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THE CRITIQUE OF TRAUMA AND THE AFTERLIFE OF THE NOVEL IN TOM MCCARTHY'S *REMAINDER*

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In the last few years, Tom McCarthy has established himself as a fixture in the British literary scene. The author of three novels—*Remainder*, *Men in Space*, and *C*—McCarthy is also a successful conceptual artist, an accomplished literary theorist,¹ the founder and General Secretary of the half-serious and semi-fictitious International Necronautical Society, as well as an almost unavoidable interviewee. McCarthy has consistently used his public appearances to recall the world of contemporary literature to the legacy of artistic and literary modernism, and to dismiss what he calls "liberal" or "sentimental" humanism (qtd. in Rourke), as well as the genre that has historically sustained that humanism: the realistic (or traditional) novel. His own novels attempt to do without the characteristics that traditionally define the novel: plot, character, readerly empathy and sentiment, social vision, and psychological depth.

In keeping with McCarthy's ambition to break with "the contemporary cult of the individual, the absolute authentic self who is measured through his or her absolutely authentic feeling" (qtd. in Rourke), his two most recent novels refrain from developing a single privileged psychological perspective, and instead opt for a rigorous curtailment of internal focalization (*C*) or a decentered network of characters (*Men in Space*). These novels can be understood as attempts to map the paradoxical remainder of the genre after everything novelistic has been subtracted from it. In *Remainder*, the excision

of psychology, which the later works take for granted, is at the core of what the book aims to achieve and is key in its attempt to overcome the novelistic tradition. It challenges this tradition's reliance on psychological realism and feeling, and it does so by taking on what it sees as the most recent instance of that tradition: the novel is an attempt to debunk the customary pieties of trauma fiction.² The narrative borrows the "grammar" of post-trauma, which thrives on "repetition and re-enactment" (qtd. in Orwell 1), while it remains conspicuously indifferent to the weighty ethical issues that normally mark our engagement with the extreme violence and the psychological suffering that characterize trauma. Yet in spite of this studied indifference, a careful reading of *Remainder's* attempt to move beyond sentiment and psychology makes clear that this does not result in a neutral and affectless narrative; instead, McCarthy's project ends up replacing the strong mode of empathic emotion and subjectivity that we tend to associate with the traditional novel with what can be analyzed as an intractable, dysphoric, subjectless affect. The novel generates affect in the very place where the literary tradition has taught us to expect to encounter—and identify with—the feelings of a full-fledged subject. In this way, I argue that *Remainder* enriches our understanding of the relation between trauma and literature in two ways: first, the novel's debunking of the habituated routines of trauma fiction lays bare the enduring assumption that formal features of literature reflect the psychological effects of trauma and shows that much trauma fiction remains in thrall to a problematic form of psychological realism; and second, the novel's move from psychological depth and subjectivity to an a-signifying affective remainder figures the structure of traumatization in a way that is not constrained by the conventions of psychological realism. *Remainder*, in other words, shows how the connections between literature and trauma need not be restricted to more or less realist narratives that register the psychological effects of trauma, but instead makes clear that trauma is also intricately connected to the affect that reading literature can generate.

Trauma Fiction and the Persistence of Realism

From its very first paragraph, *Remainder* presents itself as a confrontation with trauma fiction: the traumatic event that triggers the novel's plot is described as "involv[ing] something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, Bits" (5). *Remainder* does not pause to assess the psychological damage the accident inflicts on its nameless narrator, nor does it qualify its representation of the traumatized mind by registering its awareness of the ethical stakes involved in

the rendering of injury and pain. The narrator notes that he "can say very little" about "the accident itself": "It's not that I'm being shy. It's just that—well, for one, I don't even remember the event. It's a blank: a white slate, a black hole" (5). Instead, the novel is mainly composed of the depthless, a-psychological registration of the narrator's meticulously plotted real-world reenactment of particular scenes from his life and, later on, from other people's lives (the distinction between his own life and that of others is not vital, as the novel adopts the grammar and not the psychology of post-trauma). These reenactments are financed by "the Settlement," a vast sum of money the narrator receives from an anonymous party in compensation for the accident, and which, the narrator notes, "was held up to [him] as a future strong enough to counterbalance [his] no-past, a moment that would make [him] better, whole, complete" (6). Predictably, this chimerical completeness is never restored, and the novel unfolds as the repetitive account of the failure of that restoration. Trauma, far from registering as a psychological event, is merely mobilized as a structural plot element: it furnishes a lack that the novel's development can (impossibly) attempt to fill, and through the settlement that follows from it, it provides its protagonist with the funds he needs to finance his elaborate reenactments; trauma, in other words, by indirectly funding the events that make up the story of the novel, provides the novel with the narrative capital it needs to keep going for some 280 pages.

