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Art and The Ordinary: Literary and Visual Constructs of the Mundane

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ART AND THE ORDINARY: LITERARY AND VISUAL CONSTRUCTS OF THE MUNDANE

By

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ABSTRACT

My research has shown that it is typical of the mundane to be overlooked. The mundane spools out continuously before us unheeded in the form of tasks accomplished almost without our notice. In moment of pause, we look and are overwhelmed with a level of detail and experience which, relieved of the typical haze of inattention, is practically foreign to us. As a student of literature, I've discovered the rich exchange between the depiction and the description of mundane objects even though the two are more often treated separately. My observations and arguments below seek to bridge that division by taking an interdisciplinary approach to the aesthetics of the mundane and looking for interconnections, that is by, using each discipline to pry open the other. Inherent within the mundane is the presumption of an object or action free from pretense or affectation – in a word, something genuine. In taking up the subject of the mundane, both writer and visual artist seek to peel back the sociological coating and reveal an instance of raw unmediated human experience - the glistening kernel of the genuine. Pulling on the thread of the genuine woven into the mundane, my thesis describes key points in three literary case studies in which the mundane is used to access the genuine: the use of domestic tasks by Jane Austen to both comment on and locate genuine sensibility; the search for the genuine in poetry located within commonplace objects by Marianne Moore; and lastly Karl Ove Knausgaard's determined autobiographical record sifting for intrinsic substance seeks the genuine within mundane acts of life.

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Author

Jenessa Lynn Wilson Kenway

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INTRODUCTION

Commonplace or mundane objects and actions have always been of interest to me. As an artist, I've been inspired by the artwork of artist Bill Viola to create video projects that include milk glugging in slow motion from an overturned jug, bleeping electric tooth brushes, humming fish tanks, and blurry kitchen lights (Kenway). As a student of literature, I've discovered the rich exchange between the depiction and the description of mundane objects even though the two are more often treated separately. My observations and arguments below seek to bridge that division by taking an interdisciplinary approach to the aesthetics of the mundane and looking for interconnections, that is by, using each discipline to pry open the other. Inherent within the mundane is the presumption of an object or action free from pretense or affectation – in a word, something genuine. In taking up the subject of the mundane, both writer and visual artist seek to peel back the sociological coating and reveal an instance of raw unmediated human experience - the glistening kernel of the genuine. Pulling on the thread of the genuine woven into the mundane, my thesis describes key points in three literary case studies in which the mundane is used to access the genuine: the use of domestic tasks by Jane Austen to both comment on and locate genuine sensibility; the search for the genuine in poetry located within commonplace objects by Marianne Moore; and lastly Karl Ove Knausgaard's determined autobiographical record sifting for intrinsic substance seeks the genuine within mundane acts of life.

My research has shown that it is typical of the mundane to be overlooked. The mundane spools out continuously before us unheeded in the form of tasks accomplished almost without our notice: dishes washed, laundry folded, oatmeal boiled, teeth and hair brushed, dog fed, drive to work, only to do it all again the next day. At the moment of pause, we peel back the “cotton

wool” of Virginia Woolf’s “non-being,”¹ flip the light switch on, look and are overwhelmed with a level of detail and experience which, relieved of the typical haze of inattention, is practically foreign to us. Inherent within the act of looking closely at something that is usually overlooked, something is fundamentally altered; something is removed from its murky habitat, and the mundane takes on alien, hyper-real qualities. It may even become so real that it is unreal, prompting the question of how we can bring attention to the commonplace acts or objects without rendering it less mundane, or as art historian Norman Bryson poses the question, without “losing its qualities of the unexceptional and unassuming” (91) which define it? One approach is to try to catch a glimpse of the object through our peripheral vision — a glimmer in the cross-section of definition

The mundane is, by definition, the opposite of heavenly or spiritual- the epitome of secular, it belongs to the earthly world. The somatic world is a massive category, however, extending outwards into the vast reaches of the universe. Secondly, the use of mundane as an adjective implies something is “ordinary or commonplace, prosaic, dull... lacking interest or excitement.”² The correspondence of dullness with the plane of physical objects leads to the conceptual conflict in which an exploding star and cup of tea occupy the same category and are equally entitled to the term mundane. This conceptual overlap points to the peculiar revelatory paradox of the mundane in which the galaxy may be envisioned within the swirling cream in a cup of tea; leading contradictorily to contemplation of that which excites within that which is dull. The complex macro to microcosmic relationship found within the mundane has fascinated

1 Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1985. Print. 70

2 "Mundane, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2016. Web. 18 August 2016.

artists and writers for centuries, each seeking ways to illuminate without over-exposing the essence.

Looking towards life for content, the visual arts have aestheticized the mundane by allocating the same level of attention given to objects of perceived beauty and worth. The ability to perceive an aesthetic experience within the mundane, in fact, throws into question the distinction between life and art. The act of according mundane acts, objects and ordinary people with attention equal to observing a work of art is what blurs the distinction- a distinction that has been increasingly blurred from the moment commonplace subject matter entered artistic depiction in the first century A.D. in the form of ancient murals depicting fruit, baskets, pitchers, platters of fish and loaves of bread (Bryson 17). Food on the table moves from a position of consumption to visual admiration. A marked surge of admiration and recording mundane objects is evident in the seventeenth century preoccupation with realism. Innovations in Netherlands with the science of vision, brought about microscopes, the camera obscura, and map-making helping to open a new perspective on objects and surroundings (Alpers). Scientific research calling for illustrations of plants and insects, encouraged detailed observation and recording of the visible world at minute levels. From the opulent feasts of Willem Kalf to the casual family portraits of Johan Zoffany, and later the shockingly real sculptures of John de Andrea and Duane Hanson; ordinary-domestic surroundings have been portrayed again and again in the history of art. Viewer reception and reaction to the artistic use of ordinary subjects has been described as a combination of “admiration and irritation,” as art historian Hanneke Grootenboer suggests, explaining “admiration because of the artist’s virtuosity in rendering a nearly perfect image of reality, and irritation because the image has nothing more to offer than a meticulously painted recording of meaningless daily life objects” (22). The material of life reconstituted as art has

arguably led to inquiry into meaning, if any, behind the banal objects, places and faces. The very act of representing the mundane provides cognitive distance— contemplation apart from consumption — and tilts the mundane like a mirror reflecting ourselves back upon us.

Philosophical inquiry that describes the meaning of the mundane is accompanied by works of literature, novels, autobiography, and poetry, all seeking to explore and emulate the ubiquitous yet elusive concept of the mundane. Writers are frequently found to be in dialogue with visual art that explores the mundane: Woolf’s ordinary “moments of being” inspired by Impressionism, Cézanne’s notable influence upon Hemingway, Austen’s use of the conventions of portrait painting, the emphasis of Moore’s poetry upon domestic objects found in still life works, Knausgaard’s resonance with the works of surrealism – each has adopted and adapted visual constructs within their work. It is the premise of this study that the examination of a cross-section of literary works employing visual constructs of the mundane, providing both textual and visual perspective, ultimately will expand our window of insight in the complimentary overlap of verbal and visual media, giving words to visual images, and pictures to descriptive text.

I have selected as my focus three literary case studies: *Sense and Sensibility* by Austen, selected poems from Moore’s volume of poetry titled *Observations*, and the autobiographical novel, *My Struggle vol. 1* of Knausgaard. These selections are admittedly, in many ways, quite disparate from one another and separated as they are by academia, time, nationality and genre, may seem initially to share very little in common. However, in each work I locate common cause through use of the mundane in pursuit of the genuine as well as connection through their common linkage with and use of constructs from visual arts. So, while I acknowledge their differences, by examining their commonalities, I develop a broader understanding of the

mundane and, through that the idea of the genuine, locating nuanced commonalities that transcend genre, period, and location.

Austen became known during her time for placing her characters within domestic environments and activities and her process was highly influenced by the visual arts drawing upon the conventions of portraiture as well as a type of painting known as a conversation piece, a form of group family portrait, which I take as the focus of my study. Out of her six published novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, in particular, lends itself to the study of her application of the conventions of the conversation piece in her work. The mundane visual constructs of familial gatherings of work and play in the parlor, apart from dress, are so familiar to us, that viewing these paintings we easily relate the scene with our own mundane domestic gatherings and just as easily dismiss it, satisfied that we understand reasonably well what is taking place. Austen succeeds in exposing the hidden complexity within these mundane compositions without stripping them of their familiar quality, so much so, that the significance of moments of quintessential mundanity may be overlooked on a first pass. Juxtaposing the normative agents of mundane domestic labor and leisure activities against societal conventions of manners and sensibility Austen comments upon staged affection while locating genuine emotional expression within the imperfection of the domestic space.

While Austen seeks to recover genuine emotion within the domestic space, Moore strives to restore the genuine spirit of domestic objects within museum objects. Housing commonplace objects, within the museum, brightly lit, embodies the alienating effect of close examination of the mundane mentioned earlier. The essence of the object remains mundane but pulling it from the current of life stills it, emphasizing form over function, present over history. Moore evidences awareness of this effect of the museum upon object, in her poems, such as “People’s

Surroundings,” “When I Buy Pictures,” and “To Statecraft Embalmed,” and seeks to recognize the original spirit of the object within her poem while avoiding perpetrating a similar act within the poem. Ultimately, the discussion of Moore is a quest to define the quality of vision she applies to objects. To define her vision, I turn to the canvasses of Dutch still life painters as a model of sight rigorously applied to the commonplace. The seventeenth-century paintings share Moore’s interests and concerns with similar subject matter and dilemma, for to record through paint or words, the assorted cherished objects tabling the mundane is also to forever freeze it in place. Strategies of space, touch, sight and utility, derived through philosophical application of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Roland Barthes, are applied theoretical tools assisting in warding off the chilling effect of permanence, guarding object liveliness and authenticity of spirit.

And finally, the relentless autobiographical exposition of Knausgaard endeavors to lay bare the genuine and unflattering account of his life as ordinary person and artist. Rather than pursuit of forms of exception and beauty, the art of realism looks towards the raw substance of life for content finding intrinsic beauty within the unremarkable. The ecstatic high points in life are so few in comparison to the mundane bulk filling our days but, we hesitate to dismiss the preponderance of life’s substance as worthless dross for it is the banal shores of the mundane upon which the mind idles. Likewise, Knausgaard, frustrated by time taken from intellectual pursuits, wasted on mundane domestic activities, also hesitates to dismiss it. He turns towards the mundane and interrogates its apparent insufficiency, ultimately, finding artistic purpose within it.

The wide range of authors, artists and time periods, spanning from the seventeenth century to present day, provides a broad historical perspective tracking the evolving relationship

of the mundane within paired sets of written and visual works. The quest for distillation of the mundane, through art and writing, pursues understanding through intimate handling of the forms, ultimately seeking to reveal latent intrinsic meaning. Knausgaard's emphasis upon ordinary life details, verging upon excess, form a canonical link with visual art realism movement and positions him as a literary inheritor of the realism and superrealism art movement from Gustave Courbet to Duane Hanson.

In both Austen and Knausgaard, performing domestic chores preps the mind for its next utterance. Like Knausgaard, Moore, looks to the commonplace for "answers" to the intellectual questions of art. All three seek to puncture inflated notions of art that risk floating away from the concerns of everyday life borne away upon romanticized artistic ideals.

CHAPTER 1

“*This Dear Parlor!*” Parlor Conversations - Jane Austen and the Conventions of the Conversation Piece

In salons and parlors the webs of intrigue are spun,
denouements occur...this is where dialogues
happen... - *M.M. Bakhtin*

Jane Austen may never have held a brush but as critics have long recognized she was a ‘manners-painter’³ and moreover familiar with the conventions of painting. Her chief subjects were the landscape picturesque, a topic Alistair Duckworth explores at length in *The Improvement of the Estate* (1971) and Mavis Batey after him in *Jane Austen and the English Landscape* (1996) – along with the principal form of British painting, portraiture. The eighteenth-century preoccupation with the picturesque informed paintings of landscape and produced an actual alteration in the way landscape was perceived. As we see in *Northanger Abbey*, Britain’s “fashionable people with pretensions to sensibility,” as Mavis Batey puts it (3), debated the concept until it became a cliché. The subjective experience of the landscape resulted in emotive associations with the forms and distribution of space. As critic Jill Heydt-Stevenson tells us, such concepts as “foreground, middle-ground and distances came to function as geographic metaphors of the longings for privacy, security, and individuality within a public context” (8). The overlap of physical and mental landscape inherent in viewing the picturesque offered an excellent opportunity for the exploration of character within a setting, and Austen did

³ Paula Byrne notes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s lecture on Chaucer is the earliest recorded usage of the term ‘manner-painter’ but explains the term applies equally well to Austen “as a portraitist of her own social world” (297).

not hesitate to make full use of it, not only in *Northanger Abbey*, but also in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*.

Austen envisioned her characters in terms of portraiture, as we see during the Pemberley episode of *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth Bennet's perceptions of Mr. Darcy and his boyhood acquaintance Wickham are forever changed by looking at their portrait miniatures while listening to what the housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds has to say about them. A miniature portrait also figures prominently in *Sense and Sensibility* in the form of a small locket held by Lucy Steele symbolizing her engagement to Edward Ferrars. We encounter full-scale portraiture in Mr. Darcy's critical appraisal of Elizabeth and later Elizabeth's shift in regard for Mr. Darcy after fixing the eyes of his portrait upon herself. Full-length portraiture enters again briefly in *Northanger Abbey* in the "very like" painting of Eleanor's departed mother. We also encounter portraiture in *Emma*, in both the protagonist's portrait of Harriet Smith and in the form of character dialogue. Among critics who discuss Austen's use of portraits is Teri Campbell and her discussion of what she calls the verbal-visual "re-cognition" of face that develops on the parts of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Campbell in order for Mr. Darcy to arrive at an altered perception of Elizabeth he must learn how to see her. Assisted by Michel Delon, and the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century theory of *les petit défauts*, Campbell explains small imperfections come to be "viewed as an element of beauty" making the beauty of each woman unique and able to be seen by the "one who knows how to see her" (216). To reconceive Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth must apply reason to her initial sense impression. Informing Campbell's analysis of Elizabeth's change in perception is Tony Tanner's essay "Knowledge and Opinion: *Pride and Prejudice*" which enters into some of the philosophical underpinnings informing, Campbell, Tanner and Austen herself.

Both critics, Campbell and Tanner, identify the theories regarding “impressions and ideas” from eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume as being a probable influence upon, and responsible for one of the links between language and portraiture within, Austen’s work. Indeed, upon reading the opening lines of Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, recalls Austen’s original title, *First Impressions*: “all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS.” According to Hume’s theory of knowledge first impressions must be submitted to the process of reason before becoming ideas (15). Also discussed by Tanner is John Locke from whom Hume’s ideas stem directly. Regarding sense perception and reason Locke explains “settled habit— in things where of we have frequent experience, is performed so constantly and so quick, that we take that for the perception of our sensation which is an idea formed by our judgment” (109). Both Hume and Locke suggest the initial visual experience is insufficient and in need of further examination before judgment is concluded. These compelling approaches to modulating sensory and reason-based perception were both at Austen’s disposal and thus continue to profitably assist in furthering our understanding of character and portraiture in her novels.

Affecting the discussion of portraiture in Austen’s novels is the move of eighteenth-century portraiture away from mimetic likeness; the shift in priorities blurs the distinction between portrait and history painting. The phenomenon of portrait shift was in large part spurred by the painting style of leading portrait-painter of the period, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Reynolds was noted by cotemporary for his penchant for “heroic portraits” painted in the “grand” or “great” style of history-painting. Nicholas Penny argues the portraits of Reynolds were often “praised less for the likeness which they bore to the sitter than for the way in which the artist brought out qualities which the sitter possessed or aspired towards” (214). In this praise we see a preference

for a particular idea of the person rather than merely an accurate representation. While likeness was desired it was not apparently the central concern. In *Hanging the Head*, art historian Marcia Pointon explains “eighteenth-century collectors of historical portraits were...not primarily concerned with likeness” but rather a “‘good’ portrait is largely seen as the one that departs from convention and offer apparently original solutions to the intractable problem of the representation of the human subject for consumption in that subject’s own social and political milieu” (79). The person having their portrait done wish it to project a particular social status and demeanor among their peers, a better or ideal version of themselves resulting in supplanting a person with an idea of that person. This is indicative of the underlying desire that a portrait penetrate deeper, offering truthful insight into the personality and character of the individual. Eighteenth-century portrait-painter Jonathan Richardson claims “a good Face-Painter” does exactly that (23):

Tis not enough to make a Tame, insipid Resemblance of the Features, so that everybody shall know who the Picture was intended for, nor even to make the Picture, nor even to make the Picture what is often said to be prodigious Like: This is often done by the lowest of Face-Painters, but then ‘tis ever with the Air of a Fool, and an Unbred Person;) A Portrait-Painter must understand Mankind, and enter into their Characters, and express their Minds as well as their Faces: And as his Business is chiefly with People of Condition, he must Think as a Gentleman, and a Man of Sense, or ‘twill be impossible to give Such their True, and Proper Resemblances. (Richardson 24-25)

Richardson endows the portrait painter with the profound ability to penetrate the physiognomic surface revealing substance of character within, thus “Face Painter” must be equal parts mind-reader and artist. Similarly, Austen stages the reveal of character through portraiture within the framework of the novel.

