

Andrei Bogdan POPA
Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
3andreipopa@gmail.com

**“THE WORLD OF THE DYING:’ JOHN MCGAHERN’S *MEMOIR* AND
THE THINGNESS IN ANTICIPATORY GRIEF**

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Abstract: My essay will aim to prove that John McGahern’s *Memoir* foregrounds the material dimension of anticipatory grief and its aftermath as a space in which different affective responses to the “Thing” can be explored. Firstly, I look at how the text edits together memories of anticipatory grief in order to dramatize the “apparatus of thinking” (Steven Connor) as an affective spatiality (Marta Figlerowicz) in relation to an irrupting thingness within the object world. Secondly, I look at how McGahern and his father are “timed by things” (Timothy Morton) in their effort to remember or objectify affect, and how mourning itself becomes a matter of accepting nonhuman temporality. As such, this textual engagement with memories and inscriptions enacts a writerly form of anticipatory-vicarious grief, a “moral emotion” arising from the “anticipated harm” (Somogy Varga and Shaun Gallagher) that the subject feels will affect those close to her after her death.

Key words: no-thing, thinking apparatus, meontic nothingness, affective space, anticipatory-vicarious grief, memory making, temporality.

I. Preliminary remarks

This paper will offer an object-oriented reading of how grief is represented in its spatial and temporal dimensions throughout *Memoir* by John McGahern. I will start by analysing how the “dying” subject triggers a thingness in the affects of those on the outside of its intimate sphere, while those on the inside suffer a suspension of agency in relation to the object world, due to the fact that the “signifying process” in the

intersubjective engagement inhabits a “place of unobtainable happiness” (McGahern 99). McGahern’s text will also be shown to dramatize the “container of thought” as “waiting-room” (Connor 9) through scenes where affective spaces are emptied out of objects which act as repositories of memory. As such, materiality is haunted not only by the remembrance of the departed alterity, but also by a tension illustrating the distinction Timothy Morton draws between “meontic nothingness” and “oukotic nothing” (276). Nonetheless, the *Memoir* also shows how one can attempt to hijack and weaponize the affective space of the deathbed, as seen in the father’s pressing impulse to objectify the sudden awareness of his own mortality into a theatrical set of directions involving “mementoes” and “necessary provisions” (McGahern 156). These two cases of anticipatory-vicarious grief show how the material world interacts with the “anticipated harm that A’s death would cause others with practical identities entangled with A’s” (Varga and Gallagher 179).

Next, I will move from the spatial dimension of anticipatory-vicarious grief to its temporality: working under the assumption that the Thing can be said to time the world (Morton 272), we need to look at how memory itself is timed by the human agents’ reaction to the “no-thing” within the thinking apparatus, seen as “a space of suspension” (Connor 9). Following this line of reasoning, it will become apparent that the “slowness” which, in Eóin Flannery’s conception, guides the *Memoir*’s “ecological sensibility” (281) is actually informed by the relation of the subject to the object world under the affective temporality of grief. If, as Moron shows, art is a “liminal space” where Things meet (279), McGahern’s anticipatory-vicarious grief reveals itself as an engagement with memories of and inscriptions left behind by the father, whose inability to accept his own mortality is reflected in his exasperation with the thingness of the object world. Thus, McGahern’s narrative ethics and self-mourning involve an exploration of how memories and memory-making are timed by the Thing.

II. Towards an Object Ontology of Anticipatory Grief

In *Death, Memory and Material Culture*, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey argue that the material realm is marked by the “inevitable expression” of death’s intensity, since “a person’s physical being can be experienced as «elsewhere»” (214). However, even though the “physical domains occupied by the body and its lived material environment” are haunted by the “losses anticipated in the face of death and felt in its aftermath,” the act of “memory making” can confer a “powerful physicality” to the

“future” of the departed other (Hallam and Hockey 214). Thus, since remembrance takes centre stage in “cultural and social responses to death” (103), Hallam and Hockey claim that a comprehensive understanding of the “relationships between death, memory and material culture” (1) has to take into account the ability of objects to “reverberate, to exude or transmit sensations, to reach into and affect the dispositions of the living, over time to ferment or fracture memories” (106), and sometimes even to “resist and disrupt processes of materialized memory making – seemingly exuding their own form of agency” (118). This allows them to suggest that “the domain of the material was conceived” in the space pertaining to “the deathbed,” which facilitated the emergence of “sets of belongings charged with a diversity of social and personal meanings,” aside from that of the Christian theology regarding transient objects “left behind by the spirit” and of the “property governed by customs of inheritance” (Hallam and Hockey 164). This conceptual framework of material mourning and *memory making* can be broadened and rendered more productive through an object-oriented investigation of what Somogy Varga and Shaun Gallagher have theorized as “anticipatory-vicarious grief” (176). This recent philosophical insight is defined as a “moral emotion” arising from the “anticipated harm that A’s death would cause others with practical identities entangled with A’s” (Varga and Gallagher 179). As “practical identity” denominates “a person’s first-personal perspective and normative self-conception,” this very normativity is temporarily suspended by an impulse of the dying subject to “engage” with her profound commitments from their own perspective (179). I believe that this engagement informs any attempt at *memory making*, and that the memory of this anticipatory-vicarious grief, as well as its development in real time, results in the emergence of a *physicality* related to the departed other. Indeed, Varga and Gallagher argue for the epistemological value of this concept by emphasizing its potential to “[offer] insight into the structure of human agency and its operating conditions” (185). However, if the dying-survivor dyad presupposes a “bidirectional relation of dependence,” this “relationality of (...) practical identities” only goes insofar as the dying subject “[entertains] relationships to others that reflect mutually entangled relationships” (Varga and Gallagher 186). Therefore, material theorizations around the concept of the *deathbed* can be facilitated by an awareness of how this tacit “deliberative engagement” turns the memories of the dying subject into the material reverberations that linger after her death (Varga and Gallagher 186). Alternatively, the object world will be haunted by the survivor’s

