

about the things one loves. It means having to accept the ways in which the exalted realms of the Literary, the Philosophical, or the Historical are also means to a modest paycheck and an escape from what, in Castle's example, was "familial dreariness and the general SoCal strip-mall stupor." It's a fairly conformist rebellion, but also a rebellious kind of conformism, and all of it is fueled, at some level, by eros, even if an eros longing for domestic security. The book's longest and eponymous essay is a coruscating story about the overpowering charisma of intellectual mentors and intellectualism, which despite its period trappings (Castle's descriptions of mid-1970s academic avant-gardism reveal her novelistic talent for wry attentiveness) narrates like nothing else I know the perennially heady mixture of longing and dissatisfaction and the promise of better, wiser elders and worlds.

The young humanist, as Castle depicts her, is necessarily perverse, and certainly "neurotically invested." She is likely to be a prig, but is also a cynic, at least about some cultural norms. She disbelieves many hoary old narratives, but still thinks academic achievement earns love. (These days: she knows all the numbers, but still thinks she will get a job.) She is the bad child of Dewey's progressive educational model—an introvert, a solitary, an obsessive—who can fake the moves of the good child. And by trying so sincerely to earn a way into the academic middle class while feeling uneasy about it she lives out a contemporary contradiction, in which "being middle-class these days means feeling freaky a lot of the time." She is good, in other words, at inhabiting the gap between sincerity and irony, between cultural gatekeeper and cultural rebel, between grandiosity and humility. And she is good at making others feel similarly.

Richard Rorty once argued that Western culture needs the novel, in order to force us to imagine lives and destinies different from our own. Perhaps the humanities, in their current plight, need to be novelistic again. Not necessarily in their fictional mode, such as the moribund campus novel genre with its essentially demystifying comedy, but the novelistic ability to marshal narratives and details that give us back some sense of why the humanities exist for individuals—how, to put it bluntly, they still rescue lives. One doesn't enter the academy to become a disillusioned professional (although that will happen along the way). One doesn't enter it to equip businesses with flexible analytic intellects (although that will also happen). One enters it, shamefacedly and unhappily, perhaps, but enters it nonetheless, in order to devote oneself to something greater than personal resentments—to salvational or transformational modes of thought. Because, put another way, all the grievances that take aim at higher education express real suffering, and that suffering has causes and modes of expression older than most sufferers usually know. The humanities should be, if not their solace, then their weapons of choice. Prig and cynic and naïf she may be, but the newly minted academic knows this—after all, she most likely came from their midst—and one good way of explaining as much is to explain how that knowledge feels. Without such explanations, which might soften resentment into curiosity or sympathy, there may soon be very little left to be embarrassed about.

—Nicholas Dames

MCC

Tom McCarthy. *C*. Knopf, 2010.

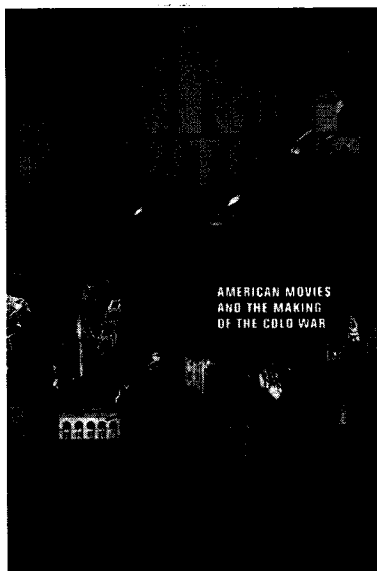
Tom McCarthy. *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*. Counterpoint, 2008.

Tom McCarthy. *Remainder*. Metronome, 2005 (Vintage, 2007).

THE RECEPTION OF TOM MCCARTHY'S MOST recent novel, *C*, recalls the hopes that were raised by his first. Famously rejected by all the major British publishing houses, *Remainder* was finally issued in a small edition by a Paris art house press. It quickly became a word-of-mouth success among artists and literary bloggers and was ultimately canonized as one of the best novels of the decade by Zadie Smith. In her long review essay "Two Paths for the Novel," Smith argues that *Remainder* offers a much-needed alternative to "lyrical realism," her name for the realist subject matter decked out in modernist trimmings that dominates the novel today. Smith has written in that mode herself, but she recognizes that it has become exhausted. Aesthetically, it is limited by its naïve faith in the power of language to represent reality and in the power of form to transfer reality, intact, into art. Ethically, it is undermined by its commitment to depicting "the essential fullness and continuity of the self," to celebrating the "beautiful plentitude" within us all. Smith is not alone in this view: a number of reviewers took *Remainder* as an occasion to attack a contemporary novel whose formal approach has grown rote and whose humanism has become narcissistic. And weariness with the contemporary novel—its complacent mimesis, its throwback psychology—similarly motivated the immediate embrace of *C*. The novel was shortlisted for the Booker, and while it didn't end up winning, it was the bookies' favorite to do so. But unlike

Remainder, a truly remarkable novel, *C* does not deserve the praise it has widely received. On the contrary, its obvious failures call into question the two claims that are often made on behalf of McCarthy: that the problem facing the contemporary novel is the persistence of realism, and that the solution is to be found, with McCarthy, among the avant-garde.