The shift in the meaning of portraits is central to critic Joe Bray’s analysis of the staging of portraiture within eighteenth-century novels of Maria Edgeworth and Austen. His discussion connects the shift in portraiture signification to the slippage and misinterpretations between portrait and character occurring in Edgeworth’s *Belinda* and in Austen’s *Emma*. Bray reveals Mrs. Weston’s visual description of Emma aligned with the notions of a Reynold’s portrait, by portraying the heroine in the “most favorable light” to Mr. Knightley, a suitor Mrs. Weston has in mind for Emma. The concept of “likeness” and Emma’s portrait of Harriet Smith generates much confusion, as Bray relates, such as improvements upon Miss Smith’s person by Emma and compliments accorded the portrait but intended for the artist (10-11). Finally, scholar Alison Conway, outlines the eighteenth-century connection between the novel and the portrait highlighting in particular the way the “eighteenth-century English novel uses the painted portrait to analyze the meaning of women’s relation to private interests” (3). The term private interests refers to the ideological conflict defining the role of women with respect to domestic and personal life. To establish her discussion, Conway turns to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* which held that “novels and portraits became the ‘particular objects’ around which the public debated the idea of private interests” (4). Out of the dialectic of “decorous and illicit,” characteristics of both novel and portrait, Conway argues that a “third definition of private interests emerges, one that highlights women’s capacity to claim agency as spectacles and spectators, as subjects figured as both embodied and critical within the visual moment created by

the novel's representation of the portrait" (4). The thorough foundation set up by Conway provides a necessary critical framework that may well prove essential to all future critical discussion of the relationship between portraits, novel, and eighteenth-century women.

Group Portraiture in Austen – The Conversation Piece

To date so far as I can tell, however, no one has discussed Austen's use of the conventions of the conversation piece as a way of assembling her characters and launching her topics. While single-figure portraits are ideal for engaging in focused examination of one or two characters, incorporation of domestic environments, and occupations in a group setting is better suited for exploration of larger group dynamics as it allows for placement of two or more characters within a single visual frame. Over time, paintings of familial groups in domestic settings, increased in popularity, and came to be referred to as conversation pieces which is defined by art historian Mario Praz as "represent[ing] two or more identifiable people in attitudes implying that they are conversing or communicating with each other informally" (33). Visual indicators of a conversation piece include emphasis upon the domestic space itself as a habitat, the space must be a private one, not a public forum, and lastly, in addition to domestic activities, there must be gestures indicating conversation (Praz 34). The conversation piece captures casual moments of home-life in which families are having tea, playing cards, women sewing, playing music, children playing, and more often than not, the family dog curled in the middle of it - precisely the environments and activities in which we find Austen's characters.

The rise of the conversation piece coincides with the shift in individual portraiture towards portraying ordinary persons but the informal domestic space portrayed is in direct

contrast with grand history-style of single portraits prominent within the period, such as those painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds. However, despite the informal attitudes and actions of the sitters the goal of the conversation piece is not simply domestic mimesis but, like individual portraits, engages in projecting various social objectives such as status through wealth, establishing class distinctions through manners and expression of idealized notions of the family unit. Much emphasis has been placed upon the way conversation pieces offer a glimpse of private domestic life, but because portraits are always public, these images are a constructed view of private life for public consumption; they are genuine in their presentation of real families seated together, but ultimately offer staged authenticity – idealized representation of familial affections and family power dynamics. Rather than static, discussion of the conversation piece in relation to Austen emphasizes that it is an active site subject to change. Examples I will discuss show how the conversation piece is intended to function as a visual will proscribing order upon familial property and members as well as manners and behavior ideals, but, as we shall see, its mandates are not always followed. Furthermore, like a theatre, examination reveals, the conversation piece and domestic space of the parlour provide a stage in which to enact roles and domestic fantasies; Austen succeeds in pulling the curtain cord and revealing to her readers both false and genuine sentiments. Just as the novel became a place to partake in feelings, known as “sensibility” at the time, likewise the conversation piece began to visually satisfy the growing appetite to display and view emotions and familial intimacy. In her novel *Sense and Sensibility* Austen, utilizes the social objectives of the conversation piece, grafting the conventions of wealth, manners, sensibility and theatricality firmly onto the narrative. By representing breeches and adherence to the codes of decorum advocated in the conversation piece, Austen subtly observes the expression of staged and genuine sentiments, locating flaws within each. The action of the conversation

piece shows how domestic work facilitates conversation and close examination of *Sense and Sensibility* in the same way reveals Austen deploying the mechanism of domestic work to enable conversations, to propel the narrative forward to expose and question familial and emotive social dynamics

While the conversation piece does provide a window into the life of the eighteenth-century English bourgeois, one of its primary functions was showcasing and cataloging their wealth. Art historian Kate Retford tells us of the written inventory, taken a year before, which in addition to the opulent furnishings, lists four paintings contained in the room in which artist Johan Zoffany depicts Sir Lawrence Dundas with his grandson. For the portrait the number of paintings hanging in the room has been increased to at least the visible eleven and the inventory confirms that all furnishings and paintings belonged to Dundas. Deliberately adding more paintings is an obvious gesture to make a show of wealth but use of his own paintings, rather than invented classical landscapes informs the viewer that Dundas is a connoisseur and collector of fine art; the display expresses his personal art preferences, making the painting a display of wealth *and* good taste emphasizing his consumption of fine things (Retford 303). Pointon tells us “the conversation piece offered – as no other historical document did – the possibility of publicly enumerating material possession to the point of fetishization” (162). Then, as now, the wealthy were noted for acquiring rare, costly and artisanal objects partly because their ability to do so demarcated their class but also because being knowledgeable in art and culture was a further sign of refinement. For the elite rich of the eighteenth-century there was no better way to flaunt wealth than commissioning a conversation piece and flaunt it they must; newly wealthy tradesmen found it essential to advertise their wealth in order to establish membership among the fashionable ranks of high society, but as we shall discuss later on, wealth was not all that was

needed to change social ranks. The conversation piece served a variety of social needs. Not only did it make an ostentatious display of a family's wealth, the visual record functioned as a quasi-legal document.

Part of the trappings of wealth is family lineage, through which money and possessions are passed down and the family legacy continued. Although lacking the legally enforceable instruction of a written will, Pointon tells us the conversation piece “is to be understood as a visualization of the last will and testament, an imaged set of domestic commands for future generations produced at the behest of an individual who will no longer be alive when the text is read” (161). Returning to the earlier example of Dundas portrait, we understand now that, not only does the painting display his possessions, it contains the implicit command that the family treasures will be kept in the family and passed down. His “worldly goods” are “destined to become heirlooms, destined to pass down the family line to the grandson who leans against his lap” (303). Assets, as we already see in the Zoffany painting, are not limited to possessions either, but include family members. “Conversation pieces insert a particular statement of familial power relations,” Pointon explains, “into the narrative of succession, a statement *intended* to fix family members in their relationships with another” (Pointon 161, emphasis mine). From the word “intended” it is understood that the visual proscription of behavior may not always coincide with what actually happens. At this point we may consider the opening of the action in *Sense and Sensibility* in juxtaposition of a legally binding will and an informal will in the form of conversation.

From the opening line, Austen makes it clear that property and lineage are a central concern in *Sense and Sensibility*, informing us that the “family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex, their estate was large and their residence was at Norland Park in the centre of

their property where for many generations, they had lived” (Austen 5). However, as usual, the line of inheritance is through a male heir positioning the Dashwood women to be divested of all property and fortune. From his sick bed, the dying Mr. Dashwood extracts a promise from his son Mr. John Dashwood “recommend[ing] with all the strength and urgency, which illness could command, the interest of his mother-in-law and sisters” (Austen 6-7). This conversation is curiously silent as Austen informs us of its happening without dialogue. The lack of dialogue encourages the reader to visualize the conversation rather than hear it and thus, early on visual relationship to conversation is established. Mr. Dashwood passes and this visualized conversation “will” is interpreted through conversation just as we would attempt to interpret the meaning of a painting through verbal discussion and with no definitive meaning, it is subject to a variety of interpretations and subject to the mindset of the viewer looking at it. Through a series of successive negotiations with his wife, Mr. John Dashwood’s firm promise to “do every thing in his power to make them comfortable” goes from a “liberal and handsome” three thousand pounds, whittled down to “looking out for a comfortable small house for them” and “helping them to move their things...” (Austen 7-12). Just as the legal will fails the Dashwood women through entail of the estate upon their half-brother, so too does the will secured through verbal promise. “Nobody has any use for an illegible will; to be effective as a document it must be concentrated and unequivocal” Pointon expounds; “past, present and future subsumed into a single act of communication that will hold sway over a particular social grouping forever. Such also is the conversation piece” (161). Pointon makes it clear that the familial mandate forwarded by a conversation piece is to be incontrovertible but Austen by establishing the subjective nature of conversation questions its rhetorical certainty.

Later in the novel, we again see the conversation piece functioning in the form of a subjective will. With an iron grip on the purse strings, Mrs. Ferrars attempts to govern the marital fate of her two sons. Her response to Edward insisting upon honoring his unsuitable attachment has an intriguing resemblance to the visual response to family quarrels which occurs in a conversation piece. It is not uncommon in conversation paintings to see family members removed. Evidence of *pentimenti* indicate Paulus Determeyer Weslingh, not only had both wife and daughter thrown out of the house, but furthermore had their figures effaced from their family portrait after a quarrel over the daughter's love affair in which the mother sided in support of the daughter (Praz 172-173). We feel the ghosts of the missing figures that vacated the two empty chairs, leaving the coffee-pot, two teacups and ball of wool conspicuously behind. In similar fashion, Mrs. Ferrars removes her two sons: "Her family had of late been exceedingly fluctuating. For many years of her life she had had two sons; but the crime and *annihilation* of Edward, a few weeks ago, had robbed her of one; the similar *annihilation* of Robert had left her for a fortnight without any; and now by the resuscitation of Edward, she had one again" (264 emphasis mine). Annihilation suggests a visual obliteration referring to the destruction of the mental image Mrs. Ferrars holds of her sons, which she effaces from her mind as though blotting them out of the family portrait. The difference here, between the story and painted example, is that rather than a male authority authorizing the removal of figures, the removal order has been issued by a matron performing a subtle shift in the powerbase within the family dynamic. Just as family members can be erased from a portrait or from a will, they can also be put back in again. Both Edward and Robert are resuscitated in due time, the word "resuscitation" gesturing towards the domestic space as a living canvas subject to frequent changes. Not only were conversations

pieces about allocating wealth and intended familial power structures, they also convey social status by portrayal of good manners.

Display of manners, politeness and good breeding were essential signs of social standing during the period. Art historian Ching-Jung Chen informs us the eighteenth-century elite were “defined by politeness rather than gentility.” The social upwardly mobile merchant applied good manners to solidify status and the impoverished noblemen retained his title, in part, through show of politeness. The rise of a wealthy merchant class led to mixing of landed gentry with rich untitled tradesmen⁴ initiating confusion of the term “gentlemen” resulting in a new set of qualifications, as Chen informs us, which depended upon:

wealth and lifestyle...refined manners, agreeable conversations, and wealth filtered through taste. Taste, displayed through the consumption of fine material possessions, leisure, and art marked the gentleman. The popularity of the conversation piece in the early eighteenth century lay precisely in its ability to record and signify the experiences and aspirations of these people. (Chen 207)

Through the application of polite manners, commissioning of conversation pieces thereby demonstrating refined tastes in goods and art, the nouveau-riche signaled their entrance to the upper echelons of society and rather than “initiating conflicts between classes” with these qualifications met, “the newly affluent were accepted as gentlemen” (Chen 207). Thus it is no surprise that the subject matter of the conversation piece itself demonstrates the union of manners and wealth distilled through art.

⁴ Adding to the blurring of class lines, tradesmen born without title, after becoming wealthy could be granted titles. Sir Lawrence Dundas, mentioned earlier, was a merchant who made a large fortune and was rewarded with a baronetcy (Retford 301).

Out of the bourgeois trinity — manners, wealth and art — good manners are the most unquantifiable in numeric terms yet prove in many ways to be the most valuable, often making up for any deficiencies found in the other two. Manners are almost a form of currency permitting entrance to social circles that could not otherwise be accessed as we see in the deft application of civilities by Lucy Steele to gain access to inner family circle of the Ferrars. A quintessential conversation piece moment occurs when Lucy activates the dynamics of the conversation piece using the domestic work of fillagree to facilitate conversation with Lady Middleton:

“I am glad,” said Lady Middleton to Lucy, “you are not going to finish poor little Annamaria’s basket this evening; I am sure it must hurt your eyes to work fillagree by candlelight... The hint was enough, Lucy recollected herself instantly...”Indeed you are very much mistaken, Lady Middleton; I am only waiting to know whether you can make your [casino] party without me, or I should have been at my fillagree already.”
(Austen 103)

As is typical of the conversation painting, the domestic space, action and dialogue are seen in collaboration. Working candles on the way and work table drawn near the domestic space comes into focus visually and we see Lucy “reseated... with an alacrity and cheerfulness which seemed to infer that she could taste no greater delight than in making a fillagree basket for a spoiled child” (Austen 103). The crafting of the basket supplies the means for conversation and the conversation itself allows Lucy to demonstrate civilities and manners thus ingratiating herself further with Lady Middleton, and assisting further climbing of the social ladder. At the same time this is going on, Marianne engages in the domestic activity of playing music and pointedly uses conversation to contradict the conventions of the conversation piece: “with her usual

inattention to the forms of general civility, exclaimed, ‘Your ladyship will have the goodness to excuse me- you know I detest cards. I shall go to the piano-forté’...without father ceremony, she turned away and walked to the instrument. Lady Middleton looked as if she thanked heaven that she had never made so rude a speech” (Austen 103). The violation of decorum stands out in striking contrast emphasizing the proper conventions of civility through negation. The injection of honest but poor manners rubs up against the good yet cunning and deceptive manners of Lucy, stirring societal conventions, reasserting the often duplicitous nature of decorum. Rather like a form of acting, the appearance of good manners is such it that it may mask intentions self-serving or genuine kindness. One might even say manners are a socially engendered form of acting.

There are visual parallels between the conversation piece and the theatre, making the domestic space both a stage to act upon and site of domestic imaginings. The assignment of domestic tasks to sitters “to avoid the rigidity of pose” (Praz 71) was a common practice which automatically establishes the conversation piece as a *tableau vivant* (Praz 69), or living picture, a form blending the art of painting and the stage. Interior conversation pieces are frequently framed in the manner of a style with thick velvet curtains on either side of the image while exterior conversations are portrayed “against a screen of foliage” (Praz 125), imbuing the paintings with a cinematic presence. Discussing William Hogarth’s painting of *The Cholmondeley Family* Praz describes now the “little Cupid actually draw[ing] the drapery on the left,” in (1731), combined “with its counterpart on the right, forms almost a stage: the theatre is already present in Hogarth’s mind” (69). The artists themselves painting conversation pieces could not help but see the similarities between the theater and the characteristics of the domestic space. Moreover, it was not uncommon for the entire domestic space of a conversation piece to

be a product of artistic imagining. For example, in the conversation piece *The Porten Family* by Gawen Hamilton, “the splendid hall in the Stafford group...did not correspond to any room in the Wentworth Castle...the opulent architecture, which seems such a perfect setting for the elegant figures, is in fact fictitious, invented by the painter” (Chen 213).

Austen herself viewed conversation pieces that made use of the side-swept curtains and foliage screens at the retrospective of Joshua Reynolds that she attended. The exhibit was a blend of mythological paintings such as *Venus and Cupid* displayed next to more prosaic domestic subjects such as Reynold’s *Portrait of Lady Melbourne and Child* resulted in a visual collision of fantasy and domestic sites (whatjanesaw.org). This exhibit combined with Austen’s fascination with the theater make it highly unlikely a theatrical connection to the conversation piece would miss her notice. The theatrical and inventive qualities of the space make the conversation piece a product domestic fantasy, a stage upon which to entertain desires and build fantasies upon. We encounter domestic fantasizing in the novel when Mrs. Dashwood, overlaying imagined improvements upon Barton cottage exclaims “it is too late in the year for improvements. Perhaps in the spring, if I have plenty of money, as I dare say I shall, we may think about building. These parlours are both too small for such parties of our friends as I hope to see” (Austen 24).

Immediately after marrying Lucy and Robert spend their honeymoon in Dawlish where Robert spends his free time “[drawing] plans for “magnificent cottages” (266) linking newly wedded domestic bliss with cherished imaginings of intimate domestic environments. Characters by action or deed admit to having acted a role within the domestic environment. In his final monologue to Elinor, Willoughby confesses the role he played:

When I first became intimate in your family, I had no other intention, no other view than to pass my time pleasantly while I was obliged to remain

in Devonshire...I endeavored by every means in my power, *to make myself* pleasing to her without any design of returning her affection. I was *acting* in this manner, trying to engage her regard, without a thought of returning it. (Austen 227 emphasis mine)

Willoughby's entrance and role-playing actions among the Dashwood family demonstrates the staged authenticity of the conversation piece. Eventually Willoughby's feigned love is transmuted into something real – "I found myself, by insensible degrees, sincerely fond of her" (227) – but he waits far too long to drop the act. Marianne also enacts a role within the domestic space at times. Upon the departure of Willoughby, on joining her family "she would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it" (Austen 62). Ironically, Marianne strives to make her visible appearance match her state of heartbreak. Lucy Steele is, at long last, revealed to be the cunning actor we always suspected, switching affections from one brother to the other as the occasion demands. Robert begins visiting Lucy at Bartlett's Building in an attempt to persuade her to drop the engagement with Edward finds "another *conversation*, was always wanted to produce this conviction...They came gradually to talk only of Robert...a subject she *betrayed* an interest even equal to his own... the vanity of [Robert] had been *so worked on* by the flattery of [Lucy], as to lead by degrees to all the rest" (Austen 266, 257 emphasis mine). Lucy is an expert manipulator of manners and conversation fulfilling Austen's sarcastic injunction as the "most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest...will do" (266). Mrs. Ferrars plays "*make-believe* of decent affection" when she visits Edward and Elinor after they marry, "they were never insulted by her real favour and preference" (266 emphasis mine). Through further enactment of civilities "respectful humility, assiduous attentions, and endless

flatteries” Lucy restores herself and Robert to the good graces of Mrs. Ferrars. The connection to acting in which motives and desires are telegraphed through word and gesture upon the stage has strong ties with early examples of conversation pieces in which manners were expressed through easily identifiable coded gestures of etiquette.

Early Conversation pieces often displayed the visual signs of good manners in the form of physical gestures, many pulled directly from etiquette books of the time period. For example, in a conversation painting of a married couple by the artist Arthur Devis the wife, Mrs. Hill, is depicted with her hands in the proper position for holding a fan while Mr. Hill stands, one hand resting inside his vest, as Anne Birmingham notes, in accordance with Francis Nivelon’s *Rudiments of Genteel Behavior* (23). Devis’ portraits, Birmingham informs us, do not usually correspond this closely with the code of etiquette but it serves as a clear example of the emphatic requirement that the conversation piece portray polite manners. However, a growing desire for more casual poses lead to a decrease in the use of such overt signs of manners.