memories regarding this past exploration of relational *practical identities*.

Before moving on to the interaction of thingness and anticipatory-vicarious grief, I first have to explore the affective dimension of the *engagement* instigated by the aforementioned moral emotion. In *Spaces of Feeling*, Marta Figlerowicz describes affect as “not immediately or even necessarily conscious” (1), but rather marked by a delay between the moment of its inflection in the subject and the moment of its apprehension. This delay turns the person vulnerable in relation to their environment, and makes it difficult to cast value judgements upon the exteriorization of their affect. Such a conceptual framework can both complicate and clarify the relational engagement in anticipatory-vicarious grief. Figlerowicz goes on to expand the understanding of affect by insisting upon its ability to simultaneously undermine “our pretense of autonomy in even belatedly interpreting our bodily and mental states” and to create “a tension between our dependence on others for our self-awareness, and these others’ relative lack of concern about whether or not we can explicate our feelings to ourselves” (2). In this conception, interpersonal relations are marked by the inability to involve others in correctly assessing our affect. Again, this insight is of crucial interest if we are to trace the way in which anticipatory-vicarious grief instigates the efforts on the part of dying and the survivor to affectively adjust the latter to the “suspension of engagement.” Of even greater importance to my argument is Figlerowicz’s claim that, in modernist literature, these conundrums regarding “affective awareness” are depicted “primarily through the relationships of human bodies to their surrounding social and physical environments” (14). As such, the emergence of *affective awareness* in the case of anticipatory-vicarious grief can engage with the object world in ways that can reveal a deeper, object-oriented understanding of our relation to death.

At this point I need to address two related questions. The first concerns the way in which the “epistemic function and [contribution] to cognition” served by grief can move through and beyond its affective dimension, and into the ontological. The second addresses why the work of literature is a productive site where this phenomenon can be explored and reflected upon. I will start from Bill Brown’s thesis that “the task of art” is “[to dramatize] the thingness of objects,” while “thingness emerges both outside the subject and at [her] centre” (39). Thus, if “the objecthood of the self” is stabilized by “conferring stability on the object world,” any affective engagement faced by anticipatory grief is always already subsumed by this “interobjective relation”: “the

thingness of the constituted object is the outcome of an interaction (beyond their mutual constitution) between subject and object” (Brown 21-2). The process of signification is developed by the subject in order to deal with the gap between itself and the real; this gap is the thing. As far as *recognizing* affect within anticipatory grief goes, Steven Connor’s theory of the “thinking thing” (1) can shed light on the ontological dimension of this process. According to Connor, thought starts with objects: “[thinking] must lose itself in objects, be unthinkable except through substitution, surrogacy, standing-in” (Connor 11). Connor picks up on Wilfred R. Bion psychoanalytical theory, where the “apparatus of thinking” is understood as a “space” where the “intolerable thing” of the bad object, an “object of privation,” a *no-thing*, is ejected through being made a “thing” (Connor 6). Since affective engagement involves thinking, then both the dying and the survivor are hosts of “no-things” (Connor 6). To get a better understanding of the relation between “things” and affect, will examine Bion’s own theory of thought, founded on a “primordial absence of the subject/object differentiation,” followed by “an absence of the object as such” (82). This is how the “thinking thought” is constituted and facilitates the “establishment of relationships” (Lévy 82). Bion’s conception of incipient intersubjectivity can be read as the ontological dimension of the “dependence of others on our [affective] self-awareness” (Figlerowicz 2), which itself can be seen as part of the *structure of agency* in the AV-grief specific “bidirectional” relation of dependence (Varga and Gallagher 184). As far as “specific no-things” go, Michael Eigen points to their functions “as mental aches akin to hunger or gaps that call for the accretions of meaning” (45). I will be focusing on both of these functions throughout the textual analysis, with a focus on how “meaning itself is a no-thing,” and the “«is not » of no-thing” is what maintains the openness of the thinking apparatus toward “development or undoing development” (Eigen 45):

The temptation to fill in, to thingify, or otherwise to nullify no-thing is ubiquitous. The natural pull of perception ties us to objects, and when our gaze turns inward we are attracted to or frightened by fantasy objects. Mental sets or habits become part of a gravitational pull with chronic ways of thingifying no-thing (Eigen 45).