McCarthy first appeared on the cultural scene in 1999, as the general secretary of the International Necronautical Society. Announcing themselves through a manifesto published in the advertisements column of the London *Times* and providing supposedly "unauthorized" recordings of subsequent manifestos on their website, the necronauts follow the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century in making the manifesto a primary form of art. The necronauts are also influenced by a later avant-garde tradition: the various theorists who attacked the disciplines and genres of the academic world just as their predecessors had attacked the art world's conventions. These theorists, lumped together now under the name of "French theory," appear everywhere in the necronauts' writings, as when the first manifesto concludes, with a familiar nod to Jacques Derrida, that "we are all necronauts, always, already." The artistic avant-garde may have present-day descendants, in performance spaces and on the internet, if not in fiction, but the theoretical avant-garde does not: it has long since been institutionalized, its status securely fixed in critical editions and on syllabi. And perhaps this is why the necronauts lack the turbulent energies of a true avant-garde, contenting themselves instead with mere playfulness. They install their members in mock-serious offices: Simon Critchley is Chief Philosopher, Anthony Auerbach is Chief of Propaganda (Archiving



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and Epistemological Critique), and Melissa McCarthy is Chief Obituary Reviewer. They report on their activities to mock-serious organs, such as the Office of Anti-Matter or the Second First Committee. And they perform mock rituals of expulsion: members have been kicked out for the crime of writing what they were told to write (that is, for publication) or for the crime of still being alive (to be reinstated after their deaths). Taken together, the necronauts' parody of an avant-garde movement, along with the various performance pieces that they have created and their manifestos and theoretical writings, constitute what McCarthy likes to call, with laddish misspelling, a "*Gesamt cuntwerk*."

With the publication of *C*, however, McCarthy has begun describing his project in more serious terms. In a recent interview for the *Guardian*, he critiques the contemporary novels he had earlier been content to ignore, and he does so in precisely the same terms as those reviewers, such as Smith, who had celebrated him as a possible alternative. The contemporary novel has failed both aesthetically and ethically, he argues, because it has chosen to deny a century's worth of "radical writers," among them Samuel Beckett, Paul Celan, and Franz Kafka; Georges Bataille and Emmanuel Levinas; Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. (This conflation of avant-garde theorists with writers who are canonically modernist, not avant-garde, into a single "radical" tradition is typical of McCarthy's critical writings.) Instead of engaging with these writers, the contemporary novel has remained unthinkingly committed, as has culture more generally, to the ideals of "sentimental humanism" and "an ongoing rational enlightenment." At best, these commitments leave the contemporary novel as benighted and irrelevant as creationists in the wake of Charles Darwin;

at worst, they make the novel complicit with atrocity, most recently the Iraq War. What is needed, McCarthy argues, are novels ready to "go beyond" the provocations of the radical writers and "think through [their] implications" for our own day.

In an effort to do this, McCarthy has adopted an artistic practice, repetition, that decenters the human and explores logics other than the rational. Following Martin Heidegger in insisting that poets and philosophers must listen before they can speak, McCarthy transforms that almost mystical claim into something more ordinary by comparing it to the "*écouter et répéter*" of the language class. At times, such repetition merely repeats, as when the necronauts pre-record sound and insert it into a live performance, or hijack pirate radio stations and use them to rebroadcast different signals, or insert foreign code into a working computer system. At other times, repetition entails some kind of transformation. In these cases, the necronauts do not merely repeat: they also, as McCarthy variously describes it, "sample and remix" or "morph and re-arrange," creating a kind of "collage or polyphony," or simply a "strange enmeshing of things." In this respect, McCarthy's theoretical invocation thinly overlays a more common ambition among contemporary avant-garde writing—the linking of musical "remixing" with prose quoting, or what has been referred to in these pages as "the fantasy of writer as hip-hop DJ."