Roger Luckhurst has remarked that, even if trauma is routinely theorized as an event "that exceeds the possibility of narrative knowledge" (81), its refusal to make immediate sense has, in the last few decades, paradoxically proven to generate rather than frustrate narrative possibility. Contemporary culture, Luckhurst remarks, "is saturated with stories that see trauma not as a blockage but a positive spur to narrative" (83), while theorists of narrative like Peter Brooks hold "that trauma does not halt narrative but might be regarded as the motor that drives its manifold forms" (84). From its very first pages, *Remainder* makes this productive role of trauma explicit. What qualifies the novel as a provocation to conventional trauma fictions is that it never stops to register the tension between the productivity of trauma and the notion that trauma should, on ethical or therapeutic grounds, be acknowledged as something that resists integration, development, and understanding. McCarthy's studied superficiality serves as a deliberate affront to the customary pieties of trauma narratives.³

The critical afterlife of the novel has focused less on its debunking of trauma than on its alleged critique of the novel genre as such. This afterlife was inaugurated by a widely noted review essay

by Zadie Smith in the *New York Review of Books*. Pairing *Remainder* with Joseph O'Neill's 2008 novel *Netherland*, Smith hails *Remainder* as "the strong refusal" of the tradition that O'Neill's novel (albeit anxiously) perpetuates. She calls this tradition "lyrical realism": a realism that invests in "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, [and] the essential fullness and continuity of the self." While lyrical realism is committed to the illusion of psychological depth, *Remainder* "empties out interiority entirely." And while the realist tradition allows no part of reality to escape from an "adjectival mania" that relentlessly converts the stuff of life into a significant totality, McCarthy's novel is marked by "a rigorous attention to the damaged and the partial"—by a materialism that "let[s] matter *matter*." It offers us the world "as a series of physical events, rather than emotional symbols."

It is remarkable how faithfully McCarthy's increasingly frequent public declarations of his novelistic intent have echoed Smith's assessment. Indeed, McCarthy consistently identifies his target as the "liberal-humanist sensibility [that] has always held the literary work to be a form of self-expression, a meticulous sculpting of the thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual who has mastered his or her poetic craft" ("Technology"). In its stead, he persistently promotes an "anti-naturalist, anti-humanist" aesthetic in which "we're being given access not to a fully rounded, self-sufficient character's intimate thoughts and feelings as he travels through a naturalistic world, emoting, developing and so on—but rather to an encounter with structure" ("Stabbing"). In a review of the work of the Belgian novelist Jean-Philippe Toussaint, from which this last salvo is taken, the renewed interest in human relationships that characterizes Toussaint's most recent novels is immediately suspected of being "a crypto-reactionary step backwards towards humanism, sentimentalism, positivism and the whole gamut of bad isms that the vanguard 20th-century novel expended so much effort overcoming" ("Stabbing").

The heightened tenor of these pronouncements is decidedly uncommon in contemporary literary criticism and arguably even more so in a British context. The simultaneous cooptation and policing of Toussaint as an avant-garde writer who annoyingly fails to be sufficiently antihumanist points to the momentous scale of the arena in which McCarthy wants his fiction to operate. This arena is nothing less than the site where the historical fate of the English novel as such is decided. The novelty McCarthy brings to this arena has an impeccable French pedigree: English literature is currently dominated by "mainstream middle-brow fiction" (Kuitenbrouwer). What makes *Remainder*, in Smith's assessment, "one of the great English novels of the past ten years" is that it refuses the middle-brow and

rather updates a countertradition whose postwar life begins with Alain Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman*, and then peaks "in that radical deconstructive doubt, which questions the capacity of language itself to describe the world with accuracy" (Smith). The future that *Remainder* dreams for the English novel, that is, is French; among postwar English novelists, only J. G. Ballard makes the cut.