Displaying manners remains important to the conversation piece but rather than blatant patrons and artists want them to come across more naturally. Describing this shift, Joseph Addison observes “the fashionable world is grown free and easy; our manners sit more loose upon us: nothing is so modish as an *agreeable negligence*. In a word *good breeding shews itself most where to an ordinary eye it appears the least*” (263 emphasis mine). In Zoffany’s painting *Lord Willoughby de Broke and his Family*, portraying an intimate family breakfast, we see agreeable negligence and subtle good breeding at play. The father is portrayed with one hand on the back of his wife’s chair, raising a warning finger to his young son who is reaching up to steal a piece of toast; both gestures subtly convey authority while his casual pose, legs crossed leaning on one foot demonstrates the relaxed grace of gentlemanly behavior. The elegantly coiffed

mother is distracted, watching her other son pull a toy horse on a string into the room. Holding her daughter, one infant leg dangled upon her arm, she does not see the attempted theft. The toast theft is perceived by the viewer as a charming lapse in decorum (figure 1).



Figure 1 - Johann Zoffany (German, 1733 - 1810) John, Fourteenth Lord Willoughby de Broke, and his Family, about 1766, Oil on canvas 101.9 x 127.3 cm (40 1/8 x 50 1/8 in.) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

While the display of wealth is still very much in evidence, with material possessions shining forth from imposing silver tea urn to the gilt frame of a painting hanging above the ornate fireplace mantle, the casualness of this portrait offers something new. Material possessions and polite demeanor are still prominent but the most remarkable aspect is the portrait's display of intimate affection. Through the mischief of the toast, the children's toys, the embrace and discipline of children, and the rapport between wife and husband the emotional intimacy of the active family unit is expressed. Formal manners are relegated to the background and misbehavior is admitted enhancing the sense that this is an ordinary family at breakfast, just

like any other family. Retford tells us that conversation pieces like this one, which appear to offer “momentary insights into private lives” (301) became immensely popular due to the informal manners, naturalness, and expression of sensibility:

What later eighteenth-century portraitists came to offer was a naturalization of the manners and attribute of politeness, and thereby a greater suggestion of interior character... With a new emphasis on sensibility, on the apparently direct communication of internal feeling, familial relationships and the display of inner virtue came to the fore... Mid century portraitists began to convey [family life] by focusing on the bonds of affection therein. Although social refinement and the tempering of emotion with reason were consistent themes throughout the period, the advent of *sensibility* emphasized the expressive body, the physical form as the conduit of internal virtues, and it demanded apparent *authenticity* and *spontaneous feeling*. (Retford 301)

The conversation piece becomes an emotive display showing familial love and tenderness thus completing the picture of an “ideal” family. Wealth, manners, and the appearance of a loving family, combine to make the conversation piece the ultimate status symbol. Through visual depiction emotional intimacy is transformed into another possession one can own. Just as material wealth and art came to be a sign of social refinement for elite individuals, “feelings,” as critic John Mullan, explains, were also a “concern or possession of refined individuals” (380). Indeed, as Retford tells us, “by the 1760’s luxuries enabled by prosperity could be seen to provide tangible aids to the development and maintenance of virtue and personal relationships. In the work of Zoffany, the display of affective relationship and the demonstration of wealth and

consumption are not merely simultaneous, but rather indelibly intertwined” (305). So, display of sensibility within the conversation piece is not merely a show of affection but display of yet another item of possession – love. Furthermore, Mullan tells us for a time sensibility represented a “laudable delicacy,” (379) “moral elevation” (382) “conflat[ing] feeling with virtue” (381) display of this particular item in a conversation piece advertises ownership not only of domestic love but also superior moral character.

Ultimately, Austen dispels the notion that genuine moral character can be seen through display of sensibility or that one can treat sensibility like a material possession. The trend emphasizing sensibility in portraiture parallels the trend occurring in novels at the same times. Mullan explains “novels” in the eighteenth century, “were where you went to have [fine] feelings” (381): “A sentimental novel,” like a conversation piece, “at once depicted sensibility and appealed to it.” Both novel and conversation piece allow for voyeuristic experience of emotion. Visual display of affection in the conversation piece was intended to offer proof that one possessed it but, as the conduct of Willoughby attests, outward signs of affection do not necessarily constitute hard proof. “It was every day implied but never professedly declared” (Austen 132) decries Marianne later of Willoughby’s deceptive behavior. According with the visualized sensibility advocated in these later conversation pieces throughout their courtship “their behavior, at all times, was an *illustration* of their opinions” (Austen 41, emphasis mine). Just as in paintings, visible behavior signifies an emotional attachment. Marianne in particular is not willing to hide her feelings but insists on boldly exhibiting them: “Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve; and to aim at the restraint of

5 An in depth discussion of the culture of sensibility is not entered into here. Sources for complete discussion on this topic include: G.J. Bark-Benfields *The Culture of Sensibility – Sex and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (1992) or J. Todd *Sensibility: An Introduction*, Methuen, London, 1886; *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988.

sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions” (Austen 41). Use of the double negative “not...illaudable” implies by default expression of emotion to be laudable. Mrs. Dashwood concurs with Marianne’s view “enter[ing] into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking this *excessive display* of them. To her it was but the *natural* consequence of a strong affection...” (Austen 41 emphasis mine). Mrs. Dashwood’s attitude corresponds with the “naturalization of the manners” (Retford 301) offered by the painters of the conversation pieces. The manner of thinking of Marianne, Willoughby and Mrs. Dashwood aligns with the later conversation painting concern of “giving the appearance of openly expressed sentiment” (Retford 301). Not only is physical display of feelings important but for these feelings to be connected with the aesthetic of the conversation piece they must be directly linked to the space in which they occur. Exemplifying the union of domestic space and expression of emotion in the conversation piece, the relationship of Marianne and Willoughby reaches it’s pinnacle with Willoughby’s speech conflating romantic attachment with the space which facilitated it. “Open to every feeling of attachment to the objects around him” Willoughby exclaims:

this dear parlour, in which our acquaintance first began, and in which so many happy hours have been since spent by us together...more real accommodation and comfort than any other apartment of the handsomest dimensions in the world could possibly afford...Tell me that not only your house will remain the same, but that I shall ever find you and yours as unchanged as your dwelling. (Austen 54- 55)

Contrary to the idealized portrayal of wealth and familial affection in the conversation piece, the domestic space of Barton Cottage is not ideal with its “dark narrow stairs, and a kitchen that smokes” (53) the space is far from the material perfection of a Zoffany painting. Yet, through familiarity the domestic space comes to be viewed as “faultless,” cherished for both “convenience” and “inconvenience.” Willoughby declares it to be “the only form of building in which happiness is attainable.” Just as a real domestic space lacks perfection, true emotional expression within that space is likewise unidealized. Whereas, in the case of Marianne and Willoughby emotional attachment was expressed through predictable behaviors such as dancing only with each other and between dances “stand[ing] together and scarcely [speaking] a word to any body else” (41) Austen reserves expression of true sensibility through domestic action. Once again the mechanism of domestic work is used to enable conversation, but this time the productivity of the work is endearingly overturned. The scene opens with Edward entering Barton cottage followed by a series of long “pauses,” inability to form “utterance” and “unintelligible repl[ies]”; the usually flowing conversation of the domestic space is initially stymied with emotional perplexity and confusion. It is only by “taking up some work from the table” that Elinor is able to push the conversation forward and “enquire after Mrs. Edward Ferrars”:

He rose from his seat and walked to the window, apparently from not knowing what to do; took up a pair of scissars [sic] that lay there, and while spoiling both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke, said, in an hurried voice, “Perhaps you do not know— you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to— to the youngest – to Miss Lucy Steele.’ . . . Elinor . . . her head leaning over her work, in a state

of such agitation as made her hardly know where she was...could sit no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy. (Austen 254)

Engaging with a domestic object, the scissors, assists Edward in giving voice to the socially awkward yet ultimately desirable news as well as providing genuine “naturalness” of manners and “authenticity and spontaneous feeling” desired in the conversation piece; however, the destructive quality of cutting up the sheath overturns the idealized representation of the domestic space. Meanwhile, Elinor endures the experience partially anchored in place by an unknown domestic task until, at last, channeled through domestic work and space, she experiences sensibility. Rather than the staged affection of Willoughby, the willful display of Marianne, real affection is evinced, in the end, without forethought, relayed through unmediated domestic action. Genuine sensibility resists the codified perfection of the conversation piece. Far from being owned, familial affection symbolically daubed upon a commissioned canvas will always be a stand-in for the real thing. By aligning emotional expression with domestic work Austen rejects classical romantic expression, grounding the love of her characters within the commonplace of the mundane.

The conversation piece is uniquely suited as an eighteenth century painting genre to engage with settings found in of Austen’s work. Her novels both respond to and resist the glimpses of private life found in these family portraits, allowing her to use the conventions while also commenting upon them. Conversation pieces offer proscriptions for inheritance and social order, but the dynamic of conversation, being inherently subjective, makes the conversation piece an active site of interpretation and negotiation rather than a solidified and permanent structuring of family order. Locating fluidity within the form, Austen forms literary parallels

with her characters enacting the effacement and restoration of family members. Display of manners and civilities central to the period are in the conversation piece linked with domestic work illustrating how these domestic activities function as tools facilitating conversation. Rather than trivial side-tasks, domestic work is revealed to perform a pivotal role in advancing social interactions. Taking cues from the conversation piece, Austen activates the dynamic of domestic work and conversation within her novels providing a literary soundtrack voicing the conversation piece. The domestic space is the stage upon which domestic fantasies play out and members use manners, gestures, games and tasks to enact both real and imagined desires. Not only is the domestic space a place in which to craft desires, the space itself is conflated with love and desire, cherished for its imperfections, analogous to the imperfect affections of those which inhabit it. Love emerges as a product of reality and fantasy. We witness the conversation piece as a site for both genuine and false sensibility. Within the staged authenticity of the conversation piece, Austen locates a place for the genuine expression of heartfelt emotion.

In the way that Austen identifies and carves out a place for genuine emotion in the novel, Marianne Moore strives to identify and create a place for the genuine in poetry. The domestic activities of the Austen parlor become domestic objects in the poetry of Moore and are likewise cherished for their imperfection and signs of use.

CHAPTER 2

“*The Life of Things*”: Acknowledging the Spirit of Things Within the Poetry of Marianne Moore

She does not fear the seemingly bizarre,
meaningless bits of lowly experience that manage
to escape the customary definitions of poetic
subject matter. — *Williams Carlos Williams*

The painter of genius will not waste a moment
upon those smaller objects which only serve to
catch the sense, to divide the attention, and to
counteract his great design of speaking to the
heart. — *Sir Joshua Reynolds*

Passing from the elegantly appointed estates in Austen, we cross the Atlantic by way of Marianne Moore’s poem “England” leaving the “baby rivers and little towns,” and “criterion[s] of suitability” to enter “ramshackle” America (Moore 99). Like Austen, Moore has an interest in domestic space and objects. While Austen’s concerns in *Sense...* made use of the mundane to detach notions of false sensibility within the novel from genuine emotion, Moore uses the mundane to moderate notions of high and lowbrow aesthetics. For Moore, the state of genuineness is unstable and constantly in flux. Moore’s selection of domestic objects within museum spaces deliberately blurs the boundaries of low and high art simultaneously elevating the commonplace to the level of art and lowering art to the level of the commonplace and in the process levels the same indeterminate hierarchy upon the “high art” of poetry. Through incorporation of the commonplace objects and conversational tone Moore brings average life into poetry and the museum and pushes poetry outside the doors of the institution.

Within the space of Moore’s poems, we encounter a variety of objects with careful attention to the space in which they reside. Critic Alan Nadel describes her poetry as a “virtual compendium of things” (170). Objects, like the shiny “Talisman” found on the beach, are picked up, but more mundane items from “school books,” “bowls,” “bottles,” and “carrots,” and are

equally valued. Bonnie Costello compares Moore to artists of the modernist period who “went rummaging for junk – nails, newspapers, scraps of fabric” remarking how “imported into the canvas or poem such trash becomes treasure” (211). However, the transformation of Moore’s found objects into art is not static. Within her poetry objects occupy a critical yet unstable position fluctuating between the museum and the mundane, in fact her objects frequently occupy both positions at once. Before considering differentiations between museum and mundane it is necessary to establish Moore’s perspective on objects in general. Moore’s objects resist interpretation and skirt around easy classification in the same way her poetry employs form which transcends grammar and rhetoric. The objects in Moore’s first sanctioned volume of poetry *Observations* — to which I will limit the critical focus of my discussion— are brought within proximity, their shape and texture supplied, but embedded within the black print upon the page they are out of reach just as the objects of still-life paintings can be seen but not physically held. In fact, the objects of her poems share much in common with the shallow space of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings containing nearly tangible goblets and breakfast remnants. Like Moore, seventeenth-century Dutch artists depicted a variety of commonplace objects from shells, flowers, fruits, cups, bowls, oysters and bread, walnuts, and peppercorns, amidst the general clatter of silver and dinnerware: There is a dazzling array of mundane objects captured in canvases throughout museums. In my discussion, I will explain a theoretical model of sight applied to commonplace objects in still-life paintings⁶ and assert that Moore shares this mode of aesthetic vision. Examples demonstrate the redirection of vision through observation of the overlooked, the effect of institutional display upon the commonplace in conjunction with concerns regarding the effect of permanence, methods of countering permanence through visual

⁶ Several components of the theoretical model of sight I discuss are outlined in large part by Hanneke Grootenboer, in *The Rhetoric of Perspective*.

attendance of nearness and the silent structures of sight and form supporting the visual act of attending.

The period of the seventeenth century is characterized by an awakening of vision provoked by inventions of the microscope, the camera obscura and, progress in mapmaking. The ability to see their world in new ways encouraged close scrutiny of everything from insects to continents. The invigorated vision fell upon everyday surroundings as well, looking with fascination, observing and recording the mundane, nearly forgotten in the middle of the scientific breakthroughs. As the Dutch were pioneers in mapmaking, it is only natural that the artists of the period would seek to map the landscape of mundane daily life as well. The sense of sight is accompanied by a sense of space, for to see is always to see into somewhere. Likewise, with Moore there is intention to map the commonplace through the landscape of language. Seeking an aesthetic of the genuine, in her poem “England” we observe Moore mapping an aesthetic shift, departing from the elitist aesthetics of Europe to the grounded everydayness of “plain American which cats and dogs can read” (99). Moore’s defense of the ordinary found in her poem “Poetry” resonates powerfully with the genre of still-life which has historically been relegated to second-class artistic status, critics, then as now (Bryson 10), failing to recognize the inherent significance of the banal. The artistic category of still-life dates back to the sixteenth century while the genre was struggling to achieve critical standing, against perceived superior categories of landscape followed by portraiture, viewed from the very start, by notable artists, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, as not the province of serious and ambitious artists (Bryson 8). Moore’s push to assert the presence and nature of creative productivity in America found in her poem “England,” in a way parallels, the still-life genre’s struggle to achieve notice among its elevated European siblings.

Still-life paintings and Moore's poems craft a heightened visual space pushing objects to the forefront entering the reader or viewers space, reveling in the examination of familiar objects often passed over. Objects arranged in the soft beige habitus of the painting push the objects, poised-for-use, to the forefront. The detailed arrangements of artists Pieter Claesz. and Willem Claesz. Heda draw the viewer into the space, our eyes wrap around the handles of idling knife and fork hanging off the table edge initiating the visual touch explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The representation of the shallow space is one we can never physically penetrate yet through observation we "draw" the painted objects near to us invoking Martin Heidegger's infinite "drawing near" to objects yet we remain unable to take hold of an object's essence, painted or physical. Moore's poetry exhibits a similar vision of fascination closely observing objects, rendered in detail and touched intimately through the gaze. This perpetual state of drawing ever closer, but never arriving, is representative of the modernist desire to get at how things are. From James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, to poets Gertrude Stein, and Moore, modernist writing seeks to crack open and understand the essence of life hidden within the core of the mundane. The poetry of Moore and Dutch still-life make a point of noticing the overlooked and challenge the very premise of what is worth looking at. The vision revolution of the seventeenth-century is reconfigured and revitalized within Moore's poetry. Solidified as art objects within the stately canvases, Moore's poetry trots the familiar back out to the proving grounds juxtaposing museum against life, seeking to portray the mundane without immobilizing its spirit.

Early critics of the still life genre conceded portraying commonplace objects of beauty, such as a vase of flowers, musical instruments or fruit platter, which please the eye, was an acceptable practice but took issue with objects that were less clearly identifiable as aesthetic

(Grootenboer 27). Eighteenth-century theorist Gerard de Lairesse notably commented: “as for cabbage, carrots, and turnips, as likewise, codfish, salmon, herring, smelt, and other such things; they are bad and awful decorations, not worthy of hanging in interiors, and we will pass over them: whoever has a taste for them may go to the market” (Grootenboer 260). Clearly, less illustrious vegetables and any plate of with a dead fish on it was out of the question. Even accepted subjects of flowers and fruit subjects must be perfect specimens, neither bruised nor wilted or De Lairesse has no taste for them. Not only were these objects deemed lacking in aesthetic value but issue was taken with their level of intellectual appeal. Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer takes issue with the way the deceptively realistic meal paintings incite baser physical human instincts of hunger and desire rather than putting forward pleasing objects of fruit or flowers for pure aesthetic and mental contemplation. (205) The reasoning behind the vehement objection is found in Schopenhauer work, *The World as Will and Representation*, which holds that in order to escape human suffering we must circumvent the “will,” or in other words, the base impulses that slavishly drive human action. Intellectual contemplation of purely aesthetic objects allows for escape from human suffering conjoined with succumbing to these base instincts and desires, hence anything that reinforces those impulses subverts this means of deliverance. The essential issue with this perspective is subverting the will amounts to a rejection of our humanity and denial of the human condition. Were we to become “will-free,” cool aesthetic-appreciative robots, the very objects appreciated would be drained of the content which gave them meaning in the first place.

