles the possibility of novelistic earnestness.[3] If the novels of this study appear at times to deploy an "aesthetics of total transparency" in order to be "extremely direct" with the reader about a "straightforward mission statement" (Worthen), such aesthetics are closely entangled with irony. As with those of literary-historical continuity, questions of quasi-generic coherence will remain an important part of this study, particularly with regard to categories of style and of postironic cultural production.

Irony: from Socrates to the contemporary novel

The divergence from the earnestness of Worthen's novels of New Autofiction marks the second commonality among the novels here: each also engages thematically, stylistically, sociologically, and narratively with irony's role in contemporary life.[4] Indeed, a central claim of this study is that, precisely because these novels draw on the discursive and formal practices of Web 2.0, they are compelled to invite contemporary irony, in all its messiness, into the literary novel. As shall be seen, however, such engagement must also confront the semantic and historical slipperiness of the term irony itself. In her book-length study of irony, Clare Colebrook writes that it, "by the very simplicity of its definition, becomes curiously indefinable" (1). Yet attempts to map out its functioning throw, by extension, wider societal and cultural landscapes into relief: Lee Konstantinou, whose writing on postirony will provide an important theoretical lens in Chapter 4, asserts that "no theory of the new cultural dominant

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[3] Some level of autofictional impulse is identifiable within Lockwood and Oyler's novels in particular, though these impulses are not of primary interest to either author.

[4] The focus of this study is on rhetorical irony – broadly understood as constructing a "gap" between manifest and implied meanings – over the dramatic or historical irony native to particular narrative forms. Unless otherwise stated, all further uses of the term irony denote rhetorical irony.

can proceed without first addressing the difficult problem of irony" ("Four Faces" 88). Irony thus proves highly historically contingent, defined and deployed variously depending on cultural context, whilst, by the same token, itself encoding a set of socio-cultural values implicit in that context.

The novel serves as an effective medium through which to historicise and decode irony for two principal reasons. Firstly, since it figures as, ostensibly, a discrete, bounded text in which to experiment with the possibilities of irony. This also allows for experimentation with the regulation (and its limits) of these possibilities, with what irony should and should not mean, how it should and should not be used. That the novel proves – for authors, readers, and scholars – useful in this way is firstly because literary texts, almost by definition, engage in multiple levels of signification. The potential for irony, at a minimum, hovers over novel-reading into perpetuity since, as Colebrook contends, "texts circulate from other contexts" meaning "we have no obvious context to refer to" when engaging in the practice of "literary interpretation" (4). In other words, we cannot rely on any sense of "original" context when grappling with the "gaps" between manifest and implied meanings in literary texts. Secondly, and somewhat conversely, the novel also works against this process of decontextualization, a process which is hypercharged, as analysis of Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* in particular will reveal, by the contemporary internet through the phenomenon of "context collapse." The novel offers a more stable discursive ground on which to navigate contemporary forms of irony, insofar as it centres a named author "speaking" consistently to a reader-interlocuter, albeit often indirectly through narrators and protagonists. The novels of this study, as a subset of "internet novel" that seeks to both experiment with and regulate irony, prove to be particularly productive case studies because they foreground both these features of the literary text. They borrow continuously from online contexts whilst centring narrators and protagonists who claim to desire distance from those same contexts and the irony that circulates through them.

Appearing in the as-yet-undefined period that follows postmodernity, these novels emerge as the most recent flashpoint in the entangled history of irony and literature. Indeed, such a history is long and varied. It begins with Socrates' reformulation of the Greek *eironeia* from a dubious tool of straightforward deception to a rhetorical tool that demonstrates "the possibility of a meaning that is latent, hidden or implied" in order either to "bring his interlocutors to ethical knowledge" or "to show that the knowledge they thought they had was not so certain" (Colebrook 23). The uses of irony extend and expand through medieval satire, such as that of Jonathan Swift, and the more covert ironies that underscored Jane Austen and George Eliot's class sensibilities via free indirect discourse in particular. In twentieth-century literature, irony increasingly morphs from the "stable irony" theorised by Wayne Booth, functioning through "straightforward warning[s]" (53) of authorial distance from surface-level signification, to the unstable irony associated with postmodernist novel-writing. Booth's stable irony is understood as "intentional," though "covert," as "finite" and thus "local, limited" to the immediate text. Crucially, it appears as "fixed:" once a "reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions" (6). Readers are thus guided, though through some obliqueness, towards a particular implied meaning or set of meanings.

Where stable irony in literature tends to "prove how shared and clearly recognisable our social norms and assumptions are" (Colebrook 16), the "complex, undecidable or insecure ironies" of postmodernism (Colebrook 16) are used to intentionally undermine those same social norms and assumptions. Canonised postmodernists such as Thomas Pynchon embraced the possibilities of irony as a novelistic tool of cultural critique, in order to expose a society of spectacle and surfaces that obscure the steady march of late capitalism. The deployment of unstable irony becomes premised on an ambivalent sense that we cannot "believe there is a truth or reason behind our values" and that, as a consequence, we "always speak and write

provisionally" (Colebrook 18) without commitment to what, manifestly, is said. This postmodernist irony is anchored in the political philosophy of Richard Rorty, whose "ironist" figure levels "radical and continuing doubts" at the "vocabulary she currently uses" (73) as well as at all other vocabularies that offer to redescribe the world. This figure thus recognises the historical and epistemological contingency of all discourses and all ideologies. Seen through this historicised lens, irony is "argued to be inherently politically liberating" insofar as "a life marked by irony remains open and undetermined" (Colebrook 18). It could thus be leveraged against the deterministic immutability of late capitalist forces.

The postmodern era, however, also marks the radical further expansion in the scope of irony, bringing it steadily to the threshold of "crisis." Traced through literary texts, irony develops teleologically from Socratic "figure of speech" or "a local 'trope' within an otherwise literal language" (Colebrook 18), to an "extended figure of thought" (Colebrook 7) that characterises satirical modes of writing. Increasingly during the final decades of the twentieth century, irony expands from a tool of postmodernist cultural critique to the rhetorical default in society at large. It begins to pervade the social "environment" (*Cool Characters* 12) as a whole, or, indeed, "life and language in general" (Colebrook 18). David Foster Wallace charts the outgrowth of irony from literary texts into this societal all-pervasiveness in his seminal 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." He argues that the commercial forces of late capitalism, particularly as expressed through television advertising, have been "ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical postmodern aesthetic" (173) that was undergirded by unstable irony. New Sincerity names the set of cultural responses for which Foster Wallace laid the ground and which sought to counteract an irony that had become seen as "cynical" and outmoded. Chapter 1 proceeds from Foster Wallace's diagnosis of and the subsequent literary response to a "crisis of irony" in the twenty-first century.

It is notable, however, that scholars such as Colebrook and Konstantinou do not consider the role of the internet, as technological successor to Foster Wallace's television, in extending irony as "a moving target" (Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* 9) further into and through the twenty-first century. An investigation of the novels of Lockwood, Oyler, Castro, Kasulke, and Kobek reveals the urgency of such a consideration. Their zany, internet-saturated premises – Twitter as "portal," tirades against the duplicity of the tech sector, the "uploading" of human consciousness into Slack channels – demonstrate that, whilst dismissed in literary fiction of the early twenty-first century, irony has continued its expansion undeterred, from late capitalist "life" offline to all aspects of life online in the era of Web 2.0. This study thus seeks to historicise the techno-present by investigating what the selected novels reveal about the role of the contemporary internet in extending a "crisis of irony" both through time and back into American literary fiction, which claimed to have disowned ironic modes of writing and reading.

Conversing and consorting: chapter summaries

In "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Foster Wallace sought to prove that "the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony" (161) in order to solicit a newly "rebellious" earnestness in the American novel. In arguing that, despite the intervening influence of New Sincerity, such a nexus re-emerges in the era of Web 2.0, this study maps chapter-by-chapter how the present day "conversing and consorting" between the internet and the contemporary American "internet novel" allows for a tracing of irony and its crisis through theme, style, position-taking in the field of literary production, and narrative.

Chapter 1 – "Meta-reflection on irony, the internet, and crisis" – sets out how irony appears as an explicit thematic interest of these novels, often in the context of confusion regarding its definition and use, as well as of difficulty in differentiating it online from sincerity. This chapter thus continues the literary-historical story begun here to claim that a "meta-reflection" on irony

in these novels gives shape to an ongoing "crisis of irony" in U.S. society at large, perpetuated and aggravated by digital technologies. This crisis, however, refuses quarantine in and as theme alone. Chapter 2 – "The 'crisis of irony' and reparative styles" – argues that style, particularly imitative and parodic styles, delineates the entrance both of the contagious "crisis of irony" into the textual fabric of the literary novel and of attempts to "repair" this crisis. This chapter reformulates Michael Dango's four stylistic "strategies of repair" (7) – binge, detox, filter, and ghost – as responses specific to the "crisis of irony." It also challenges them: here they are not performed merely affectively but self-consciously and, therefore inevitably, ironically themselves.

Chapter 3 – "Literary 'trash' in the field of cultural production" – extends the focus on simultaneity, on the oscillation between embracing and critiquing irony, to consider the novels of this study as a set of anxiously ironic position-takings in the field of literary production. Moving to a literary-sociological frame, this chapter "zooms out" to contend that the selected authors appear to construct and negotiate a charged antagonism between the "literary" and the "digital," all whilst nonetheless seeking to occupy Bourdieu's highbrow pole of autonomous production. Finally, Chapter 4 – "The 'postironic Bildungsroman' in the era of Web 2.0" – considers to what extent these novels offer the possibility of a "postironic" narrative structure that disengages, even temporarily, from the ubiquity of irony across theme, style, and the field of literary production established in the preceding chapters. It traces the narrative arcs of very online protagonists through their adherence to Lee Konstantinou's generic model of the "postironic Bildungsroman." This establishes, in turn, a tension between the postironic possibilities of linear narrative itself and the nonlinear chaos of the database as theorised by Lev Manovich. If gaining distance from the "crisis of irony" proves contingent on the fraught ability to disconnect from digital technologies themselves, the difficulty in achieving either has significant consequences for novel-writing and -reading in the era of Web 2.0.

Chapter 1 – Meta-reflection on irony, the internet, and crisis

"An orgasm can be ironic, certainly, especially if it is dramatic."

– Lauren Oyler, *Fake Accounts*

"... on the other hand, the words irony and ironic were just symbols with shifting meaning given their value by general agreement amongst members of a society."

– Jaret Kobek, *I Hate The Internet*

The narrator of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest & Relaxation* (2018) sneers at millennial peers who she views as faux intellectuals because they "gave a shit about 'irony' or Dogme 95 or Klaus Kinski" (33). In the early twenty-first century, the term irony is thus historicised as a charged social referent, a topic of contemporary interest in and of itself. At the same time, irony here compels its own regulation: Moshfegh's narrator attempts to contain irony both tonally, through scorn, and formally, via the scare quotes that fix the term as an abstracted concept. Irony's appearance as explicit theme in Moshfegh's novel and those of this study grounds what Damon R. Young terms a "meta-reflection on irony." Whereas Young investigates how particular discourses online – such as the ambivalent "for the lulz" – force consideration of irony as theme, here the novel becomes the medium for concerted meta-reflection. All these novels focalise explicit commentaries on irony's role in contemporary society through their respective narrators. Such commentaries include, too, considerations of irony' relationship with sincerity and the inability to differentiate between the two. Crucially, the meta-reflections native to this set of "internet novels" consistently frame irony through the

digital technologies via which it circulates and, cumulatively, give shape to an ongoing "crisis of irony." This chapter thus seeks to outline the interactions between irony *as theme* and the internet *as theme*.

In this context, the internet is positioned as the technological successor to the television, which Foster Wallace identified in the early 1990s as having sown the seeds for the "crisis of irony" that bloomed into the twenty-first century. This crisis, pronounced by novelists, commentators, and politicians alike, positions irony as too slippery, too ubiquitous, and too negative to allow for the forms of solidarity and conviction needed for the new millennium. Since these texts critique and, as Chapter 2 will explore, play out an ongoing "crisis of irony," irony becomes a central vector for the persistence of what Jameson defines as the "autoreferentiality of all modern culture" (42). A meta-reflection on irony tracks these novels "turn[ing] upon" themselves, a gesture seen in the ironic sneering about irony in Moshfegh's narrator. Such concerted engagement with irony registers a marked departure from novels associated with New Sincerity, which mostly engaged thematically with irony in order to dismiss it outright or to strategically displace it into the historical past as an outmoded critical tool best left in the twentieth century. These novels, however, re-foreground irony and take it seriously as an exceptionally contemporary concern: both of the moment and troubling in new and distinct ways. For postmodernist writers such as Don DeLillo irony is seen to pervade not merely "as a rhetorical strategy but as a concept that is explicitly invoked" (Brauner 31). In the novels of this study irony also appears pervasively and *as concept* but is summoned *back* into the literary novel after its attempted banishment by New Sincerity via the thematic focus on digital technologies.

A crisis of semantics

With stark consistency, the novels of this study locate the symptoms of a "crisis of irony" first and foremost on a semantic level. If, as Colebrook argues, the apparent definitional simplicity of irony makes it "curiously indefinable" (1), these novels often make self-consciously explicit such a paradoxical definitional challenge themselves. They assert, not without a sense of frustration, that society has lost grip on the supposed simplicity of irony's definition. Lockwood and others satirise what Young terms the "hypertrophy of irony," the erosion of its semantic specificity and therefore its utility. Similarly to Young, Lockwood's narrator situates the pressures exerted on irony firmly in the virtual world, lamenting that "our large deforming sense of irony would leave us completely undefended" against "cyberattacks" (95). She nods both to the term's overuse – "large" – and misuse – "deforming". The meta-reflection running through these texts thus characterises a "crisis of irony" on multiple fronts: not only can we no longer identify when irony is or is not in play, we are blighted by the uncertainty as to the basic meaning of the term itself.

Irony takes on a troubling polysemy because it becomes emmeshed with the terms "coincidence" – despite some relation to so-called dramatic or cosmic irony – "paradox," and even "postmodernism."[5] Kobek's narrator diagnoses a semantic "crisis of irony" in *I Hate The Internet*, complaining that "[m]ost Americans used the adjective *ironic* to denote something other than a situation involving *irony* … they generally meant that there was a *coincidence*" (134). In a similar vein, in *Fake Accounts* Oyler's protagonist responds curtly to anecdote she is told on a date: "I said that this was not an example of paradox but irony" (184). Such

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[5] The most significant semantic slippage with the term irony is arguably presented by that of postmodernism itself. Although scholars such as David James have argued that literary postmodernism also incubated a less obvious commitment to earnestness, to sincere connection between writers and readers, cultural forms marked by a high level of self-conscious, zany humour or an ironic playfulness become labelled as "postmodern" in popular criticism. This slippage drives, in turn, Moshfegh's narrator to signal that "irony," as proximate to postmodernism, is passé.

confusions fundamentally trouble the semantic stability of irony and, in both cases, provoke didactic responses on the parts of the respective narrators. That Kobek deploys such italicisation excessively in his novel as an intentionally heavy-handed marker of irony, here signals formally that the "meta-reflection" could also be "for the lulz" (Young).

In all these examples, the "meta-reflection on irony" directs an air of resignation at the semantic "hypertrophy" of irony. Lockwood's narrator might well be referring to irony when she asks rhetorically "How far did a word have to travel from its source in order to become unrecognisable?" (141) Kobek's narrator is, ultimately, accepting of such travelling: "on the other hand, the words *irony* and *ironic* were just symbols with shifting meaning given their value by a general agreement amongst members of a society" (134). The explanation of irony's "hypertrophy" given here aligns closely with the poststructuralist thought that underpinned so much postmodern literary production. That irony undergoes a process of semantic disintegration in this way could be understood as the continued morphing of the term in a post-postmodern era characterised by crisis. But the tone of affectless resignation directed at such morphing is not itself is not devoid of humorous intents. In another layer of Jameson's "autoreferentiality" the "meta-reflection of irony" often figures as, ironically, meta-reflective itself. In other words, even an explicit discussion of irony in contemporary society is seen to turn upon itself. For example, during her sardonic experiment with fragmentary form, Oyler's protagonist asserts with Tweet-like brevity, "I've been wondering if sex can be ironic. I think at the end of the day probably not, as much as we would like it to be" (174). Here even an overinvestment in irony as concept is satirised as also contributing to the term's semantic decay. In sum, such semantic pressure is placed on "irony" that these novelists establish the risk of the term loosing meaning altogether.

The explicit discussion of irony in these novels is not, however, neatly ring-fenced off to the realm of semantics alone, nor is it marked solely by a playful satire of millennial navel-

gazing. If the meta-reflection on irony identifies a villain in these texts, the reader is left in no doubt. Digital technologies stand accused of perpetuating and aggravating the "crisis of irony," which has virtual and "real" world consequences that extend far beyond the term's semantic decay. Driven by a consistent anxiousness about these consequences, an explicitness directed at irony as theme is also an attempt to mediate and control irony.

A tenacious, digitalised crisis: from postmodernity into post-postmodernity

Whilst postmodernity as established cultural dominant continued to wane, Foster Wallace crystallised an entrenched frustration with blinkered commitment to literary postmodernism, and with irony as its dominant rhetorical mode. In *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*, he asserts that the "reason why your pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down. … All U.S. irony is based on an implicit 'I don't really mean what I say'" (184). This characterisation marks a significant shift from Socratic modes of irony, which had an ethical emphasis on bringing interlocuters to knowledge they did not have previously. Wallace places blame on irony's emergence as both "pervasive" and "cultural" on the television, the villain of his own meta-reflection on irony, viewed as having become the preeminent technological medium of late capitalist market forces. He argues that the postmodernist writers that previously used irony to expose the hypocrisies and absurdities of late capitalist postmodernity, in particular those that find expression through the television, found that same irony blunted. It had become cannibalised by the market forces that also gather in and through the television. Irony becomes a commercialised but "mesmerising … aesthetic mode" (Jameson 21) that seduces consumers through a self-conscious playfulness.

In view of this, Wallace asks writers to reject the "weary irony" (157), they falsely believe will continue to inoculate their novel-writing against the spectacular allure of television, and

instead to become "anti-rebels," who risk "the yawn" (192) and accusations of banality in the long shadow of postmodernism. Wallace's call to reinstate earnestness in the relationship between writer and reader, laid the groundwork for the emergence of New Sincerity. Foremost among scholars of this movement, Adam Kelly has argued that New Sincerity prioritised "a sturdy affirmation of nonironic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words, as a post-postmodern embrace of the 'single-entendre principles' invoked by Wallace" (198). Subsequently, the September 11 attacks accelerated the ascendancy of New Sincerity and, by extension, appeared to seal the fate of postmodern irony as its cultural rival. The writer Roger Rosenblatt, in line with multiple other political commentators, asserted in the days after the attacks that "[o]ne good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony." Conservative voices such as Rosenblatt saw the "vain stupidity" of irony as an expression of ongoing and trenchant blinkeredness in the body politic. Overcoming irony would facilitate an unequivocal recognition of the "real" (Rosenblatt) threats to America, bolstering in turn the so-called War on Terror. For many during the period of national soul-searching that followed the attacks, it thus felt all the more necessary to contend that irony, as mode of cultural critique, could be wished away.