The momentous stakes of McCarthy's novelistic project are relevant for an understanding of *Remainder*; for one thing, they attune the reader to the impossibility of a single novel living up to such grave claims for an outright break with traditional notions of emotion and subjectivity. They validate, in other words, the critical attempt to locate the points where the novel diverges from its author's intentions. Indeed, in what follows I argue that the novel's interest for an understanding of the interface between trauma and literature results from its imperfect displacement of subjectivity and from the subjectless affect that emerges in its place. At the same time, these overstated claims have the merit of foregrounding certain assumptions that the study of trauma fiction generally takes for granted. Smith and McCarthy jointly characterize *Remainder's* intervention in the history of the English novel as a break with three crucial features of the traditional realist novel: first, it performs a "brutal excision of psychology" (Smith); second, it fearlessly confronts a reality that refuses to conform to available social or existential meanings; and third, instead of giving us thematic depth, "it works by accumulation and repetition." McCarthy's poetics, in other words, aims to disrupt our ideas of psychological integrity and the customary ways in which the self relates to society—ideas it associates with the novel genre as such. At the same time, the terms in which this post-novelistic program is described cannot but recall the way we think about trauma. As such, it suggests that a proper literary response to trauma—to an event that, like McCarthy's work, "disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev 150)—must also problematize the status of the novel as an adequate form for reflecting the effects of trauma.

One way to appreciate McCarthy's point is to consider to what extent studies of trauma fiction, for all their emphasis on fragmentation, repetition, and temporal dislocation, often continue to rely on the psychological realism of the traditional and (especially) the modernist novel; indeed, the formal features of such fictions are routinely understood as the reflection of a traumatized psyche. Some of the most sophisticated accounts of trauma literature that we have remark that "recurring literary techniques and devices" are ways "to mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma" (Whitehead 84); that an author's "innovative uses of narrative . . . convey the ways

that the past haunts his protagonists" (Vickroy x-xi); that another author's "multiperspectival, fragmented narratives provide a formal correlative to the unintegrated details that haunt her testimony" (Rothberg 144-45); or that "authors create complex/symbolic structures that mirror the complexities of thought and memory accompanying trauma" (Vickroy 116). The unquestioned dominance of figures of mirroring and reflection in such formulations makes clear that customary approaches to trauma literature have perpetuated a traditional investment in the power of literary form to represent a subject's psychology, and that they have insufficiently questioned what McCarthy calls the "liberal-humanist sensibility" that applauds psychological realism for its "meticulous sculpting of the thoughts and feelings of an isolated individual" ("Technology"). Traumatic realism, in other words, is psychological realism by (not really) other means,⁴ and it does not fatally disturb literature's powers to offer a mimesis of even extreme psychological states.⁵ *Remainder* suggests that such novelistic mediations of trauma obscure trauma's status as something that can precisely not be contained within the psyche—as, that is, an experience that "violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound" (Luckhurst 3). By denaturalizing the connection between the novel and trauma, *Remainder* raises the question: to what extent have received accounts of the relation between literature and trauma unwittingly adopted elements of traditional psychological realism—to what extent, that is, are these accounts implicitly (or residually) novelistic. In *Remainder*, the care of everyday life and even "the more intimate side" of the protagonist's life—the things traditional novels are made of—are tellingly outsourced to a company of so-called "facilitators" (76).

