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FACING DEATH:  
THE DESPERATE AT ITS MOST BEAUTIFUL

Is there a distinction between “art” and “craft,” where the former is motivated by something like “genuine” or “authentic” creativity and the latter by, at best, skill and skill alone, and at a worst, a fumbling attempt to fit in with popular modes of expression? In this paper, I suggest that there does seem to be such a distinction. In particular, I attempt to show that genuine<sup>1</sup> creativity, and so, genuine art—in varying respects—is motivated by a certain recognition of what we might understand as the most universal, and perhaps the most important property of all human beings: the brutal fact that our lives are limited; in the end, we all die.

To show why I think this is the case, I have divided my paper into three parts. In the first, I briefly explain why we might view mortality as our most pressing issue and concomitantly, why we might understand it to be the driving force behind not only our desire to procreate, but also, to create. In the second part of the paper, I do something that is not strictly “philosophical”—I canvas a number of remarks by poets and writers who, like myself, are convinced that death is our primary muse, but not necessarily in a morbid, or despairing respect—in fact, we see that this is quite the opposite in some cases (c.f. Nabokov, 1966). Why do I do this? Because it seems obvious to me that we should ask the actual artists about what motivates them, rather than putting words into their mouths.<sup>2</sup> In the third and final part of the paper, I offer a brief philosophical explanation of why and how—in light of sections one and two—we might begin to distinguish between genuine art and craft.

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<sup>1</sup> I am not inextricably wed to the word ‘genuine.’ Rather, as already intimated in my opening sentence, ‘authentic’ would serve equally well, or even the term ‘artistic integrity.’ However, for ease of reference, I will tend to use the word ‘genuine’ in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> However, I purposely limit myself to writers because they tend to be much more honest about why they do what they do—if only because their work *is* writing, and as a result, they tend to be less pretentious when it comes to writing about writing. Many visual artists on the other hand, particularly contemporary visual artists, have become swept up in an almost mandatory impulse to create complex theories about their work (with Van Gogh being an exception; see, for instance, his letters to his brother Theo (Van Gogh, 2000, v. i-iii)). In this respect, visual artists tend to become somewhat pretentious philosophers—often engaged in almost shameful game of gratuitous obscurity. In fact, in light of §3 of this paper, we might conclude that this somewhat blind impulse (motivated primarily by a desire to fit into a trend) makes their work more like craft than art.

## *§1 Dying to Give Birth*

Immediately then, we need to address the claim that our mortality is our most “universal” and most “important” property. I don’t think though, that this needs much defense, for who is *not* going to die? In fact, no matter what you think the nature of “death” is, it is certain that at the very least, your body will fail you—regardless if you think it will somehow be reactivated in another world, or transformed, or alternatively, jettisoned by your soul like so much garbage. We all have admit then, no matter what your philosophical and/or religious persuasion, your heart *will* stop; your body *will* degenerate. What then, could be a more universal property to human beings (organic entities in general) than death? Some of us might for instance, fall in love, go off to war, have children, hate, be hated, be male, be female, be honest, lie—or not. But let’s face it, we *all* have to leave in the end; regardless of who we are, good or bad, great or inconsequential. As a result, my argument in regard to the particular significance that death has on our lives is quite simple: Death affects everything we do in the respect that it *limits* everything we do, and as such, will ultimately terminate all of our activities, even our most important ones. However, the converse is *not* true; there never has been—and unless technology comes galloping to our rescue—there never *will* be anything that affects the fact that we die.<sup>3</sup>

So what does all this cheerfulness have to with slippery notions like “genuine?” To see where this is going, we must begin by entertaining the possibility that what appears to be an almost instinctual recognition of our own death, or at the very least, an acknowledgment of aging, is one of the driving forces behind procreation. And although there are plenty of scientists, psychologists, philosophers and anthropologists who, in many respects, may be read to support this claim,<sup>4</sup> we do not necessarily have to appeal to them. Common sense might come in handy instead. After all, the new life, the new child, is a mark of *growth*; brilliant and hopeful when juxtaposed to the adult’s

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<sup>3</sup> Ernst Becker (1973) makes a similar point, although he does not appeal to the argument given above. Rather, as an anthropologist/psychologist, he draws on empirical data as well as various psychological and philosophical theories (such as those respectively found in Otto Rank (1932) , and to some degree, Freud’s entire body of work, at least in the respect that Becker rejects large portions of it, and Kierkegaard (1849)). Moreover, keep in mind that although the logic is somewhat similar, my argument is in no way to be associated with, or compared to, the argument given for “epiphenomenalism” (a position that I disagree with, but for reasons that are not relevant to this paper).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, just to name a few: Darwin (1859), Rank (1932), Becker (1973), Dawkins (1976) and Dennett (1995).

persistently fading body. How awful it is, they say, to see your own children grow old, or worse still, to suffer their deaths. I don't think it is very difficult to conclude then, that at least at *some* level, for at least *some* of the time, our inextricable deaths *do* influence our longing to procreate; we are even reminded of Plato's remarks (*qua* Diotima) in the *Symposium* to this effect:

This is how the mortal creature perpetuates itself. It cannot, like the divine, be still the same throughout eternity; it can only leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left in its species by obsolescence. This, my dear Socrates, is how the body and all else that is temporal partakes of the eternal; there is no other way. And so it is no wonder that every creature prizes its own issue, since the whole creation is inspired by this love, this passion for immortality (208b) ... those whose procreancy is of the body turn to women as the object of their love, and raise a family, in the blessed hope that by doing so they will keep their memory green "through time and eternity." (209a)

We are, it seems, quietly compelled to carry on; in the driest of scientific terms, we are instinctually driven to maintain our genetic line, "through time and eternity"—breed or face extinction. Shakespeare almost obsessively reiterates this point in his Sonnets, particularly in 1-18. Note, for instance, just a few lines to this effect: "Die single and thine image dies with thee" (3: 14), "Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart / leaving thee living in posterity? / Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair / to be death's conquest and make worms thine heir" (6: 11-14) "And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defense / Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence" (12: 13-14).