Yet the early twenty-first century did not present the possibility, for the writers of New Sincerity or political figures on the right, to attend irony's proverbial wake. New Sincerity's attempt, as encapsulated by Jonathan Lethem's protagonist Chase Insteadman in *Chronic City* (2009), to "forge a language so direct, so irony-immune" (253) failed to suffuse the wider cultural landscape. Instead, the "age of irony" morphed seamlessly into what Michael Dango and others have termed, in the absence of a settled definition for a post-postmodernity, the "crisis era." The inability to ground a stable cultural dominant that succeeds, and adequately breaks from, postmodernity continues to be intimately bound up with the slipperiness of irony itself. In a contemporary culture often said to be defined by crisis, a "world in which a sense

of crisis has become permanent, chronic, and ordinary" (Dango 17), an ongoing "crisis of irony" figures as reciprocal. Irony's crisis, or even "pandemic" (James 87) is, on the one hand, subordinate to the periodizing sense of crisis. On the other hand, the "crisis of irony" persists as a paradigmatic metonym for the pervasive atmosphere of crisis, pushing it into a destabilising perpetuity. Crucially, the internet emerges as paradigmatic technological catalyst for crises generalised and particular, as well as their mutual dependency. Web 2.0 is seen to facilitate not only the over- and misuse of irony, but also its tenacity.

Lockwood allegorises a "crisis of irony" that is perpetuated and aggravated by the internet in *No One Is Talking About This*. Within the novel, online communities trace localised, condensed versions of irony's recent history. This history appears, as a result, to tend ineluctably towards the cyclical, echoing temporally the referential circularity of which irony often stands accused. The narrator understands the internet as a constellation of "subcultures," which, despite facilitating discussion on specific and seemingly everyday topics such as the fungal condition known as "candida overgrowth" (27), each have their own "language" (28). Of this language, the protagonist laments that "what began as the most snappable and elastic verbal play soon emerged in jargon, and then in doctrine, and then in dogma" (28). If, towards the end of the twentieth century, irony ceases to be an unencumbered rhetorical tool and instead is co-opted in the service of hegemonic control, the liberatory potential of ironic wordplay on the "candida overgrowth" forum is likewise gradually and then rapidly foreclosed.

Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* as a novel consisting entirely of Slack messages is, in many ways, itself a literary experiment with the kind of discursive forum online Lockwood describes. The company's Slack channels serve both as the novel's cyberspatial setting and provide its discursive bounds: the reader is invited to track the development of particular discourses between and through the employees of a marketing firm. Running jokes, in-jokes, and extravagant "bit[s]" are seen to circulate and develop discursively through instant messages

between colleagues. In a notable example, Kasulke dramatises the cyclical devolving of language online described by Lockwood's narrator. Two junior employees, Tripp and Beverly, engage in their own meta-commentary on a fictional "slack-only emoji" (66) rendered textually in the novel as ":dusty-stick:" (65) and signifying general disapproval. In the course of the romantically-charged messaging between the two colleagues, the use of ":dusty-stick:" passes through the playful, the jargonistic, the doctrinal and the dogmatic.

In case of both this emoji and the "candida overgrowth" forum (ostensibly providing support and advice to those with the condition), the trajectory dramatised telescopes, in hypercharged form, the history of irony through the late twentieth century as catalogued by Foster Wallace in particular. Irony is picked up as a tool of the budding postmodernist, undergirding formal, humorous and critical investigations of the intersections between language and power. Where Tripp describes his seniors as "high priests" of office-speak, Lockwood's narrator describes the appearance of "wizard of charisma" on the candida overgrowth board who "spurred other members to greater and greater heights of rhetoric and answerback and improvisation" (28) and thus bear comparison to Konstantinou's figure of the ironist "who simultaneously adopts a disposition toward taste and toward understanding," which they use to affirm their "status as part of an elect minority, a master of the cultural or symbolic field" (*Cool Characters* 31). Such figures have adequate discursive agency to instrumentalise irony and thus form part of a privileged in-group. However, as the discursive practices of this "elect minority" are exposed to the homogenising forces of this symbolic field, utilised by ever more "members," irony increasingly loses its exclusive critical edge and begins to resemble a form of jargon. When Beverly, new to the company, asks Tripp about the meaning and provenance of ":dusty-stick:" he replies that "someone here must've started using doing it and now we all use it the same way" (66). He thus provides an allegory of how the use of irony becomes homogenised and, in the process, ahistorical. Of course, for Foster Wallace

the process by which irony becomes "weary" is also driven by commercial interests: "elastic verbal play" provided by irony is co-opted by the strategic language, or jargon, of product advertising. As employees of a marketing firm, Tripp and Beverly provide a meta-commentary on this too: Tripp asserts that the "language of employment is cult-y" (67), identifying a doctrinal adherence to "the stuff we supposedly devote ourselves too, like 'innovation' or 'influence' or 'engagement'" (67). These buzzwords of twenty-first century immaterial labour serve to create cult-like in-groups in the office, even if they are used increasingly ambivalently.

The eventual emergence of discursive "doctrine" on the "candida overgrowth board" would corroborate Colebrook's assertion that irony began to suffuse "life and language" (18) more broadly in the late twentieth century. Following this, although Socratic irony was deployed to prompt his Solipsist opponents "to think for themselves" so that they would be "awakened from their dogmatism" (Colebrook 37), in these digital contexts irony itself becomes "dogma." In other words, it progresses seamlessly from "new vernacular," impressing fellow forum users or Slack interlocuters, to a form of "universal language" (Lockwood 28). In the historical narrative that this mirrors, irony arrives at the threshold of the twenty-first century as at a point of such forceful ubiquity that Foster Wallace would go as far as to call "irony and ridicule … agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (171). As if a demonstration of such stasis, in *Several People Are Typing* the online communication that underpinned Tripp and Beverly's romantic connection devolves into repeated use of the ":dusty-stick:" emoji alone. The emoji undergoes an accelerated hypertrophy of its own: as Beverly attempts to end the relationship with Tripp he appears able only to type variations of ":dus: :sty-sti: / :c: / :k:" (227). Anonymous posting and instant messaging drive repeated cycles of irony-inflected discourses from verbal play to jargon, and then from doctrine to dogma. For Lockwood in particular, irony is thus seen to trouble the stability of language itself. Everyday language becomes the raw material of everyday irony, steadily undergoing the same semantic

decay as irony itself. The discursive pressures exerted both on and by irony thus register an ordinariness, only fitting in an era of crisis that registers the same.

Irony, sincerity, and Web 2.0

The "crisis of irony," predicated at once on irony's semantic hypertrophy and its tending towards dogma, poses significant challenges for the contemporary subject as they navigate online and offline worlds. In *Fake Accounts*, Oyler's narrator, often glued to Twitter, emphasises that irony and its antagonists, whether sincerity, the earnestness, or authenticity, are the paradigmatic discursive vectors through which she navigates contemporary social media. She writes, "I responded earnestly to a funny woman's earnest request for book recommendations. I mocked a conservative commentator's mixed metaphor. I found it hard to believe so many people felt as cynical and blasé about North Korean nuclear missile tests as their jokes … suggested" (215). Here rhetorical ambiguities merely incite further such ambiguities. These, in turn, animate the possibility of a "verbal play" bound up in the allures of Web 2.0, not just by leveraging irony but by exploiting the confusion between irony and sincerity.

In response, the novels dramatise the internet troubling the ability to easily differentiate between sincerity and irony, to be recognised as sincere oneself, and to be recognised as ironic. That irony and sincerity often prove difficult to tell apart should not be regarded as a twenty-first century phenomenon. When Oyler's narrator references a famed Twitter user "who'd written a very long thread of tweets about Russian collusion in the presidential election that went viral through who knows what proportion of earnest belief and contemptuous irony" (155), she echoes George Eliot's narrator in *Daniel Deronda*, who tells the reader that the "irony" of Gwendolen's "speech was of the doubtful sort that has some genuine belief mixed up with it" (79). Such intermingling fosters a sense of doubt within the sensibilities of the late

Victorian novel as it does in those of the contemporary American novel: should the irony be seen as subordinate to the "genuine belief" or vice versa? And how should a doubting interlocuter best respond? Adam Kelly, too, in his demarcation of the territory of New Sincerity asserts that "[a]mong the things theory has taught contemporary writers is that sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation" (201). Coming to terms with these inevitabilities, even within the context of New Sincerity's attempted renunciation of postmodern irony, also draws the ambiguity of irony together with the ambiguity of all language, whether spoken or written, online or offline. Colebrook writes that irony "cannot always be decided … in any collection of competing voices it is always possible that the underlying or unifying intention is undecidable" (Colebrook, 12). Throughout its history as a rhetorical device, irony might therefore merely give a name to what was *already* true of all language.

However, that this undecidability is nonetheless hypercharged by the contemporary internet is clearly at stake in the novels of this study. If, as Young asserts, "language's constitutive indeterminacy … finds a properly technological support in contemporary digital media platforms," the so-called "internet novel" emerges into and through the resultant "transformed conditions for humor, politics, and authorship." As well as a fundamentally uneasy, but often markedly ambivalent, relationship with its historical present, these novels explore the impact of such radical indeterminacy on the discursive and formal practices of Web 2.0. A paradigmatic example sees Oyler's narrator access the Instagram account of her boyfriend to find it replete with conspiracy-related material. Subsequently, she must face up to her inability to securely verify the intention behind the wide-ranging posting that suggests links between Barack Obama, 9/11 and flagrant antisemitism. She scrolls through,

"doctored photos and lengthy captions that hinged on one thing being not quite what

it appeared but in fact a link in a chain of involvement of larger and larger entities,

all the way to the very top. The formula seemed too stupid to be genuine, and indeed

I believed it was, so I kept close-reading for clues, fixating on some misused word

or strange reference" (94).

In seeking to establish how "genuine" the discursive utterances of the account might be, the narrator confronts the "interrelation between form and technology," which Young argues erodes a necessary "vantage point." The absence of such a vantage point, more readily attainable in forms of analogue media such as the novel, strips internet users with the possibility of "adjudicating between satire and sincerity" (Young). Notably, the narrator's subsequent approach articulates the critical moves of high postmodernism, as supported by a leveraging of irony. As in a novel such as Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, a world is mediated in which nothing is "quite what it appeared" and gradually appears structured hierarchically by an ideologically suspect system, or "chain of involvement." Where, however, irony previously would have punctuated illusion and exposed such a system, in *Fake Accounts* the ambiguity between the ironic and the "genuine" troubles the very possibility of reading critically, of a historically situated "close-reading." Mediated through the semi-anonymity of the social media account, even that of a loved one, the playful and the harmful, the parodic and the paranoid prove impossible to disentangle. In this way, the conspiracy Instagram account both refers to and troubles the titular account of Oyler's novel: is this a fake account or simply, but less straightforwardly, an ironic account? How would the two be reliably differentiated?

Ultimately, though, attempting to decipher whether an online utterance is ironic or sincere may be a red herring. If internet users seek to categorise a social media account or one-off Tweet as one or the other, fixating on a possible "strange reference" or productively pursuing a hermeneutics of suspicion in the vein of Paul Ricoeur appears doomed to fail. Online speech

radically destabilises such approaches because it maintains the potential to be *both*. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner investigate Young's "indeterminacy" as it appears online through the topos of ambivalence. In their words, an utterance is ambivalent if it is "[s]imultaeously antagonist and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed … too unwieldly, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialised as *this* as opposed to *that*" (10). Such radical, multivalent simultaneity emerges in the opening lines of *No One Is Talking About This*, when Lockwood's narrator tells the reader that "[i]nside" the portal (the novel's euphemistic term for the internet) "it was tropical and snowing" (3). Lockwood provides an immediate sense of polarisation that, in the neutral tone with which the "the blizzard of everything" (3) is described, registers affectively as ambivalent. Moreover, the refrain throughout that novel that the narrator or others are doing or saying things "to be funny" – whether ordering "the worst thing on the menu on purpose" (26) or "exhaling gently through his nostrils" – reinscribes this ambivalence into the everyday actions of those living mostly on the "portal." As with Young's exploration of the online justification "for the lulz," such caveats encode the oscillation between antagonism and supposedly harmless humour that Phillips and Milner name as ambivalence.

However, the meta-commentary on irony presented by these novels also offers a critique of such ambivalence. Lockwood and Castro's novels in particular land a politically charged critique of ambivalence's co-opting by the far-right, in a way that allows irony to become what Young calls an "alibi for hate speech." Castro's narrator criticises the fictionalised figure of Jordan Castro in the novel (itself presumably an ironic premise) who explains away the manifest offensiveness of his pronouncements online through "supposed hidden meanings in some of the sentences" (112). The potential for irony alone is instrumentalised to redeem what, on the surface, appears to be discriminatory language. In the same vein, Lockwood's narrator tracks a loss of innocence in online discourse, asserting that her generation "had spent most of

its time online learning to code so that it could add crude butterfly animations to the backgrounds of its weblogs," whereas the succeeding generation "had spent most of its time online making incredibly bigoted jokes in order to laugh at the idiots who were stupid enough to think they meant it" (51). Irony appears initially as a form of covert signalling designed to distinguish an in-group that "knows" from the rest that do not. But where at first an ostensibly stable form of irony is deployed for humorous intents alone, the narrator then qualifies, [e]xcept after a while they did mean it, and then somehow at the end of it they were Nazis," before asking, "[w]as this always how it happened?" (51) This historical situating of irony as at the hands of a younger generation of internet users suggests clear limits, and dangers, to its use as a rhetorical tool. Lockwood extends the sense of continual discursive appropriation demonstrated via the "candida overgrowth board" to emphasise the latent potential for fascistic dogmatism. Such a potential centres the risk that the openness and multiplicity invested in postmodern irony collapses into the closed- and single-mindedness of far-right politics. Although in more veiled terms, Oyler's narrator nods to this same risk when she asserts that "[a]t some point you have to admit that doing things ironically can have very straightforward consequences" (182). In all three cases, the novelists are compelled to directly critique the significant political pitfalls of irony online.

Take me seriously today, tomorrow let me be ironic

The contemporary ubiquity of irony – as well as its possible status as dogma – is seen posing problems for individuals both in expressing themselves and in interpreting the expression of others. The selected novels dramatise these challenges, in particular when protagonists seek to be understood as either urgently sincere or as subversively ironic. The principal conceit of *Several People Are Typing*, the surprising uploading of the protagonist Gerald's consciousness into his company's Slack channels, presents Gerald with the immediate existential problem of the separation of his mind and body between the virtual and material

worlds, but also with secondary social problem of being taken seriously in order to seek genuine help. As he attempts to explain to his colleagues via Slack messages what has transpired, he has to repeatedly state that his narration is "not a bit," an "elaborate inside joke" (27), nor even a "power move" (27). He is not, however, believed: on each occasion others assume he is being ironic and are, as a consequence, wary of expressing sincere concern themselves. Further, Gerald's colleague Pradeep explains his disbelief through as a fear of exclusion via irony: "I just don't want to be left out of the joke! / I hate missing out on office jokes" (25). This emphasises that the divisions engineered by irony in the "cultural or symbolic field" (Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* 30) severely problematises effective communication between perceived in- and out-groups. Gerald cannot be taken seriously by his colleagues as long as his bizarre account brings with it the threat of being merely a joke.

Although the contemporary internet may be seen to encourage a hypercharged sincerity as well as a hypercharged irony, this accentuated sincerity is itself energised or haunted by the inevitable possibility it might be misread as irony. In *Fake Accounts*, Oyler's narrator professes that "FEELINGS were popular at the time" and that "expressing them was seen as a kind of feminist statement" (89). With a thinly disguised tone of "weary irony" from which Foster Wallace sort to dissuade writers, she claims that "as a result people were constantly declaring (on social media) the intensity of their emotions: about celebrities, about television, about heavy-handed alluded-to romantic turmoil, about pizza, about cute animals" (89). The narrator gives the reader a clear sense of her own disparaging position towards such feelings: the parenthetical inclusion of "social media" serves to undermine the sincerity of the feelings by mere association, as does the litany of popular affective foils. Yet, the narrator follows with a more direct, explicit critique of the feelings in question: "The seriousness of the object of the feelings was usually inversely proportional to the strength with which they were announced" (89). This posits a hypertrophy, too, of sincerity: these ostensibly genuine feelings become,

paradoxically, less reflective of a subject's state of mind the more fervour with which they are deployed. That, from a stylistic point of view, the narrator pastiches the Web 2.0 tendencies towards capitalisation – "FEELINGS" – and multiple exclamation marks, reinforces this hypertrophy. Oyler's narrator reports of her boyfriend, "[s]o I just said I missed him already!!! with the multiple exclamation marks I tended to use to convey a sheepish sincerity" (67) and, in *Several People Are Talking* too, Lydia's messages are consistently rounded off with multiple exclamation marks – "omg feel better!!" (18). This satirises what McCulloch terms the "quasi-obligatory nature of the sincerity exclamation point" (124). Punctuation becomes a site of continuous tension between attempts to signal sincerity and attempts to ape this sincerity ironically. Such citational practices thus track the loss of force of "hyperbolic punctuation," which Gretchen McCulloch has argued "became ironic through continued use" (125). In this way, both authors explore a hollowing out of discursive sincerity, increasingly encroached on by the potential for irony.

Indeed, the discursive consequences of the internet and those of the irony that circulates through it become entangled to the point that the two terms often appear synonymous. In *No One Is Talking About This,* the brother of Lockwood's narrator has a friend that suffers from "terrible internet poisoning" (76) and makes abrasive, irony-charged jokes to and about his own family members. The narrator reports that "he just gazed far off into the distance and said, I don't know how to act. *I've been this way so long. I don't know how to be anymore*" (76). Irony's supposed dogmatism takes effect through an entrenched orientation to other social media users: Lockwood satirises an inability to behave, even in a domestic context, in a way that is not performatively "for the lulz." She reformulates the mostly earnest title of Sheila Heti's novel *How Should A Person Be* (2012), often associated with New Sincerity, and deploys italics to signal that even articulating a disenchantment with irony must necessarily remain bound up with the continued potential for that same irony.