McCarthy's fullest account of this transformative repetition came when he called for the necronauts to form a Central Broadcasting Unit while in residence at London's Institute for Contemporary Art. He imagined that this unit would cull words and phrases circulating in culture, arrange them in new sequences, then rebroadcast them over the radio. Here, transformative

repetition would function as a mode of analysis, revealing connections that McCarthy calls "lines of fracture":

A large wall chart will show which lines of fracture we are following. One that has been suggested is the line that runs backwards from Patty Hearst to Antigone via Lucia Joyce, the "locked up or encrypted woman line." Another is a "flight line" that links banked screens of airline timetables, the names of aeroplane parts, and Ovid's description of the fall of Icarus (and, beyond that, his father's labyrinth, a site of buried pleasure where the first ever surveying takes place). Another is a line of capital and speculation mixing live stock prices with names of 18th century bubble companies and Indian IT assembly workers' salaries.

It's hard to imagine what such a performance would actually sound like (nor are descriptions of what the Central Broadcasting Unit ultimately produced clarifying), but what McCarthy seems to be envisioning is an artwork that reduces humans, such as Lucia Joyce and Patty Hearst, to a sequence of repetitions and that reveals the logic that might connect stock prices and bubble companies, airline timetables and assembly lines, overweening ambition and imprisoning desire. "This will not be an exercise in random, Dadaist cutting up," McCarthy concludes, but rather "a surveying." It is through surveying, McCarthy hopes, that the necronauts will go beyond their radical predecessors, by taking avant-garde techniques such as collage and putting them in the service of an analytical end: uncovering and depicting the various forms of connection that constitute our world.

But McCarthy has not managed to go beyond his radical predecessors, certainly not as a theorist. This failure is clear in the

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two reports he prepared on necronautical activities, reports that not only describe the works that the necronauts have created or will create, but also seek to put these works in a broader intellectual and artistic context. The first, "Navigation Was Always a Difficult Art" (2002), celebrates artworks that embrace the materiality of bodies and of words, and places new necronautical works in an antitranscendent tradition that includes Maurice Blanchot and Gilles Deleuze, Rainer Marie Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1912–22) and Lewis Carroll's "The Hunting of the Snark" (1876), the marks on Queequeg's coffin and the frostbitten toes that the members of the Shackleton expedition ate with their soup. The second, "Calling All Agents" (2003), draws on works by Jean Cocteau and Vladimir Nabokov, as well as the necronauts; theories by Derrida, Plato, and Freud; and histories of radio, espionage, and Egyptology, concluding, gnomically, that "all code is burial" and that burial is nonetheless "the space from which transmission comes." Eloquently and sometimes wittily written, the reports nonetheless read like the seminar papers of a graduate student who has gotten in over his head. What is most striking is the naïveté: McCarthy presumes that the theories he invokes are straightforwardly manifested in both life and art, and he does not distinguish between different theories or different artworks, confident that they are all revealing aspects of a single truth. This use of theory reaches its nadir in McCarthy's one book-length work of criticism, *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (2008). Here, McCarthy finds Hergé's Tintin comics perfectly illustrating an anthology's worth of literary theories. Roland Barthes understood that narrative was always a contract, and so did Hergé! Guy Debord knew that power comes from the spectacle, and so did Tintin! Derrida traced the odyssey

path of the economic, and so did Tintin's friend, Captain Haddock! What begins as a charmingly eccentric approach grows depressingly predictable, as it becomes clear that literature, for McCarthy, has no "secrets" at all. McCarthy's readings foretell the difficulties that his writings face. He is no more able to go beyond his predecessors in his art than in his theory, and so his novels prove to be least good when most self-consciously avant-garde—and best, surprisingly enough, when most realist.

WHEN *REMAINDER* BEGINS, its protagonist has already suffered some kind of accident, which goes mostly undescribed. (We learn of something falling from the sky, nothing more.) He has been in a coma, gone through a period of rehabilitation, and is contemplating, with no enthusiasm, the prospect of returning to work. Then his lawyer informs him that he has received a settlement of eight and a half million pounds. Not even this news cheers him up. The champagne that he drinks to celebrate tastes odd, his friends spill their beer when they congratulate him, and he continues to feel as he has since the accident, strangely ill at ease. Then one night, in the midst of an awkward cocktail party, he retreats to the bathroom and has a vision. There is a crack above the sink, and it reminds him of another bathroom, with slightly larger windows and slightly different taps. This bathroom belonged, he thinks, to an apartment on a high floor of an old tenement building, overlooking red roofs over which scamper black cats. As he continues to contemplate the crack, more details return: an old woman frying liver on the floor below, a pianist practicing a few floors below that, a concierge mopping faded linoleum floors, and a man repairing a motorbike in the courtyard outside. In this

place, the protagonist believes, he once felt at ease.