I would like to suggest then, that there is no coincidental similarity between this almost blind instinct to genetically regenerate and the motivation behind those artists who create because they *have* to, because they have no other choice. In other words, I submit that our fundamental limitation, namely the fact that we die, drives both our impulse to procreate *and*, in the more authentic cases, to create.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, we might say that certain artists create to stop themselves from dying, or at the very least, to make their inevitable demise *bearable*, and in some respects, this consists of making their life exceptionally beautiful by way of their work. In fact, as noted above, we might even conclude that this inextricable impulse, and perhaps *only* this impulse is the mark of *genuine* art and

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<sup>5</sup> See also Becker (1973). However, we do not need to accept Becker's entire "hero" theory to make a philosophical distinction between art and craft. Moreover, Becker does not pay particular attention to artists, mentioning them only in passing.

the genuine artist, where, at least in terms of *intention*,<sup>6</sup> may be clearly distinguished from those who create primarily<sup>7</sup> to participate in what they take to be an esteemed tradition (e.g. “realism”) or, similarly, who create primarily because they are especially skilled in a particular medium and/or those who create primarily in an effort to participate in whatever trend happens to be “hot” (and so, viewed as important) in the art world. In short then, I am suggesting that creation (at its best), is like procreation, ultimately driven by a desire to face, if not thwart death.

But why must an artist be conscious of her own mortality (and relatedly, the mortality of others, if not everyone’s) to be a “genuine” artist? Because, as noted earlier, death always holds the trump card; it embraces us with its universality and significance. As such, those artists who—in a manner yet to be defined—recognize as much are bound to make art that in a countless manner of ways and styles, captures what is most at stake. In short then, once again I am appealing to a very simple argument: If an artist is not aware of the cycle of life, and so, death, she is not aware of the most important factor in our lives. As a result, her art will lack a certain significance, a certain power and pungency, where all of these qualities contribute to what I call “genuine” artistic expression.

Admittedly, this is all still very vague. To better organize our thoughts then, let’s realize that we seem to be dealing with a two-stage process here: [A] The acknowledgment of one’s inevitable demise and [B] The artistic reaction to this acknowledgement. Accordingly, we must ask: Just what then, *is* this acknowledgement of death and how does it manifest itself in art such that we can recognize it? For instance, must visions of our mortality be wild-eyed and desperate, or can they be resolved, tempered and evenly paced, much like a well-trained marathoner who knows that the race is about to end? As for the artistic manifestations of this acknowledgement of death, must they be morbid, laced with fear, darkness and despair? Or instead, with the realization that we will pass, can one attain a certain unbounded freedom to *live*, but now at a heightened state of awareness, where love, beauty and even pain and ugliness are celebrated at an almost manic, although to some degree, it seems, still somewhat anguished state of intensity? Or, might it be the case that in a grand gesture

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<sup>6</sup> Clearly there are immediate difficulties here, for one might conceivably make a “genuine” piece of art by way of a machine, where the machine has no concept of “dying.” More on this in §3.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that authentic, or genuine artists are not, at times, motivated by a tradition, their talent and/or a desire to fit in. However, I argue above that these factors are never the *primary* and thus *most important* motivation for genuine artists.

of denial, the artist's work becomes a veneered attempt to achieve immortality, where she would figuratively "live on" through her work? In fact, in this case, couldn't it be that some artists go so far as to hope that they will *literally* live on through the timelessness of their work—as if it becomes an undying body, meticulously prepared for the day that their organic flesh and blood fails them? In this latter case, it would seem that the artist's work is constructed, in large part, much in the same way that the ancient Egyptians frenetically attempted to wrap and preserve the physical body.

My answer to all of these questions is "yes;" without too much labor, we can find abundant evidence for all three of these reactions/artistic manifestations (namely, pain, celebration and denial)<sup>8</sup> throughout the history of art—in all mediums of expression: literature, the visual arts, the performing arts, music, and in some cases, we might even include the culinary arts. In the next three sections I respectively canvas just a few such expressions, but, as noted in an earlier footnote (2), I restrict myself to examples drawn from the literary arts.<sup>9</sup> As such, I do not pretend to give an exhaustive account for each category of acknowledgment and response sketched above. Relatedly, it is not my intention to *prove* these ideas by way of examples, nor by a systematic appeal to authority, namely, established writers. For as we will see, none of these writers give *arguments* regarding the fundamental influence that death has on their work; they do not attempt or pretend to be philosophers and/or scientists. Rather, by way of both their work and comments about their work, they offer certain insights about what they are doing and why, with, as noted in footnote 2, a certain degree of integrity that appears to be lacking in most contemporary theories regarding the visual arts. Also, I hope that the proceeding section serves to suggest that evidence for each particular manifestation (namely, pain, celebration and denial) is more prevalent than we might have initially thought—even if we just rely on literature as our initial model of inquiry. Following, as noted above, in light of these examples, in §3 I sketch a more "philosophical" theory regarding genuine art v. craft, where I appeal to reason more than artistic insights.

## §2 *What Some of the Artists Have to Say*

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<sup>8</sup> However, keep in mind that I do not think that these categories are mutually exclusive, although for the sake of brevity and organization, I will occasionally treat them as such in this paper.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, I restrict myself to just Western English literature.

Below, I respectively canvas some literary instances of what I take to be the three fundamental reactions to our mortality: pain, celebration and denial.

### § 2.1 *Recognition of Death: The Initial Anguish*

As this subtitle suggests, we begin with that particular species of pain, or anguish, that worries its way into the lives of those who face their mortality head-on. However, important to note, in this case, we appear to be dealing with a pain that does *not* transcend itself to bring about the almost manic celebration of life that I mentioned in §1. Rather, this appears to be a kind of misery that may, dangerously enough, set up permanent camp in an artist's head; explicitly permeating her work and her life with an unrelenting tenacity.<sup>10</sup> Robert Lowell writes:

There is personal anguish everywhere. We can't dodge it, and shouldn't worry that we are uniquely marked and fretted and must somehow keep even-tempered, amused, and in control. John B[erryman] in his mad way keeps talking about *something evil stalking us poets*. That's a bad way to talk, but there's some truth in it (Hamilton, 351; emphasis added).