Finally, as much as these novels explore the long shadow cast across sincerity by the spectre of irony, they also dramatise the internet making it similarly difficult to be safely recognised as ironic. Of a text to her boyfriend, Oyler's narrator asserts, "I would have meant it to be ironic but I couldn't trust Felix to interpret it the way I meant it, and if he didn't get the joke he would assume I was angry, which I was I think" (255). Such tortured consideration of one's own voice and its interpretation by others reinforces irony's status as engendering, to borrow McCulloch's term, a "linguistic trust fall" that necessitates "high risks" should a speaker be taken to be earnest. As ever, the internet hypercharges these risks and does so, primarily, through the unpredictable functioning of context collapse. Context collapse names the disappearance of stable interpretative conditions, so that as material circulates through and between ostensibly distinct contexts, readers, listeners, or viewers are increasingly unequipped to gauge, for example, authorial intention. Although the term was first applied to the multiple audiences of television and radio programming, the social media landscape of Web 2.0 redoubles the constitutive risks of not knowing who in and beyond an immediate network sees publicised content, not knowing which "self" other users are seeing, private or public, personal or professional (Phillips and Milner 83). The selected "internet novels," as sites of de- and recontextualisation of online utterances, find themselves intimately bound up with the troubling and "ever-present potential for" context collapse. However, it does so not without further underscoring such the presence of a meta-reflective irony. Lockwood's narrator proclaims, "[c]ontext collapse! That sounded pretty bad, didn't it. And also like the thing that was happening to the honeybees?" (54). Here the comparison with bees as metonym for ecological meltdown positions context-collapse as a serious social malaise, but the muted use of hyperbolic punctuation and the ironic downplaying of "pretty bad" also cues the reader to the sense that, as with the more material threat of climate collapse, warnings of abstracted danger – "the thing that was happening" – will inevitably be roundly ignored.

Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* provides, perhaps more earnestly, an extended exploration of context-collapse within its own diegesis. Adeline, comic book artist and protagonist of the novel, is secretly recorded during a talk at a school. Following this, the video is edited to emphasise Adeline's flippancy, and then circulates widely on Twitter provoking an immediate backlash against perceived misogyny. As well as grounding a commentary on contemporary cancel culture as it functions through the internet, Adeline's experience is used to demonstrate that an initial intent towards humour, or at least the absence of straightforward sincerity, does not travel with the facsimiles of her off-the-cuff rant. Adeline thus fall foul to what Milner and Phillips call the "ambivalent paradox" insofar as digital media "allow individuals to control, in unprecedented ways, how they play with their own identities" (73) – and the blurring between irony and sincerity becomes an integral part of this – but they also "*strip* individuals of control, also in precedented ways: they allow users to play with the identities of others – essentially weaponizing someone else's mask" (73). Adeline finds her identity repeatedly misconstrued by others, indeed Kobek asks the reader to draw links with the functioning of context collapse here and in the novel's subplot in which the character Ellen Flitcraft becomes the victim of an act of revenge porn that eventually puts an end to her dream of pursuing a career in film. In view of these personal risks, Lockwood's repeated "to be funny" figures as much a signalling of ambivalence in the mould of Konstantinou's master ironists, his "cool characters," than as a pre-emptive defence mechanism in case of any offence is caused. That these novels risk extrapolating the consequences of context collapse by integrating online discursive forms into their textual fabric will be a central focus of Chapter 2.

Meta-reflections on irony: safely at a distance?

In sum, the meta-reflective positions taken toward irony in the novels of this study figure, to some extent, as restatements of Wallace's arguments in *E Unibus Pluram* in the fiction of

the digital age. They self-consciously offer their own critical insights, extending the theories of irony and its crisis into the era of Web 2.0. The cumulative message of these insights is clear: the internet has hypercharged an irony already seen to be in crisis, fostering heightened levels of ambiguity and ambivalence via processes such as context collapse, which can have material and damaging consequences for the smoothing-functioning of everyday communication.

But if irony has become yet more ubiquitous, hypercharged by the internet, and moved deeper into crisis, how can these writers engage with the contemporary internet and write through and beyond irony? To what degree can irony be held at arm's length as theme? To what extent does it seep into the styles of these novels? If the novelists of this study are clear-eyed, and indeed critical, of the perils inherent to expressions of irony and sincerity online, to what extent do their novels perform and mitigate these perils on the level of the sentence? These are the questions that will animate Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 – The 'crisis of irony' and reparative styles

"The internet" offers "an immense stock of already formed statements in every language."

– Maël Renouard, *Fragments of an Infinite Memory: My Life With The Internet*

"It was easier to think of technology as something that was happening to me rather than acknowledge I was doing something with it."

– Lauren Oyler, *Fake Accounts*

In *No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood's narrator anxiously asks, "[w]hy were we all writing like this now?" (63) The demonstrative "this," in its lack of clear referent, comes to stand capaciously for the stylistic conventions of Lockwood's novel in its entirety, but perhaps particularly its Twitter feed-like fragmentation. The question also echoes Virginia Woolf's more exasperated denunciation of literary realism in her 1919 essay "Modern Fiction": "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (160). In the era of Web 2.0, Lockwood's narrator probes whether writing was now like "this" because "a new kind of connection had to be made," but seems to prefer the "more frightening" answer that "it was the way the portal wrote now" (63). In other words, Woolf's disbelief that art must, reductively, imitate life, becomes Lockwood's unease that contemporary art must imitate technology.

The same line of inquiry is taken up, too, in Lockwood's essay "How Do We Write Now," in which she grapples with the day-to-day functioning of a writer in an age of hyper-connection, social media distraction, and meme-based absurdity. This troubled rumination marks the entrance, at once personal and collective, into what Renouard terms "a dangerous territory for writing, for style": the thematising of the contemporary internet explored in Chapter 1, which lay on the other side of a historical "threshold we refused to cross (75) in the early twenty-first

century. "How" and "the way" we write in the era of Web 2.0, specifically the stylistic conventions of the selected novels, will underpin this chapter. If, as outlined in Chapter 1, textual expression on the internet consistently maintains the potential for being read as ironic, the "way the portal wrote" might be seen to actualise "language's constitutive indeterminacy" (Young) within the bounds of the novel. Style, often as characterised by citation or imitation, thus becomes the vessel through which irony, after its renunciation by New Sincerity, re-enters the contemporary American literary novel at the level of the sentence. It also represents the site at which subsequent attempts to repair a contagious "crisis of irony" brought about by this re-entrance are undermined by their own self-conscious irony.

The affordances of style

Michael Dango's *Crisis Style: The Aesthetics of Repair* positions style as the site which, across all varieties of cultural production, gives expression to paradigmatic affective responses to a post-postmodern era of "generalized and permanent crisis" (7). In the novels of this study, style's imbrication with irony and its own crisis inflects the shape and scope of such responses, whilst troubling the reparative modes advanced by Dango under which these responses can be classified. He proposes "style, rather than form, as a more robust register of affective disturbance in the historical present" (8), writing that "in a world that moves too quickly to be captured, style performs actions before they become articulable as content" (9). In this way, style condenses and projects immediate, affective reactions to the external world prior to a subsequent more deliberative consideration. As style thereby becomes coextensive with Dango's conception of "action," its categories privilege the "how" over the "what" of expression without implying a strict distinction between the two. Where Chapter 1 investigated what is *articulated* directly about irony, Chapter 2 considers how what is *done* stylistically can be read as and through irony.

In the context of affective responses to crisis, style also provides a way of naming the porous boundary zone between form and content. Although I take my cue here principally from Dango, who defines style as the "*coordination*" (8) of form and content, the emphasis on such porousness can be traced back to the descriptive tenets of New Criticism. In his essay "The Heresy of Paraphrase," Cleanth Brooks advocates against the artificial "dualism" of form and content, from which "most of the common heresies about poetry derive" (194). Instead, he argues for the recognition of an "intimate," non-hierarchical relationship between "message" and the formal "instruments" (197) that render it, between the "intellectual and non-intellectual" (204) aspects of a poem. Such a relationship becomes more intimate in the era of Web 2.0, both reinforced and complicated by the contemporary ascendancy of the catch-all term "content."[6] The "intellectual" language of a Wikipedia page is closely entangled with the formal conventions of such pages and of the platform itself. Equally, the discursive substance of differing categories of meme proves difficult to disengage from their status as imitative forms. This difficulty is demonstrated by the many digital versions of the "historical" war poster meme "Keep Calm and Carry On" (Hatherley). As internet users or readers search in vain for confirmation of its presence, let alone the locus of its "source," irony exacerbates the entanglement of form and content. The linguistic formulation of a Tweet can be read as ironic, but irony can also be said to indiscriminately suffuse the same Tweet in its entirety. Lockwood's own well-known Tweet to *The Paris Review*, which read simply ".@parisreview So is Paris any good or not," exemplifies this imbrication of ironic form and ironic content. A line in an article could contain a specific ironic utterance, but the act of writing and circulating the same article could also be driven by an ironic playfulness or politically motivated negation

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[6] Tess McNulty has traced the shifting connotation of the term content, from "anything conveyed by a medium or form" to the more pejorative "entertainment — typically digital — that is a mere byproduct or afterthought, designed to do little more than facilitate some profit-driven process, like advertising or data collection."

via irony. As the potential for irony online proves eminently mobile, so too does the boundary between form and content.

Despite their status as meta-reflections on irony explored in Chapter 1, the novels of this study thus prove unable to hold irony at arm's length, to sequester irony *as theme* so its crisis can be safely diagnosed and reflected upon. Through the integration of the discursive and formal practices of Web 2.0, style performs a "crisis of irony" within the textual fabric of these novels. Consequently, I will argue that style registers the sometimes disturbing "too-closeness" (8), to borrow Lauren Berlant's term, of irony in the present moment, as well as the efforts by the selected authors to nonetheless regulate its functioning. Although these regulatory endeavours offer productive categorisation within Michael Dango's four reparative styles "trending in U.S. culture in the past generation" (11) – detox, binge, filter and ghost – the all-pervasiveness of irony troubles these aesthetic modes as strategic attempts at repair. I also contend that their very deployment cannot be located safely "beyond" irony and, indeed, invites an ironic reading itself.

If you invite the internet into the novel, you must also invite irony

Before considering how the novels of this study deploy versions of Dango's four "strategies of repair" (7), it should be established why such reparative styles are deemed necessary in the first place; how, in other words, do discursive practices that circulate online enter the novel and, by extension, ground a "crisis of irony" at the level of the sentence? Taking three examples of extended styles, distinct yet all in some way imitative, Lockwood and Castro engage in forms of citational practice, where Oyler's *Fake Accounts* functions through parody.

Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* is interspersed with utterances the reader is encouraged to recognise as drawn from the language of the contemporary internet, whether that of the "portal" within the novel's diegesis or that of the reader's own experience of Web 2.0.

Such utterances become recontextualised within the novel and are often, though not always, marked via a range of stylistic cues, some of which have been discussed previously: changes in font or punctuation, capitalisation, line breaks, quotation marks. As in the case of the ostensible citation "*Report: Man's rectum fell out after he played phone games on the toilet for 30 minutes*" (89), the use of italics is leveraged with particular frequency in suggesting a status as citation. Lockwood builds on a postmodernist tradition of integrating technologised language into novel-writing, whether this language is directly recognizable from a contemporary moment outside of the bounds of the novel – such as the restaging of the Trump idiom "Sad!" (88) – or idiosyncratic to the novel itself – such as the phrase "*Europe.Is.A.Fag*" produced apparently by the portal itself as "unmeaning machine" (126). In both cases, Lockwood plays with sense of familiarity, whether rooted in an exaggeration of coarse, zany "content" or in the stylistic cues themselves. In their brevity, absurdity and interruptive force, Lockwood's internet-derived citations echo Don DeLillo's articulate television. In *White Noise*, the daily life of the Gladney family is punctuated by statements drawn from twenty-four-hour cable television, which register as nonsensical having been decontextualised. For instance, "[t]he TV said: 'And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio'" (61). As in DeLillo's oeuvre,[7] the intrusion of technologised discourse into the literary novel is intended to mirror, and thus critique, the intrusion of this same discourse into analogue, interpersonal communication in the world outside the novel. For example, Lockwood's narrator imagines that "the next time she saw her father, he would with utter seriousness … pronounce the words *Europe.Is.A.Fag*" (103). If the novel continues to imitate technology, so too does everyday speech.

Further, Lockwood's citations also negotiate preserved traces of irony from their "original" technological mediation along with additional ironic charge from their subsequent

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[7] An articulate television also frequently interrupts the narration in *Libra*.

mediation in the discursive field of *No One Is Talking About This*. The reader learns that that novel's protagonist rose to prominence in the portal via a viral social media post that read simply, "[*c*]*an a dog be twins?*" (13). This post maintains a tone of sardonic ambivalence whilst also inviting a reflexive self-deprecation via the biographical correspondence with the author's own history of viral Tweeting (MacDonald). In this way, the reader must parse the ironic consequences of both a specific form of context collapse, in which the "source" of these utterances cannot be confirmed, and a disquieting doubling up of context between that of the fictionalised internet and that of the immediate novel. Where the formalism of the New Critics was premised on the status of texts as self-contained and of irony therefore as lying "in the tensions of language" not in "referring to the world and its conflicts" (Colebrook 19), Lockwood and others explicitly open up the novel to intertextual ironies. As a result, if Foster Wallace lamented the co-opting of novelistic irony by mass media, here layers of irony are constructed by co-opting it *back* from mass, digital media.

The integration of the discourse of Web 2.0 is dramatised, in both Lockwood and Castro's novels albeit with different results, through scenes of the habitual experience of scrolling social media. Such narrative situations, inevitably a trope of the not-quite-genre of the "internet novel," pose representational challenges germane to a consideration of style and irony. The authors must transpose a continuum of text and images into a solely textual description. In the process, they might also seek to balance the affective continuities and discontinuities inherent to the experience of scrolling: reperforming both the aesthetic and political incongruities between apparently sequential utterances, as well as the smoothing over of these incongruities by the banal mechanics of the endless feed (Dinnen). Scrolling thus becomes an exemplary instance of the "too-closeness" (Berlant 8) that might foreclose the possibility of a distanced "meta-commentary" on irony and instead see irony permeate the textual representation of interactions with social media.

In this context, differences between Lockwood and Castro emerge. In Castro's *The Novelist* the narrator's scrolling is situated and embodied firmly in the spatial and temporal limits of the diegesis, and his citational practice appears to resemble a less mediated version of Lockwood's. Castro's narrator describes:

> Now, on Twitter's homepage, I scrolled: 'everyone wearing fanny packs this year would have ridiculed anyone wearing a fanny pack five years ago – you are all horrible'; a picture of a clothed chest with an 'I Voted sticker on it; 'Dance for joy! Coffee mate seasonal flavours are back!' with a GIF of a cartoon coffee cup dancing next to a giant Coffee mate creamer bottle; a blurb for a forthcoming novel; 'I can't believe food costs money'; 'Ayyy is just short for amen.'; 'I've seen the word 'neckbeard' used to refer to antithetical things.'
>
> I grinned (10)

This list of transcribed Tweets seeks to reinscribe proximity to the everyday experience of scrolling on the page of the novel. Castro foregrounds a cacophonous confrontation with literary self-promotion, with playful social commentary that toggles between the micro-prosaic and macro-political whilst pervaded by an ironic ambivalence, as well as confrontation with commercial sloganeering that becomes entangled with this same ambivalence. The intrusion of late capitalist interests into the feed thus extends the "re-presenting" of "the very cynical postmodern aesthetic" (173) which Foster Wallace saw in television advertising of the 1990s. Here each tweet is contained and separated from those before and after as a discrete quotation. Their coexistence is flattened, non-hierarchical, and accompanied by almost no trace of mediation or commentary. In other words, Castro maintains distance from the discursive practices and their associated ironic playfulness: both are kept literally on display between

quotation marks. He thus seeks to resist the incorporation of these easily identifiable internet-inflected ironies into the style of the novel's wider prose.

By contrast, though, Lockwood integrates the experience of the extended scroll in a way that blurs easy distinction between "original" material and mediated reformulation, which, in turn, allows irony to permeate the novel more covertly. *No One Is Talking About This begins* as follows:

> She opened the portal, and the mind met her more than half-way. Inside, it was tropical and snowing, and the first flake of the blizzard of everything landed on her tongue and melted.
>
> Close-ups of nail art, a pebble from outer space, a tarantula's compound eyes, a storm like canned peaches, Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, a chihuahua perched on a man's erection, a garage door spray-painted with the words STOP! DON'T EMAIL MY WIFE!"
>
> (1)

Here no familiar tech platforms are mentioned by name and the experience of scrolling is abstracted into the cyberspatial world of the "portal," reinscribing the context collapse that facilitates the unregulated circulation of irony online. The "blizzard of everything" recalls DeLillo's analogue "contagion of paper" (38) that falls "out of the sky" (39) onto the baseball stands in the opening scenes of *Underworld*. But Lockwood's own totalizing image of information excess is transposed into the era of a climate-anxious Web 2.0: the oxymoronic "tropical and snowing" could stand for extreme online polarisation, or indeed for the extreme divergences in meaning facilitated by the irony so often associated with that polarisation. In Lockwood's mediation of scrolling, quotation marks fall away and the material of the feed – though here as *in*substantial as melting snow – is shaped through metaphor and simile. Lockwood's narrator oscillates between the figurative, absurd, and the literal, to the extent that

in the representation of the feed, too, the imaginative mind of the author meets the immediate affective experience of her narrator "more than half-way."

Both Castro and Lockwood's novelistic representations of scrolling, by staging an acceptance that "all we can do is quote and dissimulate" (Colebrook 3), thus draw on a literary postmodernist tradition. In his characterisation of postmodern "paraliterature," however, Jameson contends that cultural objects "no longer simply 'quote,' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance" (3). Whereas Castro "simply" quotes like the modernist greats Jameson names, Lockwood performs this incorporation not merely in the substance of her novel but in its style. In this way, *No One Is Talking About This* encodes its own answer to the question posed by its narrator of whether it was "better to resist the new language where it stole, defanged, co-opted, consumed, or […] to text *thanksgiving titties be poppin* to all your friends on the fourth Thursday of November" (70). Lockwood's novel walks a fine line by attempting to achieve both. As seen, the novel "texts" its own italicised absurdities to the reader, whilst also attempting to resist the "new language" by "re-fanging" it with additional metaphorical or ironic affordances and co-opting it back into the "very substance" of the novel.