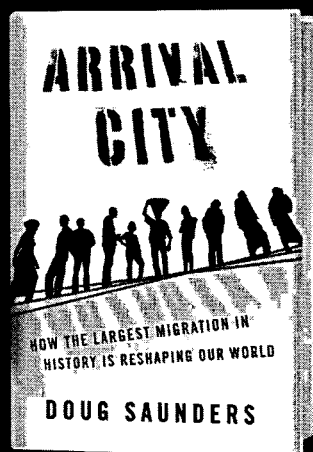
And so he sets out not to find this place, but rather to recreate it. With the help of a professional "facilitator," and on the strength of his eight and a half million pounds, he buys a promising set of buildings, remodels them until they match his memory in every detail, then staffs them with persons hired to reenact the actions he remembers again and again. Behind these reenactors stand an army of spotters and coordinators, who note, for instance, whenever the protagonist enters the building and promptly alert the old woman on the floor below him that in twenty seconds, just as he reaches her landing, she must open her door to put out the trash. Difficulties arise, of course. The liver fried continuously several hours a day covers the building with fat, while the scampering cats keep sliding off the steep roofs, and the pianist plays a tape of himself practicing so he can sneak out and audition for a better job. But the facilitator manages all of these difficulties, and soon the protagonist can reenact his memory whenever he likes. The impulse to reenact inevitably grows more insistent: the protagonist begins reenacting other experiences, then reenacting events he reads about in the newspapers, then reenacting the reenactments, and finally, with increasing violence, entirely confounding the difference between reenactment and real life.

Remainder recalls the philosophical fictions of Beckett or Alain Robbe-Grillet, not only in its content, but in its icily ironic tone. And like their fictions, it embodies ideas in character and enacts them in plot in order to throw new aspects of them into relief. The "remainders" of the novel's title are the material traces that not even the assiduous facilitator can control, and the novel embraces the grease stain on the sleeve, the



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coffee grinds on the pants, the blood of a dying reenactor. But materiality becomes comically awful, the novel reveals, when it takes the form of liver fat and dying cats. In much the same way, *Remainder* offers a new perspective on the repetition that is so central to McCarthy's aesthetic: translating the Heideggerean repetition of language and thoughts into a repetition of actions, *Remainder* shows that the impulse to repeat, far from being an avant-garde technique of dislocation and transformation, can also be driven by the pursuit of the real.

Despite its resemblance to certain strands of modernism, *Remainder* is most interesting as an allegory of realism. The realism of the 19th century sought to give us the world as it is, and *Remainder* finds a way, despite its sparse descriptions, to give us that world anew. It does so in part through the protagonist's rehabilitation after his accident. His brain damaged, he must lay new neural pathways, first by imagining an action over and over and then by performing it again and again. All of his actions thus travel by way of what he calls "the detour through understanding." This "detour" is akin to what the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky called "defamiliarization": it slows down perception so that the ordinary actions we perform without thinking, like walking down the street or dialing a phone number, draw our attention once more. And ordinary objects become newly visible as well, as we can see when the protagonist learns to pick up a carrot. He must begin by studying what picking up a carrot entails, the twenty-seven separate movements of tendon and finger and joints, and he must perform this action again and again in his imagination. But when a carrot is put in front of him, all this practice is undone by the difference between the idea of a carrot and the carrot's insistent reality. "But

then you take a carrot," he recalls, "—they bring you a fucking carrot, gnarled, dirty and irregular in ways your imaginary carrot never was, and they stick it in your hands—and you know, you just know as soon as you see the bastard thing that it's not going to work." By the time the protagonist can actually lift one carrot, he has learned to hate them all, but we, in the process, have learned to see the carrot anew, in all its gnarled, dirty irregularity.

What the protagonist's rehabilitation does to the world, his reenactments do to realism. After the reenactments begin, he dreams of flying over the city of London, arm in arm with the reenactors, the coordinators, and the spotters, all of them peering into the houses below them through newly transparent walls. This dream rewrites a famous account of classical realism, Dickens's description of the realist as a "good spirit" who flies over London and lifts off all the roofs, revealing the lives within. In rewriting Dickens, McCarthy means to expose the normally hidden mediations that all realist depictions entail, here embodied in the vast staff the protagonist's reenactments require. But far from discrediting realism, the staff of reenactors defamiliarizes it so that it can be practiced anew. Once the reenactments begin, the protagonist spends his days like any realist novelist, "sketching, measuring, transcribing" all that he sees. And just as the protagonist needs the staff, so McCarthy needs the metafictional conceit. A shabby little flat, somewhere in Paris, with a cat playing across the courtyard and piano music coming up from below—could anything be more of a cliché? It would be impossible for McCarthy to describe such a thing without showing it being reenacted, detail by painstaking detail.