Preferencing that which is already beautiful and objection to coarser yet entirely natural pleasures of satisfying hunger resonates in contrast with Moore’s opening injunction to seek that which will “give [her] pleasure in [her] average moments” (101) which occurs early on the poem

“When I Buy Pictures.” In the 1924 version of her poem, “Poetry,” Moore makes a case for including, items which may be perceived unsuitable or inferior to more beautiful specimens. In place of dead fish, among other things, she decries the exclusion of inferior texts:

nor is it valid
to discriminate against “business documents and
school-books (72)

By arguing against discrimination the of the texts of “business documents and school-books” Moore suggests they contain content of poetic value. But the poem goes far beyond simply demanding equal acceptance of all texts within the realm of poetry. She insists poetry must be “raw”:

...if you demand on one hand,
The raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in poetry. (73)

By juxtaposing rawness and “that which is...genuine” Moore establishes a relationship between the two but also distinguishes between two things many are inclined to think of as near synonyms. This separation indicates that for Moore material in a state of rawness does not necessarily mean the poetic material is genuine. The task of the poetic process is to reveal the genuine within the raw material of life. In defiance of Schopenhauer’s demand for aesthetics that that compliment soothing of human “will” Moore’s demand for rawness in art includes the gamut of instinctive physical sensations: “hair that can rise,” “eyes / that can dilate” the pangs of

hunger when looking at a savory meal. The raw includes “dead fish” and “school-books,” and the artistic process finds and focuses the beauty in them for the reader or viewer to see.

...these things are important not because a
high sounding interpretation can be put upon them but be-
cause they are
useful (72)

The poetic process does not suddenly “make” mundane “things important” with clever turns of phrases and erudite wording. These objects and the sensations they induce were already important in and of themselves. It is up to the reader, the writer, the critic, the viewer, the artist to recognize their intrinsic significance, their intrinsic raw beauty. Were that all there was too it the discussion would now be over. But it is insufficient to simply “[drag]” the mundane “into prominence” (Moore 72). Just when we think we grasped the purpose of poetry, in a rug-sweeping gesture, Moore swiftly informs us “when dragged into prominence by half poets, / the result is not poetry” (72). So, the question becomes what is the final aesthetic element that transforms the mundane into art?

Elevation and Display of the Mundane

Elevation of the mundane assaults the traditional hierarchy of aesthetic values which alters the priorities of our viewing schema. In his work, *Looking at the Overlooked*, Norman Bryson examines, among numerous artists, the work of Juan Sánchez Cotán. Although Spanish Baroque still life is not my primary focus it is worth mentioning that Cotán’s work features

disparaged cabbages, legumes and imperfect fruit. In a work titled “Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber,” (1602) Cotán depicts the dangling contents of a *cantarero* (a primitive refrigerator) in scintillatingly crisp detail. Bryson eloquently explains the result of this visual strategy is:

to reverse this worldly mode of seeing by taking what is of least importance in the world – the disregarded contents of a larder – and by lavishing there the kind of attention normally reserved for what is of supreme value... From one point of view, the worldly scale of importance is deliberately assaulted by *plunging attention downwards forcing the eye to discover in the trivial base of life* intensities and subtleties which are normally ascribed to things of great worth; this is the descending moment, involving a humiliation of attention of the self. (64 emphasis mine)

Still life artists are engaging in an aggressive retraining of the eye. Applying abundant attention to that which is overlooked upsets the balance of our visual attention which is in general lent to objects and areas where we perceive it is most needed with little left over for trivial items. It is safe to say, that we do not typically stare in the refrigerator admiring the (dis)orderly stacking of the contents. With very few exceptions, our purpose is to swiftly locate and remove that which is needed.

Once, upon the breakdown of a refrigerator and installation of a new unit, after reshelving the goods, I had occasion to admire the newly organized food stocks lining the bright shelves. Attention was lavished, in Cotán fashion, upon the objects as order was restored, pulling my gaze towards the overlooked, finding fresh appreciation for the neatly stowed chilled items. If we are suddenly to discover great worth within trivial things what then is the significance of objects of great worth? The result is not to strip them of value but to redistribute worth

differently finding aesthetic value equally within mundane objects as in objects of perceived higher value, resulting in a new definition of worth. Moore also participates in this inversion of attention and acts of object redefinition.

Moore's frequently focuses upon the small commonplace objects that surround us. Paperweights, and curios are admired. The compression of a snail is considered the "first grace of style" (65). Moore looks long and hard at the objects filling domestic spaces in her poem "People's Surroundings," as she confronts domestic aesthetic conventions with a series of detailed domestic habitats. Considering many of Moore's poems are inspired by museums, the domestic spaces in the poem can be transposed into the museum as dioramas, as well as viewed as living room environments. The result is living environments that are at once familiar and habitable but also infused with a sense of remove; exhibit spaces coolly observed from a distance akin to the polite curiosity applied to the still clutter of a Dutch repast. "People's Surroundings" begins by examining three different living environments. The first presents a modest space: "a deal table compact with the wall; ... compressed, not crowded out" (66). The second is richly appointed with "palace furniture" complete with "Sèvres china and the fire place dogs," "bronze dromios with pointed ears" (66). Lastly, she directs our attention to the mass-produced "vast indestructible necropolis / of composite Yawman-Erbe separable units" (Ikea-esque assembled furnishing of the 1930's), copies of "Poor Richard publications" "containing the public secrets of efficiency" resting on "the steel, the oak, the glass" (66). The language employed is highly visual, textured. Rather than complete objects, knowledge of a pre-existing visuals, on the part of the reader, is assumed and our eye glides over the details as though skimming a painting before us: "glass" invokes the clear shimmer, followed by the dull sheen of "steel," we palm the warm bronze "dromios" and trace the intricate "Sèvres china" patterns. Rather than describing, the

image is enacted through visual travel across the forms; a visual of each space is conjured before the eye. A state of observation established, a voice accompanies each visual providing running commentary coolly directing our aesthetic interest. “One’s style is not lost in such simplicity” intones the voice regarding the compact deal table. “One has one’s preference in bad furniture” quips the speaker regarding the “composite Yawman-Erbe” “and this is not one’s choice.” We find ourselves drifting from living room to diorama, to painting, from possessions owned, to disinterested contemplation of furnishings; up and down, we run upon the ladder of aesthetic hierarchy. Museum objects are observed dispassionately, domestic objects judgmentally.

A passage quoted by Moore from a 1921 issue of *Vogue* magazine corroborates and intermixes the two aesthetic perspectives, complicating the reading in interesting ways. The connection to *Vogue* lends the possibility of reading the poem, at least in part, as an article about furniture settings, outlining their merits to shoppers considering redecorating. The snobby tone Moore imitates is the voice of a pretentious cosmopolitan writer advising a preference for “simplicity,” or “so old fashionable” but “composite Yawman-Erbe” is never “one’s choice.” The allusion to living room set complicates the reading of the spaces as dioramas by turning them into advertisements or window displays. By the twentieth century the department store had replaced the market in American cities which, according to cultural historian William Leach, fundamentally altered the shopping experience by introducing goods displayed in glass cases and windows; rather than interacting with the goods the emphasis was shifted to visual spectacle. Whether flipping through the pages of merchandise in a magazine or admiring items in a shop window “the reader [is] on the outside,” as critic Victoria Bazin, tells us “looking in...gazing longingly at an object that will always be out of reach” (66). Likewise, objects in a museum are out of reach and not permitted to be touched. The urbane voice offering expert opinion takes on

the role of aesthetic critic modulating between artistic criticism and domestic advice for Manhattan socialites. The correlation of viewing art as shopping alternately reduces the status of art to a mundane commodity item and elevates domestic items to the status of art depending on the perspective one chooses to take. The paradox of dual distinction begins to answer the question of how Moore negotiates mundane and museum objects. Moore embraces this sort of cultural indeterminacy. We see this indeterminacy again in her poem “When I Buy Pictures”:

“when I look at that of which I may regard myself as the/ imaginary possessor, I fix upon what would give me pleasure in my average moments.” Imagining possession is the definition of window shopping. The emphasis upon average moments suggests looking for objects with these aspects of domestic usefulness linking them to ordinary life. The speaker looks about notices an “old thing, the mediæval decorated/ hat-box,” “a square of parquetry” and “letters standing well apart upon a parchment-like expanse” – domestic storage, flooring and reading material.

Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux confirms Moore’s preference for “objects that didn’t settle comfortably into their place in museums; she liked especially, those that might not be considered ‘art,’ or that come trailing evidence of domestic use: Chinese plates, a glass bottle, a pair of candlesticks...a carriage from Sweden” (88). All objects once useful but, due to age and historical significance, now removed from life into the glass housing of the museum. In her discussion of Moore’s poetry, Loizeaux helpfully reminds us “the home was, after, all where art was displayed before the founding of public art museums in the eighteenth century” (108). So, it would seem, you can take the art out of the home but you can’t take the home out of the art. Or in the case of Moore you turn the home back into a museum by donating your living room to the Rosenbach. For Moore, art is the things that we have in our surroundings but ironically are not considered art until they are taken away and we no longer have them. Possession relinquished to

institutional authority allows the object to shift from personal display to art display; however, as I will discuss, Moore challenges institutional acquisition of objects for display in various ways.

Display is a crucial aspect of Moore's definition of art. The notion of display is a central concept at work in "When I Buy Pictures," since art "must be 'lit with piercing glances'" and lighting is a key element in the display of any piece of art. "Piercing glances" not only refers to lighting but the penetrating gaze of the discerning viewer, therefore illumination may occur any time a mindful gaze is cast upon an object – a key concept to bear in mind as we move forward. The home is a location for display of individual objects and functions as a display itself with grouped objects forming a composition. The context of the home provides the conditions for a potentially very intimate display but that is not what the reader is being treated to in "People's Surroundings." The line borrowed from *Vogue* begins to enlighten us as to why that is not happening. The excerpted line reads: "a setting must not have the air of being one." The line is from an article detailing instructions to posh gentlemen readers on how to be "The Perfect Host" layering the aspect of performance on top of display. Besides advice on what "costume" to wear when pouring tea and the "grace" a cigarette lends "to the gesture of the man" the article explains the "prepared setting" for the party "must, of course, never have the air of being one":

The first of your guests to arrive must feel at the same time the impression of surprising you and of being waited for and expected. A *négligée* without negligence. That is the rule. The lamps should be lighted, but not all of them, just enough so that one may see clearly, yet not lose the impression of intimacy. (De Miomandre 62)

Restoring the quoted line to its original context brings into the poem the paradox of the living environment functioning as theater, being lit for staged intimacy, attended by feigned negligence

and expected surprise - an imperfect perfection. And of course, a stage is just another type of exhibition. No matter how perfectly crafted the living room scene is there is a desire for a degree of imperfection to enter the arrangement to breath into it a sense of authentic life. As an aesthetic ideal, perfection has a coldness to it, a sterility, that can only be cured by a dash of the warm disorder of life. Perhaps the inclusion of this line is meant to warn us, to prompt startled glances as we assess our surroundings. It could be a warning to Moore herself, a mantra warding against the trap of staged perfection lest it creep stealthily into the poem. We encounter the same conflict with staged imperfection in Dutch still life.

Attending the Object Through Visual Touch

While the preliminary sense is that Dutch artists Heda and Claesz. simply had the good fortune to stumble across delightfully disheveled meal tables repeatedly, the reality is the works are studious reenactments of the organic chaos of recently abandoned comestibles. This is not a feat easily achieved. Commenting on the difficulty of accomplishing this task Bryson relates:

Because rhopography is committed to looking closely at what is usually disregarded, it can experience extraordinary difficulty in registering the everydayness of the everyday – what it is actually like to inhabit ‘low-plane reality’, without departing from that into a re-assertion of painting’s own powers and ambition, or into an overfocused and obsessional vision that ends by making the everyday life seem unreal and hyper-real at the same time. (91)

The paintings of Heda and Claesz come dangerously close to the unreality of hyper-real due to their photorealistic quality. The dust of flour is visible on the bread roll, the spongy semi-translucent skin of the lemon glows, and each highlight on metal and glass twinkles in just the right spot – results in a sense of disbelief that the meal is not sitting directly in front of us and even if it were, we might question whether our eyes could see as much detail as is available in the painting. Nonetheless, there is a persistent sense of authenticity experienced when viewing the works which is a testament to their success. The distribution of objects adheres to the organic impulses which guide their placement and use during a meal. The authenticity is derived from disorderly spirit of genuine use, or as Roland Barthes says in his 1972 essay “*The World as Object*,” all objects are coated in “the sleek, firm film of use.” Elaborating on the nature of Dutch still life paintings Barthes continues “the units of nourishment are always destroyed as still lifes and restored as moments of a domestic chronos; whether it is the crisp greenness of cucumbers or the pallor of plucked fowls, everywhere the object offers man its utilized aspect, not its principal form” (6-7). While Barthes maintains a somewhat critical position towards the aspect of utilization, equating viewing the painting to performing an audit of property (7), nonetheless it is this character of use which imbues the works with the spirit of the genuine. Rather than strictly exercises in rendering aesthetic forms the works revel in the daily ritual of use. Fish chopped into bites, glasses of frothy beer, peeled lemons and cracked walnuts all encourage drinking and eating. Rather than pure admiration of form, form is admired for its use. Beauty distilled in the form of a tool. Usefulness makes the paintings warm habitats relieved from the cold disinterest of formal specimens. By means of utilization Barthes finds “men inscribe themselves upon space, immediately covering it with familiar gestures, memories, customs and intentions...as soon as they can they arrange their objects in space as in a room; everything in them tends

toward the habitat pure and simple: it is their heaven.” Rather than being dead these objects in Dutch still life, perched, quivering on the edge of use remain alive; mundane vessels brimming with familiar kinetic energy of life. The warmth of daily touch rests heavily upon the objects inviting the viewer to pick up and resume using them.

Like the soft beige of the painting, the space of Moore’s poems forms a habitus in which the objects of the poem live. Moore’s tone layers the warm custom of familiarity upon the objects: the hat-box causally referred to as “the old thing,” brought down from an attic numerous times, the wrist of Adam taken with the nonchalance of siblings. We nod our heads in agreement “that a good break is important as a good motor” (67) and grin knowingly at “plain American which cats and dogs can read!” (57) because that phrase, that language is part of our psyche as well. Just as cups and codfish exhibit the proud sheen of use in the paintings, Moore imports text fragments from magazine clips, advertisements, other poets and pamphlets, recasting and highlighting pieces of text fresh from the labor of crafting meaning within the world. Bracketed in quotations the extracted pieces of text are slick with the film of linguistic usage. In the poem “An Octopus” the snowy peak of Mount Rainier takes on the peculiar aquatic characteristics of the tentacle’d creature “picking periwinkles from the cracks” and “hover[ing] forward ‘spider fashion on its arms.’” (125) The science article excerpts, adroitly informing before, gain a strange and otherworld beauty within the poetic habitus that is not detracted from but rather enjoyably enhanced by the previous service in a magazine article. Like stones reused from another building, words are admired not just for their form for their ongoing usefulness as tools. And like most tools, this is not the first time those particular words have been used, a fact that Moore wants the reader to know, as evidenced by the quotation marks and indexical references. The words in poems have been used in ordinary “business documents and school books” (72);

the language of poetry, rather than precious and elevated, is composed of the same stalwart hardtack of regular communication. Deliberately pulling that into the poem, forces us to reconsider electric bills and park brochures the way Dutch artists forced the likes of De Lairese to confront plates of herring and cabbage. Reconstituted in the habitus of the poem the reused words layer “gestures, memories, customs and intentions” Barthes discusses, warming the habitat with a history of use. Moore’s inscription of familiar within the habitus of the poem creates a space that is at once familiar yet, just the paintings do, reinvigorates our attention to the familiar, refreshing our experience with it.

Despite the spirit of utilization, there is an obvious visual strategy at work in the staged imperfection arranging the objects in the paintings. Flat silver platters, curling lemon peels and thick bread rolls accumulate, spilling over the hills of napkins, midsize decanters and overturned chalices, towards the center, peaking in a crescendo of gilt tea urn and glowing wine goblet. Each pyramidal arrangement has a clear climax. The familiar warmth of use draws us in, the exquisite detail, and relatively small scale of the panels, pull us in still close to better see the



Figure 2 Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with a Gilt Cup*. 1635. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

glittering detritus. Commenting on the urge to draw near to the canvas, in *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, art historian, Hanneke Grootenboer remarks:

the objects, a little over life-size, are near to us, indeed assume *the vicinity of the viewer, who is invited to look from an arm's-length distance*. This perspectival configuration anticipates not only a coming close, but a being close of the viewer yet we are confronted with an insurmountable distance, an awareness that the space from which we look is not the space reflected in our eyes. (35 emphasis mine)

Although we are in close proximity, we are not able to enter the space or interact with it beyond a visual level. We are paradoxically inside a space and outside it at the same time. We, like Moore, are confined to “imaginary possession.” The preliminary perception of sight is a condition of distance that observes form without touch, however; further examination reveals the level of possession rendered through sight to be far more profound. A deeply intimate connection with objects viewed is facilitated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s compelling theory of visible touch. In his posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, he redefines the concept of perception through the reflexivity of touch transforming the dimension of distance into a viscous gel he defines as “flesh.” Under this theory, the visible is intertwined with the tangible and vice versa. Merleau-Ponty explains:

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted

in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes- even more, every displacement of my body- has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. (134)

Within this model the two senses are “mapped” onto one another, overlaid upon one another but not merged, that is, they operate separately but in tandem. Looking occurs within physical space, generated from a physical presence which links it to the physical objects looked upon. The things in our surroundings are “touched” by the tissue of our gaze and reciprocate that touch. Distance becomes an infinite “thickness” which “lines” the objects gazed upon. The intermixing of the senses allows for the physicality of sight; the physical organ equipped with retina and nerves, touches and is touched by the space it looks into. When looking becomes touching distance becomes paradoxically synonymous with proximity —vision wading through the glutinous substance of space. Something touched simultaneously touches back and touch reflexively experiences itself touching, like a hand resting upon another. We are enveloped within the web of viscous sight. Rather than the condition of distance causing a separation, as suggested earlier by Bazin, the imaginary possession of sight is found to possess an inherent sensuality; it swarms all over the object, caressing, grasping, exacting a keen pleasure though sight. There is a sense of touching when looking at Claesz.’s painting *Still Life with Gilt Cup*, of running one’s fingers along the patterned metal and clear globules dotting the goblet. We can very nearly taste the dry amber filling the glass, feel the sharp edge of oyster shell and the smooth handle of the knife.