The relation between trauma and the cultural forms by which it is mediated is of vital importance as, according to Luckhurst, "cultural forms have provided the genres and narrative forms in which traumatic disruption is temporalized and rendered transmissible" (80). A proper awareness of the historical and ideological weight that these forms carry with them can attune us to possible distortions that these forms inflict on the traumas they mediate. In the case of the novel genre, this historical and ideological charge is considerable. From Lukács on, novel theory has underlined the intrinsic connection between the modern novel and the formation of a "self-governing individual" that comes into existence by negotiating its relation to the social reality that sustains it, a process with which the reader is invited to empathize (Armstrong 6). The genre's unprecedented investment in psychological depth and in the detailed mapping of its characters' environment subtends what Nancy Armstrong calls "an ubiquitous

cultural narrative that . . . measures personal growth in terms of an individual's ability to locate him- or herself productively within the aggregate" (51). *Remainder's* challenge amounts to the charge that trauma fiction has failed to question this generic investment in psychological depth, social accommodation, and identification; it raises the question whether the uninvestigated attachment of trauma to individual subjectivity has not obscured the radical transitivity and mobility of trauma. Interestingly, the novel itself presents a different linkage between literature and trauma—a connection that does not depend on the mimesis of a traumatized psyche, but rather on the liberation of a dysphoric affect that confronts the reader with an evacuated subjectivity that, precisely because it does not offer a position to identify with, leaves the reader affected.⁶ Indeed, one of the prevalent critical reactions to McCarthy's work has been that, for all his avant-garde posturing and his calls for the replacement of "plot, depth, or content" with "angles, arcs, and intervals" ("Stabbing"), his novels still operate (and largely succeed) as novels. In spite of its overtly debunking stance, *Remainder* fails to leave its reader unaffected. The reader confronts the absence of subjective emotion and of the fullness and integrity of an unharmed psyche, yet this perception of nonfeeling in its turn generates a nonsubjective affect. In this way, the novel figures trauma as a frustrated expectation of emotional fullness and centered subjectivity, and as the emergence of an affective remainder unable to disappear.

Affects without Subjects

Remainder's antisentimental and antihumanist thrust not only asserts itself in the deliberate debunking of the pieties of trauma narratives, but also in an outright reduction of psychology to the bare distinction between feeling "neutral" and feeling "not-neutral." The latter generally registers as "a tingling," a bodily sensation that intermittently besets the narrator and that is often "both intense and serene at the same time" (10). Yet in spite of its official investment in neutrality and affectlessness, and perhaps against its author's intentions, the novel allows a diminished mode of feeling to persist, most conspicuously so in a number of scenes in which it explicitly stages that neutrality. In one of these scenes, which I will spend some time unpacking, the narrator is discussing with two friends what he will do with the eight and a half million pounds he has just received as compensation for his accident. While one (male) friend suggests he uses it to open an account with a coke dealer, the other (female—the stereotypical gendering of the passage is part of its point) friend suggests a resource fund for development projects in

Africa. The narrator tries hard to "feel some connection with these Africans," but this attempt ultimately falters:

I felt a kind of vertigo. I knew what I meant but I couldn't say it right. I wanted to feel some connection with these Africans. I tried to picture them putting up houses from her housing kits, or sitting around in schools, or generally doing African things, like maybe riding bicycles or singing. . . . 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, but I lost this image among disjointed escalator parts. . . . I wanted to feel genuinely warm towards these Africans, but I couldn't. Not that I felt cold or hostile. I just felt neutral. (36–37)

This debunking of emotion and empathy seems a clear instance of McCarthy's programmatic antipsychologism. The narrator's move from an imagining of African life to the visualization of grids and networks is one of the many literal applications of McCarthy's manifest intent to replace "plot, depth, or content" with "angles, arcs, and intervals."

Still, it makes a difference that the narrator's statement of dispassionate neutrality does not appear in a manifesto but as part of a scene in a novel. As such, it is inevitably part of an affective interaction with the reader, which complicates such programmatic purity. The passage conjures the feelings that plans for humanitarian aid are expected to elicit—compassion, connectedness, sadness, and so on; it goes on to debunk these feelings—and those expectations—by its deliberately provocative phrasing ("African things"); it prolongs this sense of inappropriateness by failing to remark on the phrasing's offensiveness and by instead opting for an incongruous imagining of nonhuman lines and vectors; and it then asserts the narrator's supposed indifference to the inappropriateness of his thoughts by underlining that the whole scene left him feeling neutral. Even if the passage does not convey a strong emotion that readers can share—that is, feel—it does not avoid conveying an expectation of such an emotion only to go on to frustrate that expectation; the passage even emphasizes this sense of frustrated expectation when it begins by referring to the feeling of "a kind of vertigo." As such, it cannot but transmit a failure to feel, an unfeeling feeling that, even if it is not the full-blown empathetic emotional experience on which the traditional novel thrives, is also not neutral. The passage raises an ethical and affective issue about which we cannot help but care without feeling something: the failure to care itself generates