The great classical realists sought, much as McCarthy's recent proposal for

"surveying" supposedly does now, to draw connections, to reveal the interdependencies among seemingly unrelated persons and events. Connections become an issue when the protagonist is considering what his money might do. One friend suggests that he buy a bathtub full of cocaine and hire breasts and asses to snort it off of, and another suggests that he donate it to Africa instead. If the latter suggestion does not appeal to the protagonist, it's in part because he cannot imagine Africans. "But what do they, you know, do in Africa," he asks, "... like when they're just doing their daily thing. Walking around, at home: stuff like that." But it's also because he cannot imagine any connection between Africans and himself:

I wanted to feel some connection with these Africans. I tried to picture them putting up houses . . . or sitting around in schools, or generally doing African things, like maybe riding bicycles or singing. I didn't know: I'd never been to Africa. . . . I tried to visualize a grid around the earth, a kind of ribbed wire cage like on the champagne bottle, with lines of latitude and longitude that ran all over, linking one place to another, weaving the whole terrain into one smooth, articulated network. . . . I wanted to feel genuinely warm towards these Africans, but I couldn't. Not that I felt cold or hostile. I just felt neutral.

This failure of imagination is something that classical realism sought to remedy. Most obviously, it sought to expand the domain of representation so that readers could see all kinds of persons "doing their daily thing." (Of course, classical realism was often more capacious in theory than in practice: Dickens, after all, satirized those who paid too much attention to a fictitious African

country named "Boorioboola-Gha.") But its most ambitious practitioners, novelists like George Eliot and Tolstoy, also sought to uncover the connections among those persons. In doing so, they relied not only on realist depictions but also on multiple plots, which highlighted the relations between seemingly unrelated characters, and a narration that analyzed those connections in terms of the most sophisticated contemporary discourses, such as evolutionary biology and historiography. With the advent of modernism, the project begun by the most ambitious realists was continued by modernists with encyclopedic ambitions, such as Joyce, Musil, and Döblin. But while the encyclopedic modernists continued to draw connections, even more capaciously than the realists had done, they no longer offered a confident account of how these connections should be understood. Realism's aspiration to objectivity gave way to modernism's embrace of the subjective, and overarching explanatory discourses now appeared as fragments with no authority of their own—excerpts from psychiatric reports in Döblin, for instance, or snatches of scholarship in Joyce. And in the aftermath of modernism, the attempt to draw connections would be largely abandoned, carried on only in ironic or self-doubting form, as in Pynchonesque paranoia.

McCarthy alludes to these old ambitions when the protagonist's friend reminds him that "it's all part of the same general, you know, caboodle. Markets are all global; why shouldn't our conscience be?" Of course, *Remainder* does not become a novel about the global economy: the protagonist's friend soon flies back home, leaving the protagonist free to proceed with his reenactments and McCarthy free to continue exploring the relation between the material world and art. But the conversation between the

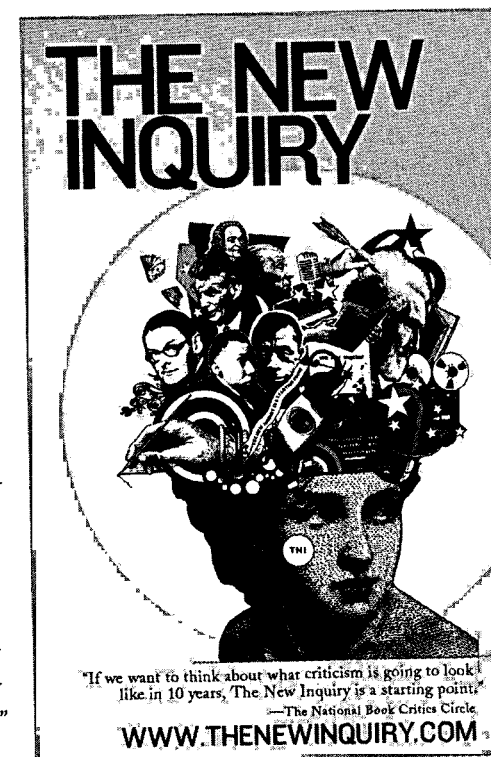
protagonist and his friend registers the need for a new discourse to make sense of our contemporary "caboodle," a new way of drawing the connections between Britain and Africa. And in this way, *Remainder* reveals that necronautical surveying is not a uniquely avant-garde practice, but rather a way of continuing the project that realism and modernism began.