If social media challenges the scroller to be an "ironist," to know "what he is supposed to find aesthetically disgusting—at different times, the kitschy, the middlebrow, the lowbrow, the pop, hippies" as well as "when a text is winking at him" (Konstantinou *Cool Characters*, 31), *No One Is Talking About This*, unlike *The Novelist*, passes these challenges on to the reader. It does so, paradoxically, by animating a description of the feed that itself shifts between aesthetic modes and itself frequently winks at the reader. Lockwood thus negates the possibility that the novel offers a stable recontextualisation of the discursive practices of Web 2.0. In the first half of the novel in particular, she refuses to occupy a role as author that serves as Young's "vantage point," insofar as it guides the reader to distinguish between the quoted and the "original,"

between the ironic and the sincere. Instead, her style reconstructs the "portal" on the page, allowing internet discourses and their associated ironies to haunt the novel throughout.

In many ways, Oyler's parodic style extends aspects of Lockwood own imitations. Where Castro and Lockwood engage in various forms of citational practice, online discourse enters Oyler's *Fake Accounts* through a first-person narrative voice that parodies the laconic ambivalence of much online discourse and pairs it with a novelistic loquaciousness. In a characteristic example of her long, multi-clause sentences, the narrator asserts, "I felt my high-level search engine excavation skills were knavish and petty; they marked me as a member of the generation that grew up watching reality TV, without respect for fundamental principles of functional society and the human soul" (40). Here Oyler's parody functions through the uncertainty of "felt," the construction of overwrought noun phrases such as "high-level search engine excavation skills," the keen focus in generational differences, and the parroting of the well-worn sentimentality of "human soul" in such close proximity to the low-brow signifier par excellence "reality TV." In the age in which the internet has gained technological hegemony from the television, Oyler's narrator nonetheless resembles the ageing postmodern writers who Foster Wallace accused of continuing to engage in a "weary irony" (157) towards the television, even when such irony had already been cannibalised. By extension, she also resembles Young's contemporary television viewer who figures as jaded yet committed to continuous viewing. If this latter viewer takes "pleasure in being surprised by nothing, cynical about everything, distanced from, but somehow still transfixed by, the never-ending spectacle of televisual simulation" (Young), the narrator takes up a similar position of knowing irony towards her continued attachment to social media. For example, she suggests that "[w]e could pretend something good, *connection*, had come of our turning to technology to deal with boredom" (115). Again, italics cue a punning irony, which here seems to focalise a collective weariness towards the banal allures of Web 2.0.

On the one hand, the parodying of familiar ironic online voices in order to direct critique back at the internet might prove a blunted stylistic technique. Wallace's "weary irony" reappears only to remind readers that the internet, as the successor to the television teleologically, has always already "ingeniously" absorbed, homogenised and re-presented the same cynical aesthetic that once presented "the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative" (173). On the other hand, all of the novels discussed here to differing degrees perform a critique of the internet by harnessing stylistically the inability for users to differentiate between irony and sincerity, which Chapter 1 showed these novels embed thematically. In all cases, irony makes its way into the textual fabric of the novel through an engagement, by turns playful and distanced, with the discursive and formal practices of Web 2.0. Style also, however, becomes the vector through which the novelists subsequently seek to regulate this circulation of irony – or of its potential at least – as well as the vector through which readers are offered possibilities of repair.

Detox, binge, and the "crisis of irony"

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, Michael Dango grounds four reparative modes in an age of perpetual crisis – detox, binge, filter, ghost. Each of these invite application to the stylistic strategies of the selected novels as they respond to the re-emergence of irony in the literary novel. Further, each is drawn from "a hyper-contemporary digital culture" (8): that these novels thematise digital technologies so self-consciously brings Web 2.0 as exemplary site of contemporary crisis into yet sharper definition.

In the context of these novels, style traces the contemporary disturbance induced by the "crisis of irony." In his emphasis on crisis, Dango draws heavily on the lexicon of Laurent Berlant, asserting that the contemporary moment is "organized by threats to intimate worlds" because of "technological acceleration and hollowed-out fantasies of the good life" (17). Here

the same "technological accelerations" precipitate confusion between irony and sincerity that undermines "intimate worlds," as well as hollows out the stability of the language that makes such worlds possible in the first place. In this way, an implicit sense of resignation runs through their deployment: the "crises themselves cannot be fixed – globalization and fragmentation cannot simply be undone" (7). In each case, the styles in question are seen to be reparative only insofar as they provide "a fantasy of reparation … holding patterns or improvisations that allow people personally to displace the crisis for a moment" (7). Detox, binge, ghost and filter might offer temporary respite, but they can only imagine lasting resolution.

Whereas Dango establishes these categories of style as reparative of "a sense of generalized and permanent crisis" (7), I maintain his focus on the reparative but as investigated when directed at the "crisis of irony" outlined in Chapter 1. In the novels of this study, detox, binge, and filter in particular become targeted to "displace" the "crisis of irony,"[8] a crisis both ancillary to a sense of generalised crisis and metonymic of a protracted crisis of periodisation, of a diffuse post-postmodernism that continues to refuse stable characterisation. Having demonstrated how the discursive and formal practices of Web 2.0, enter the novel via imitation and parody, and with them the potential for irony, I now investigate expressions of Dango's aesthetic styles as they map targeted "strategies of repair" (Dango 7) in response to these incursions. Although such expressions reinforce the usefulness of Dango's theoretical terms, they also provide ways of thinking against the limitations of these same terms.

Seen through the lens of Dango's categories, Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* engages in a practice of bingeing irony-inflected discourse, where Castro's style in *The Novelist*, conversely,

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[8] Ghost remains less relevant in the context of this chapter. The novels of this study are replete with instances of real- or virtual-world disappearance – such as the narrator's boyfriend faking his own death in *Fake Accounts* or the abrupt departure of colleagues as Slack-users in *Several People are Typing* – but these register less as *stylistic* attempts to repair a "crisis of irony." The affordances of ghosting as disconnection, as an attempt to disengage from the online world, remains nonetheless highly relevant for the focus on narrative arcs in Chapter 4, in which Konstantinou's fourth "face" of postirony will come to the fore: the "postironic Bildungsroman."

reads as an attempt at a detox from such discourse. That binge and detox respond to a "crisis in accumulation … a world with too much information" (Dango 20), speaks to an intensification, in a contemporary era of content and content overload on Web 2.0, of the proliferation of "information" that was already a concern of literary postmodernism (Johnston). A crisis in the endless build-up of "information" inevitably becomes coupled with the "crisis of accumulation" in interpretations of this information, which, in their own troubling build-up, begin to resemble aspects of a "crisis of irony." In online and offline worlds pervaded by unstable ironies, "too much information" also becomes too many possible interpretations.

Kobek performs an unceasing accumulation of information and interpretations on the level of style, as both a qualitative and a quantitative bingeing. His narrator emphasises that the novel is intended to mimic "the computer network in its irrelevant and jagged presentation of content" and subsequently asserts that "the bad novel that you are reading is about 72,900 words long" (26). In contrast, Castro's leveraging of the "concrete/literal style" that Frank Guan associates with writers of the alt lit movement appears as the reverse.[9] This stylistic mode places descriptive relevance, as much as possible, only on material actions, prefers unqualified nouns over adjectives and adverbs that nod towards a diffuse sense of interiority, and thus seeks to strip away the excesses of language that facilitate an ironic reading. Indeed, in examining the categories of binge and detox as they undergird *I Hate The Internet* and *The Novelist* respectively, productive correspondence emerges with Konstantinou's categories (or "faces") of "postirony" – "Motivated Postmodernism" and "Relational Art" in particular – themselves naming quasi-reparative modes in a range of cultural productions.

Of the novels of this study, Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* is most explicit in proceeding from a narrative premise based on direct and excessive engagement with the discursive and

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[9] Guan describes the prose of Tao Lin as the paradigmatic example of this style. Lin, a figurehead to the alt lit movement, is a friend and mentor to Castro, appearing thinly disguised in *The Novelist* as the character "Li."

formal practices of the internet, and the most committed to the resolute delivery of this premise. If bingeing "disavows a desire for control and, absent institutions to direct what information matters at a given time, the strategy becomes to consume it all, to take it all in, and for the self to become sublimated into the pleasures of dissolution" (Dango 23), then Kobek's explicitly "bad novel" (26) undermines any possibility that the novel itself reinstates the "absent" institution. Instead, the novel draws on the legacy of hypertext fiction to embrace a Wikipedia-influenced style,[10] which thrives off digression, repetition, and excess. When Adeline is filmed during her politically dubious rant, the narrator is, ironically, clear regarding her "real" fallacy:

> Adeline's real error was criticizing both Beyoncé and Rhianna and their fans' relationship to their achievements.
>
> Beyoncé and Rhianna were pop stars.
>
> Pop stars were musical performers whose celebrity exploded to the point where they could be identified by single worlds.
>
> You could say BEYONCÉ or RHIANNA to almost anyone anywhere in the industrialized world and it would conjure a vague neurological image of either Beyoncé or Rhianna.
>
> Their songs were about the same six subjects of all songs by pop stars: love, celebrity, fucking, heartbreak, money, and buying ugly shit. (64)

In a paradigmatic example of a welding of content and form, Kobek here stages the experience not of scrolling, but of moving frenetically between information sources online. He anticipates and satirises a distracted and fragmented readerly attention. Relentless paragraph breaks and an obsessive need to pursue informational threads to their over-explained minutia stage a

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[10] Genre marked by non-linearity and associated with early forms of electronic literature in the 1990s that allowed readers to switch between multiple narrative strands.

"[f]ighting too-muchness with too-muchness" (Dango 3), reflected also in the listed subjects of "all songs by pop stars" that revolve in each case around forms of excess. Kobek's style also begins to resemble Konstantinou's aforementioned postironic "Motivated Postmodernism," which encapsulates "art that redeploys postmodernism not as critique but as a representation of the world as it is" (*Four Faces* 90). This gesture is implicit in Kobek's narrator's assertion that the "only solution" is to write a novel such as the one we read which constructs a highly ambivalent world through and as online "content" (26). In this way, "Motivated Postmodernism" balances the same risks as Dango's binge, which "blurs the division between resisting and merging with the world" (3). In flooding the novel with an "overaccumulation of information," and overwhelming readers with an attendant excess of interpretations, Kobek tests the limits of this blurring and poses the question of whether the "dissolution" of Dango's binge can indeed be pleasurable for contemporary novel-readers.

The Novelist, in marked contrast, encodes an attempted detox from the excess of content and associated ironies. Whereas binge responds to crisis by attempting to forge "new connections within the informational network," "detox repairs this crisis through a localized sense of control in a reduction to basics" (Dango 20). Castro stages this move towards control on the "localized" level of the sentence, channelling a concrete or literal style that locates the "basics" in semantic and syntactical simplicity. Similarly, this strategy reverses the gesture of "Motivated Postmodernism" and instead resembles the postironic mode Konstantinou names as "Relational Art." As with other practitioners of this mode,[11] Castro "turns away from ironic forms typically associated with aesthetic postmodernism" in order to apprehend "an underlying reality that postmodern theories of mediation took to be inaccessible" (*Four Faces* 98). In bare

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[11] It should not come as a surprise that, as in the context of Guan's concrete or literal style, Konstantinou names Tao Lin foremost among the writers that exemplify "Relational Art."

descriptive prose, the protagonist seeks to present the reader with such a reality and with as a little mediation as possible:

> My vision softened as I scrolled; the screen appeared farther away than it was; the tweets became blurry – I considered my novel abstractedly. My novel was a third person, present tense, short-chaptered account of the three days in 2015, during which I was going through severe benzo-diazepane and heroin withdrawal in a house where I'd just signed a lease with my soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend […] I had been working on the novel for five months; I'd started it when I moved here to live with Violet in Maryland, where I could write about my life in Cleveland as something that existed more concretely in the past, and not, as it had felt while I lived there, in one big, hopelessly continuing present. (13)

This passage shifts the narration away from the scroll towards the psychology of the scroller but remains drained of expression and insistent on factual detail throughout, even when the protagonist is recounting significant issues with dependency. Whether thinking happens "abstractedly" or "concretely" both modes are made explicit as such and folded into tone that reads as the continuation of "the waning of affect in postmodern culture" (Jameson 4). In other words, the style is indicative of the difficulty faced in experiencing, classifying, and communicating a familiar system of emotions within a condition of "new depthlessness" (4) that Jameson tracks through late twentieth-century cultural production. Perhaps the deployment of this detoxing style by Castro, "in which physical objects and activities take almost total precedence over thoughts" (Guan), might reveal the literal as the proper antonym – and therefore reparative balm – to the ironic, supplanting any such implicit claim made for sincerity by proponents of New Sincerity. In the near total absence of affective qualifiers, "big, hopelessly continuing" appearing as the only expressive adjectival phrase, any potential for multivalent meaning-making appears negated.

In comparison with the strategies of Kobek and Castro, in *Several People Are Typing* Kasulke deploys a stylistic mode that combines elements of binge and detox. At first gloss, the novel, written entirely as Slack messages, constructs a diegesis mediated entirely through internet discourse. As Kasulke's cast of colleagues procrastinate by continuously joking, gossiping, and flirting with one another, their innumerable instant messages pile up on the virtual cloud and its real-world servers. Gerald undergoes an apparently literal dissolution of the self within this "overaccumulation of information" when his consciousness is uploaded into the Slack channels. In parallel, the Slackbot, as the initially hidden consumer of all the team's cumulative utterances, is focalised as linguistic "binger": saturated with ironised "content" to the extent that it begins to direct nonsensical amalgamations of the team's messages back at them. However, by the same token, a novel with these stylistic conventions, with the complete absence of a narrator, could also be seen as an extended example of Dango's detox. Dango traces how the "hyper-attribution" (96) of speech on digital platforms negates any risk of "distraction of background" (94) as illustrated by the integration of Gchat conversations into the novels of alt lit. In this way, the style of *Several People Are Typing* encourages a detoxifying focus on who is speaking and what they are saying: there is no narrative voice, no uncertainty of perspective, no extraneous description, all of which would allow for contextual cues for irony on the part of the author.

Repairing the "crisis of irony," ironically

Whilst Dango's reparative styles can be reformulated as attempts to repair the "crisis" of irony's re-emergence in the contemporary American novel, such attempts are themselves entangled with irony. Put simply, the deployment of reparative styles is itself marked by the potential for an authorial irony. Consequently, these novels provide a means to push against the boundaries of Dango's theoretical framework, insofar as he does not account for the possibility of an ironic ambivalence pervading the very premise of the strategies he names.

That irony also characterises the reparative modes on display here underscores its status as highly mobile, mirroring how the potential for irony moves seamlessly through and between discursive contexts online. Taken further, irony appears as contagious, tracking ineluctably through these novels from theme, into imitative styles, into subsequent reparative styles, in other words into the "strategies of repair" (Dango 7) themselves. In nodding to the risk of the circular negativity of which irony is so often accused, irony's ubiquity here also highlights how the contemporary American novel prolongs the influence of a literary postmodernism understood as staging the "impossibility of overcoming irony" (Colebrook 164).

Not unlike Kasulke's emphasis on discursive utterance achieved through the stylistic insistence on Slack messages in *Several People Are Typing*, Oyler's narrator in *Fake Accounts* foregrounds the role of "voice" in textual expression online. This term reformulates a stable conception of "style" as a non-hierarchical interweaving of form and content, and creates an opening for potential irony even within attempts to repair its crisis. Newly single and in the process of setting up a dating profile, the narrator asserts "I wanted to express an alluringly evasive personality, and I knew I would have to do it through voice rather than content" (138). In contrast to the "*coordination*" of form and content inherent in Dango's "style," here "content" – the "what" – is gently subordinated to the "how" of expression. She aims to become "a person whose voice determined her thoughts and feelings, whose thoughts and feelings you could only figure out by interpreting her voice … And even then you would be wrong" (138). Here the narrator consciously rejects sincerity as defined by Lionel Trilling, as the outward expression of internal feeling. Instead, she establishes not simply the need for interpretation of her own voice but also that such interpretation might fail. Presumably such a failure comes about because irony points the listener, through the "gap" between manifest and implied meanings, in the "wrong" direction. Irony thus figures as both productively alluring and "evasive" for the speaker, while potentially troubling for the listener. A novel's reflection of

the kind of pre-engineered "voice" deployed online undermines the rhetorical stability of its affective "style." The narrator's position cues us to the possibility that the reparative styles of these novels themselves being ironic: the reader of these novels could well be "wrong" in an assessment of their sincerity. Crucially, this irony becomes possible because Oyler's narrator demonstrates a pained self-reflexivity *in advance* of the deployment of her "voice" during the experience of online dating.

The forethought of Oyler's protagonist here has important consequences for the stability of Dango's theoretical framework when coupled to irony as per the examples of binge and detox set out above. A central aspect of his conception of style as "action" is its status as pre-emptive or intuitive. Dango thus remains heavily indebted, here as well, to Berlant and their own claim that "the present is perceived, first, affectively" (4). In turn, Dango asserts that, style "performs" unarticulated actions in a constantly evolving present and therefore "before people become conscious of their reparative function" (9). How should we understand, then, an ironic performance of these styles themselves? How should a performance that would appear explicitly conscious of and implicitly cynical about any "reparative function" be read? In drawing a distinction between "observing and imitating a style" and "in forming a style with or without knowing it" (10), Dango proceeds with the latter. But this distinction becomes blurred when the selected authors self-consciously redirect a citational or parodic approach to the contemporary internet in a way that is often articulated as such to the reader.

That these novels appear to perceive the present in slower time, and therefore to be capable of ironizing the contemporary internet, is also explained by historical and generic factors. As outlined previously, an important point of departure for this study is that the heralding of the "internet novel" reflects a prior absence of the internet within literary fiction. If, as Alexander Manshel contends in his study of twentieth-century technology and fiction, there is "a pronounced *lag* between when a technology enters American culture or the home and when it

enters the novel" (42), this might also facilitate an affective lag in supposedly immediate responses to digital technologies in the twenty-first century. The temporality of the broader literary-historical lag would allow aspiring millennial authors to "observe" the styles of Web 2.0 over a period of years before the internet became "noble enough" (Renouard 74) to "imitate" within the highbrow novel. That the "shape of this lag appears surprisingly consistent across multiple technologies" (Manshel) further troubles Dango's equating of "style" with "action." It suggests that the analogue genre of the novel must, necessarily, provide a delayed stylistic response to faster-moving technologies, as it is seen to do across the twentieth century. In this way, novelistic responses to the era of Web 2.0 cannot be purely affect-driven "actions," but can therefore potentially engage with irony.