Therefore, the act of containing and tolerating the *no-thing* is contingent upon the ability to hold on to it, instead of simply expelling it via objectification. We can

contextualize this reading within Connor's own object-oriented treatment of Bion's work: in the *container of thought*, which offers itself as a *space of suspension*, the object can "oscillate between being and non-being" and the *no-thing* can be preserved from being objectified into a "bad thing" (9). In light of this framework, I suggest that we may understand affect itself as the emotional enactment of the very thingification which serves as an "escape [from] the difficulty of interacting with no-thing" (Eigen 46). Consequently, reading and becoming aware of affect can uncover the traces of this thingification, and thus offer a way of identifying the *no-thing* with which the subject interacts. This thingification influences the way in which the agents involved in the bidirectional dependence of AV-grief interpret the affects of others and become aware of their own. Moreover, if, for Eigen, the thought or representation of memory can also be seen as "no-things that lend themselves to thingification inasmuch as they are easily confused with and reduced to their objects," the work of literature may have the capacity to foreground just this difficulty of facing the no-thing (46). Conceiving the thingness of grief in this way would broaden Connor's theory of the thinking thing, according to which "writing and thought are bound together, (...) because writing is the same kind of substantial no-thing as a thinking thing" (17). While hinting at its "insufficiency," the thinking thing needs to "at once be a thing and a no-thing" in order to "make present the impresent or unrepresentable" (Connor 17). As I will argue in this essay, literature can even dramatize the process whereby "the apparatus of thinking arranges (then is) a space in which this «thing» and «no thing» can be allowed, even encouraged to co-exist" (Connor 5). Spaces of affect would then double as sites where the "no-thingness" (Eigen 46) harboured by the subject meets the thingness of the outer world.

What happens to affect when the *no-thing* within the subject meets the nothingness, rather than the thingness, in the affective space of externalized grief? Alternatively, and on the temporal side of the issue, how does the nothingness within anticipatory grief pass into the nothingness of mourning? The answer may lead to a better understanding of how *physical environments* distribute *affective awareness* in the process of anticipatory grief and its aftermath. It can illustrate how a subject (consciously or unconsciously) prepares to experience the other's *physical being* as *elsewhere*, or what Varga and Gallagher refer to as "desert," meaning the *suspension of engagement* with the practical identity of an alterity which is "irreplaceable" to its own (177).

In the same vein, Timothy Morton’s article “The Liminal Space between Things: Epiphany and the Physical” can shed light on the bearing such questions have on the work of literature. Morton identifies himself as one of the “object-oriented ontologists” who have decided to define “nothingness” “as the core of anything whatsoever” (Morton 278). By this, he means that certain things are “not susceptible to being easily posited as constantly present, or as reducible, in ways that the metaphysics of presence has demanded” (Morton 278). By skirting this “metaphysics of presence,” Morton defines things as “a kind of liminal space made of other things,” and thus, the exact space in which “art happens”: “a meeting place of other beings” (279). However, as Connor’s theory of thinking things borrows heavily from Bion’s theory of thought, we can also broaden Morton’s definition of art by recognizing (via Lévy) that “thought is (...) about linking and the linking of thoughts” and thus an “activity” which “supposes that links have been established between oneself and the other before other sorts of links present themselves within the psyche” (Lévy 82). If, for Bion, “thinking (...) is an activity” (Lévy 82) and the capacity to hold a *no-thing* in suspension means being “capable of being in uncertainties” (Keats qtd. In Lévy 82), we can begin to see how the *no-thing* of the subject interacts with art, itself conceived as both “metaphysically (constantly) present,” and “shot through and through with nothingness” (Morton 279). The indefinable beauty of “aesthetic experience,” is “given” to us, much like “an epiphany that coexists anarchically alongside us” (Morton 279) despite not being always evidently present. For Morton, this is the space where one can contextualize the “meontic nothingness” that subjects come across as they stumble through the affectively and epistemically uncertain engagement in AV-grief, and into the space of mourning, from which the departed alterity is absent. Likewise, the subject stumbles into death itself, an “oukontic nothing” (276), that is an absolute form of inexistence.

This same type of epiphany resurfaces in anticipatory-vicarious grief, or indeed anticipatory grief in general. The relation of the dying subject to the Thing informs her affective engagement with other practical identities, as well as her motivation to be aware of her own or other person’s affects. How does this reflect in the object world? It might do so through the very “beginning” of death’s eventuality, wherein any beginning whatsoever “must appear as a distortion [in the real itself],” as it “[manifests] for something.” The shifting spectrality of meontic nothingness, a “nothingness [that] is a kind of «something»,” is there, always already, in the “gap between being and presence” (Morton 274). This epiphanic space is also where “the

experience of bringing our affects into conscious awareness” (Figlerowicz 9) is most threatened by nonhuman agency. Moreover, such an understanding of thingness only goes to enforce Figlerowicz’s claim that a “nonsolipsistic way of inhabiting the world” is dependent upon affective “recalibrations,” which “the multiplicity and contingency of the sources from which what we come to describe as our awareness of ourselves actually emerges” (9). This material ecocritical incursion into object ontology can also shed light on what Varga and Gallagher refer to as the *structure of human agency* in the face of anticipatory grief.