NOTHING IN McCarthy's oeuvre is more shocking than the opening pages of *C*. After the manifestos and the performance art, the theory-addled criticism and the remarkable novel of ideas, McCarthy gives us a country doctor jogging along in a horse cart, on his way to deliver a baby, while "black birds whirr silently beneath a concave vault of sky." This is the novel at its most lyrically realist, unfolding in the most conventional genres. A bildungsroman as well as an historical novel, *C* follows the life of its protagonist, Serge Carrefax, from his birth on an English estate, where his mother breeds silkworms and his father runs a school for the deaf, through his childhood and adolescence in the shadow of his brilliant and charismatic older sister, Sophie. After Sophie dies suddenly, Serge sets out into the world, going first to an Eastern European spa on the eve of World War I, then to the Belgian front with the Royal Air Force and to the London demimonde in the war's aftermath, and finally to Egypt on the verge of independence. Throughout the novel, there are self-conscious allusions to modernity as such: Serge is born in 1898, the year that wireless telegraphy was invented, and he dies in 1922, the year the BBC was born; in between, he learns about automobiles and aeroplanes and jazz. This interest in modernity is familiar from the realist tradition that culminated in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), but McCarthy overlays his

novel's realist architecture with modernist ornament. *C*, like *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land*, both published in the year of Serge's death, is a palimpsest of texts. It is punctuated by explicit quotations, by songs sung by pilots, lines from Shakespeare and Hölderlin, scenes from neoclassical masques, choruses from a West End musical, passages read aloud from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*; and it is constituted by myriad other unmarked borrowings, from texts both literary and not. At the same time, *C* also seeks, as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) had done, to capture the stream of consciousness, most obviously in the virtuosic chapter devoted to Serge's sublime experience of aerial war. But despite its abundance of realist plot and its array of modernist techniques, despite its automobiles and aeroplanes, its jazz and cocaine, *C* remains stately and inert. Too conspicuously well done, it is less a novel than a museum of all that the novel has been.

This is what McCarthy intended. In the *Guardian* interview, McCarthy acknowledged the conservatism of the novel's "main-frame rhetorical mode" and explained that this enables *C* to serve as "a kind of Trojan horse." Hidden inside the novel are familiar necronautical topics and figures. Like "Calling All Agents," *C* is concerned with transmission, encryption, and death. There are telegraphs, radios, and men who dream of the day when images will be sent, like sound waves, through the air; there are coded messages arranging assignments, advertising cocaine or heroin for sale, and circulating among diplomats who may or may not be spies; finally, there are deaths in war and death by suicide, as well as near deaths by drowning, by car and plane crashes, and by wartime execution. In "Calling All Agents," transmission, encryption, and death had

been most fully embodied in two figures: Freud's Wolf Man, as interpreted by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and Deleuze and Guattari; and Alexander Graham Bell, as interpreted by Avital Ronell. Both figures return in *C*. Serge is modeled on the Wolf Man, sharing with him an incestuous love for a suicidal older sister, a problem with constipation, an obsession with sex *a tergo*, and a childhood filled with insects, while Serge's father is modeled on Bell, who also tried to teach the deaf to speak and who invented the telephone in the hopes of communicating with the dead. Inserting these topics and figures into what seems to be an ordinary historical novel of the lyrical realist variety, McCarthy makes *C* into another necronautical performance—like the concerts to which the necronauts added sound or the computer system they infiltrated to insert foreign code. And readers have the



pleasure of tuning in to the secret transmissions being sent along the novel's more familiar frequencies.

Yet *C* aspires to be more than just a Trojan horse for sneaking academic theory into the citadel of lyrical realism: it aspires not only to contain necronautical content, but also to achieve necronautical form. Necronautical form is allegorized in an early pair of scenes, the first of which shows Serge listening and repeating. Every night in late adolescence, he tunes in to his radio, dialing through the channels and listening to whatever messages are being transmitted, first nearby, then far away. On the lowest frequencies, there are the call signs and gossip of local radio "bugs"; higher, sports news and chess moves transmitted ship to shore; higher still, the daily news:

The press digest goes out from Niton, Poldhu, Malin, Cadiz: Diario del Atlántico, Journal de l'Atlantique, Atlantic Daily News . . . "Madero and Suarez Shot in Mexico While Trying to Escape" . . . "Trade Pact Between" . . . "Entretien de" . . . "Shocking Domestic Tragedy in Bow" . . . "Il Fundatore" . . . "Husband Unable to Prevent" . . . The stories blur together: Serge sees a man clutching a kitchen knife chasing a politician across parched earth, past cacti and armadillos, while ambassadors wave papers around fugitive and pursuer, negotiating terms. "Grain Up Five, Lloyds Down Two" . . . "Australia All Out for Four Hundred and Twenty-one, England Sixty-two for Three in Reply."

Passively listening to these transmissions, Serge enables the novel to repeat them, and listening and repeating has its usual dislocating effect. Call signs, sports scores, news stories, stock reports—transmissions like these are being sent and received all

around us, all the time, so ubiquitous as to be imperceptible until they are recorded in another form. Making them perceptible, McCarthy captures the explosion of new media at the turn of the 20th century and prompts us to reflect on the similar explosion at the turn of the 21st.