That is, something, Lowell and Berryman tell us, something *evil* stalks the poet; something is not quite "right" with them but they cannot, or will not, put their fingers directly on it. But this "something" is, I suggest, nothing more than a vision so penetrating, that it sees an inevitable emptiness on the horizon; Lowell and Berryman cannot, in some fundamental respect, get over the fact that we are all going to die—this "marks" them and their work. Faulkner's Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* also appears to realize as much when she remarks: "My father said that the reason for

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<sup>10</sup> A number of the following literary examples have been taken from Kate Jamison's book, *Touched by Fire* (1993), where she argues that many great artists have suffered from manic depression. In particular, in some cases she argues that acute depression—which can be linked to a preoccupation with death—is often the artist's muse (Jamison, 119-120). To some degree, then, Jamison's work has inspired this paper. However, Jamison only occasionally mentions a preoccupation with death as a source of artistic inspiration, and even then, she claims that it is to be understood as an unhealthy bi-product of manic depression, rather than as a source of genuine art. Similarly, she argues that the manic phase of a bi-polar mood swing may be a source of inspiration as well, which, to some degree, I agree with, as explained in section 3 of this paper. However, Jamison does not suggest, in any respect, that such acute states of inspiration should be attributed to a love of life *qua* a recognition of death. Instead, once again, she argues that most such states may be

living is getting ready to stay dead.” (Faulkner, 175) Poe is even more explicit: “You saw, you *felt* the agony of grief with which I bade you farewell—You remember my expressions of gloom—or a dreadful horrible foreboding of ill—Indeed—*indeed* it seemed to me that death approached me even then and that I was involved in the shadow which went before him” (Poe; *Letters*, 401). Here, Poe expresses the grief of a leaving that is simultaneous to death’s approaching. In fact, we might even say that most of Poe’s work reflects a pained obsession with the horrified nuances of death.<sup>11</sup>

The poet Randall Jarrell echoes this despair when writes:

I see at last that all the knowledge

I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—  
It is worthless as ignorance; nothing comes from nothing,  
The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness  
And we call it wisdom. It is pain. (“90 Norton:” 29-33)

That is, in the face of what can only appear to be oblivion, namely, “darkness,” Randall finds no kind of enlightenment, no kind of wisdom, but instead, pain; only darkness, he attests, can come from darkness. Edward Thomas openly admits his addiction to such pain, particularly, the acknowledgement that not only his own life will end, but the entire earth, and so, all of humanity:

And yet I still am half in love with pain,  
With what is imperfect, with both tears and mirth,  
With things that have an end, with life and earth,  
And this moon that leaves me dark within the door. (“Liberty:” 24-27)

Similarly, Omar Khayyam writes:

My love will end,  
My tears will end,  
My grief will end,  
And all will end. (Qtd. Lorca, 22)

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attributed to an unhealthy psychological condition. Thus, although Jamison and I appeal to many of the same literary passages, our respective interpretations of these passages are fundamentally different.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the better-known examples are: “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Cask Of Amontillado,” “The Fall Of The House Of Usher,” and “The Masque Of The Red Death.” But one might argue that all of Poe’s work is preoccupied with death, in some shape or form.

But is this artistic instinct to suffer in the face of death a recent phenomenon—a morbid turn that certain artists took at some particularly depressing point in history, say, with the introduction of “postmodernism”? No, for if we look hard enough, I am certain that we could find such expressions in almost every epoch of humanity. Consider, for instance, Plato’s brief commentary on death at the beginning of Book III of the *Republic*. In particular, Socrates insists here that all verse that depicts death as something to be feared, to be despaired over, must be expunged; the guardians must be ready and willing to die, while such disparaging verses can only retard their courage. In fact, Socrates tells Adeimantus, anything like the following lines from Homer—spoken by the ghost of Achilles to Odysseus—must go:

I would rather be on the soil, a serf to another,  
To a man without lot whose means of life are not great,  
Than rule over all the dead who have perished. (*Od.* XI, 489-491. Qtd. *The Republic*)

That is, Achilles would rather be *anything*, even a serf to another, than dead—even if while dead, he could be *ruler* of all the dead. We might suppose that Homer was of the same opinion, particularly when we read his account of what of it is like to be dead:

Under the earth, like smoke,  
Went the gibbering soul (*Il.* XXIII, 100-101. Qtd. *The Republic*)

Like bats who in a corner of an enchanted cave  
Fly gibbering when one falls off  
The cluster hanging from the rock, and  
Rise holding on to each other,  
So they went gibbering (*Od.* XXIV, 6-10. Qtd. *The Republic*)

That is, according to these lines, death reduces us to a gibbering mass of disgustingness; to a pack of clustered, filthy bats. Death is to be reviled, abhorred, and thus, it would seem, to be avoided at all costs.

We have seen then, that is easy enough to find examples where a fear of death may manifest itself in an artist’s work, either as a kind of pain, or in Homer’s case, as a kind of repugnance. Moreover, I have purposely picked instances where this fear and pain is more explicitly manifest



than not. However, this is not to say that that this fear and pain may be more subtly manifest, and, as suggested above, more measured than desperate—but present nevertheless. Regardless, we may say that in all such cases, the artists’ work appears to serve as a certain kind of requiem, conspicuous or not. As such, we might even say that these artists use their work to not only lament their pain, but to *escape* from it: “No one has ever written, painted, sculpted, modeled, built or invented,” poet Antonin Artaud claims, “*except literally to get out of hell*” (Artaud, 497; emphasis added).

Yet some might object that just because I have found instances where some poets seem to be overcome by death (which is natural enough, one might continue) this does not mean that they are not equally overcome by *other* powerful moments in their lives, e.g. love, betrayal, ruin, etc. In response, realize that in the majority of poems and passages cited above, death clearly seems to be the *most* important issue to the poet at hand, reflecting the claim that I made in §1, namely, the fact that everything we do is affected by death, but nothing we do will affect the fact that we all die: “we can’t dodge [death]” (Lowell), “Pain [not wisdom] comes from [death],” (Jarrell), “living is getting ready to stay dead” (Faulkner), “death approached me [always],” (Poe) “[all things that I love] have an end” (Thomas), “all will end” (Khayyam). Federico Garcia Lorca’s poem “Absent Soul” also captures this point quite effectively, I think:

The bull does not know you, nor the fig tree,  
Nor the horses, nor the ants in your house.  
The child and the afternoon does not know you  
Because you have died forever.

The back of the stone does not know you,  
Nor the black satin in which you crumble.  
Your silent memory does not know you  
because you have died forever.

The autumn will come with small white snails,  
misty grapes with clustered hills,  
but no one will look into your eyes,  
because you have died forever.

Because you have died forever,  
Like all the dead of the Earth,  
Like all the dead who are forgotten in a heap of lifeless dogs.

Nobody knows you. No. But I sing of you.  
For posterity I sing of your profile and grace.  
Of you appetite for death and the taste of its mouth.  
Of the sadness of your once valiant gaiety.

It will be a long time, if ever before there is born,  
An Andulasian so true,  
So rich in adventure.  
I sing of his elegance with words that groan,  
And I remember a sad breeze through the olive trees (Lorca, 79-81).

That is, when you're gone, you're gone (forever); death affects us all in just this respect, but again, we cannot affect *it*.