In addition, Morton goes on to define “ecological awareness” itself as a confrontation with the “always already of actually existing, coexisting beings,” claiming that ecocriticism must enable a “caring attunement to the [irreducibility]” of the nonhuman (279). Following Kant, for whom his “attunement of beings” is a “precondition for the aesthetic experience,” he locates a “certain nothingness” in the perception of beauty (Morton 271). However, if we keep in mind Morton’s reading of Heidegger, according to which “things time other things” and “a thing times itself” (272), we can also recognize a certain tension between *human timing* in the face of death, whether on the part of the survivor or the dying, and the *nonhuman timing* exerted by things. The aesthetic work can show us how an attunement to the *no-thing* facilitates our affective attunement within the AV-grief engagement. As such, this is not only a matter of space, but also a matter of (prospective) time. If “present and presence” represent the “uneasy, shifting relative motion between different things” (272), then the act of memory-making, and indeed, the work of literature itself, need to recognize this reality. An adjustment of human temporality to the agency that the object-world exerts over memory can inform the meontic nothingness of beauty in the aesthetic process.

Thus, in the work of art, a *meeting of things* can stage the *no-thing* within the affective spatiality and temporality of grief. The narrative affective space can dramatize this *space of suspension* into the *suspension of engagement*: the changes triggered by the (impending) death of a loved one will engender *no-things*, which can be “spat out as bad things,” or go on as “ambivalences” (Connor). This is because the emotional torment of anticipatory grief intensifies the process whereby the subject must resist the temptation to use words in order to “evacuate rather than build meaning,” to treat the *no-thing* as “an object,” thus killing the “capacity to support experiencing” (Eigen 47). As such, both the dying and the survivor are timed by the thingness of objects, and

the morality inherent in the process of engagement is tied to a recognition of meontic nothingness and the question of no-things.

III. No-things in the Affective Space

McGahern’s *Memoir* has been read by John Clearey as a “Freudian psychodrama” in which its author “[retakes] adult possession of the maternal landscape” in order to “return to the world of childhood” (232). Anne Goarzin has offered an exhaustive taxonomy and analysis of *thingness* in McGahern’s oeuvre preceding the *Memoir*. The core of both perspectives can be extended upon and synthesized in order to reveal how the *thinking thing* functions in this text. On the one hand, Goarzin’s insights regarding “the indefinable «thingness» which takes the place of and blurs the character’s apprehension of the real” (29) in McGahern’s work needs to be brought up to speed with recent developments in Thing theory if a productive object-oriented inquiry into *Memoir* is to be elaborated. On the other hand, Clearey’s claim that the text stages an “incestuous retaking of the mother through the power of writing” (241) stands to be questioned via an analysis of how the psychoanalytic concept of the *no-thing* can be applied to the affective *entanglement* between father and son. This subchapter will therefore elaborate upon previous critical perspectives via an analysis of the text’s affective spaces.

I will start by analysing the way in which an outward Thingness of the object world impacts the affective memories around the traumatic event of anticipatory grief. Earlier in the text, McGahern’s narrator recounts the feeling of safety that his mother’s presence conveys to their emplacement in the natural space: “the whole night, dark trees, the moon in the small lake, moonlight making pale the gravel road we walked (...) all filled with healing and the certainty that we’d never die” (McGahern 54). During these ritualistic, bucolic walks, his “chattering (...) [grows] so wild” that his mother “[places] her fingers on [his] lips in reproof and amusement and love” (McGahern 55). Already, we can liken the text’s depiction of affective space to the “container of thought as a space of suspension,” derived from “the containing screen constituted by the relaxed, attentive receptiveness of the mother” (Connor 9). As the narrative reaches the moment when his younger (ten year old) self finally becomes aware that his mother is terminally ill, it is clear that, in this recollection, “the world of the dying” (McGahern 99) is peopled by subjects seen as *things* in the sense that they “threaten the illusion of endless continuity” of others; they threaten the positive affect felt by the non-dying,

as well as their sense of agency over their own affect, since their potential “pious platitudes are like a covering of dust or chaff” – “no one makes plans around a dying person” (McGahern 99). While the agents of AV-grief navigate an engagement in which the *no-thing* is to be *thingified*, those on the outside simply objectify their awareness of death. The healthy are faced with an alterity for whom the *bad object*, meaning the thought that one day the self might die, can no longer be discarded and it too, turns into a thing, which renders the object world completely autonomous to the subject, as it becomes “the world they are losing” due to the emergence of cancer from a meontic nothingness of potentiality and into metaphysical reality, thus “marking” their identity (McGahern 99). The thingness of the object world in this case is robbed of its potentiality to meet the future of the maternal alterity, and the agency of the subject over memory-making is continuously threatened. These images are not memories; they are what the author now knows to be the alienating lack of agency over affect in the face of imminent death, even in relation to the materiality of the spaces he associates with his mother.

Inevitably, the dreaded and discarded time arrives and has its own shape: suddenly, the waitress pouring coffee at tables, the builder laying blocks, a girl opening a window, the men collecting refuse, belong to a world that went mostly unregarded when it was ours but now becomes a place of unobtainable happiness, in even the meanest of forms (McGahern 99).