Claesz.'s *Little Breakfast*, exemplifies, Grootenboer tells us, the notion visual touch. The viewpoint of *Little Breakfast*:

is so close to the pictorial plane that the viewer's gaze crosses a boundary, or rather blurs the distinction between the space of the viewer and picture...The ridges of the glass, the smoothness of the pewter plate, and the crust of the roll are executed by Claesz. so brilliantly that we can "see" their touch. We see how the texture of the bread or the knife feels without there being a texture other than the paint on the panel. We can feel the paint on the panel, while seeing the texture of the bread or the knife. (40)

However, one thing we cannot do, according to Grootenboer, is visually penetrate the shallow space of the canvas. We can "caress the painted objects with our gaze, enveloping them in the thickness of depth and the flesh of look...we see a distance that is near, indeed a distance that is synonymous with proximity, a glimpse of the flesh." The soft haze of warm brown background is the embodiment of the contradiction of something that is both near and far allowing us to both look into a space and touch the space we look into. The pictures and art objects Moore "buys" in the museum are initially distant but ultimately brought close, intimately possessed through vision. The reader of the poem sees the medieval hat-box decorated with "hounds, with waists diminishing like the waist of the hourglass" (59) and, like the studded cup and crusty bread in Claesz's painting, we content ourselves with feeling over the object through sight, unable to press past the shallow space of the ivory page and enter the space the objects inhabit. The cryptic enjoinder to "acknowledge the spiritual forces which have made [the object]" with which the poems ends leads us to query how might we fulfill that directive? For Moore that

acknowledgement is accomplished through vision and it is an on-going process, never truly complete.

To understand what it means to continuously approach an object through the gaze, I turn to Heidegger's essay titled "The Thing" in which he seeks to uncover the essence of things. He refers to the character of a thing as its "thingness" and to get at a thing's "thingness" he explores the concept of "nearness": "Near to us is what we usually call things," writes Heidegger. For his discussion he adopts as his object a jug (incidentally, an object frequently found in still life paintings). The character of the vessel does not lie in the material with which it is crafted, nor the substance it may be filled with but, is found in the void, the emptiness, the jug holds. Therefore, what we see as we approach the jug, is a re-presentation of the "thingness." No matter how far or how close, there is always a degree of separation; something in the object that cannot reach us. We can only be near to the object and paradoxically nearness is characterized by "farness," "nearness preserves farness. Preserving farness, nearness presences nearness in nearing that farness." (175) As we cannot encounter nearness directly we succeed in reaching it by "attending to what is near." (164) However, Heidegger clarifies "the thing is not 'in' nearness, 'in' proximity, as if nearness were a container. Nearness is at work in bringing near, as the thinging of the thing." (175) The essence of the thing is not invisible but rather is caught in a perpetual process of bringing near; the object is not present but is *presencing*. The process of bringing near is never finished; the object is never fixed but rather in a continuous state of bringing near. The essence of the object flickers like a candle before the attendant eyes of the viewer as we acknowledge "the spiritual forces" (as Moore instructs) of the thing through nearness. Grootenboer finds the process of "bringing near" manifests in the paintings of Claesz.:

Not only are the objects proximate, but we have to come near ourselves, and it is in the process of bringing near that we become aware of the fact that these objects, and this painting, are within reach of our own body. The positioning of the painting on the one side and of us on the other is not a static but an *active moment* whereby we become proximate to each other.

(41 emphasis mine)

Viewing the painting requires nearness in order to fully take in the rich level of detail, and that very nearness results in a physical relationship with the objects as we literally step up and take our place at the vacant seat at the table. Silvered bites of smelt are lined up on the plate and the end of the knife protrudes slightly over table edge, into our space. Perhaps there is even a sensation in our fingers, curling to grip the cool metal utensil. Details indicate engagement in the process of nearness as they are only visible when we get close.

Likewise, the process of nearness is engaged by Moore through the application of attentive gaze in her poetry. Moore steps up close to the objects in the poems assiduously examines the details, guiding and bringing the eyes of her reader into proximity. Observing the top of Mount Rainier we find the color a spectrum of shades “indigo, pea-green, blue-green, and turquoise... cliffs the color of the clouds, of petrified white vapor” The surface is “composed of calcium, gems and alabaster pillars, / topaz, tourmaline crystals and amethyst quartz,” it is “a mountain with those graceful lines which prove it a volcano” (126). On top of the mountain live “bears, elk, deer, wolves, goats”, it is “the property of the exacting porcupine.” The “thing” that is a mountain top upon examination splinters into a plethora of things, lines and colors: Moore’s things are made of things. To attend to a thing is to discover still more things within, each of which require attending to. The things of Moore also conspire to form portraits. In “Those

Various Scalpels” the title implying dissection a portrait is assembled through vivid details of objects: “cheeks,” “rosettes of blood on the stone floors of French chateaux” a hand is “a bundle of lances all alike, partly hid by emeralds from / Persia” (104). Resembling the shining collection of objects in a painting the poem’s portrait is a:

collection of half a dozen little objects
made fine
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragon fly blue; a
lemon, a
pear
and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a
magnificent square
cathedral of uniform
and at the same time, a diverse appearance (104)

Captured within the poem, the portrait of an individual is broken down leaving us a shelf of objects constituting an individual rather than a face and yet bright colors, scented with fruit “these things are rich / instruments” assembling a detailed portrait through things. Within the essence of things we locate the essence of the individual, of humanity itself. Moore formulates an intimate connection between people and things.

Through physical proximity Moore strives for a totalizing connection with her reader – mind and body. We take up physical position next to the “silver fence protecting Adam’s grave” and join “Michael taking / Adam by the wrist” fingers encircling the slender joint (59). We count the pages of the “Poor Richard publication,” noting “paper so thin that one thousand four hundred and twenty pages make one inch” (66). The gentle admonishment “too stern an

intellectual emphasis upon this quality or that, / detracts from one's enjoyment" prods us into recollecting our physical presence before the object prompting us to stay present within the moment, to absorb the experience. Engaging intellect alone is insufficient. Moore contrasts a purely intellectual response to an object against the physical instinct that can "like trout, smell what is coming" (67). The self-assured equilibrium of expertise based in fact is pleasantly destabilized by soothing "cool sirs with explicit sensory apparatus of common sense." Physically occupying space before the object transcends intellectual apprehension entering the amorphous, unquantifiable pleasure of "average" moments. The poem "An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish" physicality precedes aesthetic appreciation— thirst, before art.

Here we have thirst

And patience from the first,

And art, as in a wave held up for us to see

In its essential perpendicularity (62)

We drink from the sturdy prism with our eyes. Thirst also alludes to the essence of the thing: the emptiness of the vessel which can hold a liquid must be acknowledged first before even considering the "wave held up." We patiently thirst for the object's "essential perpendicularity." The process of nearing, never complete, the intense "spectrum" of the fish "scales turn aside the sun's sword" and our eyes, "with their polish" forcing us to circle back around and attend once more. Reaffirming physicality through nearness levels an incalculable variable upon the viewing experience which disrupts simplistic object-information packaging - domestic or museum - making "things" more than the sum total of their parts.

Overturning Hierarchy and Resisting Permanency

Moore directly confronts the leveling of permanent systems of order and meaning upon, objects, occurring in museums in particular. Once subsumed and systematized, objects cease to evolve, instead becoming labeled, defined, and “embalmed,” within the museum structure. She addresses this issue in her poem “To Statecraft Embalmed”:

There is nothing to be said for you. Guard
Your Secret. Conceal it under your hard
Plumage, necromancer.

O

Bird, whose tents were ‘awnings of Egyptian
Yarn,’ shall Justice’ faint, zigzag inscription—
Leaning like a dancer—
Show the pulse of its once vivid sovereignty?

...

Sarcophagus, you wind

Snow

Silence round us and with moribund talk,
Half limping and half ladified, you stalk
About. Ibis, we find

No

Virtue in you—alive and yet so dumb.
Discreet behavior is not now the sum
of statesmanlike good sense. (71)

Once “leaning like a dancer” in the wind, the regal Egyptian tents are now still, an ornamental zigzag all that remains to suggest the pulsing life that once fluttered the “awnings.” The cold silence of the sarcophagus speaks only of death, the life that crafted it no longer in evidence; the vibrant life behind the penumbral-gold objects is guarded by the necromancer of museum statecraft. Necromancers commune with the dead so to refer to statecraft as necromancy boldly declares the dead state of the objects on display. However, Moore is a bit of necromancer herself. Within the poem the Egyptian bird deity “Ibis” lurches to life, like a reanimated corpse, to stalk about “half limping” “half ladified,” emasculated in the “snow silence,” dumbstruck by the “discreet behavior” of the cold institutional space that now purports to sum up his existence. For Moore objects are not so easily divested of the life which animated them: “As if a death mask ever could replace / Life’s faulty excellence!” Imperfect life is once again preferred to the cold hardness of perfection. The placid features of the sarcophagus are somehow incomplete, stripped of the conditions which gave rise to them. Long before they were museum artifacts, these Egyptian relics were the intimate diurnal tools of royalty. Moore’s poetry resists their transformation into dead artifacts. The poem challenges the deadening classification placing these objects firmly within the past. The inherent conflict in embalming objects peaks in an identity crisis:

...the wrenched distortion
of suicidal dreams

Go

Staggering toward itself and with its bill, attack its own identity, until
Foe seems friend and friend seems

Foe. (71)

Locked in the distorted reality of a waking nightmare, Ibis turns his sharp beak upon himself illustrating the conflicted state of the artifact removed from time. Moore's poem resists the embalming effect of the institution attempting an "incarnation of dead grace" but like most spells in necromancy the reanimated object is horrified by itself and seeks its own demise as a means of escape. This internal conflict is tantamount to an admission by Moore that the conflict of permanence is not so easily resolved. Restoring life to ancient artifacts is no simple matter for they are inextricably linked to a past and purpose not concurrent with the present world and cannot simply be raised from the dead. We must approach them on their terms, as a mixture of life and death, which perversely aligns with all living beings, as we are all simultaneously alive and dying. Nearing the essence of an object, we obliquely approach the essence of the human condition. By establishing the conflict of the embalmed object, the artifacts in this poem are at once frozen yet pulsing with remembered life, expressing discontent with stillness.

The objects in still-life paintings are engaged in a similar dilemma. The tangible counterparts long since gone, eaten or rotted, the representation lives on in an eternal present. Fixed in place, awaiting consumption that will never come, the objects live on in a curious frozen afterlife, useful no longer, now valued as aesthetic objects mapping out a meal from long ago. In the absolute stillness, we can faintly hear the distant clanking of glass and silver of the meal in progress before it was suddenly halted as though a spell were cast and all guests had vanished without a trace leaving bewildered objects behind. The stillness is interrupted only by the eager touch of eyes roaming over the crystal and linen surfaces.

Removed from time, the former life of the objects, in poem and painting, clash with the institutional audacity casually freezing them in place. The perpetual motion of objects paradoxically both dead and alive keeps the full immobility of death at bay.

Within Moore's poems we witness the struggle of objects to resist the embalming effect of permanence. To write poems about animals in dioramas – living systems which have been stilled - and domestic relics in museums – seldom handled or moved about – and not commit them to yet another form a paralytic stillness, requires deft handling of the concept of permanence. The notion of permanence is disrupted early on "People's Surroundings." In addition to the first three domestic spaces, there is one exterior domestic space in the poem which recalls the garden of an old English estate: we pass through the "hand-forged gates" to a view of "peacocks" "ivory ground" "pierced iron shadows of cedars" (108) We observe "Chinese carved glass," and "old Waterford" alongside elegantly spiraled shrubs:

lettered ladies; landscape gardening twisted into perma-
nence: (108)

In the printing of the poem, as shown here, the word permanence is broken running out of space at the end of the page. While the break is ostensibly accidental, Moore permitted it to rupture the word "permanence" – coyly undermining the word's meaning, breaking it anew each time the word is read. The break of permanence is followed by stretching the coiled cypress out in "straight lines over such great distances as one finds in Utah / or in Texas" invoking a sense of sudden release from a cramped position. The allowance of the break and subsequent reshaping of permanence aligns with scholar Karin Roffman's analysis of Moore's sentiments towards the museum, noting that there is "something oppressive in any idea of a museum as a permanent 'formidable' structure complete within it-self" (113), the comment itself suggesting a closed circuit form. Placed within a classical estate, permanence is clearly being associated with traditional old world values and thinking, and while not portrayed negatively, Moore resists, true

to Modernist from, the antiquated ideals of lasting, unchanging order, snapping it, delicately, in half. Moore subtly undercuts permanence and exposes organizational systems which employ it.

In line with the legend of the tower in the poem, answers are not gained until protocol is broken, the system in place, disrupted. In the story, the sinister aristocrat Bluebeard gives his seventh wife the keys with permission to open any door, save one. Needless to say, she disobeys, unlocks the forbidden door and discovers the corpses of the six previous wives – knowledge comes at a price. The grim tale reinforces the inherently difficult and uncomfortable process of personally acquiring knowledge but moreover emphasizes once more the type of vision Moore advocates. The skeletons of the dead wives mischievously play off of Moore’s mention of X-ray vision. “X-ray like inquisitive intensity upon it” reinstates the nearness of Heidegger arriving at the interior essence of the thing by attending to it. Opening doors is akin to the physicalized vision of Merleau-Ponty in which tangible objects can be opened with the tactile gaze. A grisly *nature morte* is uncovered despite the “interfering fringes of expression” of the curvilinear tower system “are but a stain on what stands out” (68) – objects, even repugnant ones, merit examination. And the system in place was disrupted to do so.

Moore observes the system of Bluebeard’s tower both up close and from a distance. Including the twisted garden landscape, Bluebeard’s tower is the second spiral figure within the poem and once again, like “perma – nence,” the spiral is broken. Bluebeard’s Tower is a real place located on the island of St. Thomas, that Moore actually saw and visited during her lifetime (Levy 195) which makes this passage an ekphrasis – a verbal rendering of a visual image. The language at this juncture in the poem is dramatically lush and colorful, fitting of a tropical locale.

And Bluebeard’s tower above the coral reefs,

The magic mousetrap closing on all points of the compass,

Capping like petrified surf, the furious azure of the bay
Where there is no dust and life is like a lemon-leaf,
A green piece of tough translucent parchment,
Where the crimson, the copper and the Chinese vermilion of
the poincianas
Set fire to the masonry and turquoise blues refute the clock;
...
tan goats with onyx ear, its lizards glittering and without
thickness
like splashes of fire and silver on the pierced turquoise of
the lattices. (109)

Color is applied in bold “splashes,” from a tube of “Chinese vermilion” oil paint, the bright “crimson” setting “fire” “to the masonry,” the tower “above the coral reefs” blazing forth like a Hudson River School painting at sunset. The “surf” is “petrified,” the still white caps frosted with the tip of a brush. Lizards, “without thickness” are flat daubs of paint “glittering” upon the “turquoise lattices.” The use of ekphrasis configures the tower as a painting at the center of the poem. Viewing it as a painting, we enter the “magic mousetrap” of Merleau-Ponty once more, engaging in close proximity with a distant landscape; “closing on all points of the compass,” Bluebeard’s tower is paradoxically everywhere at once. We find ourselves outside with a view of the entire column looming “above the coral reefs.” We visually scale the turquoise lattice assessing the forbidding tower from top to bottom. Panning back “there is neither up nor down to it; / we see the exterior and the fundamental structure.” The complete view suggests the ability to fully comprehend the tower, to see it in its totality. If we consider the tower a symbol of an

inaccessible forbidding system, transformation into a painting, allows approach and close scrutiny of said system. Furthermore, placed upon a canvas hanging on the wall, lifts the system from an all-encompassing position, making a (museum) system just another object - not of greater or lesser importance - to be examined with the same level of discerning observation and curiosity applied to all objects. Not only do we have a complete view of the tower's exterior but utilizing "X-ray vision," Moore penetrates the interior finding that "the mind of this establishment has come to the conclusion that it would be impossible to revolve about one's self too much." The system, the cylinder of the tower, is circling around itself. The spiral staircase of the tower has:

Like "an escalator," "cut the nerve of pro
-gress." (110)

As with permanence earlier, another word break is permitted here; "progress" is both literally and figuratively cut. Walking in circles, the steps of escalators, slipping beneath the motorized rubber lip, both end where they started: "there is neither up no down to it." Moore's poem finds progress is arrested when trapped in proscribed circular permanence.

Yet for all her resistance to systematized permanence, in the poetry of Moore, the fuzzy outline of system, although ever-changeable, is present. In the chaotic tabletop clutter of a Dutch still life a climax is perceived in the pyramidal composition – the visual language of the painted forms strives towards a pinnacle of visual satisfaction. Similarly, the poems of Moore, have a visual structure. The white space of the page is conscientiously broken up and fed to the reader in shapely portions. Line breaks create visual interest as well as highlighting sounds and words. In longer poems, speed increases with compact sections and fewer breaks. Long lines, chipped with small breaks, flow like cracking glacial ice in the "Octopus" Some poems in *Observations* tend

towards more overt structures such as the wave in “The Fish” and repeated shape in “To a Steam Roller” but many give way to a perspicacious search for form. The poem “People’s Surroundings” earnestly strives to represent an absence of system: segments capriciously morph from the initial discreet domestic space chunks to thin switchbacks, then denser passages describing the tower, culminating in series of cliffs riddled with sudden drops. Moore has even allowed the fate of page-length to provide word breaks, embracing felicitous cuts that serve to enhance poetic intent.