## §2.2 *Living in the Face of Dying*

Yet as I suggested earlier, not all artists appear to become paralyzed when they are, as Jarrell put it, “flung into the darkness.” Rather, some choose to embrace their mortality in a concerted effort to live well, to live high, to notice what may have escaped them previously. It’s as if one begins to look at living in the way that a lover might look at a person whom she has just realized that she is in love with; suddenly, the smallest, most insignificant details take on an almost revered importance. In this case, the pain involved with the recognition of one’s inevitable demise transcends itself to become a certain kind of highly attentive joy.<sup>12</sup> Along these lines, Nabokov writes in “The Art of Literature and Common Sense:” “In a sense, we are all crashing to our death from the top story of birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns of the passing wall” (Nabokov, 374). “This,” Nabokov tells us, this “capacity to wonder at trifles—no matter the imminent peril—these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the

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<sup>12</sup> In this respect, we might agree with Jamison that such a state is, indeed, “manic” in its intensity. However, it need not be necessarily understood as a result of a chemical disorder, namely, manic depression. Rather, as noted above, it is simply what I take to be a particular reaction to an acknowledgement of our mortality, which as such, is decisively more enjoyable than the despair discussed in § 2.1 of this paper. As such, this state of being need not be representative of a self-destructive high, where one is clearly out of control, as one tends to be when in a clinically diagnosed “manic” state. Instead, one is simply more alive, more attuned to living than she may have otherwise been.

highest forms of consciousness” (Nabokov, 374). And this level of consciousness, what he also refers to as the “childishly speculative state of mind” (Nabokov, 374), constitutes *genuine* inspiration, and likewise, an abandonment of “common sense” (Nabokov, 373). In fact, I add, such an abandonment is part of what it means to be in love, but as noted, we are not talking about being in love with just one, or perhaps a few individuals, but instead, with *living*, with *our lives*. And ironically enough, Nabokov suggests, it is only a recognition of our *dying* that allows us to do so.

Lorca, whose poem I cited at the end of §2.1, had a similar view on art, claiming that genuine art and artists are inspired by what he called “duende,” where Christopher Mauer characterizes Lorca’s notion of duende as “an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening to [those with duende]... [the duende consists of] irrationality, earthliness, a heightened awareness of death, and a dash of the diabolical” (Lorca, Introduction, ix). That is, like Nabokov, Lorca thought that genuine art is motivated by a certain “irrationality” (which might be construed as a certain kind of childish delight), paired with a desire to live *now*, live *here*, (“earthliness”) where both of these qualities are brought about by the awareness of the inevitable end. Moreover, such artists sport a certain “diabolical” edge, as if those with the “duende” feel somewhat obliged to break certain rules that may have otherwise been respected, particularly, by those who do not fully grasp the fact that they will die. As such, these latter individuals would tend to focus on more immediate issues, such as fitting in, or following trends—like so many dogs mindlessly chasing deer. Along these lines, Lorca himself writes:

The muse awakens the intelligence, bringing a landscape of columns and a false taste of laurel. But intelligence is often the enemy of poetry, because it limits too much, and it elevates the poet to a sharp-edged throne where *he forgets that ants could eat him or that a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on his head...The true fight is with duende...* But there is neither maps nor exercises to help us find the duende. We only know that he burns the blood like a poultice of broken glass, that he exhausts, that he rejects the sweet geometry we have learned, that he smashes styles, that he leans on human pain and makes [for instance] Goya (master of the grays, silvers, and pinks of the best English pantry) work with his fist and knees in horrible bitumens. (Lorca, 51; emphasis added)

That is, this recognition of death, and thus, all the “irrationality,” “earthliness,” and “diabolicalness” that comes with it, is not necessarily a function of intelligence (namely, what we might understand as

rationality). Rather, according to Lorca, this “duende” appears to be some kind of gut feeling, something that relentlessly smacks the artist down, despite any “columns” and “false tastes of laurel” that intelligence may bring—namely, any sense of glory bestowed on him or her by the given establishment. With this in mind, we should note that Lorca makes it abundantly clear that this duende, this *mood*, is, at root, a function of the artist’s recognition of death:

*The duende does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible.* The duende must know beforehand that he can serenade death’s house and rock those branches we all wear, branches that do not have, will never have, any consolation...with the idea, sound, or gesture, the duende enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well...The duende wounds. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the strange, invented qualities of a man’s work (Lorca, 58; emphasis added)

That is, *here*, according to Lorca, is the very heart of real, genuine creativity—in this coming to grips with death, this *battle* with death. As a result, as also noted in the passage cited just above the one given above, the real fight is not with the audience (critical or lauding), or with various lovers, or anything else (where all of this put together consists of “those branches we wear”) but always, it is with the artist *him or herself*, particularly in terms of how [s]he deals with death. In fact, Lorca tells us, everything that is *not* motivated by this mood stinks of fraud: “[Others] may be able to fool people into thinking they have duende—authors and painters and literary fashion mongers do so every day—but we have only to pay a little attention and not surrender to indifference in order to discover the fraud and chase away their clumsy artifice.” (Lorca, 52)

Keats was also no stranger to this manner of thought, reminding us of both Nabokov and Lorca when tells us in so many words, that his deepest inspiration is inextricably traced in the silhouette of death:

Heart! Thou and I are here sad and alone;  
I say, why did I laugh? O mortal pain!  
O Darkness! Darkness! Ever I must moan,  
To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain.

Why did I laugh? I know this Being's lease,  
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads;  
Yet could I on this very midnight cease,  
And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds;  
Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed,  
*But Death intenser—Death is Life's high meed*  
("Why did I Laugh Tonight;" 5-14; emphasis added)

In other words, as noted throughout this paper, yes, things such as "Verse, Fame, Beauty", *are* important ("intense indeed"), but *nothing* surpasses the influence of death: "But Death intenser—Death is life's high meed."

Similarly, Walker Percy tells us that he has, in some fundamental respect, conquered death by embracing death, re-appropriating its horror into something he can name, and thus, he is certain, something we can prevail over: "Death in none of its guises shall prevail over me, because I know all the names of death." (Percy, 314) And Yeats puts it bluntly enough in one of his essays: "You-you will make no terms with the spirits of fire and earth and air and water. You have made the Darkness your enemy. We—we exchange civilities with the world beyond." (Yeats, 107) That is, "we"—the poets, if not artists in general—look death ("the world beyond") square in the face and return invigorated, inspired, alive. Meanwhile, the "you" constitutes those who cannot bear to do as much, but instead, make death (namely, "Darkness") their "enemy." In this case, Yeats may even be obliquely referring to that breed of artists discussed in the previous section, namely, those who are paralyzed by the "darkness," and as such, use art to stop, or at least, to *temper* their anguish. Better still however, Yeats infers, to *celebrate* what the anguish leaves in its wake.