Having set up her online profile, the narrator's approach to dating itself in *Fake Accounts*, and the expression of this approach through style in the novel, provides the starkest instance of an ironic performance of repair. At first glance, the narrator draws on the signs of the zodiac to engage a strategy that appears akin to Dango's "filter." She quickly interrupts narration of the dates in question to articulate this deliberate strategy to the reader: "I decided to go on a series of dates assuming personalities based on the twelve signs of the zodiac. This would, I imagined, provide structure" (167). The narrator's decision dramatises the "target of repair" disclosed by filtering: a response to the "decline of both internal and social difference" by reinstating the possibilities that a subject might have "multiple discrete roles" as well as that "of a public providing a plurality of scenes in which these different roles can be played" (Dango 24). Although the dates themselves and their narration might allow for this very "plurality of scenes," the series of performances appear to quickly disappoint the consistently ambivalent narrator on multiple levels. She writes that "the consequences of public character building are not as fun or as useful as the fantasy of social media fame suggests" (184), thus demonstrating how the pursuit of the Berlantian "fantasy of the good life" (1) through a stylistic role-play,

here explicitly digitally mediated, fails twice over. It fails both in its "usefulness" as a possibly sincere attempt at repair and in its ironic playfulness. Temporarily inhabiting the signs of the zodiac as prefabricated identities may offer an exemplary expression of filtering, driven by the "desire for the self to be both multiple and generic," but the affective pleasure of "belonging together with other people" (Dango 24) through those signs is foreclosed. The narrator laments: "[i]t turned out to be incredibly boring to learn about the made-up characteristics of other people" (174). Although an ironic identity play had promised a sense of liberatory fun, the framework through which this play is made to function cruelly disappoints.

Through a stylistic lens, it is notable that the narrator imagines the achievement of "structure" via her recourse to the signs of the zodiac. The narrator's performative filtering also finds stylistic expression on the level of a self-consciously "fragmented" (162) structure on the page. This structure both indexes the fraught potential for repair and cues the reader to the irony entangled with this potential, an irony which functions through imitation and self-reflexivity. Prior to her experiment, the narrator critiques what she sees as the dominance of fragmentation in contemporary novel-writing, writing that "this trendy style was melodramatic, insinuating utmost meaning where there was only hollow prose" (162). Further, in asserting that there was "something distinctly feminine about the style" (162), she also suggests a gendered aspect to this trend. Recalling Lockwood's capacious "this" of "[w]hy were we all writing like this now" (63), Oyler's narrator suggest "[m]aybe if I wrote like this I would better understand them" (165). Lockwood's ostensibly sincere question becomes, through the ambivalent "maybe" and dismissive "them," an ironised attempt to achieve a tenuous sort of empathy through overt imitation. In this way, the narrator's performative "filtering" as a structure for her romantic life and the textual structure that gives form to this become, doubtfully, a provisional component of the diegesis itself. The narrator proceeds to narrate a series of vignettes for each star sign interspersed with "sex scenes," the kind of meta-commentary on irony that appeared in Chapter

1, as well as meta-commentary on the stylistic "filtering" itself: "Fuck! I messed up the structure. That one was too long" (173). The pastiche of a hollowness of prose emphasises that filtering via fragmentation registers also as a stylistic failure. By establishing a distance between author and text, a temporal distance between diagnosis of and response to crisis, and by thus thematically and stylistically encouraging an ironic reading, such commentary establishes a fatalism at the core of this stylistic attempt at repair.

That Oyler integrates this satirised fragmentation into an otherwise continuous prose style also prompts readers to read a similar balancing of the reparative and the ironic in Lockwood and Kobek's novels, both of which appear to be examples of the feminised "fragmented books" (162) against which Oyler's narrator rails. As this narrator observes eventually of her own experiment, Lockwood and Kobek's novels too might index how "earned self-consciousness mutate[s] into unearned self-preservation in real time" (179). Notably, the narrator of *Fake Accounts* sees this rhetorical shift as itself borrowed from the internet: this was "something I usually only saw online, where it was easier for the unbelievable to remain that way" (179). Shifts such as these further entangle "strategies of repair" and contemporary forms of irony: if the reparative must deform into the ironic, so too can the ironic morph into the reparative, here into the "self-preservation," the desire for a stable sense of self. Indeed, the "filtering" of Oyler's protagonist is far from the only instance of such entanglements, of ironic performances of repair, in the novels of this study. Kobek's stylistic bingeing of internet "trash" itself surfaces a delicate balancing of "self-consciousness" and "self-preservation," particularly visible in its position-taking within the literary field of production explored in Chapter 3. As will be seen, his designation of *I Hate The Internet* as a "bad novel" must be read ironically, in fact encouraging the reader to appreciate its literariness. Equally, Castro's attempt at a reparative detox is coloured by his narrator's bingeing within the diegesis. The narrator spends almost all the novel aimlessly scrolling on social media, even whilst on the toilet. Further, the novel's

toilet scenes themselves offer scatological descriptions that come to stand for the literal and metaphorical result of his various binges. His "concrete/literal style" also registers as what Jameson terms a "blank irony" (17): replete with parodies of prior styles and, in this case, barely suppressing the consequences of the narrator's self-confessed "ironic disposition toward the world" as equated with an "unarticulated hatred toward almost everything" (Castro 126). In this way, the narrator's carefully managed stylistic detox emerges as precarious, giving shape nonetheless to implicit, "unarticulated" rhetorical excesses.

Dango reframed

In the recontextualisation of discursive and formal practices of the internet, these novels seek, often simultaneously, to delimit the potential for irony and undermine these limitations ironically. The reparative modes levelled at the "crisis of irony" become drawn into its orbit in spite of themselves. That the styles of these novels can be read as ambivalent performances of prior styles, as discursive performances of Web 2.0 within the literary novel, has important literary-historical consequences. These novels emerge in a techno-present, dominated by social media, in which "[e]verything has been said, and we only have to draw from the depths of the reservoir the already deposited phrase" (Renouard 90). They thus continue to contend with the legacy of a postmodernism that brought to an end style "in the sense of the unique and the personal" (Jameson 15), whilst they engage the possibilities of a "postirony" that necessarily remains uneasily coupled to postmodern irony.

Taken together, the fraught attempts to repair a "crisis of irony" through style in these novels, necessitate a rejoinder to Dango's theoretical framework. Here style as indexing "strategies of repair" can no longer be understood as a pre-emptive or instinctive form of "action." Instead, that the stylistic conventions of these novels often appear self-consciously calculated, inevitably introduces the potential for irony. The impossibility of stylistic

originality and of overcoming irony encourages a reformulation of binge, detox, filter and ghost as functioning more or less ironically, through citation, imitation, and parody. In other words, irony troubles Dango's "larger ambition" to resist the "commonsense notion that people think first and act second, that they plan their actions before performing them" (19). These novels instead become symptomatic of a society of overthinkers who bide time, strategise and dissimulate with irony.

Whether the possibility of style's entanglement with irony must, by definition, undermine Dango's "strategies of repair" becomes, perhaps however, a moot point. On the one hand, such an entanglement may necessitate a serious critique of these strategies: it encourages a reformulation of what is meant by "repair" by elucidating how these novels can hold irony within their very stylistic premise whilst at the same time ostensibly desiring to repair its crisis. On the other hand, the same entanglement could also be read as inevitable as irony and the novel continue to pass through the "stretched-out present" (Berlant 5) and deeper into "crisis ordinariness" (Berlant 10). The stylistic modes that initially registered as affective responses to crisis "before people become conscious" (Dango 8) become drawn into the "crisis of irony" as the same people begin to perform them more consciously. Irony, understood in this context as a rhetorical default, subsequently indexes more explicitly, and perhaps playfully, the resignation that Dango argues already runs implicitly through his crisis styles: that these reparative modes can only ever be futile.

In sum, these novels both invite irony into the novel, harnessing a subsequent playfulness with language and voice, whilst also seeking to control or regulate its presence in their novels. This attempt to do both also finds expression in the novels' position-taking in the field of literary production through an oscillation between the literary and the "trash"; the following chapter will take up this oscillation through a literary-sociological lens.

Chapter 3 – Literary "trash" in the contemporary field of cultural production

The "book's presumptive foe" is "wired, virtual and overwhelmingly visual."

– Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*

"'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction; every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and sprit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss."

– Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction"

"the forms of our best rebellious art have become mere gestures, shticks, not only sterile but perversely enslaving."

– David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram"

In Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts*, the morose narrator asserts she "had insisted social media was not part" of her "real" life but "rather some aberration, new, ephemeral, a phase passing too quickly to warrant serious inclusion in a summary of my world" (115). She then, however, begrudgingly admits to having accepted that social media did "fit in a summary of *the* world, certainly" (115). The narrator, and by extension Oyler, exposes the mechanics of her Bourdieusian writerly disposition, her ability to perceive and appreciate new possible position-takings in the field of literary production today. She perceives the importance of social media for contemporary fiction but remains sceptical of appreciating its lasting role. In other words, Oyler's protagonist turns towards the internet whilst seeking to hold it explicitly, and uncomfortably, at a distance.

The protagonist of *Fake Accounts* thus stages a personal reckoning with the rise of the "internet novel" or "very online novel." According to the journalistic accounts of this rise, increasing numbers of authors – millennial, mostly female, often writing debuts, and all emerging from a distinctly online habitus – are now turning towards the internet as worthy material in and of itself for the novel. These authors break with the generation of literary fiction writers before them who, for the most part, turned away from digital media in apathy at the perceived "aberration," ignorance, or fear that the "phase" might indeed pass quickly and render their writing unceremoniously outdated. This chapter argues that the prevailing narrative of the "internet novel" obscures continued writerly anxiety about the decision to include social media within a "summary of *the* world."

This chapter proceeds from the tension that Oyler's protagonist constructs between the "ephemeral" on one hand and the "serious" on the other to consider how *Fake Accounts*, Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, and Jarett Kobek's *I Hate The Internet*, among others, map out explicit, though also often satirical, versions of the contemporary field of literary production. In line with Bourdieu's assertion that all works of art are "*manifestations* of the field as a whole," in which "all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated" (37), these novels self-consciously construct and appear to position themselves between two extremes of literary production: an autonomous pole that figures as out-of-touch with the realities of Web 2.0 – as pretentious, overly masculinised, and overly literary – and a heteronomous pole that grounds the nightmare of fully technologised novel, in which unreconstructed expressions of digital media intrude in forms previously the preserve of the literary. Despite these often-satirical constructions, however, all the selected novels maintain unironic investments in the literary.

An investigation of these novels as encoding overlapping confrontations between the digital and the analogue, between the commercial and the literary invites a set of wider conclusions about literature today. The position-takings of these debut authors throw into relief the transformations wrought by digital media and rapidly changing commercial interests on the Bourdieusian field of literary production. By encoding traces of John B. Thompson's so-called "book wars", they shed light on the pressures exerted on the traditional publishing industry by the digital revolution but also the surprising tenacity of the material book in the face of these wider pressures.

The good, the bad, and the hyper-digital

Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* opens with the protagonist immersed in the allures of social media, euphemistically renamed the "portal," and remains keenly aware of its own position-taking, its status as a "summary of the world" that centres social media so explicitly. Lockwood's protagonist laments the failure of previous writing about the internet, asserting to a fellow "portal" dweller that "[a]lready when people are writing about it, they're getting it all wrong" (27). Further euphemism maintains distance from the internet as unspecified "it" and obscures the identity of the "they" that are writing about this "it." However, the protagonist goes on to disparage these failed endeavours with more conviction, as having "a strong whiff of old white intellectuals being weird about the blues, with possible boner involvement" (94). Here we are invited to read a thinly veiled vilifying of Mark McGurl's "technomodernists." Literary novelists such as Pynchon and DeLillo stand accused of mystifying and objectifying the internet – more so, presumably, than through Lockwood's use of the "portal" and "it" that we are to read as tongue-in-cheek – and this accusation is rooted in a demographic warping across age and race. This, we are led to presume, is why writers, if they have deigned to write about the internet, have been "getting it all wrong."

In *I Hate The Internet*, Jarett Kobek's narrator makes explicit what in Lockwood's novel remains mostly implicit. Lockwood narrator's questions whether the vaguely institutional "they" had "done this to *make American novels bad for a time*?" (93), whereas Kobek's more fervently ironic critique is aimed at the consistently italicised *"good novel."* This so-called *"good novel,"* Kobek's narrator deadpans, proves "hopeless at addressing the pace of technological innovation" and instead offers a "false vision of American complexity" (26). In other words, a successful representation of online existence as ever-changing and multidimensional eludes the writers of such novels. The narrator oscillates between a highly satirical mode – unsettling the distance between the autonomous pole in the literary field and the dominant pole in the field of power by suggesting the CIA created the "*good novel*" as well as funded its cultural infrastructure such as *The Paris Review* and Iowa Writer's Workshop (24) – and a more direct attack on literary elitism – "*literary fiction*" appears seamlessly as another instantiation of the "*good novel*" and figures as a "term used by the upper classes" (24). That Kobek's narrator later names Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as a paradigmatic example of the "*good* novel" makes explicit the more recent literary-historical context within which his own critique functions. Here the writers of New Sincerity are in Kobek's crosshairs, guilty not of mystifying America's techno-present, but because they completely "missed," or we must suspect suppressed, the internet "as the only important story in American life" (24). In response, Kobek's narrator seeks to differentiate *I Hate The Internet*: the reader is told, on page six, that "[t]his is a bad novel" (6). Although in more uncompromisingly stark terms, Kobek is seen to engage in comparable self-conscious positioning as that traced through Oyler and Lockwood's novels.

Where, however, there are self-confessed bad novels, there are worse novels waiting obediently in the wings. As a counterpoint to the portrayal of literary fiction as by turns inadequate and ideologically suspect, the novels of this study also explicitly position

themselves against the more extreme forms of digitally mediated fiction that appear within them. These boogieman forms threaten long-form fiction via the hyperbolically short-forms of social media – Oyler's narrator's sneers at the "books of collected tweets you occasionally see displayed on tables at Urban Outfitters" (189) – or they threaten to dethrone the written word itself via the digital image – Kalvin Kasulke's highly online novel *Several People Are Typing* (2021) sees protagonist Gerald confront a writer on Slack "in a chat with himself / writing a visual novel of something / where every word in each sentence was also a gif" (184). Kasulke thus reinstates the "book's presumptive foe" as "wired, virtual and overwhelmingly visual" (2) as Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues of the era of television's ascendency in *Anxiety of Obsolescence*. Fitzpatrick argues that the claim of the high postmodernist novel, that literature was being displaced by the television, should in fact be read as an effort to reconsecrate and ringfence literary fiction from a field of production otherwise in thrall to mass, increasingly digital, media. The message of these novels figures as both more self-conscious and as more anxious. Indeed, the examples from both Oyler and Kasulke's novels here invite readerly ridicule and unease at mutually reinforcing processes of commercialisation and trivialisation that serves to debase the novel. If McGurl's "technomodernism" registers the "scandalous continuity of the literary *techne* (craft) with technology in the grosser sense" (42), these diegetic strawmen are understood as too continuous with digital technology, too proximate, and, by extension, too scandalous.

Similarly, Kobek's narrator rails against a perceived overcorrection away from the "*good novel*" by American writers who respond to the digital revolution either by pretending they possess "worse literary skills than a fifth grader" (25), embracing a hyperbolically abbreviated textspeak, or who follow the "pop sizzle" of science fiction and write about "the sexual rutting of supranatural creatures like werewolves, succubi, vampires, boy wizards" (26). Here a denigration of science fiction as coalescing ineluctably around Bourdieu's mass market

heteronomous pole and refusing a thematic complexity stands for the "worse" novel. Kobek's critiques appear as more hyperbolic, more ironic, and therefore more anxious. According to his narrator, these literary-historical trends result in "intellectual feudalism produced by technological innovation arriving in the disguise of culture" (25), which asserts a total reversal in the affirmative logic of McGurl's "technomodernism": here literary craft is stymied and even undone by an overemphasis on technological novelty that radically blurs the line between "techne" and "technology in the grosser sense."

In sum, these novels engage in a self-conscious mapping of the contemporary field of literary production within the worlds they construct. On the one hand, they make reference to literary fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which become guilty of a dismissive or out-of-touch relationship to the internet respectively. On the other hand, they satirise highly commercial and highly digital threats to the novel as cradle of "serious" literature, which themselves becomes guilty of a total complicity with the threats posed to literature by the internet. Understood through the lens of Bourdieu's literary sociology, both gestures figure as position-taking that gain "value" from their "negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which they are objectively related, which determine it by delimiting it" (30). Through the charged voices of their respective narrators, these texts carve out space in the field of production by defining themselves against what they are not in two distinct directions.

In view of this, it could be assumed that Kobek's narrator's assertion of the "only solution" if you were a writer who wanted to write about the Internet" (27) and neither wanted to write science fiction nor in text slang, is the assertion of a false choice. The narrator appears to a reject the need to prioritise one of the symbolic capital of the autonomous pole or the financial capital of the heteronomous pole. It could, by extension, be tempting to contend that by seeming to position themselves so squarely in the middle of a self-constructed field of literary production, so explicitly between "good," "bad" and even worse novels, they seek an

affirmative inclusion within Beth Driscoll's "new literary middlebrow" (1). They certainly demonstrate, as I have shown, explicit and "conflicting orientations towards both poles" (Driscoll 12). Their over-orientation towards the autonomous pole might be seen as a form of reverence, if qualified heavily through resentment, whilst they conspicuously immunise themselves against total subsumption by mass and highly digitalised cultural forms. Driscoll argues both gestures track through the literary practices she identifies as middlebrow.

The continuing, unironic allure of the highbrow

In fact, far from attempting to carve out a positively defined space in the middle, I argue that these novels manifest an anxious version of Bourdieu's struggle for consecration at the pole of autonomous production in the digital age. They encode a hyper-contemporary "struggle between the established figures and the young challengers" that itself has driven the "history of the field" (60). The clue that these texts are strategically pointing in a different direction than that of some form of middlebrow lies, not just in their digital age reformulation of Fitzpatrick's self-serving anxiety of obsolescence, but also in the consistent irony of their diegetic position-takings, which works against Driscoll's assertion that the "earnest" middlebrow is a marked by a foundational "seriousness" (40). These texts trade very explicitly in the first of "two senses" in which Lee Konstantinou argues that the "ironist knows" (30) discussed in Chapter 2. They demarcate what should be found "aesthetically disgusting … the kitschy, the middlebrow, the lowbrow." Here the established highbrow also figures as, if not straightforwardly aesthetically disgusting, then nonetheless somehow morally repugnant. But crucially, they also engage Konstantinou's second category of ironic knowing: namely, knowing "when a text is winking" (30) at you, the reader. Kobek's narrator's assertion that *I Hate The Internet* is a "bad novel" and Lockwood's narrator suggestion that other internet writers are "getting all wrong" encode such winks that here points towards barely masked

efforts to redefine and achieve the legitimacy as literary novelists that is the precondition for their desired ascendancy at the autonomous pole.