Moore’s structuring of the textual elements cannot be accounted for within grammar. It “leaves a residue of indetermination” according to Paul de Man in his essay “The Resistance to Theory” in which he addresses textual elements that are not ungrammatical, but for which grammar and logic do not provide a method of analysis. As it cannot be fully broken down, the indeterminate residue gels on top of poetic works insulating them against full analysis, preserving the moisture of the subject. For Moore this residue guards the liveliness of her subjects. The residue aids in preserving the fluctuation of objects in “People’s Surroundings” as they vacillate between mundane and museum. Moore embraces indeterminacy in both form and subject. Moreover, indeterminacy correlates with the relationship of the invisible to the visible. Alphonso Lingis, the translator of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, discusses the invisible structures which provides the “invisible axes and pivots, levels and lines of force of the visible” (lii). The invisible structures are not what we see; they are that with which, according to which, we see” (li) to which Grootenboer adds “just as grammar is not what we speak but what structures our speech” (57). We cannot speak the structure of Moore’s poems when reading them but the structure is silently shaping our reading experience. When viewing a painting our eyes apprehend the image as a whole prior to breaking down the compositional structure used to

create it. The structure of the poem is not spoken but reclines in the background quietly supporting the words upon the page. Structure is the malleable void, the unseen. Like Heidegger's thing, "it cannot be encountered directly" as it is only visible within and inseparable from the "presencing" of the visible form, rendering up what we see. The essence of things is found in the shadow of vision.

Directing the organic jumble of a finished meal, Claesz. and Heda. employ the intuitive shadow of structure to which the visual already naturally succumbs in placement. Were it not so, something akin to a gravitational issue would become apparent within the sense of weight and distribution of the objects contained in the work. In searching out the organic chaos of assembled language, feeling out the intuitive cracks and gullies- as though the poem were subject to internal gravitational pools and eddies – Moore lets the shadow of structure pull upon the poem. The deliberate attempt to collaborate with the shadow of the invisible speaks to a desire to penetrate the essence of things.

The artists of Dutch still life recognized within the mundane edibles and objects something of intrinsic value that could only be examined through recording. Objects held, used and looked at every day, yet not truly seen, caught up in the moment of daily ritual, had to be pulled out and observed separate from the act, to aesthetically appreciate the forms. Possession of the objects had to be relinquished, given over to display, before this mode of vision was possible. Stripped of contextual space, the tables of food, cups and plates, occupy a beige museum-like space: the result elevated mundane meal remnants onto a pedestal - a forcible redirection of vision towards that which is overlooked.

Like the still-life painters, Moore recognizes the value of the commonplace objects and challenges traditional aesthetic hierarchy by focusing on the mundane. She struggles against

divesting things from their origins. We see that struggle in “People’s Surroundings” where living room spaces waver between exhibit and living space, between possessions and potential purchases. She finds beauty in the mundane, feels certain of its place within art, searches it out within museum spaces, but almost hesitates to drag it into prominence fearful of snuffing its everydayness in the process of doing so. When portraying the mundane there is always a risk of “losing its qualities of the unexceptional and unassuming” (Bryson 91), losing its “everydayness”; authenticity is risked in staging the intimacy of the mundane in painting or poem. Nevertheless, Moore seeks to acknowledge and represent the spirit of the mundane, as do the Dutch still life painters, each struggling against the chilling effect of permanence which steals in once an object is packaged and systematized. Permanence is resisted by attending to things through nearness, the process never complete, the specificity of details envelops us in continuous state of observation. Visual details render up tactile sight, as through the indirectness of nearness, we approach the essence of the mundane. Still-life paintings succeed in identifying and bringing notice to the mundane, coopted into the realm of art, the life force of the objects is preserved through “the firm film of use.” Likewise, Moore preserves the life of her objects in a poetic habitus, firmly linking poetic language with the everyday tool of language. Filled with things, poem and painting, engage the reader in the process of drawing near, never complete we must continuously attend; the essence, the intrinsic beauty of things, like a flame, can only be observed, never caught and pinned down. The closer we get the more there is to see. Through “piercing glances,” constituted by tactile vision and drawing near, Moore sees into the hidden “life of things.” The museum is replete with the mundane. It is a vast collection of compositions: “captains of armies, cooks, carpenters, / cutlers, gamesters, surgeons and armourers, / lapidaries, silkmen, glovers, fiddlers and ballad-singers, / sextons of churches, dyers of black cloth, hostlers

and chimney-sweeps”— all subjects found in art, all creators making and working with commonplace objects in life. While placing mundane objects on a museum pedestal may assist us in noticing its beauty it was there all along waiting to be noticed but, it is the essential character of the mundane to avoid notice, to fail to merit notice. Drawing near to things, Moore finds the essence objects to be inextricably caught up in the “forces which have made it,” (101) the “raw” ordinary conditions which gave rise to it. The source of the beauty of the mundane is the prosaic utilitarian role within life, noticed after retraining our visual focus. Burnished through habitual use, “that which is ...genuine” glimmers in the surface.

CHAPTER 3

Beyond Ordinary - Karl Ove Knausgaard: Visual Realism to Superrealist Considerations

Art has come to be an unmade bed... Art has come to be a spectator of itself. — *Karl Ove Knausgaard*

Leaving the poetic habitus of Moore, and her domestic objects on display, we exit the museum and turn left towards unrelenting realism that pushes identifying art in “people’s surroundings” to the limit. Examination of utilitarian aesthetic objects in flux in the poetry of Moore prepares us to leave institution behind and enter aesthetic consideration of ordinary places and objects that exceed our comfort level and challenge our aesthetic perspective still more. There must be a division but, where to draw the line separating life and art becomes cloudy. The pleasure of Moore in attending to “average moments” is continued and amplified by Knausgaard to the point of surpassing the endurance of his readers.

Knausgaard continues the use of imperfect mundane tasks initiated by Austen, and like her, uses them as a primer for social interactions but then diverges using the mundane for interaction with the self – and quite often the more distasteful the task, the more profound the reflection. Knausgaard’s meticulous documentation of thought, face and place marking the canvas of mundane reality marks the passage of realism’s heritage from artist’s brush to writer’s pen.

The relentless slew of mundane, boring, repetitive chores and activities we brusquely attend to generally merit little thought. The experience of performing such tasks as driving, cleaning, making coffee, folding laundry quite often induces a sensation of auto-pilot in which we are simultaneously aware, controlling what we are doing, and absent, the mind wandering between present activities and thoughts of other places, people and things. Perhaps Virginia

Woolf best describes this sensation in her memoir *Moments of Being*, calling it the “cotton wool” “of non-being” (Woolf 70 - 71), identifying the light packing muffling the mundane. Moments of banality may not be exciting but there is a great deal of thinking, remembering, complex mental processing going on during these junctures. In the performance of tasks, one’s mental state is divided between the task at hand and cerebral musings, cogitating on what is to come, what happened earlier, current strivings and failings, and at times, simply watching one’s self preform. It is this habitual layered self-awareness that Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard taps into in his memoir, *My Struggle, Book 1*. Knausgaard seeds major life events throughout the novel like pills in a cotton-packed bottle. There is an ever present current of awareness that flows above observing and narrating life as it is lived. Understanding assembles within the realm of inner thought, allowing for a contemplative separation between consciousness and occurrence. Knausgaard putting his finger on this point of separation attempts to catch the hum of the brain on auto-pilot, to depict the inattentive layer of consciousness that generally goes unnoticed. Knausgaard’s work ponders the fuzzy moments of non-being and attempts to bring them into focus trying to pin down the surface and content of thought at its most loose and most undefined state in order to contemplate what lies beyond the pale light of idling thoughts.

The cognitive tendency to separate thought and self is also applicable to the aesthetic experience of perceiving art. In mundane and art moments alike, minute details and qualities are thoughtfully assimilated and digested. This cognitive similarity translates into the ability to perceive an aesthetic experience within mundane occurrences which ultimately throws into question the distinction between life and art. According mundane acts of cleaning, cooking, and eating with attention equal to observing a work of art blurs the distinction— a distinction that has been increasingly blurred since the onset of genre painting during the Renaissance, when the

mundane events of life were first adopted for artistic contemplation. From Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting of "The Peasant Wedding" in 1568 to the unmade bed combine of Robert Rauschenberg in 1955, the material of life has been pulled inexorably into art. Initially, it may seem surrealism is the culminating coup de grace, completing, the long-in-progress, transformation of life into art, and it is possible to view it in this way. As the barrier grows still more thin, there is, however, as I shall discuss, another way of conceiving this transformation of art into life.

The blurring of life and art is at the center of Knausgaard's explorations. In the inversion of life and art, art becomes subordinated to life. The exploration of life as a substance for art is a concept of primary importance within the art movements of realism and surrealism. In drawing content directly from life, visual artists such as Gustave Courbet and Duane Hanson, like Knausgaard, perform the familiar cognitive distancing that characterizes the experience of the mundane which, in turn, viewers of their work must also perform. Examples comparing Knausgaard with Courbet reveal a shared focus in the dilemma of the disinterested intellectual and decision to confront the mundane chores of life that appear to "waste" the time of the artist. Moving from Courbet to Hanson demonstrates the shared and continued concern of art turning towards life for content in which Knausgaard participates. Comparisons of Knausgaard with Hanson highlight visual similarities in social types depicted, dedicated documentation of surface, attention paid to mundane objects with intention to view them aesthetically and lastly, an interest in the placid states of mind during inattentive moments. With both visual artists and writer, the contextual change of recording life using art is downplayed and intentionally minimized.

The use of the mundane within art elevates common experiences where change of context results in a fundamental shift in our understanding. Artistic distillation of apparent drudgery reveals

surprising intrinsic substance. Knausgaard's decision to pull from his life experience for content, combined with his emphasis on mundane details, situates him within the movement of realism, originating in the 1800's, followed by the surrealist sculptural works of the 1960's through 1980's. Knausgaard's work is aligned with the canon of realism, participating, like visual surrealist works, in the hyper-real amplification of mundane subject-matter, positioning him as the literary inheritor of the surrealist art movement. Examination of the work of Knausgaard initiates the assessment of surrealism's function within literature.

Disinterested Intellectual and the Turn Towards Life

The realism art movement arose during the 1800's in France as a response to the widespread disconnect occurring between art and life. Rejecting the classical mythological subject matter, involving frolicking nymphs, satyrs and goddesses populating the work of Academic painters, artist Gustave Courbet, considered the father of realism, adopted everyday



Figure 3 - Gustave Courbet "The Stone-Breakers" 1850 Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

subjects situated in mundane contexts. According to art historian Lois Fichner-Rathus, his painting “The Stone-Breakers,” depicting the scene of an old man and young boy breaking stones on a roadside, was an “object of public derision. . . . So common a subject was naturally criticized by contemporary critics, who favored mythological or idealistic subjects” (449 - 450). Despite critical rejection —Courbet quoted as saying he couldn’t paint an angel because he had never seen one (Fichner-Rathus 450) — persisted in his selection of mundane subjects.

Art critic Linda Nochlin, in an article discussing the roots of contemporary new realist art movements, explains that “Courbet was accused of painting objects just as one might encounter them, without any compositional linkage, and of reducing art to the indiscriminate reproduction of the first subject to come along” (120). Declining to use “compositional linkage” suggests the pre-existing placement of the subject to be painted was used with no attempt to re-situate the person or object into a more pleasing visual arrangement. The work *The Wheat Sifters* demonstrates this rejection of classical elegance and contrived arrangement with two female workers situated on top of a pile of grain spilling out over a tarp - the general mess of their profession involving numerous bowls and spoons scattered about them along with a sleeping cat, and young boy snooping in the adjacent tarare. The composition ignores the viewer, with the lead figure facing into the canvas, glances of the other two deliberately averted. The painting exhibits a disinterestedness in orderly composition directing itself towards the disarray of life. In pointedly turning away from the fantasy of elegant and orderly art, Courbet affirms the creative process of art, like life, is messy and laborious. While the subject matter of the work is commonplace labor, it is worth noting the inherently creative act embedded within the task; the particles of grain cascading upon the white tarp invokes the painterly act of mark-making upon a canvas drawing a clear parallel between mundane labor and artistic labor. Rather than a separate

and sacred act, creative labor is situated on par with other typical forms of manual labor. The objective, as Nochlin goes on to say, is “the ordinariness of the artistic statement, or even its ugliness, is precisely the result of trying to get at how things actually are in a specific time and place, rather than how they might or should be” (120 -121). The struggle to get at how things are logically falls upon the ordinary and at times unattractive material, from working, resting, eating and sleeping, that comprises the bulk of human existence. Early realist paintings set the precedent and tone for constituting a visual equivalent with, and mining of, the mundane and, if not forming a deeper understanding, at the very least connecting with life experiences. Later artists will continue this tradition ultimately far exceeding their predecessors in the appearance of reality achieved.

Discussion of the work of Courbet reveals numerous creative parallels with that of Knausgaard. Nochlin’s critical commentary leveled upon Courbet is easily transposed to Knausgaard as we find in his work that “ordinariness...or even...ugliness” is also part of his point. Knausgaard shares in Courbet’s struggle to “get at how things are” and the need to turn towards unappealing or bland material to get there. Both writer and artist ranks creative labor alongside the drudgery of manual labor and the messiness of life. Courbet and Knausgaard question philosophical traditions that place art on a pedestal and turn art into something sacred, fragile and separate from life.

While Knausgaard’s style has more in common with the hyper realism of later artists, early on in the memoir he establishes himself within the cannon of realism. In a scene reminiscent of Courbet’s “Stone-breakers,” Knausgaard’s first portrait of his father places the father in the “vegetable plot” of the author’s childhood home “lunging at a boulder with a sledgehammer.” Knausgaard continues “painting” into the scene describing “the hollow” as

“only a few meters, deep, the black soil he has dug up and is standing on together with the dense clump of rowan trees growing beyond the fence behind him cause the twilight to deepen. As he straightens up and turns to me, his face is almost completely shrouded in darkness” (8). Face, landscape, and action are grasped as a singular whole up to this point. The lumping together of boulder-breaking and father in this segment brings to mind a criticism Courbet received: “He makes his stones as important as his stone breakers,” (Nochlin 120). Likewise, Knausgaard’s trivial “stones” share equal importance with principle protagonists and events.

Knausgaard spends a great deal of time railing against the trivial “stones” of domesticity and by doing so emphasizes them, thereby increasing their importance. He expresses his frustration with the seeming trivial aspects of life, trying to find the “solitude” he needs to satisfy his stated goal of “writing something exceptional” (32), but finding himself overwhelmed by the “superior force” (32) of caring and cleaning up after his children. We find similar circumstances, in the casual disarray of Courbet’s “Portrait of P.-J. Proudhon of 1865,” depicting the distracted philosopher in rumpled clothing sitting with books and papers, turned away from his two daughters at play. Mme. Proudhon’s absence is indicated by a basket of mending on a nearby chair. Within this tranquil moment we find mirrored the conflict of Knausgaard - the disinterest of the intellectual in domesticity. However reluctantly, domestic duties are still performed by each nonetheless. Proudhon’s supervision of the two girls is through physical proximity alone as his mind is clearly elsewhere. The portrait of Proudhon foreshadows yet pales compared with the baldly casual and harsh portrait Knausgaard provides of himself and his children in moments



Figure 4 - Gustave Courbet "Portrait of P.-J. Proudhon" 1865 Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

sans maternal assistance. Mentally distracted, like Proudhon, Knausgaard is eager to shuttle his two daughters off to daycare allowing him to return to his intellectual pursuits.

It is a question of *getting through* the morning, the three hours of diapers that have to be changed, clothes that have to be put on, breakfast that has to be served, faces that have to be washed, hair that has to be combed and pinned up, teeth that have to be brushed, squabbles that have to be averted, rompers and boots that have to be wriggled into, before I, with the collapsible double stroller, in one hand and nudging the two small girls forward with the other, step into the elevator, which as often as not resounds to the noise of shoving and shouting on its descent, and into the hall, where I ease them into the stroller, put on their hats and mittens...and deliver them to the nursery ten minutes later, whereupon I have the next five hours for writing until the *mandatory* routines for the children resume. (32, emphasis mine.)

Comparatively, Courbet's portrait is idealistic next to this exhausting itemized representation. While Proudhon sits lost in intellectual reverie, two well-behaved daughters at play nearby, Knausgaard entirely occupied with grooming, dressing, feeding, scolding and transporting two small girls does not have luxury of musing while in the presence of his children. This portrait of himself and his two daughters is created after the fact when they are not around. Yet, during his "five hours" of reprieve it's as if the girls are still there as the chaos of caring for them is clearly still on his mind hindering his ability to mentally transition to other thoughts. So, while both portraits illustrate the disinterest of the scholar in domesticity, Knausgaard, by including the typical disorder of caring for children, achieves a greater degree of realism surpassing Courbet, and by doing so emphasizes the importance of mundane acts within his art. Each portrait, makes use of "specific context, texture and density essential simply to being at a concrete historical moment" (Nochlin 121). As opposed to metaphor and symbolism found in romantic and symbolist art, the items depicted are all related to one another through "metonymy (the linking together of elements by contiguity)" (Nochlin 121). The books and hat belong to Proudhon because they are placed near him, as are the children. The black shoes stand out, but not because they hold special significance; they are simply of interest as shoes Proudhon happened to be wearing on that overcast day. "Wriggling into rompers and boots" and carrying the "collapsible double stroller" are significant as laborious mundane details of the morning routine. Rather than symbolic or coded intention, these portraits are crafted to express the straightforward reality of a particular moment in time. There is no hidden agenda. A banal morning raising children with the general mess of life tumbling about it is sufficient in and of itself.

The seeming peaceful equilibrium represented between work and family found in *Portrait...* is something Knausgaard longs for but cannot seem to achieve: "Time is slipping

away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I...do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children in play areas, bring them home, undress them, bathe them, ... tidy up...It is a struggle..." (32). Knausgaard's dilemma resonates with the question embedded within the pensive gaze of Proudhon, sitting on front porch steps in the painting, and a question Knausgaard identifies: "the question of meaning." Why "isn't it enough?" (35). Why is the "meaning [his children] produce insufficient to fulfill a whole life"? (36). To find the answer, like Courbet, Knausgaard turns to the unembellished jumble of life for answers. Submitting to the "chaos" of life Knausgaard embraces the reality "of three hours of diapers," "paying bills," and "howling" children, along with rest of his assorted life experiences, as a source for content.