Eliot makes a similar point throughout "Little Gidding," a tortured requiem that transcends itself to become a certain kind of sorrowed love song. Note the lines towards the end of the poem that indicate as much:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
[.....]

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning  
Every poem is an epitaph. And any action  
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat  
Or to an illegible stone: And that is where we start.

We die with the dying:  
See, they depart, and we go with them.  
We are born with the dead:  
[.....]  
With the dreaming of this Love and the voice of this Calling  
We shall not cease from exploration (V: 210-240)

Wake up then, Eliot seems to implore, you're dying. In this respect, the bored may be raised from the dead, where the distinction here is one between those who are necessarily dying, but simultaneously living, versus those who are living, but in a certain respect, are *already dead*; they are unable to truly embrace, to truly love, living. For, as Eliot puts it in his exquisitely melancholic manner, "We are born with the dead." It is no wonder then, that the poet George Edward Woodberry wrote: "The sign of the poet, then, is that by passion he enters into life more than any other men. That is his gift—the *power to live*." (Wilkinson, 13; emphasis added). Similarly, William Wordsworth writes in his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads:" "[the poet] rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him" (Wordsworth, 246). And the immortal alien in Orson Scott Card's short story "Mortal Gods" punctuates this point still again:

Here, Mr. Crane, we have found a race that builds for the sheer joy of building, that creates beauty, that writes books, that invents the lives of never-known people to delight others who know they are being lied to, a race that devises immortal gods to worship and celebrates its own mortality with immense pomp and glory. *Death is the foundation of all that is great about humanity, Mr. Crane.* (Card, 152; emphasis added)

In other words, the alien insists, death, and death alone, inspires human beings to live; our mortality is, as Eliot put it, our "Calling," our deepest "Love;" it is no wonder then, that Lorca claimed that this duende, which is itself a love of life by way of recognizing its preciousness, promotes a certain kind of love between the poet and his/her audience: "The magical property of a poem is to remain

possessed by a duende that can baptize in dark water all who look at it, for with duende it is easier to love and understand, and one is *sure* of being loved and understood” (Lorca, 58)

At this point then, we might conclude that the world of literature is manifestly marked with a certain *celebration* life, achieved through a recognition of death, which, as such, seems to directly oppose, or at the very least, transcend, the misery and pain discussed in §2.1. In this respect, death is a resonant Muse, the estranged cupid of mortality. Moreover, these writers both implicitly and explicitly insist that a recognition of death (which, in their cases is made manifest through a celebration of life) and this recognition alone, underlies and motivates all genuine art.

### §2.3 *A Kind of Denial: The Quest for Immortality*

Yet not all artists use their work to just directly lament or celebrate mortality. Rather, as suggested in my opening remarks, some artists might also view their work as some kind of vehicle for *immortality*, sometimes in a figurative respect, sometimes in a literal respect.<sup>13</sup> Rorty writes specifically of this phenomenon in “The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty,” where he characterizes what I’ve called figurative immortality as “literary” immortality and literal immortality as “theological” or “metaphysical” mortality. Note:

[Here], Nabokov is talking about immortality in the “literary” sense—in the sense in which one is immortal if one’s books will be read forever. But elsewhere, especially in his autobiography, he talks about immortality in the ordinary theological and metaphysical sense—the chance of somehow surviving death, and of thus being able to meet dead loved ones in a world beyond time. (Rorty, 150).

And indeed, the figurative, or “literary” immortality is common enough in the artworld—sometimes patently obvious, sometimes not. Along these lines, Nabokov writes in the first passage Rorty refers to (taken from *Lolita*):

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<sup>13</sup> See also Rank (1932; p. 39), who argues that this is, in fact, the artist’s most fundamental reaction to death.

And do not pity C.Q. [Claire Quilty]. One had to choose between him and H.H. [Humbert Humbert], and one wanted H.H. to exist a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of double pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. *And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita*" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 307; emphasis added)

In other words, according to this belief, the artist may, so to speak, live on in the "minds of later generations," similar, it seems, to how one may live on simply by being remembered. But as noted by Rorty, Nabokov goes further than this, remarking in "The Art of Literature and Common Sense"<sup>14</sup> that with the abandonment of "common sense" that accompanies what he takes to be genuine inspiration—namely, being in love with living—one may simultaneously embrace the possibility of his/her own *immortality*. Note:

The human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out. (Nabokov, 377)

That is, here Nabokov insists that the soul is "serial," and so, may somehow perpetuate itself. This phenomenon, he suggests, is not only recognized as a result of abandoning common sense, but, it seems, is made manifest by such an abandonment. The claim here is then: Loving and living life in the artist's irrational manner ensures a kind of immortality that might otherwise be lacking, or at the very least, not acknowledged.

Strains of Nabokov's approach are not especially new—Shakespeare, in love, attempted to literally construct an immortal body for his lover in a number of his Sonnets. Note just a few lines to this effect: "Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st. / So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee" (18: 11-14) "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme. / But you shall shine more bright in these contents / Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to those passages that Rorty cites from Nabokov's *Speak, Memory; An Autobiography Revisited* (14, 37, 57, 87, 103)



time” (55: 1-4) “My sweet love’s beauty, though my lover’s life / His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live, and he in them still green” (63: 11-13)

In short then, although I have only cited a few instances of writers’ attempts to achieve both literal and figurative immortality by way of their work, the reader may be confident that further evidence is rife in the art world. As such, in many cases, the term “an artist’s *body* of work” should be read in just this respect—it is her physical body transformed.

### §3 *Art v. Craft*

Surely then, our journey through the world of literature has been fast and furious—not even close to being comprehensive. However, at this point the reader should be convinced that these fundamental reactions to death—pain, celebration and denial—are, at the very least, *prevalent* in the world of literature. In fact, if space allowed, I am certain that I could show that this is the case for art in general. However, even if we accept as much, none of the writers cited, as noted earlier, presented *arguments* which show that some kind of recognition of mortality constitutes “genuine” creativity, and so, “genuine” art. Rather, as artists tend to do, they merely *insisted* or *intimated* that this is the case. What then, is the “argument” here?