Kobek and Lockwood's satire both troubles Bourdieu's assertion that such position-takings function "quasi-mechanically" and therefore "almost independently of agents' consciousness and wills" (59) and reformulates his subsequent claim that "being determined relationally, negatively," these position-takings amount "to little more than a *parti pris* of refusal, difference, rupture" (59). Here negative relationally emerges as literally negative or critical, and functions specifically through irony's negative open-endedness. Indeed, putting Bourdieu in direct dialogue with Konstantinou reveals the how the deployment of irony in the so-called "internet novel" belies indifference. By leveraging irony to assert their "disposition toward taste and understanding" simultaneously, these authors, as per Konstantinou's ironist, themselves seek to affirm their "status as part of an elect minority," as "master[s] of the cultural or symbolic field" (30). Further, these novels help us recognise that Web 2.0, so often host to such irony, aggravates struggles for autonomous consecration in the present moment – becoming the contemporary index of Bourdieu's "*social ageing*" (59) – but also serves as the vector, a technological form of the "external change" (57) necessary in Bourdieu's formulation, by which the "young challenges" (60) are able to, albeit anxiously, assert dominance over the ageing "technomodernists" and ideologically suspect figureheads of New Sincerity alike.

Further, that these millennial novelists struggle for consecration at the autonomous pole of literary production runs more implicitly throughout their texts. Despite their meta-positioning as formally radical, as representative of a "break" with the literary establishment, a distinct set of literary pretentions run throughout these novels, which seek to define what it means, in Lockwood's narrator's loaded formulation, to "write it" (26). Their protagonists are invariably themselves writers of one form or another: Oyler and Lockwood speak through autofictional internet-savvy journalist-freelancers, and Kobek choses to conclude with an extended

monologue, not from the novel's comic book artist protagonist Adeline, but from her friend the novelist J. Karacehennem. In this monologue, Karacehennem asserts that he is a "literary writer" (267) "of the Internet" (268), whist asserting that he is the only literary writer "in America with a serious tech background" (267), thus repositioning the "serious" of the loaded term "serious literature" and Oyler's earlier "serious inclusion." His closing monologue tracks, on a micro-level, the displacement of an ironic anti-intellectualism by a more full-throated argument for self-proclaimed literariness among Kobek and others. Karacehennem declares "[d]own with all literary people!" before immediately announcing that "[b]ook people are the only people have had the natural resources to resist the internet's misery … who have a half-way interesting argument to make against the Internet!" (269) This unearths the complex navigation of the literary field undertaken by these novelists: they utilise a proximity to social media and fluency in irony in order to assert literary dominance and, almost simultaneously, offer pointed, apparently unironic, critiques of those same digital technologies.

The set of "natural resources" that allow such writers to level this "interesting argument" at the internet are distinctly literary, grounded in stylistic and intertextual techniques. While, as argued by Chapter 2, these novels experiment with a proximity to the discursive and formal practices of the internet, signalling this proximity as functioning via parody simultaneously ensures some level of anxious distancing. Kobek's narrator emphasises he "mimicked" the "irrelevant and jagged presentation of content" (27) and *Fake Accounts* is interrupted by the narrator's aping of the "trendy style" of "fragmented books" such as Lockwood's novel, before claiming she is "not very good as this structure" and deriding its facileness. Such self-conscious differentiating works here to preclude an over-identification with the alluring forms of digital media and instead stages their integration into literary fiction through formal experimentation, though ironically perhaps, in the mould of McGurl's "technomodernists." But these "resources" also mean allusive recourse to the pre-internet literary cannon. In *I Hate The*

Internet, Karacehennem dramatises the central historical narrative of Thompson's *Book Wars*, suggesting that the internet is the reason why publishing "evolves and consolidates and rots from the inside" whilst claiming defiantly that "no technology can ever overwhelm Charlotte Brontë!" (269). Lockwood's narrator herself suggests a successful "internet novel" would have to "be like Jane Austen," and drops the "media" from "social media" to suggest this would mean "a *social* novel," invested in the satirical – "the fatal quadrille error" (26) – but also the suddenly much more earnestly erudite – "[p]ale violent shadings of tone" (27). Here irony persists, but serves to cloak a distinctly literary authorial intention, to mitigate, therefore, the risk of being taken too seriously.

These intertextual figures nod not-so-covertly to what Lockwood has claimed, unironically, to wish to achieve stylistically on the level of the sentence. Responding to a question on the challenges of representing a Twitter feed in the novel at a panel discussion at the 2021 LA Times Festival of Books, Lockwood echoes Kobek's narrator by asserting a singular, implicitly literary, "solution" to the challenges of responding to the internet within the novel. She sets out her strategic decision to foreground text that is "maybe the shape of a tweet, maybe a length of a tweet" but, ultimately, registers as "more elegant, more elevated … more permanent." Alive to the supposed linguistic dumbing-down that Kobek's narrator associates with unsuccessful internet writing, Lockwood suggests the process of recontextualisation of online discursive practices into the literary novel must, conversely, undergo a concurrent process of stylistic elevation. This latter process seeks to immunise its author both against accusations of over-resemblance to Kobek's "junk media" and against the risk of falling out of step with the technological present. Lockwood's narrator claims to publish writing within the "portal" that would "distill the whole sunset cloud of human feeling to a six-word lyric" (8), signalling a self-reflexive welding of authorial intention and sentence-level style within the novel's own diegesis. Both Lockwood and her narrator maintain a

hyperbolically abbreviated textual scale, whilst dramatically expanding the representational scope of such fragments. These gestures are only reinforced through Lockwood's self-confessed suppression of the digital media's visuality in *No One Is Talking About This*. In the same interview, she suggests she wrote with a marked focus on Twitter, as if image-centred platforms Instagram did not exist, and thus encoded a desired triumph of the written word over the digital image.

The literary establishment and self-publishing rebels

Indeed, this position-taking as literary within the diegesis of the novels reasserts the position already taken in the way novels such as Lockwood and Oyler's are published and marketed. Both debut novels are published by Penguin Random House, one of the big five established publishing houses, and neither are marketed explicitly as "internet novels." In their appearance as material objects and their paratext, they thus display minimal openness to what Thompson terms forms of "hybrid culture" (426) made possible by the digital revolution in publishing. Further, that literary journalists delineate these novels as exemplary "internet novels" thus excludes, through a gesture of literary-historical amnesia, the plethora of writing that has experimented with multimedia and alternative modes of online production and circulation since the internet's conception. This, in turn, reveals a circular complicity between the literary establishment and these novelists that have been "allowed" entry at the autonomous pole of literary production.

However, the publishing journey of Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* troubles this otherwise homogenous coalescing around established publishing and demonstrates that the anxieties traced here within the so-called "internet novel" can also leave literary-sociological traces. The author struggled to find a publisher for the original manuscript of *I Hate The Internet* and so set up a LA-based indie publisher called We Heard You Like Books in order to publish the

novel himself. This enterprise was marked by a multivalent professionalism, exhibiting what Thompson identifies as the basic premise of self-publishing: the author becomes "the principal agent involved in publishing the work" (219). Indeed, Kobek designed the novel's cover and wrote the code for the Kindle version himself. In an attempt to mark out a reclaimed, albeit historic, digital space from the tech companies he rails against, Kobek even produced a video game prequel to *I Hate The Internet* playable only on defunct model of microcomputer called Sinclair ZX Spectrum. The novel then received a groundswell of popularity in the Bay Area, buoyed by endorsement by establishment literary figures such as Bret Easton Ellis. Kobek himself has acknowledged the obvious irony that this rapid increase in symbolic and financial capital was facilitated in large part by the same technology disparaged in the novel's title. Following this success, Kobek then fell in step with Lockwood and Oyler by embracing publishers of literary fiction that had previously rejected him: he chose to publish the book with Serpent's Tail in the UK and the novel's sequel was signed by Viking in the US.

This case study, and the emergence of We Heard You Like Books in particular, reveals the delicate balancing, in Thompson's terms, between self-publishing as "sign of desperation or failure" and self-publishing as "a badge of honour" or indeed "positive choice" that would undergird the status of an "indie author" (Thompson 222). This balancing mirrors the negotiation between technophobic attitudes in the diegesis of the novels and the technophilic, or at least techno-friendly. The unashamed folksiness of the name We Heard You Like Books, as well as its eponymous commitment to direct relationships with readers of the kind Thompson argues are made possible by digital media, butt up against simultaneous attempts to underline its position at Bourdieu's autonomous pole of literary production. Kobek has asserted, though probably inaccurately, that *I Hate The Internet* was the first self-published book that garnered a New York Times review (Raile) and the blurb of more recent publication by the imprint boasts that its "crowdfunding campaign that reached five figures and 150% funding" is an

"unprecedented accomplishment for a literary novel" (Kobek). We Heard You Like Books thus subtly navigates the online crowd as "source of capital," for which financial capital serves as a measure of success, and the offline crowd, the "you" of the publishing house's name, as "future market" (Thompson 284) for *literary* fiction. The publishing house's self-presentation maintains an anxiety that "serious" literature is incommensurate with digital technology and must, therefore, succeed *despite* its enforced reliance on the internet both inside and outside the novel's pages.

Anxious irony in the field of cultural production

Whether or not the term "internet novel" sufficiently names a generic consistency among this set of contemporary American novels, it becomes a productive category through which to investigate, in concentrated form, the tensions in the twenty-first century's hyper-connected field of literary production. Ultimately, in drawing on the discursive practices of the internet, its authors, author-protagonists, and author-self-publishers, do not, or perhaps cannot, perceive the novel to be "fundamentally out of sync with our increasingly online, screen-based digital culture" (Thompson 470). But the delicate position-taking at the pole of autonomous production that proceeds from this disposition must remain veiled in multiple layers of anxious irony.

Chapter 4 – The "postironic Bildungsroman" in the era of Web 2.0

"But knowing everything is a bit like knowing nothing; without a story, it's all just information. So let us return to the story we began…"

– Jennifer Egan, *The Candy House*

"The Internet is in my blood. I am of the Internet."

– Jared Kobek, *I Hate The Internet*

Not without a certain self-referential irony, the narrator in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* observes how "novelists in the portal," Lockwood's extended internet metaphor, "began to rise on a tide of peculiar energy" (167). Satirising the uneasy, quasi-paradoxical emergence of the so-called "internet novel," she suggests sardonically that "[t]his was their moment … They were going to say the final goodbye to all that!" (167). The narrator's euphemistic "that" serves as a capacious counterpoint to the deictic "this" of the novel's title: it gathers into itself the constellation of social media platforms and the ironic modes that pervade them. The self-actualisation of these novelists, and perhaps Lockwood herself, *as* novelists appears predicated on a contemporaneous distancing from the internet and from irony, thus engaging the potential for a digital age postirony.

This final chapter leverages the term postirony, specifically as grounded by a Web 2.0-era recontextualizing of Lee Konstantinou's "postironic Bildungsroman" ("Four Faces" 44), to investigate the extent to which a desired goodbye to what Damon R. Young terms the "ironies

of Web 2.0" can ever really be a "final" goodbye. It considers how the markedly consistent

narrative arcs among the novels of this study seek postironic resolution that counterbalances or

even counteracts irony's return to the novel via theme, style, and sociological position-taking

as set out in Chapters 1, 2, and 3 respectively. Finally, I leverage, perhaps anachronistically,

Lev Manovich's writing on "New Media" to show how the figure of the database continues to

haunt the linear narrative. As a result, the digital continues to haunt the analogue, and so too

must the ironic haunt the postironic.

Postirony and the Bildungsroman

If irony proves "curiously indefinable" (Colebrook 1), it should be of no surprise that

postirony, as relational by definition, proves the same. Similarly circulating freely in

contemporary cultural discourse, postirony or the postironic variously qualifies an ability to

move seamlessly between irony and sincerity, to productively combine elements of each, or to

reconfigure what previously registered as ironic into a source of earnestness. In each case, the

term names modes of cultural production and their reception that are positioned as reparative

towards the "crisis of irony" thematised in Chapter 1. For Konstantinou, literary texts that

deploy postironic strategies emerge as concurrent to but nonetheless distinct from those of New

Sincerity, the cultural movement whose turn away from postmodern irony characterises most

twenty-first-century Anglophone writing. Although postironic texts also diagnose and seek to

"oppose" irony's ascendency as "part of the established symbolic order" (*Legacy of DFW* 103),

New Sincerity goes further, seeking to "either ignore the problem of irony or alleviate its

tortures prematurely by presuming that sincerity is what stands in opposition to irony" ("Four

Faces" 89). In this way, postirony emerges from irony as postmodernism emerges from

modernism: both shifts balance a sense of rupture against a sense of continuity. The "post" in

the postirony also comes to signal a purposeful, but similarly troubling, open-endedness.

Whereas Adam Kelly positions New Sincerity as "a theory and practice of sincerity that is

forward rather than backward looking, new rather than old" (198) postirony, according to Konstantinou, does not "decide in advance what follows the age of irony" ("Four Faces" 89). Indeed, an intentional narratological ellipsis undergirds the "postironic Bildungsroman" at the generic level, as one of the four "structurally distinct literary responses" (89) to postmodern irony posited by Konstantinou. These generic categories organise a multiplicity among attempts to resolve the "problem of irony" (89) in the contemporary field of cultural production.

As a refiguration of the Bildungsroman – the literary genre most associated with nineteenth-century narratives of lasting characterological formation – the postironic Bildungsroman specifically dramatises passing "through irony's negativity en route to some troublingly unspecified postironic paradise" ("Four Faces" 8). In other words, and for the purposes of this study, protagonists and authors of the postironic Bildgungsroman would be seen to achieve a distance from irony. They would make headway in undoing its circularity and achieving a liberated capacity to seamlessly navigate and deploy ironic and sincere rhetorical modes. Whereas, however, Konstantinou's literary postironists are representatives of the generation that "came of age under postmodernity" (Zadie Smith qtd. in "Four Faces" 88), those writing so-called "internet novels" belong to the millennial generation that follows. These younger authors came of age in a post-9/11 era during which New Sincerity was well in the process of challenging the cultural hegemony of the postmodern, but during which, in parallel, a rapidly expanding internet was achieving technological hegemony. These potential postironists are not, therefore, necessarily able to construct the "postironic Bildungsroman" as early twenty-first-century postironists are. For millennial postironists, the internet's "total intrusion" (Renouard 73) into contemporary subjecthood troubles the stability, and perhaps even possibility, of a "final postironic condition" (Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* 96). For both generations, however, as in the novels of this study, narrative itself is appointed as the

exemplary medium for the materialisation of the postironic, even if the precise form of a postironic narrative conclusion remains necessarily undefined.

From the ironic to the postironic; from the online to the offline; from database to novel, the novelists of this study, themselves "novelists in the portal," test the fraught possibility of moving through and beyond irony via narrative or, at the least, of gaining some vantage over its ubiquity. In parallel they consider whether, in the contemporary moment, these possibilities are mutually dependent on the feasibility of logging off. Lockwood's novel provides the most systematic exploration of postironic possibility during its second half that sees the protagonist exit the "portal" to support her new-born niece who has been diagnosed with Proteus syndrome. Subsequently, the ailing baby becomes a multivalent figure of the postironic, standing for an analogue, pre-ironic perspective on the world, as well as for narrative coherence and progression. Castro's *The Novelist* (2022) concludes with the apparent pastoralism of a solitary forest walk, Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* (2016) with an impassioned diatribe against Silicon Valley from San Francisco's Twin Peaks, and the surprising (offline) formation of a queer domestic space marks the end of Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021). Each of these narrative arcs invites a comparison with Konstantinou's literary-historical category of the postironic Bildungsroman, as well as an investigation of the pressure exerted on this category in the social media age.

Such a comparison necessitates the reformulations of the postironic Bildungsroman that animate this chapter, as well as broader considerations of irony's ongoing role in our present digital age. Where Konstantinou's protagonists, like Lockwood's protagonist's young niece, are able to demonstrate a pre-ironic, "naïve origin" ("Four Faces" 96), those of the postironic Bildungsroman for the era of Web 2.0 are "born with the internet inside of them" (Lockwood 54) as Lockwood's narrator asserts of the musician Thom Yorke. They prove unable or unwilling to "reject postmodern form and postmodern content at one stroke" (Konstantinou,

"Four Faces" 95) because the achievement of an adequately postironic subjecthood would mean the foreclosure of the discursive allures of internet ironies. That a shift offline necessarily might lead to a "renewed … political commitment" (*Cool Characters* 44), as for Konstantinou's postironists, is troubled by the inevitable mediation of contemporary political action through digital technologies. Finally, the postironic Bildungsroman surfaces an unresolvable tension between narrative, linear and discrete, that enables and performs the postironic on the one hand, and the internet as an infinitely expansive database that stands for atemporal, fragmented, and repeated forms on the other.

Logging off … from irony too?

No One Is Talking About This explores the possibility for a lasting, stable achievement of the "condition of postirony" (Konstantinou, "Four Faces" 102): in Lockwood's novel the "troublingly unspecified postironic paradise" ("Four Faces" 8) gains a certain level of specificity. The first half of the novel explores a life very online, and the second half explores the same life totally offline. An explicit structural and narratological pivoting occurs, therefore, around the news that the protagonist's embryonic niece will be born with the debilitating genetic illness Proteus syndrome. Following this news, the protagonist returns to her family home to offer care and support and, in doing so, disconnects abruptly from her existence in the "portal." This shift of attention from the discursive chaos of the "portal" onto the mute fragility of her niece, facilitates a parallel shift from online irony to offline earnestness. Indeed, the baby herself comes to embody an idealised form of the postironic perspective. The protagonist's brother sings *Fiddler on the Roof*'s "Sunrise, Sunset" into "the baby's ear, his voice joking at first and then seamlessly serious," at which the protagonist asserts that "she liked it, of course she liked it, she could not tell the difference between beauty and a joke" (183). The figure of the baby prompts an implicit realisation in the protagonist that irony is a learned skill, not an innate faculty, and might therefore include the potential to be unlearned. Whereas an inability

to differentiate the ironic from the sincere online results in at best a trenchant ambivalence and at worst a disturbing polarisation, infant subjecthood reformulates this inability into a perspective that refuses both differentiation and hierarchy: the aesthetic and humoristic co-exist peaceably, neither threatening the other. Moreover, the baby elicits the same postironic capacity in others, the brother moving "seamlessly" between rhetorical modes. The achievement of this capacity, underscored by the reverence the family directs at the baby, relies explicitly on a non-technological or pre-technological existence. The protagonist provides a further example of this existence in the figure of a girl who "had an IQ of 48, watched no television, didn't use the computer, and according to her mother could not lie" (177). Here a hyperbolic sincerity is predicated on a hyperbolically analogue lifestyle. By extension, the absence of the computer and the internet it summons negate in turn the potential for irony.