The proximity to the eventual, imprecise departure imbues the object world with the future causality issued by the departed other. However, as it will become clear further on, the way in which the narrator is now remembering this event is shot through with an acknowledgement of the agentic nonhuman that the walks with his mother had affected upon the younger self: this object world of open potentiality is not *ours*, but was it ever to begin with? Moreover, if it had been *unregarded* up until that point, the text (and McGahern’s oeuvre at large) makes it clear that the author will indeed dwell upon the materiality of the world, but from a vantage point which is cognizant of the thingness in the nonhuman.

For now, the child is aware of his mother’s condition, but her carefulness regarding his affect triggers a feeling of inaccessibility. In the lack of agency over the object world, all he has to offer her is his own affective awareness, since the *signifying*

process through which the engagement is carried out is timed by the prospective thingness of her death. However, these spaces also harbour a tension between *action* and *thinking* (for Eigen, the two responses to the *no-thing*), in the child’s self-perceived practical identity regarding his role in sustaining the affective wellness of his dying mother. This dynamic culminates in the scene where the children move, along with their belongings, to the barracks. Even though the younger self wants to “rush to the room” (McGahern 106), he stays in the lorry with his brothers, sisters, relatives, and a lot of furniture. The narrator remembers their affects precisely, then turns his gaze to the erupting thingness of the nonhuman, which also turns the kids themselves into objects to be moved out of the maternal home: “with each pothole we hit, the furniture shook and jumped and would have fallen if it hadn’t been roped to the crates. The hens clucked their alarm for the whole of the journey” (McGahern 106). Once they arrive, the younger self watches the anticlimactic scene of the furniture being brought inside and the lorry “driving away” (McGahern 106). Here, what Cleary sees as the “[unusually distinct] separate spheres of the father and mother” (234) can be read as spaces of distinct affect: if the maternal home has produced the children’s receptivity as thinking things, the paternal one will be revealed to function according to a regime of objectification. This movement also undermines the potentiality of the inanimate objects to act as repositories of memory. Instead, the children themselves become harbourers of newly-valorised memories. If the text leaves out any mention of intersubjective acts of remembering, this may be precisely because the intimate affective wellness they had felt in their mother’s company must be held in suspension as an object of privation which would only be trivialized if thingified as verbalization.

Alternatively, the eruption of Thingness in the object world reveals itself to be sifted through the narrator’s memories of his mother, who had treated his affects as those of a thinking thing. Listening to his childish ramblings on their ritualistic, bucolic walks through nature, she had shared her deeply religious beliefs, and also sheltered him from any real knowledge of her illness. This scene foregrounds a type of thingness that will haunt the child’s relation to the object world and its potential to act as a repository of memory. In the delayed awareness of affect, accessed through remembering, the *no-thing*, the *object of privation* (meaning the acceptance of the fact that he will have to grow up without a mother) meets the “meontic nothingness” as constituted by the surviving feeling of maternal love, an affect which will see the children through their father’s abusive regime. In light of this imagery depicting a

movement through the object world, we can see how, even though the eventual *emptying out* of the house the mother lived in constitutes a violent brush with Thingness for the narrator, his epiphanic association of memories of mobility will eventually inform his ethics regarding the lack of human agency. This *emptiness* will revisit him vividly when he and his first wife get divorced and she moves out:

As the apartment emptied, those hours in the poor rose garden when the furniture was taken from the rooms in Aughawillan and stacked with the brown hens in the crates of the red lorry while my mother was dying came back with such vividness that I started to shiver in the summer's heat (McGahern 218).

This emptying out engenders absences: the object world is evacuated and filled with *no-things* to which the child survivor, and respectively, the new divorcee, will have to react. This space of suspension will also echo within his vision of an afterlife shared with his mother: "I would want no shadow to fall on her joy and deep trust in God. She would face no false reproaches. As we retraced our steps, I would pick for her the wild orchid and the windflower" (McGahern 232). The "picking" of "flowers" mirrors the material evacuation of the maternal home: in the thinking apparatus, McGahern traces an affective space where human agency is harmonious with the nonhuman. Such a reading of the final scene would shed light on the narrator's renunciation of the promise he had made to his mother, which is that he would become a priest and say mass to her (in the wake of her death, this mass would only be said in her honour). Becoming a writer, a "god of a small, vivid world" (McGahern 173), and thus escaping his father, is an action powered by the "strength" he gets out of the love he still feels from her part long after her death. As such, "the affective and material agency of nonhuman nature" that the author, in Flannery's view, "embraces" (288) throughout the narrative, is deeply informed the memory of his mother, who "spoke to [him] of heaven as concretely and with as much love as she named the wild flowers" (McGahern 8). Here, the mother is already enacting a process of memory making in light of a future she knows she will not inhabit. As we have seen, the text points to no effective mementoes besides a continuous awareness of and attunement to the agentic nonhuman. However, the author also "realizes" that when he used to pray, "God (...) was blankness" (McGahern 173). There is thus an oukontic nothing of normative religion colouring the text's discourse around grief, spirituality, and the object world,

while a meontic nothingness can be attested as what Goarzin had interpreted in the rest of McGahern’s play to be a “repetition [which] provides a coherent approach, one which avoids «stranding» isolated objects or stories, and connects them through structuring sometimes invisible, textual devices” (35). Therefore, even though the “blankness” of God does not refer to any sort of spiritual potentiality (as the text itself will make clear), it does seem to influence the narrator’s view on aesthetics in narrative fiction.