To see how we might be more philosophical about this phenomenon, and as a result, be as rational as possible, recall that in §1, we agreed that procreation is, at some level, driven by a biological impulse to perpetuate one’s genetic line—to project it through the onslaught of terminations that inevitably threaten it. Artistic creation, I claim, is driven by a very similar, but not necessarily identical impulse—namely, the desire to deal with death. As such, artistic creation might even be construed as some kind of biological by-product of human intelligence, kicking into gear to help prevent certain individuals, if not the species in general, from dealing with its seemingly

singular ability to become acutely conscious of its own mortality.<sup>15</sup> But for our purposes, it does not really matter just how we construe this phenomenon. Rather, we simply need to note, as explained in the introduction, that mortality is the most pervasive, unavoidable property of all humans. As a result, any confrontation with this phenomenon inevitably captures what is most at stake—at least as far as human life is concerned. This is why, I claim, such confrontations constitute “genuine” inspiration— manifest, generally speaking, in terms of pain, celebration and/or denial. All else is secondary. And as suggested in my introduction to this paper, we might even call such secondary production “craft,” even it means that much of what is currently be shown in some of the contemporary artistic hot spots (e.g. New York City and Berlin) falls into this category.

### §3.1 *Craftmakers and The Inability to Face the Facts*

In what respect, then, do non-genuine creators avoid a confrontation with death, such that they should be understood as craft-makers rather than as artists? Basically, as already suggested in our discussion of Lorca, it seems clear enough that certain individuals do not and/or cannot face the fact that they will die. As such, these individuals seem to be capable of persistently dodging a confrontation with mortality but in a kind of denial that is distinct from those artists who think that they may “live on” through their work. For in the former case, the individual at hand seems to deny the fact that his or her present life (namely, the life given to her by his/her present body) *will* end, where in the latter case, the artist is fully aware that the body will fail him/her, and as a result, somewhat frantically attempts to create a *new* body, which consists of his/her artistic creations.

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<sup>15</sup> See also Becker (1973), who makes a similar point, however, after Kierkegaard, Jung, E. Fromm, R. May, F. Schachtel, A. Maslow, N. Brown, and L. Perls, characterizes it in terms of our “paradoxical” nature, offering what might be construed as a psychological explanation for humanities’ almost knee-jerk attraction to certain forms of philosophical dualism (e.g. Plato, Descartes) : “Man is a worm and food for worms. This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars yet housed in a heart pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill-marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways—the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split into two: he has an awareness of his own impending uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly rot and disappear forever” (26).

Regardless, as I see it, those creators who do not come face to face with mortality tend to gravitate towards the production of things that fit into a historically established mode of expression (e.g. realism) and/or a mode of expression that is trendy and/or fashionable, where in all cases, such creators consist of Lorca's "fashionmongers"—their primary "battle" is with becoming popular, with fitting in, with displaying their talent, *not* with their inevitable fate. Along these lines, Becker (1973) argues that such individuals are simply unable to face the true "human condition" (namely, the fact that we all die) and as a result, hide themselves in guises of what he calls "character"<sup>16</sup> (Becker 47-64): "If character is a neurotic defense against despair and you shed that defense, you admit the full flood of despair, the full realization of the true human condition, what men are really afraid of [namely, dying, and thus], what they struggle against, and what they are driven toward and away from" (Becker, 57). Becker claims that the artist<sup>17</sup> on the other hand, tends to face his/her mortality head-on, where all his/her work results from this confrontation—once again echoing Lorca's remark that the "true fight is with duenda" (Lorca, 51 ):

When you get a person to look at the sun as it bakes down on the daily carnage taking place on earth, the ridiculous accidents, the utter fragility of life, the powerlessness of those he thought most powerful—what comfort can you give him from a psychotherapeutic point of view? Luis Bunuel likes to introduce a mad dog into his films as a counterpoint to the secure daily routine of repressed living. The meaning of his symbolism is that no matter what men pretend, they are only one accidental bite away from utter fallibility. The artist disguises the incongruity that is the pulse-beat of madness but *he is aware of it* (Becker, 59; emphasis added).

To support and clarify the claim that those who produce without facing this "pulse-beat of madness" are what I call "craft-makers" rather than genuine artists, we must revisit the idea that something fundamental is missing (namely, a confrontation with death) in those artistic expressions that are created *just* to convey a display of shocking emotion, or *just* to be beautiful, or *just* to be technical masterpieces, or *just* to be theoretically sophisticated, or *just* to be new; or any combination

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<sup>16</sup> For our purposes, we need not discuss, or even agree with Becker's notion of "character."

thereof. To help illustrate how and why this is the case, I now include the visual arts in my discussion, where I appeal to hypothetical comparisons.

Consider a painting completed in the context of great emotional turmoil, say, the breakup of an intense love affair; in this case, we will call the painter “Tina.” Now, clearly, Tina’s painting is bound to reflect some kind of deeply felt anguish—some measure of pain. Let’s also assume that Tina knows how to paint, and thus, the end product is masterfully executed. However, according to what I’ve said thus far, if this painting does not in some way manifest some kind of confrontation with death, either in terms of generally speaking, fear, celebration or denial, then it is not “genuine art.” But how could this be? It *could* be, I argue, because the same painting, if completed by an artist who, at some level, was aware of her mortality, would convey a poignancy of anguish—so fundamental to the human condition—that would be clearly missing in Tina’s painting. Let’s call this second painter “Sarah.” In Sarah’s case, a loss of love—where that love could have either tempered the pain and fear of an inevitable death, or made a love affair with life still more exquisite—would be a cause for a desperation almost too devastating to bear; transcending the rubble of the particular relationship to a basement of an emptiness so loud, that Sarah’s ears would seem to ring in a resonate display of deftly expressed paint. *This*, and only this breed of anguish would mark Sarah’s painting as a genuine work of art, while Tina’s painting is just about a breakup, which, however masterfully executed, falls short of what I take to be “art,” or what I take to be a genuine reflection of the mortal human condition. Instead, it is “craft.” Moreover, I contend that the difference between Sarah’s and Tina’s painting could be spotted—at least by a viewer who is in touch with her own mortality. In fact, I would even go so far to say that these kinds of viewers make the best (if not the most genuine) kind of critics and historians; they know what they are looking for.

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<sup>17</sup> Note however, that Becker only mentions the artist in passing.