Such pre-technological perspectives might prove impossible to inhabit for the contemporary adult subject, but Lockwood's protagonist is able to reposition herself as a nascent postironist through the offline sociality that gathers around her niece. The baby as both diegetic event and extended metaphor precipitates and comes to stand for a wider shift in the protagonist: the proximity to her niece and the coterminous distance provided by disconnection facilitates her critique of the allures of the "portal." She considers her motivations for previous online existence, concluding that she "entered the portal … [b]ecause she wanted to be a creature of pure call and response, to delight and be delighted" (205). Irony and the discursive playfulness it affords are positioned at the root of her entanglement with the virtual world. Conversely, the retrospection now available to the protagonist enables a personal reckoning with the "crisis of irony." She asks, now more rhetorically, "if *all she was was funny*, and *none of this was funny*, where did that leave her?" (125) Her questioning exposes a previous overreliance on irony, as well as its inherent circularity. Indeed, the persistence of the ironic has left the protagonist undefended against the consequences of significant offline distress.

Despite the continued use of italics, often deployed to overtly signal the invitation to read ironically, the framing of the protagonist's shift through repeated questions such as this grounds a striving for sincerity, through both their tone and their status as literary devices that engage direct appeals to the reader. As with the functioning of irony explored in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, in the second half of Lockwood's novel postirony finds expression both explicitly and implicitly: both at the level of theme in the protagonist's set of realisations and at the level of style in the way these provoke a shift in how this protagonist seeks to engage the reader.

Further, in her novel of two halves, Lockwood deploys a network of textual echoes to map the journey her protagonist "must" take, and has taken, in order to achieve "a passage from sincerity through irony toward renewed postironic commitment and political engagement" (Konstantinou 44). Such an echo is found even at the level of the novel's dominant metaphor, the apparently omnipotent "portal" that stands for the spatialised internet in all its fickle capaciousness. After hearing news of her niece's illness, "she opened a portal where her mouth was and spoke better than she ever had before" (112). The protagonist is thus able to reappropriate the "portal" both symbolically and functionally, dramatising a coming to individuated speech. Crucially, Lockwood centres voice as the vector which registers a shift from irony to postirony. This claim, in turn, draws again on Trilling's definition of sincerity, as grounded in speech that mediates inner feeling without alteration. Whereas irony obscures or negates entirely the presence of inner feeling, sincerity claims to provide direct access. By extension, if the "portal" previously mediated all experience, distorting contemporary subjecthood through an inability to engage unironically, reframed as her mouth it mediates only her own tangible thoughts.

In a similar vein, the protagonist's understanding of what it means "to know" becomes reframed between the novel's two halves. If in the "portal" knowledge allowed her to appropriate ironic discourse, to signal to others she was not "rooted in her provincial ignorance"

or "pinned to one place" (93), returning to her provincial home allows her to emotionally take part in the singular offline "this" of the novel's title that stands apart from the "everything" happening on the "portal" (144). Whereas in the first half the protagonist herself "was an instantaneous citizen flash of lightning that wrote across the sky *I know*" (93), in the second half the sentence is repeated, though without the first-person subject. Lockwood thus charts a shift from knowledge conceived as the ability to recognise when irony is in play, to knowledge conceived as the ability to gain emotionally charged insight into the human collective; in her narrator's words, to gain access to an "unexpected sympathy" (120). This warrants returning to Konstantinou's emphasis on the knowingness of irony, particularly his assertion that an ironist knows "when a text is winking at him" (31). Here Lockwood leverages repetition as "winking" to introduce a differentiated postironic mode of knowing or recognition. Formally, both the reformulation of "portal" as motif, from internet to mouth, and that of the declaration "*I know*" stage within the bounds of the novel the de- and recontextualisation of the discourse online. But, far from dramatising a troubling extension of context collapse, in both cases Lockwood attempts to demonstrate how both discursive utterances and the very gesture of recontextualisation itself can be recuperated for postironic ends.

However, Lockwood's narrator is clear that the shift she is undergoing does not represent a false return to some former, pre-postmodern, state of earnestness. She is not seen to "ignore the problem of irony" ("Four Faces" 89) and thus, in Konstantinou's terms, distinguishes herself from proponents of New Sincerity. She briefly returns to the "portal" and, on reading a punning review of a play, asserts, "[n]o, the ability to laugh was quite intact" (163). She refuses any sense of a zero-sum game: taking seriously her increased emotional involvement with the tribulations of her immediate family does not mean a diminishing or indeed erasure of her playful approach to language as facilitated through and by the "portal." Indeed, a continued irony is even elevated as a coping mechanism for grief. In a further instance of rhetorical

questions serving as a stylistic expression of the postironic, the protagonist asks whether "the impulse to walk down the aisle to 'The Imperial March' – which seemed the essence of survival itself, the little tune we hummed in the dark – would that make it out of whatever was happening alive?" (124). Irony-driven irreverence is positioned as necessary to survive trauma and likely to survive such trauma itself. Lockwood thus avoids a "straightforwardly anti-postmodernist stance" and refuses a temptation to "turn back the clock or simply dismantle the 'environment' of postmodernism" (Konstantinou, "Four Faces" 6). The protagonist draws on the recognition of the *Star Wars* soundtrack as kitsch but rehabilitates this recognition as well as kitsch's status as "aesthetically disgusting" into a postironic sensibility.

What is more, kitschy cultural forms that previously would have registered solely as ironic become recuperated as postironic, gaining affective meaning whilst maintaining a certain level of ironic sheen. At the baby's wake the protagonist remembers a line she saw "somewhere in the portal, painted on a piece of plywood": "*I am because my little dog knows me*" (194). Whereas previously such earnest recourse to kitsch would have incited ironic derision, aiming to expose the discordance between the unreconstructed sentimentality of the discursive content and the cheapness of its "plywood" form, the protagonist, and by extension Lockwood the author, now foreground an ability to also engage sincerely. The protagonist whispers "leaning close to the child's ear to tell her goodbye, I am because my little dog knows me" (194). As the italics fall away, the pronouncement is leveraged to instantiate emotional connection between aunt and niece. "Knowing," once more becomes the axis across which a transition from ironic to the postironic is tracked, and the protagonist is unphased by any irony risked in the implicit comparison between the baby and a "little dog."

The scope of Konstantinou's postironic Bildungsroman is not limited, however, to a revitalised capacity to merely know. A "renewed postironic commitment and political engagement" (Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* 44) is also integral to each of his literary-

historical "faces" of postirony. But, whilst these novels are clear to foreground the troubling entanglement between contemporary political engagement and social media, and, by extension therefore, with irony, only Kobek's *I Hate The Internet* offers a version of postironic Bildungsroman that concludes with a concerted turn towards the overtly political. For much of Lockwood and Oyler's novels, their protagonists struggle to engage sincerely with the political issues of the day. Each centre highly ambivalent online engagement, particularly with anti-Trump sentiments following his 2016 election. Lockwood's protagonist strains "every fibre in her being" in order to feel able to "hate the police" (19) and Oyler's protagonist laconically joins the 2017 Women's March. In this way, the authors dramatise an uncertainty as to "which forms of protest against the current regime were actually useful" (Lockwood 24) and, in tandem, downplay the possibility of effective political engagement via digital technologies. An uneasy incapacity to engage unironically is focalised notably through Lockwood's darkly consistent reference to Trump only as "the dictator" (4).

In contrast, Kobek's J. Karacehennem draws the acidic tone of the narrator into the diegesis and, in his hilltop speech, names and rails against tech barons such as Mark Zuckerberg. He declares, "[y]ou have taken the last true good thing, the initial utopian vision of the Internet and you have perverted it into a series of interlocking fiefdoms with no purpose other than serving advertisements" (267). He risks recourse to overly earnest descriptors – "last true good thing" – as well as to the internet's own "naïve origin" ("Four Faces" 96), a pre-ironic utopia, in order to oppose not just the discursive practices of Web 2.0, but the relentlessly commercial forces that undergird it. This position-taking differentiates itself from Castro or Kasulke's protagonists whose postironic actualisation relies on a sense of individualistic isolation, and Lockwood's protagonist who sarcastically eschews the instinct to "*post*" about healthcare inequalities, instead coming to recognise the necessity of localised, offline political action, but finally seems to forgo this too, admitting that "the letter to the senator was never

mailed" (171). In *I Hate The Internet*, though, Karacehennem's monologue breaks the previously insistent satire of the novel. In doing so, resisting irony and resisting the tech companies euphemistically hidden behind "the internet" in the novel's title emerge as one and the same. As a novelist himself, Karacehennem undoes the narrator's own status as a self-confessed "hypocritical writer" and emerges from this "bad novel" that "mimicked the computer network in its jagged and irrelevant presentation of content" (26) to ground a highly charged critique that understands itself as cohesive (though expansive) and relevant (though ignored). Indeed, to achieve this critique, Kobek, through Karacehennem, leverages an unabashedly excessive rhetorical range but also, perhaps more fundamentally, a sense of narrative progression. Via this monologue, Karacehennem both tells the story of the internet's corruption by market forces and demonstrates that the events of the novel, a litany of the socio-economic ills wrought by Silicon Valley, drive the postironic stand that Karacehennem takes. The novel's status as narrative form, bounded and linear, lends force to its political messaging.

The postironic possibilities of linear narrative and sunsets

In fact, beyond the question of resemblance to the narratological features of Konstantinou's postironic Bildungsroman as pre-packaged category, *No One Is Talking About This* in particular positions narrative writ large as the ultimate guard against irony's "dogma" (Lockwood 28). In other words, Lockwood argues that none of the reparative or recuperative measures in question are possible without a vehicle that facilitates *temporal* shifts from the ironic to the postironic, from the online to the offline. Again, the baby becomes the site of postironic possibility. But Lockwood deploys a productive ambiguity as to whose voice is referred to – the baby's mute voice or the protagonist's own voice having been reinvigorated by that of her niece's – in the assertion that "[h]er voice, when she heard it in unguarded moments, still sounded like a flow of human sunshine, kindness. *To* somewhere" (162). Although risking derision with the overly sincere "human sunshine" and "kindness," the newly

postironic "voice" here stands in stark opposition to the calculating "voice" of Oyler's narrator, who is titillated by the risk her dates might misinterpret her. It negates irony's endless circularity, and that of an internet that functions through the continuous de- and recontextualisation of content. This ambiguous "voice" does so by opening up linear narrative's promise of progression, of a "flow," and by facilitating a more direct, more stable "flow" of information from speaker to listener, from writer to reader.

Lockwood invites the reader to note, and implicitly welcome, an equivalent stylistic progression in her novel of Tweet-length fragments. Indeed, the first half of the novel is self-consciously anti-narrative. Lockwood's narrator evokes and ironises the grim fundament of DeLillo's *White Noise* "all plots move deathwards" (26) to scorn "[t]he plot! That was a laugh. The plot was that she sat motionless in her chair, willing herself to stand up and take the next shower in a series of near-infinite showers" (63). In the internet age, the "plot" appears no longer to move "deathwards" but instead remain suspended in a continuous repetitive present that Dinnen argues is mediated by the "digital banal" (73). This pervasive banality undergirds the contemporary condition by which the "affective novelty" provoked by the evolution of digital media is systematically negated. Lockwood parodies a culture that "tropes repetition and seriality" as well as "exhibits narrative impasse" (Dinnen 8) through the protagonist and, in turn, the protagonist parodies the form to which Lockwood, and the reader, seem to have subscribed, deriding the possibility that "these disconnections were what kept the pages turning, that these blank spaces were what moved the plot forward" (63). In the novel's second half, Lockwood writes directly against the sense of stasis imbued in the non-linear formal practices of the internet, in social media as a radically unbounded database. Her protagonist acknowledges the fragility of narrative as mediated by digital technology, that the "end of the Wikipedia entry is always the most suspect," but seeks nonetheless to affirm the potential for its successful resolution: "[b]ut listen, this time it was true" (189). Wikipedia as encyclopaedic

database, nominally open to co-writing by all internet users, is thus reconfigured as novel, with a singular author who uses stable narrative resolution to speak directly to their reader.

In elevating narrative writ large but nonetheless foregrounding experimentation with digital forms, Lockwood and others seek to shore up linear narrative over the threatening non-linear database. The opposition between narrative and database, which for Lev Manovich is understood as an opposition between the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic dimensions (230), throws a consideration of literary postirony into relief in two different ways. Firstly, the perceived balance between narrative and database determines the stability, and even possibility, of postironic narrative progression. Secondly, such an opposition stages the tension, underlying all narrative, between Foster Wallace's desired "single-entendre values" (192) and a disturbingly slippery irony that supports two or more meanings.

In his consideration of "new media" (as they were in 2002), Manovich asserts that the elements of a "system," or indeed a narrative, relate to two "dimensions—the syntagmatic and paradigmatic" (230). The syntagmatic functions by "stringing together elements, one after another, in a linear sequence" (230) and thus serves as pre-condition for the postironic narrative arcs in question. As shown, the "development of central characters from a naïve origin through a phase of irony en route to a final postironic condition" ("Four Faces" 96) is only possible if the novel constructs and maintains a linear narrative. Unlike the syntagmatic, which is made explicit by a narrating subject, the paradigmatic dimension is implicit or imagined. It represents the potentially infinite "set of other related elements" from which "each new element is chosen" (Manovich 230) to form a discrete, syntagmatic narrative. In this way, the paradigmatic grounds the internet as, what Joseph R. Worthen terms "a database of interchangeable fragments" that form a "heterogeneous but singular texture," but also the endless multiplicity in meaning construction made possible by "complex, undecideable or insecure ironies"

(Colebrook 16) of the kind that produces such troubling effects on the internet as monolithic database.

The advent of digital technologies, according to Manovich, reverses the prior relationship between the syntagmatic, as explicit, and the paradigmatic, as implicit. He writes that through "new media" the "database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is dematerialised" (231). These contemporary novels perform this materialisation of the paradigmatic by "mimicking" (Kobek 26) the discursive practices of digital media but maintain a marked anxiety about the implications of the database for contemporary subjects otherwise seeking a "final postironic condition" (Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* 96). Lockwood's narrator claims that "they" collect the results from DNA tests "in a huge database so they could eventually send your distant cousin to prison for stealing a loaf of bread" (111), directing a paranoia at the internet as a tool for "surveillance capitalism" (Shoshana Zuboff). Kasulke's novel goes further, staging a distinctly discursive materialisation of the paradigmatic dimension through the errant slackbot. Initially articulating only pre-programmed language – "Welcome to Slack! … Glad you're here!" – the workplace AI begins to regurgitate amalgamations, by turns nonsensical and lyrical, of characters' private messages sent previously in the novel. The paradigmatic chaos of slackbot thus serves to work directly against the novel as bounded syntagmatic narrative, by dramatising the intrusion of database into the novel. This, in turn, similarly points to a diegetic anxiety around internet user privacy, as well as an extra-diegetic writerly anxiety around automation and the foreclosure of "human" originality.

Further, in both *Several People Are Typing* and *No One Is Talking About This*, the figure of the sunset becomes the exemplary intersection of the multiple overlapping tensions at stake here, the tension between the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, between the offline and the online, between the postironic and the ironic. Digitally mediated sunsets diminish their

aesthetic value in the "real" world, and, insofar as the sunsets stand for narrative closure, their co-opting by digital technologies dramatises the ascendency of the database. In Lockwood's novel the sunset becomes a site of the digital's radical diminishing of the materially beautiful or immaterially transcendent. Through the "portal," the protagonist seeks, though not without irony, to "distill the whole sunset cloud of human feeling to a six-word lyric" (8). The motif of the sunset also serves as a victim of the virtual's suppression of the material: the protagonist admits "she might squint at the pink of a sunset she was too lazy to meet outside" (30). However, in the novel's second half the sunset is recuperated as another sign of the postironic striving. Not only does the brother sing "Sunrise, Sunset" to his niece, but the protagonist's assertion that "when the apocalypse began bringing with it unbelievable sunsets … Then it was time for cults as well" (175). The sunset as symptom of apocalyptical collapse again recalls DeLillo's *White Noise*, in which sunsets seem to accompany the "airborne toxic event" and Jack bemoans the "industrial wastes" that are mooted to produce both "scalp degeneration, glorious sunsets" (22). Although Lockwood's protagonist demonstrates an unease with a newfound sincerity, again inoculating her declaration with an irony inherent in the potential qualification for cult membership, the "unbelievable sunsets" nonetheless point to offline credulity, albeit paradoxically.

Kasulke explores a digitally mediated version of DeLillo's "postmodern sunset" (*White Noise* 216), updating its implications for the internet era as it tracks from the offline to the disturbingly digital. In conversations with the slackbot, Gerald initially positions the sunset as figure of the "physical sublime" that "fucks with your brain" unlike anything else (20). Then, however, the sunset approaches the online world via simile – "we love to say the digital is fleeting / like a sunset" – as well as metaphor, with Gerald implicitly drawing a comparison between the sunset and the online "ephemera" (81) that, in turn, bears comparison with Lockwood's "sunset cloud of human feeling." When Gerald "sees" a paradigmatic set of

"sunset gifs," he proclaims "I've never seen a sunset Out Here before! / *Gerald has left the chat*" (92), which offers a satire of the abrupt narrative closure native to digital media. However, when Gerald is asked by slackbot if he wants to "*be* a sunset" (142), the possibility of such syntagmatic resolution is disturbingly foreclosed. Subsequently, *as* a sunset gif, Gerald himself *becomes* the paradigmatic dimension, and Kasulke thus allegorises the troubling implications of the database for contemporary subjecthood. He asks his colleague to "imagine that's your consciousness, your you-ness / in many places / *simultaneously* / hurtling across beckoning wifi ports / rocketing wherever I was summoned … wherever anyone on slack wanted to see a small, animated image of a setting sun" (159). Gerald's frighteningly personal experience of the database dramatises Manovich's materialisation of the formerly implicit paradigmatic dimension. But it pushes this materialisation to its logical conclusion: the total inability to grasp at a syntagmatic stability, at linear narrative, contextualised in age in which versions of personal identity emerge as data amalgams, forming across multiple social media platforms. Unsurprisingly, this hurts – Gerald reports that "the pain was shattering and enormous" (159). That subjecthood becomes radically destabilised by both the multiplicity and simultaneity of database "nodes" invites metaphorical equation with the destabilising impacts of internet ironies. Driven by the context collapse Gerald experiences in extreme form, these ironies trouble contemporary subjecthood by offering multiple possible meanings, interpreted as such by internet users "*simultaneously*."