As far as the affective space of AV-grief is concerned, Frank McGahern tries to manoeuvre the material dimension of the death bed to his advantage. The verbally, physically, and (to a lesser, though real extent) sexually abusive father is keenly equipped to read the affects of others, only to manoeuvre such awareness into using any alterity as an object, as a prop in his deeply narcissistic and impulsive theatrics. The author’s recollection of his own father’s hypochondriac, theatrical self-mourning, as well as his attitude toward grief and death at large, mark the patriarch with a humorously emasculating impotence in relation to the object world. Frank “[indulges] his fantasy” (McGahern 157) that he is dying, further traumatizing his children:

He explained that it was unlikely he would return alive from hospital, but I was not to worry: he had made all necessary provisions. He opened the box. The wad of money in the rubber band was for the immediate expenses of the funeral. The large envelope contained all his instructions, together with bank and post office accounts, government bonds and insurance policies. He was to be buried with our mother in the plot in Aughawillan. Immediately after the funeral I was to open the big envelope and read his instructions, and then take it to the solicitor in Boyle. He would give me all necessary help. The other larger package was of no immediate concern: it contained mementoes and things of sentimental value that might be of interest as we got older – our mother’s rings and jewellery, medals and certificates, old photos, old letters (McGahern 156).

In direct opposition to the “emptying out” of previous scenes, Frank empties, or thingifies, the epiphanic *no-thing* of his own mortality (obviously inaccessible to the subject) into a set of directions and personal belongings: the thingness of death is reduced to its object in the thinking thing as constituted by Frank; he ejects the *no-thing* into action instead of allowing it to remain in suspension, that is, in thinking. The memory-making is thus hijacked and the engagement specific to AV-grief is mimicked through the normative Western social rituals around the *deathbed*. The text

itself negates the possibility that this might have been a ploy to emotionally manipulate his children back into good graces: the hospital finds Frank “in perfect health” (McGahern 157), and his withdrawn behavior during the following days betrays a deep disappointment that the outcome has not been as dreary as expected (or, for that matter, desired).

Subtly emphasizing the absurdity of the situation, McGahern remembers his perplexity as to what to do with “the key to the metal box”: “Instinct told me not to hand it back. Eventually, I left it on a small table by his side of the bed, and was relieved when next I looked to see that it had disappeared” (158). Under Frank’s regime, not only are humans rendered as props for his narcissistic “rages,” but the object world itself is devoid of any emotional resonance beyond his self-interest: the objects of memory, the *mementoes* would need to be granted to the children via his posthumous good will. Indeed, such materials become a sort of emotional currency, which the text has shown to be not wholly necessary. Of course, it could be argued that the impotence of any object to act as a repository of memory is caused by Frank’s autonomy over the *mementoes*, but we also have to note that the letters mentioned in this passage are probably the ones which McGahern directly cites and comments upon in this text. Indeed, in this sense it could be said that the author literally includes the inscriptions of these objects of memory into a text which, while eulogizing his mother and painting an unremittingly honest portrait of his father, is also a form of authorial anticipatory-vicarious grief. McGahern’s memory also repeatedly uncovers Frank’s lack of autonomy or awareness over his affect, as it will become clearer further on.

IV. Timed by the Thing

If, for Clearey, “the power of writing” in *Memoir* serves as a strategy directed at “an incestuous retaking of the mother” (241), my paper has already hinted at how this claim can be contested, even through a psychoanalytic lens. However, as I move on to explore the temporality of grief in the text, I have to also address Catriona Clutterbuck’s argument that McGahern’s oeuvre foregrounds a certain vision of an “afterlife”: “one which in this world may be temporary but is nonetheless available and necessary in the here and now, and which in this fullness – however provisional – anticipates, surely, our life to come” (150). As I hope to prove further on, this type of anticipatory gaze towards a life to come is but the prospective remainder of anticipatory grief. In addition, it will also become apparent that the slow temporality

which, in Flannery’s reading, powers the “ecological consciousness” (273) of *Memoir*, is deeply rooted in the protagonist’s reaction to the no-thing within, as well as to the rift between the self and the object world under the traumatic event of the subject’s anticipatory grief, and subsequent mourning, of his mother.