With this in mind, note that what we might *typically* take to be an artifact of “craft,” say, wooden eggs poorly painted with flowers and houses, could, under my definition, count as art, although perhaps, *bad* art in the respect that the vision is poorly executed. This could be the case if our artist in question—let’s call her Mary—creates these poorly constructed eggs out of a somewhat desperate attempt to leave something behind before she dies, much in the same way that we leave our children behind. However, one might ask, could we necessarily recognize this desperation in the eggs themselves, or must we know the intention of the artist? Frankly, the answer is, “it depends.” In some cases, we could recognize a fear of death in an art object, as in the painting discussed above. But in other cases, we probably could not, thus in these instances, one *would* have to know the intention of the artist to make an evaluation. Regardless, the viewer’s knowledge does not affect the status of the object or objects at hand, which in this case, would consist of thousands of poorly constructed eggs, hidden away in, let’s say, a Newark garage.<sup>18</sup>

Now contrast these eggs with a piece that was recently displayed at a prominent New York City gallery as “high art:” an egg carton filled with expertly painted eggs. Now, I contend, if this piece was constructed to be cute, or new, or eye-catching, or even as an opaque commentary on American consumerism, it surely would not, by my definition, count as “art.” Rather, at best, it is a clever illustration, at worst, a gimmick: *New York City Craft*. And although the maker of this object,

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<sup>18</sup> Thus, regardless if one *does* confront mortality in the sense sketched above, this does not guarantee that [s]he will be a “great” artist. For as intimated in the example given above, despite having the right intentions, an artist may not have the skill to realize them in what [s]he or anybody else takes to be an effective manner; making for what I think is an especially heartbreaking situation. See for instance, Van Gogh’s early letters to his brother Theo, where he persistently complained about his technical inability to capture his intentions. I begin however, by citing a particularly trenchant remark he makes in regard to death: “On the ground lies a skull; and at a distance in the background, the bleached skeleton of a horse near a hut where a horse-knacker lies. The sky above is stormy; the day cold and bleak; the weather, gloomy and dark. It is a sad and melancholy scene, *which must affect everyone who knows and feels that one day we too have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death*” (# 126, Nov. 15, 1878; emphasis added). “A caged bird in spring knows quite well that he might serve some end; he is well aware that there is something for him to do, but he cannot do it. What is it? He does not quite remember. Then some vague ideas occur to him, and he says to himself, ‘The others build their nests and lay their eggs and bring up their little ones;’ and he knocks his head against the bars of the cage. But the cage remains, and the bird is maddened by anguish” (#133, July, 1880). “So you see that I am in a rage of work, though for the moment it does not produce very brilliant results. But I hope these thorns will bear their white blossoms in due time, and that this apparently sterile struggle is no other than the labor of childbirth. First the pain, then the joy.” (#136, Sept. 24, 1880).

let's call him Jim, is a much better craftsman than Mary because his eggs are expertly painted, Mary is the artist here, not Jim.

Likewise, it seems obvious enough that there is a fundamental difference between something that is created *just* to be beautiful v. something that reflects a life that is conspicuously spent dying, and so, represents a kind of *living* that is consummately attuned to the beauty embracing it. This distinction is easier to grasp if you consider a painter who paints the portrait of a man whom she takes to be beautiful but with whom she has no emotional attachment, versus a painter who, with the same technical ability, paints the same man, but is in love with him; the two paintings will, I contend, be fundamentally different. Now apply this distinction to an artist who finds various aspects of life attractive and beautiful versus a painter who, *because* she is in love with life, finds various aspects of it beautiful. The latter is, as Nabokov put it, genuinely inspired, while the former is merely attracted; in the relationship just for sex, so to speak. Similarly, a figure that is sculpted by an artist who wishes to only display her sophisticated knowledge of human anatomy will be significantly different from a figure that is constructed to come to grips with—in some shape or form—death. In this case, not only does the difference lie clearly in the intention, but in the work itself; ironically, the work completed as a display of talent will, in some fundamental respect, already be dead, devoid of life, while the work completed in the face of death will be alive; vibrant with either pain, a celebration of life, a desperate quest for immortality, or any combination thereof. Think, for instance, of Madame Tussaud's wax figures; they are almost exact representations of the subjects in question, creating a venue where the every-day person can, it would seem, come face-to-face with celebrity. But these figures do not move, they do not breathe nor do they speak. In fact, because the viewer is constantly reminded of her misplaced anticipation *for* them to do so, she is simultaneously reminded that these figures are *dead*, they are not “real.” Contrast these dead-although-expertly-prepared

figures with the well-known “Venus of Willendorf,” who, bloated in all of her idealized fertility, is vibrant and alive with the celebration of birth in the face of death.

Fair enough, you might say, but what about religious modes of expression? Are these, according to my definition, “craft,” rather than art? For the most part, I would have to answer *no*. Rather, we may simply say that in a fundamental respect, a love of god or gods represents a certain kind of love of immortality; an attempt to align one’s self with a purity that transcends the world of fleeting, dirty, particulars—echoing the philosopher’s quest for truth with a capital ‘T.’ Along these lines, John Donne writes in his “Sermon on Death:” “If in death there be no remembrance of God, if this remembrance perish in Death, certainly it decays in the nearness to death; if there be a possession in death, there is an approach in age; and therefore ‘Remember now thy Creator in the days of youth’” (Donne, 103). Similarly, he ends Holy Sonnet 10 as follows: “one short sleep past, we wake eternally / And Death shall no more; Death shalt die” (10: 13-14). In this respect then, religious modes of expression are in fact, *art*; they represent an attempt to touch, if not achieve, a certain kind of immortality through one’s work. Yet as with all art, as well as craft, such attempts may be “good” or “bad,” depending on how well they are executed.