These new media help constitute us as individuals, and here the novel's attention to technology has consequences for its form. Everywhere in the novel, Serge is shown to be made up almost entirely of the transmissions he receives: he is the product of indecipherable codes, misdelivered messages, and uncomprehended texts, and he thereby challenges lyrical realism's commitment to a unified, coherent consciousness. But if McCarthy offers up a self constituted by wayward transmissions, he shows little interest in exploring what it might mean to live like this. Rather, the transmissions are useful to McCarthy because they evacuate the space that would otherwise, in the Freudian case history no less than in lyrical realism, be filled with more familiar forms of interiority. Serge endures the traumas of war, in addition to those of incest and the primal scene, but he does not register any of them as traumatic. When a fatuous civilian attempts to sympathize, saying "you've lived through the war and all its horror, and—," Serge cuts him off: "But I liked the war." The truth is more complicated than that, of course, and the novel acknowledges that Serge carries his wartime experiences "buried" within him, much like the weight in his stomach following his sister's death. But *C* has no interest in disinterring those experiences or somehow giving voice to them on Serge's behalf. On the contrary, it needs them to remain mute so that a still-evacuated Serge can be used to personify an array of familiar theoretical themes: he is sometimes the Freudian subject of incestuous

desire; sometimes the Derridean subject of linguistic free play; sometimes the Futurist fusion of man and machine.

Paired with Serge's episodes of listening and repeating is a scene in which Sophie surveys. Recently returned from her scientific studies in London, Sophie locks herself in a makeshift lab at home and begins creating a strange work of art. Always fascinated by insects, she takes her diagrams and writings about them and arranges these texts and images in patterns that Serge cannot understand:

Bizarrely, Sophie's started interspersing among these texts and images the headlines she's torn from each day's newspapers. These clippings seem to be caught up in her strange associative web: they . . . have certain words and letters highlighted and joined to ones among the scientific notes that, Serge presumes, must correspond to them in some way or another. One of these reads "Serbia Unsatisfied by London Treaty"; another, "Riot at Paris Ballet." Serge can see no logical connection between these events and Sophie's studies; yet colours and lines connect them. Arching over all of these in giant letters, each one occupying a whole sheet of paper, crayon-shaded and conjoined by lines that run over the wall itself to other terms and letter-sequences among the sprawling mesh, is the word Hymenoptera.

"Hymenoptera?" Serge reads, "What's that? It sounds quite rude."

"Sting in the tail," she answers somewhat cryptically . . . "Paraphyletic: it's all connected."

"It's all connected." The lines Sophie draws across the wall recall the "lines of fracture" that the Central Broadcasting Unit was meant to identify, as well as the lines of longitude and latitude that *Remainder* had

recognized as an inadequate substitute. But this project of surveying yields depressingly predictable results. Sophie's lines do nothing more than connect a piece of modernist art, the debut of *The Rite of Spring* (1913), to its familiar companion, the advent of World War I; later in the scene, she will make an equally familiar connection between bodies shattered on the battlefield and bodies coming together and separating during sex. Nor can the banality of these connections be ascribed solely to Sophie: McCarthy explores the conjunction of sex, violence, and art throughout the novel without coming to any more original conclusions. The failure of Sophie's surveying is all the more disappointing because McCarthy's attention to media could have brought to surveying a new analytical sophistication. For surveying entails the drawing of connections, and *C*, alone among McCarthy's works, considers the material forms that these connections take: not simply the telegraph, but the copper that is needed to make the telegraph wires; not simply the radio, but the eardrums ruptured by radio transmissions on the battlefield. The systems of radio signals, the web of telegraph wires—these are the material connections that make imagined connections possible. If the protagonist of *Remainder* were ever to learn what Africans, actually, do, it would likely be through the mediations of television and the internet, just as the spinning radio dial that informs an English youth of the Mexican Revolution also confuses the deaths of Madero and Suarez with a commonplace story of marital infidelity.

But the promise of this media-savvy surveying is never achieved. Sophie dies soon after this scene, and, with her death, the novel abandons surveying for less analytical modes of connection. Its disparate events are knit together by a series of puns—insects/incest, encrypt/crypt, the

Egyptian god of writing (Toth) misheard as the German word for death (Tod)—and, even more extensively, by games with the letter “c.” C is for caul, chute, crash, and call, the titles of the novel’s four sections, but it is also for the cyanide that kills Serge’s sister and the cysteine-infused water that is supposed to cure his grief, the chloroform his mother took while giving birth to him, the codeine she stole from the doctor afterward, and the cocaine he snorts before taking flight, as well as standing for carbon, the origin of all life, and cc, the technique that reproduces text. The links are striking at first, but ultimately not illuminating: c is for connections that reveal nothing at all.