Soon after the news of his mother’s death, the survivor is terrorized by the thought of having to eventually witness her funeral in all its physical details. Consequently, the text emphasizes the temporal dimension of the mourner’s material imagination: “All day I watched the clock. At six they’d take her to the church. Once the hands of the clock passed five, I was close to panic as I pictured the house: the brown coffin came in the glass of the hearse” (McGahern 111). This psychological “rehearsal” of the funeral is reiterated next day (“All morning I watched the clock”), but this time with a stress upon the immediately physical: “I held the cold glass of the clock to my face as the minutes beat away”; “The clock beats in my hands in the shelter of the laurels” (McGahern 111). The safe, autonomous space of the nonhuman participates in the child’s discourse of grief, with its religious and affective drive: “She has waited for the Lord as sentinels wait for the dawn, and now she goes to the Lord; but the Lord has many servants, and I had but the one beloved” (McGahern 113). Thus, these scenes of mourning stage a tension between the child’s internalized religious theology, stressing an openness towards the nonhuman, and the affective weight of losing the loved object. As the younger self is essentially timed by the thing of his mother’s burial, his physical immobility echoes her own *waiting*, while the nausea he feels during the ceremony suggests that the emerging gap between himself and the object world will indeed call for a *thinking* in slow time. Young McGahern’s relation to things will consequently strive for a certain ethics of *suspension*, springing from the remorse he feels at not having been present enough in the day before having to leave his dying mother. I will argue that this prospective temporality, this rehearsal, reverberates throughout *Memoir*.

For one thing, if any remainder of the “frail maternal” home of Aughawillan succumbs to natural decay by the end of the novel (“«There’s not a stone left standing of that house now (...) You’d never think it was ever anything but a field»”(McGahern 231), there is also a sense that any material mourning is not very relevant, nor even desirable, given the fact that the affective sense of worth received from their mother was enough for the children to resist (collectively) against an explosive and tyrannical

father. Frank, on the other hand, doesn't even bother to visit his wife on her deathbed (living separately, despite being married), a moral failing which McGahern reiterates when his father repeats this pattern with his sister-in-law. What he does put his efforts into is a lavish, eye-catching and spacious grave for himself and his departed wife: "a big limestone cross" on a "[large] plot of land." When his son enquires Pat, a worker, as to the reasoning behind such a dimension, the response is telling: "«That man will want plenty of space for himself when it comes round to his turn»" (122). Here, normative mourning practices facilitate a way for Frank to further consolidate his illusion of mastery over the object world (human or nonhuman), while his absence from his wife's deathbed will reveal itself to be far from a matter of circumstance or emotional vulnerability, and rather a drive to objectify those around him in a bid against the thingness of time. Throughout the rest of the text, the author engages with memories of this impatient and compulsive father figure. As we will see, the affective dimension of such a process can be likened to certain anticipatory-vicarious grief on the part of the author himself. Recalling his affect at the news of Frank's death, McGahern feels that "the intensity of [his] conflicting emotions – grief, loss, relief" is related to "those years in which his life and mine were entangled in a relationship neither of us wanted" as much as "[to] the man who had just met the death each of us face." If the father's life "had to be a life of darkness" because "the past was so rigorously shut out" (McGahern 231), his constant attempt to evade the thingness of time is challenged by the son via the act of inscribing his memories of Frank and including the patriarch's letters in the text. This gesture also suggests a complication in the conflict between the two worlds the narrator had inherited from each of his parents: they have both influenced the author in taking up the mantle as a "god of a small, vivid world" (McGahern 173). This point is only reinforced by the final two sentences that the author spends on Frank after having spent the last few chapters going through the letters received from him in his old age (and before immediately starting to quote his mother from memory). McGahern bluntly states that: "Though I have more knowledge and experience of him than I have of any other person, I cannot say I have fully understood him, and leave him now with God, or whatever truth or illusion or longing for meaning or comfort that word may represent" (McGahern 231). Following Morton's claim that *art happens* at the *liminal space between things*, I argue that the frankness with which McGahern writes about his father may offer the paternal figure a certain opening to the time of its prospective audience. Moreover, the

text will reveal Frank McGahern to be as vulnerable as he is toxic, and if the text is informed by the memory of the author’s mother, even an abusive tyrant like his father can be seen as a thinking thing. Both Clearey and Clutterbuck have addressed the theme of redemption in *Memoir*: while the former suggests “an emotional need not so much for closure as to keep things open,” in which “John McGahern refuses to play God by either condemning or forgiving (Clearey 242),” the latter claims that the “[author’s] voice throughout his opus recognizes that redemption should be foregrounded over transcendence as this-life aim” (Clutterbuck 140). Nonetheless, I think that the redemptive potentiality that the text hints at can also be understood by reading the father-son relation through the lens of a writerly anticipatory-vicarious grief engagement, while the *need to keep things open* can be related to the treatment of the no-thing within the thinking apparatus: the tension between father and son is the tension between acting in order to thingify the no-thing (Frank) and leaving it in a suspension between being and not-being (John). This tension can be attested by Frank’s exasperation in the face of Things, and the affective strategies and obliviousness that such failures will also reveal. The young McGahern grows to belatedly read affects in his father of which the latter never even becomes aware. The most emotionally brutal of these might be the observation that “during the beatings there was sometimes the same sexual undertow” (McGahern 160): again, action takes precedence over thinking, due to the inability to bear the no-thing of some deep, malevolent sexual disturbance in Frank’s psyche. In addition, the physical and psychological damage inflicted upon his seven children through many “beatings,” “scolding’s and (...) rages” (McGahern 6, 24), leaves them vulnerable: “Many of us started to walk in our sleep,” and paranoid of intimacy: “we were learning never to trust any of his moods and to deal with them as they came” (McGahern 146); “While, in fits, he could charm and seduce us, when we did go towards him he found us tiresome and could not sustain what he had brought about” (McGahern 24). His awareness of the other’s affects is what powers this incessant drive for emotional manipulation. However, this cognizance also breaks down in the realm of the object world, thus emphasizing Frank’s impatience toward the labor of affective engagement. Interestingly enough, a similar pattern of failure emerges in Frank’s relation to the object world. The text tells us that he is a “devoted listener of a programme on the Athlone station, *Making and Mending*” (McGahern 164), an educational series on house and car maintenance which his children understand better than he does. In