a dysphoric affect. Sianne Ngai has described such a second-order emotion as "a feeling which is perceived rather than felt and whose very *nonfeltness* is perceived" (76). Far from leaving the reader neutral, such a "perception of an unfelt feeling produces a secondary, dysphoric emotion" (83). This secondary emotion is dysphoric because it is inevitably shadowed by the frustrated expectation of a stronger emotion.⁷

Other scenes in the novel confirm that the strong emotions that we tend to associate with the traditional subject—and, therefore, with the literary genre that has historically sustained that subject—survive in McCarthy's text as diffuse, nonsubjective, dysphoric affects. Even if the terminology that deals with feelings and passions is notoriously slippery, recent cultural theory has begun to deploy a consistent distinction between emotions and affects. While emotions are linked to cognition and meaning and are structured narratively, affects are intractable intensities that escape from cognitive or semantic determination, and that lack "the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions" (Ngai 27). Because affect, unlike emotion, is "disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration" (Massumi 25), it can also, again unlike emotion, be decoupled from the subject (Favret 1162). Affect is "inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective" (Massumi 35). Affect, in other words, is what is liberated after McCarthy's decoupling of literature from the genre that consolidated the notion of a sovereign subject with full-fledged emotions. In her 2001 book *Feeling in Theory*, Rei Terada opposes the customary link between feeling and "centered subjectivity" (8), and shows that genuine feeling in fact entails the absence or the elision of a subject; feeling, that is, is a "nonsubjective experience in the form of self-difference within cognition" (3).⁸ *Remainder*, by repeatedly staging expectations of strong subjectivity and emotion only to empty them out, makes it possible to perceive the absence of emotion and to perceive that vanished subjectivity as the site of the emergence of nonsubjective, dysphoric affect.

In another scene, the narrator is in the act of watching a group of homeless people from the window of a coffee shop. He decides to go up to one of them and invites the man to share a meal. At one point during their meal, the narrative breaks down: "the waiter leant across me as he took the tablecloth away. She took the table away too. There wasn't any table. The truth is, I've been making all this up—the stuff about the homeless person. He existed all right, sitting camouflaged against the shop fronts and the dustbins—but I didn't go across to him" (56). What is remarkable about this passage is not the metatextual twist—which is conventional enough since postmodernism—but the fact that the novel does not invite the

reader to imagine a psychological motivation for the narrator's act of fabulation, nor for his sudden retraction of this fabulation. In an affective scenario that is reminiscent of the one discussed before, the novel presents the reader with an ethically and affectively charged situation—the clash between privilege and poverty, the privilege of narrative power—only to leave a blank failure of response where the reader is led to expect an elaboration of this situation. The novel bluntly refrains from offering a strong emotion, yet it ends up making a perception of that nonfeeling inescapable, which in turn generates a second-order dysphoric affect.

Even if McCarthy's critique of the traditional novel officially wants to do away with feeling and subjectivity, it fails to banish affect. Indeed, this affective yield is even generated by the novel's paradoxical intent to bury the novel genre in what ultimately remains a novel. Laurent Berlant has defined genre as "a loose affectual contract that predicts the form that an aesthetic transaction will take" (847). The affectual contract of the novel genre promises identification and empathy, and *Remainder* cannot avoid being bound by that contract; even if it tries to overwrite the terms of that generic contract by an affectless neutrality, the superimposition of both cannot avoid generating a perception that the initial contract remains unfulfilled, just as it cannot avoid that that perception of nonfeeling generates affect.⁹