ZADIE SMITH, THEN, was both right and wrong. She was right that the novelistic commitment to unfolding consciousness and perfecting form, once championed by realists like Flaubert and modernists like

James, has since declined into an increasingly narcissistic and ornamental kind of literary fiction. But she was wrong that the only alternative to this is the avant-garde that McCarthy embodies. For there exists within realism and modernism an alternate tradition, exemplified by Eliot and Tolstoy, Joyce and Döblin. These novelists strain against the limits of the genre in their efforts not only to depict, but to explain the forces that connect seemingly unrelated persons and events, and in the process the self is evicted from the center of their novels, and new forms are created. Set against these serious efforts, McCarthy’s necronautical games seem all the more jejune.

His novels straddle the two traditions. *Remainder* really belongs to neither, but it nonetheless argues for the value of the second, less ingrown tradition, trying to imagine the kinds of lines that might be drawn between England and Africa. C, on the other hand, is a strange mix of the two. McCarthy writes in a lyrical realist mode, but he does so only to expose its limitations: he decenters the novel’s protagonist by evacuating his subjectivity, and he imports an array of theoretical frames that further attack the very idea of an authentic and autonomous self. But if he is trying to write in the second tradition, he has failed to live up to his predecessors. For where Musil and Döblin decentered protagonists in order to put a network of relations in their place, McCarthy simply leaves an absence that reminds us of the self that has been lost; where Eliot and Tolstoy reflected on and even challenged the theories of evolution and history on which they were drawing, McCarthy is content simply to listen and repeat. And so while the critical embrace of McCarthy can help us to see the problems with the contemporary novel, C is a work that provides no solution.

—Amanda Claybaugh

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INDECENCY DOCTRINE

US Congress. *Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act* (47 U.S.C. §230). 1996.

GLENN REIT IS AN UPPER EAST SIDE DENTIST who recently sued Yelp.com and lost. The trouble began in May 2009, when “Michael S.” posted a negative review of Reit’s practice on its Yelp page, which until then contained about ten uniformly positive reviews. To Michael S., Reit’s office was “small,” “old,” and “smelly,” his equipment “old and dirty.” Calls for new consultations dropped markedly that month.

Yelp wasn’t cooperative when Dr. Reit called for help. Not only did it refuse to remove Michael S.’s allegedly defamatory post, but, according to Reit, it proceeded to delete all his positive reviews, in an effort to coerce him into buying advertising on the site. If Reit had paid for ads, the complaint alleges, he would have gained some control over his reviews. In March of last year, Reit brought a defamation suit against both Michael S. and Yelp, and he further claimed that Yelp violated New York’s deceptive trade practices statute. In September, however, a New York state court dismissed Reit’s claims against them, leaving Reit only the ability to pursue his defamation claim against Michael S. directly. If he chooses this route, Reit will face an uphill battle: even finding out Michael S.’s real name would require some showing of the case’s merits and perhaps a First Amendment analysis. And since Michael S.’s pockets probably aren’t quite as deep as Yelp’s, that battle may not be worth the cost.

THIS ISN’T THE FIRST TIME Yelp has been accused of this sort of pay-to-play practice. In early 2009, several newspapers rounded up allegations that Yelp made sales

pitches to rearrange and remove reviews in exchange for ad money. And in February of this year, Cats and Dogs Animal Hospital in Long Beach headed up a class action suit against the website under California’s somewhat amorphous unfair competition law.

Throughout all this, Yelp has denied any shady dealings. It has insisted that the only review-related benefit that advertisers received was the ability to select one “Favorite Review” that Yelp bumped to the top of the business’s page, with a notice that the business had specially selected it for viewing. To explain the observed shifts in review presence and order, Yelp has pointed to its automated “review filter,” which blocks reviews from less “established” users until they become more established. If a user becomes more established, her reviews will suddenly appear; if she becomes less established, they might disappear. Yelp credits much of its success to the filter, which it says prevents the dual plague of false positive reviews from business owners and false negative reviews from their competitors.

Last April, however, Yelp made two changes to its policies: it eliminated the “Favorite Review” benefit for advertisers, and it enabled users to click through to reviews that have been filtered out of a business’s page. These modifications were no confession, framed instead as ways to “reinforce that trust” that underlies Yelp’s success.

The deceptive-trade-practices prong of Dr. Reit’s case was based on alleged discrepancies between Yelp’s claims in its Business Owner’s Guide that its review sorting is “entirely automated to avoid human bias” and the reality Reit painted in his complaint. The court was swift in its disposal of this charge. Under New York common law, to qualify as a “deceptive practice,” business conduct must first be “consumer-oriented” and “materially misleading to a reasonable