Courbet's painting "The Painter's Studio" (1854) serves as an excellent reminder that the artist, writer or painter, engaged in creative work, is never truly alone. The canvas depicts Courbet at work upon a landscape in his studio surrounded by a broad assortment of individuals. Interpretations of the piece are myriad and tend towards elaborate and over-wrought existential political musings. Setting aside symbolic and political motivations, at bottom, the piece is an artist's studio filled with an imagined host of individuals. Though physically empty, the studio teems with the entire cast of the artist's life swirling about him, a nude woman leans over the shoulder, (taking up the roles of lover, muse and model all at once), a small boy stares intently at the artist, (even absent children clamor for mental attention), a white cat cavorts upon the floor, creditors, dealers, shareholders, merchants, friends, priests, neighbors and more hang in the wings. The creative act is thoroughly permeated with life, not separate or above it. The "solitude," the great "swathes of loneliness" (32), Knausgaard longs for are a fantasy he surrenders for when he is alone he is writing about the very life he claims he wants to escape

from. Alone in his studio, Courbet is hemmed in by the people of everyday life on all sides: “It’s the whole world coming to me to be painted” he declares (Musée d’Orsay.fr). By grafting his writing onto life, Knausgaard exhibits the same disinterestedness in art for the sake of art, turning his art upon life. The question becomes, the goal of uncovering latent meaning behind the chores of life. Or are they simply meaningful in some way in and of themselves? While tied to a pioneer of realism, it is Knausgaard’s use and emphasis upon mundane details that ultimately move him beyond realism, participating in the hyper-realism of the surrealist art movement.

Superrealism and Knausgaard

Early critics originally referred to surrealist works as “new realism” as they endeavored to account for the more visually “real” quality, far exceeding previous works of “realism.” Figurative sculptures by Duane Hanson and John De Andrea surpassed expectations for imitation of the human body with life-cast polyester and fiber glass, polychromed figures, rendering luminous skin, hair and features so convincing one almost expects to catch them in a breath. “Pygmalion is back in business,” critic Kim Levin commented regarding the works, referring to the Greek myth in which a sculptor’s creation came to life. Grappling with the super “real” sculptural works, critic Joseph Masheck, writes “with an ostensibly styleless and baldly descriptive art upon us, we seem uncertain how to apply the term realism” (188). The dilemma of Masheck resonates with the tone of the dilemma of critics faced with the work of Knausgaard. “It is peculiarly difficult to get a grip on what makes the book so compelling,” writes book critic Hari Kunzru, “because much of it appears painfully banal. It is boring, in the way life is boring,

and somehow, almost perversely, that is a surprising thing to see on the page.” Likewise, superrealist works seem “designed to frustrate criticism,” continues Masheck, and with the ambivalence of Knausgaard, “hyper-realist sculptures couldn’t care less whether we find them bad art or not even art at all” (190). But, at bottom, “no matter how ‘real’” Knausgaard and superrealist works are “still art and, hence, somehow different from the reality of life” (Masheck 188). This distancing occurring between the super real recreation of reality corresponds with the previously discussed natural cognitive distancing that occurs between individual consciousness and the apprehension of life experience. Like realism before it, superrealist works examine the undistorted, unembellished forms of life. This dynamic accounts for the “more direct access to the world” accorded superrealism by Masheck: “In true realism, art is released from its limit as a mere analogue to reality and is permitted to regain continuity with the live concerns of mankind” (211). In the context of realism, “live concerns” is taken to mean the day-to-day concerns of a lived existence. Discussion of higher order philosophical and political concerns must inevitably give way to the ordinary “needs of the moment...trump[ing] promises of the future” (Knausgaard 19); this piece of wisdom relayed to us by Knausgaard relaying his inability as a child to conserve his glass of milk till the end of the meal, requiring copious sips to swallow the un-liked sardine sandwich. We go to work to pay the bills, cook dinner, vacuum the house, and drive our children to soccer matches; the “live concerns” of just getting through the day often absorb our focus leaving no room for tomorrow. By approximating reality as closely as possible, artists such as Hanson and Knausgaard attempt to penetrate the cotton veil of the mundane.

While aspects of other superrealist artists resonate with the work of Knausgaard, out of all them, the work of Hanson in particular shares a special affinity with Knausgaard. The two share an obsession with seizing hold of life through the crafting of exactly thorough records

of ordinary lived experience. For Hanson “the figure must seem to embody life” explains critic Kirk Varnedoe. “Whole ensembles of personal clothing” are acquired to “incorporate the model’s identities into the final figure” (Varnedoe 18- 21). Using clothing worn by the actual model adds the essence of personal choice, sweat, and fabric stretch of the individual lending an authenticity obtainable in no other manner. Socks slipping, trousers taut with stride, stained shirts, rumpled blouses - each bespeak the kinetic energy of arrested motion - life paused. Hanson captures a cast of familiar unidealized persons focusing on “middle or lower-class people” in “blue collar service jobs, small business and diner eating,” “neither grotesque nor picturesque” (Varnedoe 11). Ordinary people with ordinary jobs: a construction worker at lunch, janitors, athletes, elderly shoppers, obese tourists in clashing patterns: the act of simply existing offers sufficient cause for distilling their likeness.

Visual similarities between Knausgaard and Hanson

The initial draw to link Knausgaard and Hanson is spurred by the resemblance of the figures of Knausgaard with some of those of Hanson. The image of Knausgaard’s father sitting dead in a chair in the living room mentioned several times - “He died in the chair in the room next door, it’s still there” (384) remarks Knausgaard during a telephone conversation – correlates with Hanson’s sculpture *Man in Chair with Beer*. While not identical, the two find compelling visual companionship with Knausgaard’s description of his alcoholic father’s final years and moment of death: “Dad, now fat and bloated, with an enormous gut drank nonstop...he was fat as a barrel, and even though his skin was still tanned it had a kind of matte tone, there was a matte membrane covering him, and with all the hair on his face and head and his messy clothes”

(241). Taken in the context of Knausgaard, the swarthy ill-kempt figure in stained white t-shirt fluctuates between drunken stupor and death. The position of sitting, presumably watching television, hovers over the narrow gap between life and death, a fact Knausgaard comments upon: “That Dad had been here only three days ago was hard to believe. That he had the same view three days ago, walked around the same house...thought his thoughts only three days ago was hard to grasp” (382). The essence of life permeates the location of death lending a sense of intermission after which normal activities will resume. Prior to identifying the departure of life, for a time, the figure is perceived as inhabiting both states of being.

Likewise, in the sculpture *Self-portrait with Model* one easily deposits Knausgaard’s “brooding” (362) grandmother “sitting, as she had when we left her a few hours before, at the kitchen table. In front of her was a cup of coffee, an ashtray and a plate full of crumbs from the rolls she had eaten...Something happened to her, and it was not old age that had her in its grip, nor illness, it was something else. Her detachment had nothing to do with the gentle other-worldliness or contentedness of old people, her detachment was...hard and lean” (425-426). We identify in this description of the detachment of the grandmother the vacant facial expression of the Hanson sculpture. There is a sense that Knausgaard’s grandmother and the sculpture of the woman seated at the diner table with liquefied fudge sundaes are undergoing an involuntary separation from life. Still physically present but both are figures that are habitually overlooked, passed over, and in that act stripped of purpose and cast adrift upon the sea of invisible mundane individuals. The grandmother, numbed by the routine passage of years, the habitual disappointments of life (such as marriage to the wrong brother, the collapse of her son into alcoholism) has gradually withdrawn into herself, slipping into auto-pilot mode. Her routine intonation, “life’s a pitch, as the old woman said. She couldn’t pronounce her ‘b’s” (396), has

become a perverse mantra summing up her life; the pre-recorded phrase inserted repeatedly attempting to fill the blank space of her increasingly pointless existence. Like pulling the string on a wind-up doll, the phrase is uttered, the lights flicker, followed by “silence, and she withdrew into herself as she had done so many times...she sat with her arms crossed, staring into the distance” (295). Lost in thought, the grandmother’s body rests, like a sculptural shell, at the table in a state of blank detachment. the figure of Hanson, in *Self-Portrait...* sits across from the elderly woman absentmindedly thumbing the pages of magazine, her partially consumed sundae melting unheeded - her state of detached contemplation resembles Knausgaard’s grandmother. The figure of Hanson thoughtfully regards her just as Knausgaard observes his grandmother during kitchen table conversations. The same sense listless detachment in the sculpture finds a



Figure 5- Duane Hanson "Self-Portrait with Model" 1979 Polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories, life-size. Collection of the artist.

literary echo in the descriptions of the grandmother in the text. In their depiction of ordinary

overlooked people, both Hanson and Knausgaard identify within the mundane a blind spot in the eye of humanity.

In addition to their use of similar cast of figures, Hanson and Knausgaard share in the dedication to rigorous documentation of mundane surfaces. “To satisfy only his own intense ...desire to be faithful to the idea of the character at hand,” writes Varnedoe, Hanson “puts painstaking labor into whole areas of skin and hair that will never be seen (for they will lie beneath layers of clothing)” (Varnedoe 18). Hanson “lavished a great deal of attention” upon the surface of the skin writes critic Robert Hobbs, “the skin is a record of human existence...It records the life a person has lived.” Discussing Hanson’s sculpture “Security Guard” Hobbs comments how the skin “is an accumulated memory of collisions, poor diet, little exercise, and lack of exposure to sunlight” (Hobbs 22). Hanson patiently duplicates the signs of aging, sagging jowls, dry skin, traces of old scars, liver spots, treating the skin like a manuscript to be copied. This act is in direct conflict with the inclinations of a society preoccupied with removing and erasing these same signs. Lavishing attention upon flawed surfaces suggests a reverence for the storied physical experiences encoded upon the skin – an intriguing alternative to the typical attitudes of rejection and disgust. “Unlike wax figures that appear amazingly real at an intermediate distance,” continues Hobbs, “Hanson’s figures become most real when inspected closely” (Hobbs 22). In the same way Hanson’s sculptures increase in reality upon close examination, Knausgaard’s exacting level of detail likewise invites close scrutiny.

In the way Hanson documents the surface of skin, Knausgaard documents the surface of place and the mass of thoughts that pile atop it with intense detail. The reverence of Hanson for the history documented in skin translates into a history of thoughts accessed through the surface of mundane tasks. Following the passing of his alcoholic father, the house of Knausgaard’s

grandmother has fallen into squalor and disrepair. The task of cleaning it in preparation for the wake falls upon Knausgaard and his brother so cleaning it becomes the subject of several passages.

In a brief aside, I want to re-mention as discussed in chapter one, how in Austen, domestic work was used to facilitate conversation and forward narrative, and to a degree it fulfills that role in Knausgaard as well; however, we see it differ significantly with lengthy digressions from the primary narrative taking the kernel of psycho-narration, known to have been initiated by Austen, and pushing it to its outermost limits. In Austen, the reader is frequently provided with a character's thoughts. In Knausgaard we encounter the character's thoughts about his thoughts. In this comparison, we observe increased layered complexity in conjunction with an increasingly aestheticized vehicle of the mundane.

Domestic labor functions like a washboard upon which Knausgaard vigorously scrubs his thoughts. With a "bottle of green soap and a bottle of Jif scouring cream" he tackles the bannisters "stair-rods" covered in "all sorts of filth...disintegrated leaves, pebbles, dried-up insects, old spiderwebs...in some places almost completely black, here and there sticky" (360). The condition of the railing conveyed he "sprayed the Jif, wrung the cloth and scrubbed every centimeter thoroughly. Once a section was clean and had regained something of its old, dark, golden color I dunked another cloth in Klorin and kept scrubbing." While engaged in the monotonous task, stimulated by the "smell of Klorin" his mind wanders thinking back to the "1970's" and his childhood memory of the "cupboard under the kitchen sink where the detergents were kept" (360). Little effort is required to invoke this cupboard, as many readers have a personal connection with just such a cupboard, in both present and past, so we readily

supply our own alongside Knausgaard's. Detail is applied with intention to correspond with the natural tides of the mind.

Jif didn't exist then. Ajax washing powder did though, in a cardboard container, red, white and blue... It was a green soap. Klorin did too... There was also a brand called OMO. And there was a packet of washing powder with a picture of a child holding the identical packet, and on that, of course, there was a picture of the same boy holding the same packet, and so on, and so on. ... I often racked my brains over *mise en abyme*, which in principle of course was endless and also existed elsewhere, such as in the bathroom mirror by holding a mirror behind your head so that the images of the mirrors were projected to and fro while going farther and farther back and becoming smaller and smaller as far as the eye could see. But what happened behind what the eye could see? Did the images carry on getting smaller and smaller? (360)

In this passage the texture of the moment and memory are addressed. Engaged in the task he watches himself scrub and polish for a few moments. As is natural with laborious mindless tasks, it's not long before mental auto-pilot kicks in and Knausgaard's mind goes other places. In this passage, as always, he crafts a heightened reality attempting to capture the unedited progression of his thoughts, the natural flow of the mind making random connections prompted by what is in front of it. One bottle of soap powder recalls another and another. The random remembered detail of a particular soap label surfaces for no particular reason articulating the inexplicably capricious nature of memory. Out of the repetition of scrubbing and the smell of soap, he lands upon the complexity of *mise en abyme* within a dimly recollected cleaning label. And in so doing he creates his own instance of *mise en abyme* by nesting memories of cleaning

powders within the present act of cleaning. Performing housework tasks — which have a tendency to feel never-ending — he contemplates the puzzle of infinite images. Here, and in many other passages, the mundane platform is central to developing the ensuing aesthetic intrigue. The task complete he pauses to admire “the gleam” returning to the “varnish...although there was still a scattering of dark dirt stains...” (362). Like the skin of Hanson’s figures, imperfections in the skin of reality are meticulously recorded. Not only are imperfections noteworthy, but the banal beauty of the everyday is also of immense interest to Knausgaard.

Knausgaard makes a point of going out of his way to aestheticize mundane moments and actions and on occasion directly articulates his intentions to locate an aesthetic experience within the mundane. Noticing a construction crane near his grandmother’s house, he remarks on the beauty of the commonplace piece of building equipment: “There were few things I found more beautiful than cranes, the skeletal nature of their construction, the steel wires running along the top and bottom...the way heavy objects dangled when being slowly transported through the air, the sky that formed a backdrop to this mechanical provisorium” (363). “Objects dangl[ing]” silhouetted against the “backdrop” of the sky, apperceived as spontaneous landscape painting. Incidentally, the syllabic texture and vocabulary of this description are reminiscent of the prosy poetry of Moore aligned with her admiration of the “concrete statuary” of the “municipal bat-roost.” He describes the crane with the attentive reverence of a work of sculpture. Contemplating readymade objects as works of art is a well-established concept within the art world — the critical difference here is this readymade has not be transformed through re-contextualization. Placed upon the pedestal within the museum the mundane object is forcibly pulled up to be reconceived as art. Skipping this step entirely, Knausgaard receives the crane as

art, no contextual alteration required. All that is required is the ability perceive an aesthetic quality, distinct from functionality.

Hanson shares in this sentiment of perceiving in life readymade art. His sculptures presented without pedestal are placed on equal footing with visitors which instantly diminishes the separation between art and viewer. Frequently, Hanson's works have been presented outside the bounds of museum walls appearing in airports, cafeterias, and shopping districts, making the only difference, between viewer and sculpture, the presence of a spiritus animus within the former. Viewers gazing upon works so extremely life-like are actively engaged in questioning the distinction between themselves and what they are looking at, pondering the criteria for what exactly is it that makes one of them art?

The same level of observation given to place and objects is applied to food. Knausgaard cooks and eats with the deportment of a painter. Cooking dinner he observes the food colors "pink, light-green, white, dark-green, golden-brown" (376) of a meal of salmon, green beans and potatoes. On another occasion, he "[makes] a little sculpture...it's called Beer and Rissolle in the Garden," puckishly translating his impromptu title into French "Or des boulettes et da la biere dans le jardin" (346) linking his meal with French paintings of la nature morte and a long history of depicting arrangements of food and meals. Knausgaard's "little sculpture" probes the difference between art and life. Before brush was ever put to canvas, the images portrayed in still life paintings were actual food on the table, mundane objects deemed worthy to capture for posterity. Mightn't we attend the mundane fare of our meal tables with aesthetic appreciation regardless of ever transposing it into pigment on canvas? Does "beer and rissole" become art the moment we conceive of it as such? Like Knausgaard, the diner tables of Hanson are populated with Ketchup bottles, coffee cups, half-eaten sundaes, magazines, chips and Coca Cola – many

objects of which lifted away could quickly resume regular meal functions, *objets d'art* no longer. The barrier separating life and art is thin and transient.

Not only does Knausgaard contemplate food on the table, but those gathering around it also become part of the composition. The inane details from frying pan to table of a family breakfast at his brother Yngve's are recounted moment by moment.

The coffee pot light was on. The extractor hood hummed, the eggs bubbled and spat... Radio blared out the traffic news jingle... Kari Anne shuttled back and forth between the table and cupboards, setting the table... Yngve slipped the spatula under the eggs and transferred them, one by one, onto a broad dish, put it on the table, beside the bread basket, fetched the pot of coffee, and filled three cups... I generally drank tea at breakfast and had since I was fourteen but I didn't have the heart to point this out... (261)

The mundane fanfare of table setting and serving food to a guest that is also a family member, capture the loosely formal, semi-awkward vibrations of Knausgaard's family breakfast. The outwardly solicitous response of accepting the coffee as well as the privately critical and semi-ungrateful thoughts of Knausgaard renders an ordinary breakfast experience filtered through his interior perception. He draws out the experience still further including "scour[ing] the table for salt, but there was none to be found," (261) followed by the mundane dialogue requesting "Any salt?" responded to with a clipped "here," by Yngve's wife (261). No detail is deemed too small to include.