### §3.2 *Art-Making Machines that don’t “Die:” The Dismantlement of the Notion of “Genuine?”*

Having sketched a general distinction between art and craft, we must pause to address the following problem, inspired by Dennett (2004). To motivate this problem, first assume that we *have* identified a few of these “genuine” artists. Let’s say that they are the muscians Mozart, Bach and Puccini.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, realize that a machine has been made by David Cope, the “EMI” (short for Experiments in Musical Intelligence), which, when given the work of various composers (say

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<sup>19</sup> Keeping with some of Dennett’s examples (p. 276). Note however, that Dennett does not suggest that Mozart, Bach and Puccini are either genuine or not genuine. In fact, although we might assume that he considers these men to be good, if not great composers, we must keep in mind that this paper is written, in part, to question the “myth” of genius

Mozart, Bach and Puccini) can combine and recreate *new* pieces, based on what it has been fed: “it readily analyzes their styles and composes new music in their styles, better pastiches than Cope himself—or almost any human composer—can compose” (Dennett, 276). In fact, Dennett continues: “I can personally attest to the fact that an EMI-Puccini aria brought a lump to my throat—but then, I am on a hair trigger when it comes to Puccini, and this was a good enough imitation to fool me.” (Dennett, 276). In other words, here we have evidence that a *machine* can make a “genuine” work of art, at least in the respect that it can fool its musically-educated listeners into believing that they are hearing an actual composition by Puccini (where we assumed that Puccini made “genuine” music), rather than an EMI compilation. However, seemingly crucial to note, as I understand it (and I think that it is safe enough to assume as much), this machine has no concept of death. Moreover, Dennett argues, “David Cope [the inventor of EMI] can no more claim to be the composer of EMI’s symphonies and motets and art songs than Murray Campell can claim to have beaten Kasparov in chess” (Dennett, 276). Thus, we cannot say that somehow, Cope’s own personal conception of mortality somehow “leaked” in to the EMI machine such that it enabled the machine to create such moving music. In fact, Dennett’s point is that artistic creation is in fact, a complex algorithmic “research and design” (“R and D” for short; Dennett, 273) process that as such can, and in fact is, effectively and convincingly reproduced in machines. Accordingly, the idea is that creative genius, if not human creation in general, is not “inspired” by any mystical, external source (e.g. God or gods) but rather, is perfectly explicable by way of naturalistic means. As a result, we need not parse “artists” into some special “chosen” category, as if they are motivated by a higher power or appeal to some kind of mind-blowing “magic” to complete their tasks. Rather, according to Dennett (and as illustrated by the EMI example), artists simply inherit aspects of their technique from their cultural environment and proceed to synthesize them to create something new; where just how good they

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(although, I argue above, doing as much does not preclude us from distinguishing between more or less authentic, or genuine art).



synthesize and create is a function of how well they process the information, in other words, is a function of what we might characterize as their organic “hardware.” And thus, Dennett writes: “To the extent that this is not enough for the anti-Darwinians, to the extent that they want to hold out for authors as an objective, metaphysically grounded, “natural kind,” they are looking for a skyhook [namely, some kind of non-naturalistic explanation]” (Dennett, 277).

Yet oddly enough, despite all that I’ve said so far in this paper, I agree. For it seems clear enough that artists *are* great synthesizers, where they may not be entirely in control of what they are doing and why, making them, as Dennett puts it: “pack rat[s] which [dissolve] in turn into a collection of trial-and-error processes over which nobody has any control” (Dennett, 277). *However*, crucial to note, this explanation of the creative process as a non-teleological<sup>20</sup> Dennett/Darwinian reflection of adaptation does *not* rule out the possibility that what I call “genuine” art is motivated by a particular psychological state, namely, a confrontation with death, which as such, may admit of as naturalistic an explanation as say, our need to breed does. This is easily shown to be the case if we recall that in the case of the EMI, we entertained the idea that all of the work that was fed into it was made by “genuine” artists.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the EMI simply amalgamated what was *already* generated by artists in this psychological condition (e.g. Puccini) into something that it seems, *continued* to reflect this condition, such that the EMI-Puccini had the power on its audience that it did. But my hunch is that if we fed the EMI music that was made just to make money, say, any of the music made by the currently popular “boy-bands” (and thus, is *not* motivated by any kind of confrontation with death) the EMI, however brilliantly it works with this material, would, I must

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Non-teleological’ is not Dennett’s term, but I think it accurately captures his claim that all of life (as well human creativity) is not motivated by some “master plan” that as such, always has, does, and will “guide” life as we know it; where such a master plan might be characterized as a god or gods, or, from a more secular point of view, Aristotle’s “unmoved mover.” See Dennett (1995) for more detail.

<sup>21</sup> Yes, perhaps a big assumption. But all I am trying to show here is that regardless if we understand the creative process as a non-teleological research and development process, replicable as such in various machines, this does *not* rule out the possibility that some creations/creators have more authenticity, or integrity than others, regardless if the creators at hand are viewed as “great” or not.

assume,<sup>22</sup> generate more music of the same genre. Or, switching artistic venues: assume that we had a “painting machine” that could, based on the images it was given, like the EMI, amalgamate the styles and produce something new based on them. Assume that we fed it just images of velvet-art paintings consisting of say, various Elvis figures, made by an artist to impress her in-laws.<sup>23</sup> The painting machine, if given nothing but these paintings, might produce, from a technical point a view, a better velvet Elvis painting than our craftsperson could ever make, but because its initial input is a product of repression, not authentic artistic inspiration, its products would still be velvet Elvis paintings made to impress the in-laws, and thus, *not*, I argue, genuine art.

Thus, we may, after Dennett, argue that creativity, at least from a technical point of view, may, indeed, be nothing more than some kind of complex Darwinian R and D process, derivative of the material “fed” into the artist by way of his or her own life and the cultural history he or she inherits. And thus, as such, artistic expressions may indeed, be effectively reproduced in machines, such as the EMI. In fact, one day, machines might even be able to synthesize and subsequently create, “new” work in the style of *any* artist, say for instance Donatello, who we might assume was an artist who had “duende.” Thus, if the machine is well-cared for, we could, conceivably, force our machine-Donatello to make new work for an “eternity” (or at least as long as the machine lasts and/or is reproduced). But ironically enough, the creations of such machines would be particularly powerful to humans because they grew out of the *human* condition, namely, the mortal *human* Donatello’s recognition of the fact that we do *not* last for an eternity. So until we find a way to stop our bodies from aging, that is *until we stop dying*, our universal confrontation with death will always be—artistically and literally speaking—what is most capable of knocking us off our feet. Or as

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<sup>22</sup> For otherwise, the EMI would somehow have to have access to the psychological state of reacting to mortality *independent* of it being manifest in a particular musical composition. But as I understand it, to date, no computer can be programmed with such a “state” in a “pure” form (nor, as I understand it, can we isolate such a mood in a “pure form” in humans).

<sup>23</sup> However, it is not the case, as explained earlier, that velvet paintings could not be genuine art. Rather, as explained above, it depends on who is making them and why.

Card's alien puts it<sup>24</sup> "Everything [genuine] you [humans] do smacks of death" (Card, 153). *Death* then, is what we should be looking for when we look for authentic art; making the best critics and historians "vultures," but now in a most auspicious sense of the word.

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<sup>24</sup> However, I have added the word 'genuine' here.