time, his “fascination with anything mechanical” (McGahern 166) regresses into a “trouble with all things mechanical” (McGahern 227). First, young McGahern learns of his incompetence through an outside source (a repairman who finds his father’s inability to grasp any *mending* concepts) and steps in to take his sister’s side when she correctly guesses the solution to a maintenance task. Frank’s ensuing anger betrays a frustration with the Thingness of objects, which can be read as an intolerance of *no-thing*, rationalized via the “the conviction that no-thing does not exist or that an object is no-thing itself” (Eigen 28). Indeed, his inability to master anything *mechanical* is something that echoes Eigen explanation of how “modulated openness and learning from experience” is informed by the “tolerance of no-things” (47). The intensity of this impotence is only matched in a later episode, when, after renouncing any hope of fixing his car’s engine and intending to call for a repairman, Pat fixes it almost immediately. Frank’s reaction is to “pound his fists on the bonnet”: “When he exhausted his rage, my father sat back into the car, banged the door without a word, and glared out like a violent, unappeasable child” (McGahern 228). Thus, the dysfunction of Frank McGahern as a thinking thing can be understood as an obsession with control that breaks down against things, in their resistance to human agency. The *space of suspension* in which objects oscillate between being and non-being is never accorded *patience* by Frank, and the *bad object* of his own humiliation must be ejected, angrily and theatrically, into his objectification of others, into the thingness of his *rages*.

Alternatively, one of the most interesting displays of this father-son dynamic shows him musing poetic on the beauty of roses, trying to impress his son’s first wife during his rise to literary fame. One must read this letter in view of its intention: immediately before this passage, we learn that McGahern’s wife “[dislikes his] father” and that “disliked her too, but once he saw that she wasn’t in the least afraid of him grew intrigued by her foreignness and beauty” (McGahern 215). As such, this event, just as the one in which Frank is convinced of his imminent death, betrays a theatrical drive to manipulate and objectify:

In a letter to us both, this surprising reflection on roses must have been intended for her eyes: «I gave a doz. rose bushes to someone as a present once upon a time. I love roses. They so very well represent life. The thorns are there to prick but still the beautiful bloom comes again and again – if you have patience» (McGahern 215).

The sense of authorial reflection throughout this passage brings to a head McGahern’s insertions of the nonfictional inscriptions left behind by his father. The author is meditating upon their *entanglement* towards the end of his own life (he would die of cancer a year after publishing *Memoir*), formulating his aesthetic principle as following: “«To write well, to write truly and well about fellows like [his father]»” (McGahern 223). Thus, the musings upon the *roses*, with its focus on *patience* (precisely what the younger author realizes that his father lacks when it comes to *mechanical things*), reveal that the father indeed must have interpreted some of McGahern’s affects correctly. It also shows us how both the temporality of cyclicity (*the beautiful bloom comes again*) and an awareness of one’s own vulnerability (*the thorns are there to prick*), do enter into Frank’s view of the world. However, this *epiphany*, just as the earlier, much stronger one, of his own mortality, are objectified straight out of the *waiting room* of thought. Indeed, the author himself gives a brief, insightful comment on the letter: “[I] thought the passage hilarious: «They so very well represent life! (...) if you have patience»” (McGahern 215). The hilarity of Frank’s discourse comes precisely from its unexpected focus on representation. We know from McGahern that his father’s parents had been cold and distant, and I think this traumatic aspect of Frank’s childhood can be tied to what Bion (in the reading of Eigen) sees as the tyrannical conviction that “representing painful emotional realities is useless” (47). This “antirepresentational stance” keeps the psyche from “increasing the capacity to connect with experience in fruitful ways” (48). These are affects that the father is not aware of, but which his son can read, even if only through remembering, and into which he “probes,” in writing *Memoir*, as into something resembling an authorial anticipatory-vicarious grief.

V. Conclusion

I have demonstrated that, via an exploration of how the subject’s *no-thing* is thingified through action into the object world, or kept in suspension within the thinking apparatus, *Memoir* spatializes the successful and unsuccessful affective attunement of agents engaged in anticipatory-vicarious grief. The text also sifts its representation of this entanglement through an explicit act of remembering, and therefore illustrates how human agency in relation to the *no-thing* is timed and undermined by the thingness of the external material reality. By tracing the spatial and temporal dimensions of grief, with its effects upon the mind as a thinking thing, the text also

reflects the capacity of literature to stage the affective engagement between the living and the dying, survivors and memory, subject and object. Art itself can thus help us to contextualize our grief, and consequently, our relation to the *no-thing*, in an object world where the distinction between presence and absence is timed beyond our agency.

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