It is precisely the inconsequential details of universally familiar exchanges, such as asking for salt, discussion of sports, his niece Ylva's request to sit by her uncle, that make this

breakfast at once recognizable yet specific to the individuals involved. He proceeds, another surrealist quality revealed and observed in his description of eggs.

Flipping open the little plastic cap watching the tiny grains sink into the yellow yolk, barely puncturing the surface, as the butter melted and seeped into the bread ... The fried egg-white was crispy underneath, large brownish-black pieces crunched between palate and tongue as I chewed...I bit into the yolk and it ran, yellow and lukewarm, into my mouth. (261-262)

Knausgaard uses the buildup of insignificant details as a platform to indulge in an equally detailed still-life of consuming fried eggs. Reference to palate, tongue and mouth establishes overt self-observation of the mundane act of eating bringing to the forefront the fleeting sensory pleasures of eating that are forgotten in the space of the same moment in which they achieve notice, yet here are recorded. Observed in rich surface detail makes this plate of eggs acutely real, the level of detail surpassing, in surrealist fashion, the typical level of observation bestowed upon the cooked yellow orbs. Captured in this breakfast are a myriad of commonplace actions and as we pause to look at Knausgaard's breakfast table and eggs, we see the toast and eggs of countless yestermorns. The result is a tableaux vivant of a specific yet ordinary breakfast we can see, hear and taste. The heightened experience of this breakfast from food to family members can be conceived of as literary equivalent of a Hanson sculpture.

However, it is in solitary non-moments of thinking in which the concerns of Knausgaard and Hanson are most alike. A mundane morning in his office, Knausgaard happens to glance at the floor, and for seemingly no particular reason, proceeds to describe it: "It was parquet and relatively new, the reddish brown tone at odds with the flat's otherwise fin-de-siècle style. I noticed that the knots and grain, perhaps two meters from the chair where I was sitting formed an

image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns” (190). Observations such as this offer an example of unfocused thinking. Procrastinating, daydreaming, spacing-out, like a cat, we reflexively knit our mental claws upon our surroundings. Knausgaard records the idling purr of the mind. In these moments of thinking about nothing, we absently pluck upon the thread of our life, running from past to present. Moments lost in thought is also a central characteristic of the figures of Hanson.

Corresponding with a retinue of ordinary people engaged in ordinary activities and tasks, Hanson’s figures are also presented in a typical moment of lost in thought. Hanson avoids the more fleeting states of laughter, smiling, and affectionate interpersonal communication viewing them as “secondary, temporary adjuncts to the more fundamental human conditions of passive self-enclosure and isolation” (Varnedoe 20). “As opposed to extraordinary revelation,” Hanson “wants to depict states of indeterminate duration, when the ephemeral or eccentric fades in the face of the habitual, and the characteristic truths stand more clearly exposed” (Varnedoe 20). Like particles settling in a glass of water, in the un-agitated state of neutral calm the undiluted essence of the individual reveals itself.

It is worth mentioning, that this state of neutral self-absorption is also present in the work of Courbet. The figures of the stone-breakers are clearly absorbed in their task while in *The Wheat Sifters* task absorption intersects with the unmindful woman in gray, idly plucking at the grains on her plate. In the painting *After Dinner at Ornans* (1849) a group of four friends is engaged in listening to one of their party play the violin after a meal, but each gazes off in another direction, clearly lost in individual thoughts and feelings. The condition of wandering internal reverie marks both realism and surrealism. Encountering the bulk of life’s mundane tasks and moments, we quite often find ourselves engaged in solitary thought, staring into the recesses of our own mind. The reality is, highpoints of ecstasy, pleasure and happiness are the

exception, not the norm. The attempt to pin down the essence of existence falls upon the inattentive wool-carding of idling minds. Eating lunch, scanning the horizon, reading, waiting with luggage, the figures of Hanson are locked in the contemplative indeterminacy of mundane moments. Inscrutable, the precise thoughts of Hanson's figures are forever denied to us but Knausgaard, begins to fill this superrealist gap, gathering the wool of his thoughts and attempting to locate a thread of continuity running through the fabric of thought.

For example, returning to the face-knot in the floor, Knausgaard suddenly makes the connection, recalling a distant memory of discovering a face shaped in the foamy sea of a news broadcast watched as a child: "I suddenly remembered something...deep in my childhood, a similar image on the water in a news item about a missing fishing vessel...the remarkable thing was not that the face should be visible here, nor that I had once seen a face in the sea in the mid 1970's, the remarkable thing was that I had forgotten and it and now remembered" (190). Disparate, details, irrelevant at first, are suddenly drawn together and pulled tight revealing a glimpse of the whole being woven over the course of life. During these moments of unconscious thought, the unfettered brain, interlaces past and present playing with the loose strands waiting to be caught up by the perceptive individual resuming conscious control.

Restoration of the Mundane

From mundane actions and things to the mundane act of an idling brain conjoins the two halves — physical and intangible— of the mundane accounting for and aestheticizing mundanity in its entirety. From one perspective this can be seen as the totalizing exploitation of life for artistic purposes. However, there is another perspective from which superrealism can be viewed

as an attempt to restore the inherent significance of people and objects appropriated by art. In her 1964 article, “Against Criticism,” critic Susan Sontag complains of the refusal of critics to leave works alone citing the dangers of interpretation: “By reducing the work of art to the content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretations makes the work manageable, comfortable” (99). Once boiled down through interpretation, even the most controversial art can be rendered quite approachable, provided with handles for gripping it so to speak. Knausgaard reveals himself to be of a similar mind concurring with Sontag’s laments over the over-intellectualizing and resultant taming of art: “The situation we have arrived at now whereby the props of art no longer have any significance, all the emphasis is placed on what the art expresses, in other words, not what it is but what it thinks... Everything has become intellect, even our bodies, they aren’t bodies anymore, but ideas of bodies” (Knausgaard 225). But Sontag’s suggestion to leave the art alone seems impossible to implement as looking at art objects is naturally followed by acts of thinking, comparison and interpretation. However, Sontag is not suggesting a halt to artistic contemplation but rather an end to the act of intellectual distancing from art. Rather than dulling down the edge of art with protective interpretive coating, the solution, both Knausgaard and Sontag find, is sharpening the edge still further with hyper realistic art that is so close to life that we must turn towards life to make sense of it. Sontag corroborates this notion suggesting “the aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and by, analogy, our own experience – *more, rather than less, real* to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (104 emphasis mine). Like Sontag, Knausgaard, too, wishes to restore “the unfathomable...the incomprehensible” (Knausgaard 225) to life and to do this harnesses the vehicle of superrealism. His memoir is first and foremost the sincere attempt to capture the raw

substance of his life. Hanson's works are not allegories of a figure, but in every way possible strive to be that figure. In his crowded studio, Courbet is an artistic conductor channeling the everyday figures populating his world. The goal is to allow the object to speak its own truth. Our attempts to interpret and, thusly tame, the content of superrealist works, must always fall back upon the objects themselves. Regardless of the lofty ideals we may bring to bear, "gestures and objects will be 'there' before being 'something';" explains French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. "And they will still be there afterward, hard, unalterable, externally present, mocking their own meaning" (21). Significations we pin upon gestures and objects are tried on like a coat, and just as easily, shrugged off. The action of scrubbing a bannister, sitting at a diner table, are already thick with unquantified substance, which is why we intuitively respond, why we have the urge to explain the meaning of the seeming meaningless, as if perhaps, some cosmic explanation lies within.

As with Courbet and Hanson, documenting "ordinariness," even "ugliness" is the point, the means to get at how things are. As Nochlin informed us earlier, "it is exactly this sort of accuracy of 'meaningless' detail that is essential to realism, for this is what nails its productions down so firmly to a specific time and a specific place and anchors realist works in a concrete rather than an ideal or a poetic reality" (122). Realism supposes intrinsic significance, an intrinsic beauty, within ordinariness. For lying just beyond the periphery of the most ordinary postures of life lies the inverse - death. The "cotton wool" of non-being is the outer rim before crossing over into true nothingness. "The most acute records of life," remarks Varnedoe "are often intimately connected with the threat of death" (8). Drinking coffee in his office, looking out the window, Knausgaard muses "I saw life; I thought about death" (195). Like the sepulchral

effigies lying in cemeteries capturing the living image of a deceased, the work of Hanson and Knausgaard perform the role of vivid memento mori.

Art, straying too far from the concerns of life, was recalled by the realism of Courbet. Super-realism, continued the realism movement, breaking boundaries and raising the level of realism to still greater heights. The musings of the mundane idling brain attached to chores and reverie, completes the circle of superrealism, supplying the final link and expanding the circumference still further. The knife-edge of superrealism forces us to actively look for the barrier separating life and art which ultimately causes us to look longer and harder at the composition of each. The acquisition of superrealism into literature offers new prospects, currently with no set limitations – its success entirely dependent upon the voyeuristic patience of readers.

CONCLUSION

Although useful for the purpose of pulling out particular nuances within mundane objects, the inclusion of a poet within a predominantly prose mixture was problematic at times as poetic use of language is more abstract and intentionally ambiguous. The poetic examination of objects provided a needed transition from Austen to Knausgaard moving thematically from representation of emotions through domestic tasks in which the objects themselves are not excessively examined; followed by a case of Moore in which the primary focus was upon objects themselves within both domestic and institutional space; and finally to the concluding chapter of Knausgaard in which domestic objects and emotions are examined simultaneously in exacting detail. Future inquiries into this topic would benefit from separate studies of mundanity in poetry and prose. Ultimately, it was shared interest in visual art among the three authors that made it possible to position Moore alongside the other two. However, I do find the modernist link forms an essential bridge between Austen and Knausgaard. While these two authors may seem vastly separated in theme and style, modernism is the connective tissue which reveals common thematic concerns between the two. Inclusion of a different modernist writer between them, such as Joyce or Woolf, would be a fruitful reconfiguration of what I accomplished here.

I mentioned in the Austen chapter that during the eighteenth century there was a surge in popularity of portraits. Artist Jonathan Richardson insisted mere likeness was not enough in a portrait: the artist must “express their Minds as well as their Faces” (25). Richardson accords the artist with the need for abilities approaching mind-reading. In an early self-portrait Knausgaard provides a self-portrait: “Apart from one eye, which is glistening...two deep furrows divide my forehead, one deep furrow intersects each cheek, all of them as if filled with darkness and with the eyes staring and serious, the corners of the mouth drooping, it is impossible not to consider

this face gloomy” quickly followed by the interrogative: “What has engraved itself in my face?” (25) pondering the story written into his physiognomic features. A page later he contemplates his portrait alongside the grizzled painted visage of Rembrandt establishing a direct link to classical portraiture and his work. The eighteenth-century desire for a portrait to reveal character finds itself realized two centuries later in the surrealist novel of Knausgaard.

Though wildly different in time period and style persistent links, such as the one mentioned here, encourage the joint examination of works separated by vast spaces of time, assisting in the creation of a holistic understanding of literature itself. All three works of literature discussed here evidence a deep desire to use writing to penetrate artifice and reveal genuine unmediated states of being through examination of the mundane. Each author recognizes within art the inherently staged quality of display and seeks to transcend it through a revelatory glimpse of genuine life, essence intact.

Looking at the conversation piece Austen perceives the staged familial affection that mirrors the staged emotions occurring simultaneously within the novel. The seeming glimpse of private life in a portrait meant for display is ultimately a constructed view. Working within these constructs Austen uncovers genuine emotional intimacy within domestic space through representation of the imperfection of mundane tasks and spaces thereby subverting covert acts of manners and civilities. Austen strives to restore genuine emotion to the domestic stage.

Moore, too, is attuned to notions of staged intimacy attached to domestic spaces and objects. The “agreeable negligence” spoken of by Jonathan Addison in reference to good manners and a desire for a more loose casual appearance is revived in the poetry of Marianne Moore in her poetic discussion of staged intimacy in “People’s Surroundings.” We encounter the “négligée without negligence” (De Miomandre 62) attached to Moore’s borrowed *Vogue* line: “A

setting must not have the air of being one” (110). The subtle social disruptions of Austen, play out in Moore, in the form of disruptions of hierarchical museum system and subtle line breaks in her poetry. While Austen seeks to break up staged intimacy in the novel to reveal genuine intimacy, Moore strives to preserve an intimate connection with objects in the museum by attending to the essence, the genuine spirit of the object. The vision she applies to her objects resonates with rigorous sight applied to Dutch still-life paintings and shares in the paradox perpetual motion resisting the dead state of permanence. Moore acknowledges the value of the institutional authority to transform objects into art through display but she resists the notion of imposing permanent state of being upon objects. The objects in her works exist in a state of flux wavering between high and low art, between domestic item and art object.

Like, Moore, Knausgaard blurs the boundaries between low and high art. Knausgaard closely observes domestic spaces and objects giving them the close scrutiny usually reserved for works of art. Both poet and novelist engage in the aggressive redirecting of the eye towards low-plane reality, paying special attention to the overlooked. The need for museum walls which Moore deliberates upon, are declined by Knausgaard as he locates aesthetic experiences in life without the need for contextual change. Nonetheless, he and Moore agree upon direct injection of life into art: Moore through her use of conversational language and focus upon utilitarian objects; Knausgaard through his aesthetification of mundane tasks and thoughts - both insist upon art that is in contact with the concerns of life and reject notions of art as sacrosanct. Austen participates in this concept as well, seeking to align the novel with genuine sentiments of life, departing from the exaggerated appearance fine feelings and morals. All three authors share in the concern of art that fails to connect with life.

Yet each writer realizes, as pointed out by Joseph Masheck, that “no matter how ‘real’ their work may seem it is “still art and, hence, somehow different from the reality of life” (188). This distinction continues to hold importance for this separation, no matter how thin, is what allows art to reveal the overlooked aspects of life. In the progression from Austen to Knausgaard the trend is towards increasingly realistic on to hyper-realistic portrayal of things, people and places. The tableau vivant of the eighteenth-century conversation piece in Austen, in which sitters performed domestic tasks to avoid rigidity of pose gives way to the sculptures of Hanson that, but for lack of breath, are indistinguishable from life, and textual tableaux of Knausgaard observing gatherings in the domestic space in exhaustive categorical hyper-real detail. With the increased proximity to life we get closer to the mundane superfluity that constitutes so much of life allowing us to examine closely what is so often overlooked as we attempt to quantify the amorphous pleasure of “average moments” sifting for the intrinsic significance within the ordinary. Just beyond the edge of our inattentive gaze upon the mundane, beyond the condition of non-being lies the realm of oblivion – the place we have so many questions about, the place we make up answers for with God and assertions of afterlife. Peeling away feigned intimacy to real emotion, peering into the essence of objects, stripping down the mind to the idling hum of an inattentive consciousness, we approach the threshold nothingness and thus arrive at the pivotal point separating life from death. Through negation we define the void beyond by what it is not; through study of mundanity we seek to define earthly consciousness — the unembellished container of the self.

Ultimately, in all three cases the banal and imperfect nature of the everyday is used to reveal meaning located within mundane objects and actions. Articulation of the concept of that which is genuine within artistic expression is found to be inextricably linked with imperfection.

Rather than an escape from the boredom and imperfection of life, the vehicle of the mundane in art finds interest in boredom and virtue in imperfection. Aesthetification of the mundane counters art for art's sake, transcending aesthetic gratification as an end in itself, transforming the expression into art for the sake of living; art finding purpose through the content of life.

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Graduate Assistant Instructor – Courses: English 101, English 102. Art 160 (Art Appreciation),
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Freelance Art Writer for various publications including: Desert Companion, BLVDS, CityLife, Las Vegas Weekly, and Las Vegas Bound Magazine.

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Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada Las Vegas (Instructor of record Drawing 1 Summer 2010 – Spring 2011)

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Volunteer Art Teaching in Colima, El Salvador, One Month. Through San Francisco State University College of Extended Learning, teaching topics included: recycled art, watercolors, collage, intro portraiture, film manipulation, and bilingual basic drawing.

Technical Skills:

Software:, Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, After Effects & Premiere Pro CS4, Final Cut Pro, Camtasia, Garage Band iMovie and iDVD, Microsoft Office suite Mac & PC.

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Select Publications:

“*Vanity Plates* Takes and Bakes What This Election Year is Dishing Out” *Seven* Jun. 2016
“Pop Cultural Monuments” *Seven* Apr. 2015
“The Shape Within” *Seven* Apr. 2015
“Musings on Existence” *CityLife* Jan, 2014
“High Art with High Stakes: Jevijoe Vitug’s ‘Casino Capital’” *CityLife*, Mar. 2013
“Artist creates giant inflatable sculptures of himself,” *CityLife*, Feb. 25, 2013
“Everything old is new again at the ‘Saver’s Prom’” *Citylife* blog, Jan. 2013
“Balls and Glitter: Michael Barrett’s performance art” *Citylife* blog, Oct. 2012
“Resident alien: Art that turns an outsider’s view of Vegas into rich allegory” *Citylife* Sept. 2012
“Touch it! Three exhibits put the ‘art’ in ‘participate’” *CityLife*, May 2012
“Shaping Water, Building Trees” Review of exhibit at Pop Up Art House, *City Life*, Dec.2011
“Peripheral Vision” Review of Off the Strip Art Festival, *City Life*, Oct., 2010
“Scribbled Daydreams” Review Toshie McSwain solo exhibit, *City Life*, July 2010
“The Golden Eras” Review Erin Stellmon solo exhibition, *City Life*, June 2010
“Deus ex Machina” Review of Leonardo Aguirre di Matteo solo exhibition, *City Life*, April 2010
“Who’s Coming to Dinner,” Review *Figuratively Speaking: A Survey of the Human Form*, *City Life*, May 2010
Critical writing & literary analysis excerpts included in: *Adios Strunk and White*, academic writing handbook by Gary & Glynis Hoffman, Birmingham Press 2004

Scholarships, Grants & Professional Activities:

2017 Far West Popular Culture Association – Critical presentation and panel discussion.
2016 & 2015 Guest lecturer at Graduate Training Seminar
2015 Recipient of mentorship grant and participant in UNLV Graduate Mentorship Program
2015 Guest lecturer at undergraduate visual language and literature course.
2013 Jackpot Grant Nevada Arts Council
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