Recognising the pervasiveness of these database anxieties, to what extent does the paradigmatic dimension, made explicit, derail the narratological stability of the postironic Bildungsroman, which must nonetheless be anchored in the syntagmatic dimension? Joseph Worthen extends the tenets of Manovich's media theory into the social media age in order to map out a distinct set of "internet novels," such as Megan Boyle's *Liveblog* (2015), that he terms New Autofiction. Worthen explores the tension inherent in the recontextualisation of an

online blog, which is "continuous with the internet," into a discrete text that "mimics non-narrative fragmentation in the linear medium of the novel." As set out, these tensions are also inherent in the formal consistencies among the "internet novels" of this study. Like the novelists of New Autofiction, Kasulke, Lockwood, and Kobek navigate the limits imposed by the novel that "[f]unctionally … still exists as a syntagm … a single, inflexible, finite expression of signs". Whereas Worthen argues that New Autofiction texts seek to "camouflage their narrative components and simulate the experience of moving between narratively disassociated nodes in a database," however, each of the novelists discussed here, in exploring the possibilities of the postironic, in fact attempt the opposite. They also experiment with a hyper-fragmentary form that emulates the "disassociated nodes in a database," whether through Lockwood' Tweet fragments or Kasulke's novel as Slack transcript. But, in foregrounding narrative progression, they ultimately seek to camouflage the disturbing openness of this database with a "finite expression of signs", a "single narrative" that coalesces generically around the postironic Bildungsroman. In other words, these novelists render Manovich's paradigmatic dimension explicit and then implicit again, obscured by their protagonist's postironic formation.

In Lockwood's novel, it is yet again the figure of the baby that gives metaphorical as well as narratological form, not merely to the importance of narrative writ large, but to the apparent triumph of syntagmatic over the unruly chaos of the paradigmatic database. Although while she lived the baby was, from a scientific point-of-view, merely "information printed on pink paper" (133), the protagonist leverages her niece to ensure the novel cannot itself earn the same classification, cannot itself be reduced to "just information" (Egan 334). The protagonist asserts that "[w]hen considering the vast waterfall of data in the baby's exome sequencing … it was impossible not to think that there was some power of gravity, a magnet, that drops of mercury flew together, the flock cohered into a single wing" (138). Despite the uncertainty introduced

by the syntactical double negative, this amounts to a concerted, and sincere, defence of an ineluctable narrative coherence. The drive towards narrative formation seems to obscure the agency of an author, suggesting instead reliance on fundamental so-called laws of nature, and thus seeks also to obscure the status of the syntagmatic as provisional and artificial.

By extension, the baby comes to stand not just for the triumph of the offline over the online but also for the triumph of the postironic over the ironic. In what could easily be read as lamenting of the "hypertrophy of irony" (Damon R. Young) itself and irony's impact on online discourse more widely, the protagonist asks "[h]ow far did a word have to travel from its source in order to become unrecognisable?" (141). She cycles through various ways of writing the word baby – "babey, babby, bhabie" (141) – "nodes" in the semantic database, before asserting, "[y]et in every variation, the meaning shone through, as durable as a soul, wrapped in swaddling clothes" (141). Understood in this way, the baby represents an immunity to the splintering of meaning precipitated by irony. Instead, she becomes a quasi-holy figure of Foster Wallace's "single-entendre values" which, invites comparison with a baby Jesus and thus imbuing an otherwise secular "postironic paradise" ("Four Faces" 8) with an ironic religiosity. Moreover, the cumulative density of metaphor through and around the figure of the baby seeks to distinguish the narrative that emerges from the database as literary, as possessing a surplus aesthetic value. In other words, the "single wing" becomes a markedly literary instantiation of Manovich's "single narrative".

Indeed, the elevation of linear, and literary, narrative as a means to counteract the endless, and endlessly ironic, narrative constructions emerging from the database also has implications for the self-conscious positioning of the novel and novel-writing in these texts. As set out in the Introduction, these texts are marked by their diegetic construction of two opposing poles, the one literary, the other digitally mediated "trash" (Kobek 26). Here narrative itself, particularly as realised through (analogue) literary fiction as well as the very process of writing

a novel stands in opposition to an over-orientation to social media, which foregrounds narrative construction across the paradigmatic dimension and, on a practical level, provides fodder for but distracts from the "serious" business of novel-writing. An almost dialectical opposition understood in these terms is most visible in *The Novelist*. What little plot there is to Castro's novel is driven primarily by the protagonist's attempts to wrestle himself from the stultifying allures of the internet so that he can progress his mise-en-abyme novel – "why I had wanted to focus in the first place" (11) – and thus earn the title of the Castro's "real-world" novel. The embedded narrative of narration in *The Novelist* thus functions temporally: successful, analogue authorship emerges from a previous position of personal entanglement with the internet. In other words, and although these novels engage so thoroughly with the discursive practices of Web 2.0, progress in novel-writing becomes the measure of a positively coded distance achieved from the online world, a measure of the ability to achieve a postironic account of the self that stands apart from the irony-haunted subjecthood as database online. And, therefore, the finished novel emerges as material proof of narrative's vitalising effects on the contemporary novelist. Indeed, this eponymous figure of Castro's novel could provide a productive lens through which to understand the aspirational writerly narratives of real-world authors such as Lockwood and Oyler. Despite having, or perhaps because they had, begun their careers as writers of Twitter poetry and short-form literary journalism, and therefore as "creature[s] of call and response" (205) closely attuned to the discursive irony online, both writers have gone on to publish literary fiction through established publishing houses. By extension, the postironic elevation of narrative in *No One Is Talking About This* points ineluctably towards the author's own elevation, in symbolic capital terms, from the database to the material book, from the internet as "story that had seemed, up till the very last minute, to require her perpetual co-writing" (120) to her emergence as a literary author who writes alone and, in part, against that story. All the novels of this study represent tangible proof that their

authors avoided, professionally and personally, having "disappeared into the internet" (Lockwood 130), disappeared into the ironies of Web 2.0.

Turning on *Do Not Disturb* mode, temporarily

If, as a result of irony's dominance online, however, the potential to inhabit the world postironically becomes contingent on the potential to feasibly inhabit an offline, literary, world, the denouements of Kasulke and Castro's novels both trouble the stability of the "postironic Bildungsroman" for the era of Web 2.0. As in Lockwood's novel, *Several People Are Typing* and *The Novelist* both stage conclusions premised on their respective protagonists moving offline and thus attempting to disengage from the dense atmosphere of irony that otherwise saturated both novels. The suddenness of these narrative turns distinguishes their exploration of the postironic from Lockwood's extended and more systematic investigation of its possibilities. In Kasulke's novel, Gerald's consciousness is returned to his body – perhaps an extreme allegory for the everyday act of logging off – after which he is able to begin a surprising romantic relationship with his colleague Pradeep. In the final lines, or rather in the final Slack messages, Pradeep asks Gerald "if you're picking up groceries, I think we're low on eggs?" before typing "see you at home" (246). In a novel otherwise so dedicated to networked communication between a set of colleagues for whom irony is the principle discursive currency, the novel thus concludes with a set of tropes around offline connection: Gerald's re-embodiment and the sexual possibilities this affords, as well as a newfound domestic bliss premised on the earnestness of a real-world first-person plural "we." The relentless zaniness of Kasulke's plotting up to this point appears smoothed into a normative, albeit queer, romantic conclusion. This could be read as Kasulke putting "realism into conflict with postmodernism" ("Four Faces" 96) as per the tenets of the postironic Bildungsroman. However, the speed and ease of this resolution encourages suspicion in the reader. They are asked to recognise these tropes *as* tropes and, more broadly, to consider how the continued

mediation of these tropes through instant messaging asserts an inability to disengage from digital technology, which, in turn, troubles the possibility of achieving the "post" of postirony in any meaningful sense.

Castro's solipsistic protagonist is more self-consciously uneasy with a similar inability to disengage from the internet. At first glance, Castro also appears to dramatise a move offline and, simultaneously, away from an interiorised "crisis of irony" that otherwise haunts protagonist and the "concrete/literal style" (Guan) through which his narration functions. His protagonist takes his dog Dillon for a walk and declares he "felt grateful to have left my phone in the car" (192). This seems to stage a successful retreat away from digital technology and into nature as reparative setting, bearing comparison to J. Karacehennem's decision to deliver his monologue in Twin Peaks park in *I Hate The Internet*. The pastoral experience of the forest in *The Novelist* becomes imbued with a quasi-mysticism when the protagonist considers "how my ancestors, thousands of years ago, must have felt upon finding running water in the wild" (184). In claiming that "[s]ome small part of me must have felt that now" (184), the protagonist foregrounds an, albeit shaky, access to immediacy and credulity that pushes back on the tempting possibility of reading irony into a doubled narrative of return: to nature *and* to historical forebearers. But here not only is the protagonist himself aware of the tropes in play – he claims to be experiencing something "stereotypically hippie-like" (192) – he goes on to bemoan a subsequent inability to fully achieve a postironic positioning. Indeed, the protagonist draws a direct link between failed unironic experience and the continued mediation of this experience through a digitally inflected interiority. He tries to "focus on the beauty around me, but felt too self-conscious to earnestly experience anything" (190), lamenting that "things seemed through a screen" (191) and that his thoughts took on the form of "quasi-visualizations of the internet" (192). Although he has not disappeared into the internet as was risked by Lockwood's protagonist, the internet may well have appeared within him. This, then,

dramatises a failed postironic Bildungsroman: the formal practices of the internet must be resisted to secure a level of postirony, but extricating these from *within* contemporary subjecthood proves impossible, much as, in Kasulke's case, extracting these formal practices from the narration itself proves impossible.

Both Castro and Kasulke's protagonists enact a version of Michael Dango's conception of "ghost" by attempting to "flee circuits of communication," but prove able to do so only temporarily. This gesture is allegorised in the ability of Kasulke's employees to activate "*Do Not Disturb mode*" (29) or even "*leave the channel*" (141) but never really leave the *novel* as network. Here to "ghost" means to deploy a fated reparative style that responds, not to the broader "crisis of recognition" (217) diagnosed by Dango, but to the online "crisis of irony." Dango asserts that those who ghost are "abandoning recognition" but that this cannot be equated with "rejecting" it (217). Castro's protagonist and Kasulke's Gerald fail "to simply cut the circuit altogether" (217) but perhaps this does not, after all, mean a failure to achieve a postironic resolution. Indeed, to the question of whether "ghosts can learn new technology," Lockwood's protagonist and her sister thus reinforce a sense of perpetual return: they imagine spectres affectively haunting the digital realm, "ghosts in the portal, reading forever, tenderly holding down hearts" (202). A fundamental premise of Dango's stylistic "ghost" is the balancing of being absent with keeping "open the possibility of a return" (217), and this, in fact, invites comparison with the "openness to contingency and self-ironising capacities" that Konstantinou prescribes when the postironist's "precarious alliance dissolves" ("Four Faces" 102). In the same vein, reparative strategies in both these novels accept the inability to fully renounce either digital technologies or irony in the contemporary moment, instead encoding the potential for their continual return.

"Postironic paradise" lost

Although, proceeding from Dinnen's assertion that in much contemporary literature "technology is effaced in deference to the narrative" (3), strategies of effacement run throughout these novels, so too do admissions that such effacement can only ever be partial. The achievement of a digital age "postironic paradise" (8) can only ever be provisional, as per Dango's stylistic ghosting. Lockwood, Kasulke and Castro's protagonists in particular do trace attempted shifts from the ironic to the postironic, overlayed firmly on an analogous shift from the heavily online to the abruptly offline. But a complete disengagement from digital technologies and the ironies so entangled with them proves neither feasible nor indeed, often, desirable.

In seeking to draw wider conclusions on the novels of this study, it remains only to be asked, whether the allegiances of these authors and their author-protagonists are, ultimately, backwards-looking – tied to uneasy reformulations of postmodern irony and New Sincerity – or forwards-looking – seeking to break postironic ground for the contemporary American novel in the era of Web 2.0.

Conclusion

The contemporary is "a strategy of mediation: a means of negotiating between experience and retrospection, immersion and explanation, closeness and distance."

– Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift*

"Thus, metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate!"

– Luke Turner, *The Metamodernist Manifesto*

Notably absent from scholarly accounts of New Sincerity and postirony, as from the texts they foreground, is the primary technological medium for the evolution of contemporary irony and its crisis: the internet. Taken together, Jordan Castro's *The Novelist*, Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing*, Jarett Kobek's *I Hate The Internet*, and Lauren Oyler's *Fake Accounts* are paradigmatic of a twofold gear shift for the American literary novel in the twenty-first century. Not only do these novels ultimately take the formal and discursive practices of Web 2.0 seriously, but, in part as a result, they are compelled to break with the tenets of New Sincerity and re-engage with irony. As I have shown, they thematise, perform and attempt to mitigate a prolonged "crisis of irony." They stage attempts to safely discern and come to terms with the functioning of irony when recontextualised in the bounded, authored world of the novel, as well as the inevitable failure of such attempts.

The anxiousness that drives these strategies of control are reputational, blurring the boundaries between the professional and the personal. The selected authors are aware of the continued influence of New Sincerity on the literary establishment, yet desire to demonstrate a mastery over the discursive playfulness of Web 2.0, which stems from their own experience as Twitter users and digital self-publishers. Where, in the novels of New Sincerity, the author-figure served as the guarantor of a literary sincerity and, by extension, a guard against postmodern irony, these contemporary authors prove unable to occupy such a position in good faith. New Sincerity thus comes to appear as merely a brief, wilfully myopic hiatus in the literary-historical entanglement of irony and the American novel. Irony has continued to pervade and challenge contemporary society in the twenty-first century, putting into question the ability of the novel, or any cultural production for that matter, to offer possibilities of effective repair in an era of crisis. In the inconclusiveness of their attempts to repair an ongoing "crisis of irony," whether through stylistic modes or narrative arcs, each of these novels reinscribe the contagious circulation of unstable ironies through context collapse, as well as the potential for ironic reading that haunts all literary texts. In turn and through a literary-historical lens, this negotiation, inevitably troubled and troubling, animates and entangles the legacies of a literary postmodernism marked by ironic critique and the tenets of a variously defined postirony that seeks to hold such irony safely at arm's length.

Contemporaneity and simultaneity

Perhaps, therefore, whether these novels are primarily backwards or forward looking belies their predominant focus on the present: each are preoccupied with and a product of the contemporary moment. Historicising the present via the novel proves such a slippery undertaking because, as argued by Theodore Martin and others, it must navigate the "opacities of historical closeness" (22) on the one hand and, on the other, must accept that mediations of these "opacities" can only ever already result in yesterday's news. These novels perform the

"*strategy of mediation*" (5) that Martin argues is bound up in effective attempts to come to terms with the contemporary. They toggle between the first-person experiences of heavily online narrators and a literary-historical retrospection; between binge-like immersion in the "crisis of irony" and explanation of this crisis through meta-commentary; between the too-closeness of the immediate present and an ambivalent distance from online worlds that reduces the risk of a technological obsolescence.

Among the inconclusive attempts to periodise the contemporary era that follows postmodernism, metamodernism has gained notable scholarly traction. British artist Luke Turner published "The Metamodernist Manifesto" in 2011, which positions the liberatory possibility of *being both* at the centre of the cultural formations it seeks to inaugurate and describe. If the ambivalence of online discourse is understood by Phillips and Millner as functioning through an oscillation between antagonism and humour, Turner's manifesto is a decidedly less ambivalent, unequivocal reformulation of this oscillation – as "the natural order of the world" – and its merits. He asserts that "metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt," before proclaiming, "[w]e must go forth and oscillate!" Notwithstanding an elision of an in-betweenness and the *being both* named by oscillation, these concluding lines of the manifesto establish reliance on a set of paradoxes, stacked one on top of the other, foremost among which is a positively coded juggling of irony and sincerity.

Indeed, a readiness to function through pairs of contradictory terms, albeit anxiously, is not limited to the mediation by these novels of a contemporary moment. The possibility and, even, necessity of *being both* is a condition that runs through each of the chapters of this study: the potential to combine elements of irony and sincerity figuring as an "ambivalent paradox" symptomatic of the wider "crisis of irony"; the stylistic conventions of these novels both performing and attempting to repair the "crisis of irony" simultaneously; these novels

appearing to self-identify at once as "trash" and "serious" literary fiction; and, finally, narrative attempts at logging off to attain a postironic condition remaining inevitably provisional: as being offline nonetheless remains traces of being online.

Irony and failure

Much cultural criticism of the twenty-first century, journalistic or scholarly, is quick to see aesthetic merit in such juggling of terms, to emphasise generative combinations of irony and sincerity, of irony and forms of postirony. Metamodernism and the "four faces" of postirony that Konstantinou has theorised under that periodising banner, provide off-the-shelf theoretical frames for such conclusions. It would be appealing to draw a conclusion along such lines from the novels of this study, neatly arranged around those theoretical frames. Yet, taken together, these novels do not cue us to see the oscillation between a postmodern irony and an indeterminate postirony as a successful act of rhetorical or aesthetic harmony. Not only do these instead represent the necessary but disorganised "improvisation[s]" that form part of a "survival strateg[y]" (4) in Berlant's "stretched-out present" (5), but, by extension, such oscillation becomes indicative of rhetorical or aesthetic failure. Anxiously strategic attempts to *be both* or *do both* in these novels resist stable categorisation within Konstantinou's conception of the postironic. Instead, they invite comparison with the sense of inevitable failure inherent to the optimistic attachments to Berlant's "fantasies of the good life" (17) and Dango's fraught reparative styles.

Such failure can be understood in various ways, but from every angle has consequences for the roles of irony and the novel in America today. These novels foreground a failure to foreclose the rhetorical and historical circularities of irony; they stage the impossibility of being "beyond" irony as per Turner's manifesto, in other words of achieving the narrative promise of a postironic Bildungsroman. Where metamodernism celebrates an in-betweenness, the

failure of these novels becomes a falling in the "gap" between, as irony fails listeners or readers that fall in the gap between manifest and implied meanings. Such failures are an inevitable part of communication in the crisis era, whether, online or offline, between anonymous users or author and reader.

But the failure to achieve a seamless coherence between the ironic and the sincere, as well as between the digital and the analogue, should not be equated with a broader novelistic failure. Lockwood, Oyler, Kasulke, Castro and Kobek point us to the reverse. The re-emergence of irony in the novel, in all its messiness and particularly in its unstable forms that circulate through Web 2.0, should also serve as a reminder of its exceptional potential to enrich the novel. An ambiguous layering of meaning, slippery playfulness of voice, as well as the ambivalent possibilities of citation and parody do not simply provide for a richer reading experience, but they continue to equip the reader with a toolkit with which to negotiate irony, sincerity, and their confusion in the world outside the novel, whether online or offline. Seen in this light, Konstantinou's "difficult problem" of irony is perhaps not such a problem after all. Its difficulty, though, is undisputed: Castro, Kasulke, Kobek, Lockwood, and Oyler show us that it demands ongoing "addressing" in the present continuous tense of the contemporary American novel.

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