Affect and the Logic of Superimposition

The novel thematizes this movement in which the superimposition of two things does not lead to the cancelation of one of them, but rather to the paradoxical production of an affective remainder. The minimal affects that the narrator experiences are often the result of the superimposition of two different images or experiences. A discussion with Naz, the main facilitator whom the narrator engages to take care of the logistics of his reenactments, brings on "a clearly defined picture" of the building to be reconstructed, until "Naz's office superimposed itself over that." When this second image "started fading" in his mind, he does not experience a return to the clarity of the first image, but rather a "sudden surge of fear . . . through the right side of [his] body," which only disappears when the first image finally "eclipsed the image of the office" (85). Later on, when the protagonist finds himself in the street, this experience is superimposed with the imagining of an overhead view of the city that allows him to take in "the pattern" of his team of facilitators walking around (91); this superimposition brings on the feeling of "a light breeze moving round [his] face," and of "a tingling creeping up the right

side of [his] body" (92). Once the building is ready and the narrator is contemplating it, he "trie[s] to X-ray through the door," and the attempt to project things in his view again leads to a "tingling . . . from the top of [his] legs" (102).

This logic, according to which the displacement of one thing by another is doomed to leave a remainder—where every attempt to erase results in a messy superimposition—is at the heart of McCarthy's enterprise in the novel. After his accident, the narrator feels "self-conscious, embarrassed" (15). His reenactments are so many attempts to overcome the sense of inauthenticity—the "self-conscious, embarrassed" feeling that marks his condition after his accident (15)—and to return to an illusory condition of prereflexive, unmarked authenticity and spontaneity.¹⁰ The different reenactments confront him time and again with the disappointing realization that "Everything must leave some kind of mark" (11). Instead of offering a saving transubstantiation, the end of the novel offers us a narrator who seems to have left earthly matters behind as he has taken flight in an airplane, only to be confronted with a damningly materialistic cloud that is "gritty, like spilled earth or dust flakes on a stairwell" (284). So much for escape. The novel's last words are "turning, heading back, again." The stain of materiality cannot be overcome—in the same way that McCarthy's novel cannot write the "affectual contract" between novel and reader out of existence.

In the novel, the friction between reality and the attempt to transcend or sublimate it through a fictional reenactment time and again transforms reality into a site of affect.¹¹ At the beginning of his first elaborate reenactment, the narrator moves across the landing and down the staircase he has walked over "a hundred times before," whereas it had earlier been "just a floor," "now it was fired up, silently zinging with significance," seeming "to emit a kind of charge, as invisible as natural radiation—and just as potent" (133). This intensity is repeated during the novel's last reenactment when the narrator and his team reenact a bank heist, when the "markings of the surface of the road—perfect reproductions of the ones outside [his] warehouse, lines whose pigmentation, texture and layout [he] knew so well—seemed infused with the same level of significance" (260–61). Such affects that can neither be controlled, measured, nor possessed are the only yield of the narrator's strategy to stop feeling "fake" and "second-hand" and to become "real," "perfect," and authentic instead (23). This logic also elevates forensic procedure into an artistic practice, as its work of retracing an original event generates affect. In a description that reads like an allegory of the novel's own reduction of psychology, the narrator explains that the diagrams used to plan the reenactments, "with all their outlines, ar-

rows and shaded blocks" may "look like abstract paintings," but are in fact "not abstract at all": "Each line, each figure, every angle—the ink itself vibrates with an almost intolerable violence, darkly screaming from the silence of the white paper: something has happened here, someone has died" (173). The ink on the white page transmits the remainder of the subjects whose disappearance it records. The superimposition of schemes and structures over the density of actual lives generates the affect released by a missing emotion.

Like its treatment of emotion and affect, the novel's approach to matter situates it in the wake of the novel tradition. In the traditional novel, the reality that the novel evokes (the setting) is converted from mere matter into (in Smith's term) "emotional symbol," into a part of the significant whole that the novel writes into existence and that the narrative achieves. *Remainder* locates the narrator in a setting that has become radically meaningless for him; instead of writing it back into significance through the narrator's recovery, it offers us the record of his numerous failed attempts to sublimate matter into meaning through meticulous reenactments. Yet the residue of these efforts is not nothing. Reality is produced as that which remains after—and thus resists—the attempt at transubstantiation, in the same way that the novel produces affect as the residue of a subject that is unable to disappear. Reality radiates with a significance that cannot be converted into a particular meaning for any subject and that stubbornly resists such a reduction.

The novel's final reenactment scene consists in a simulated bank heist that the narrator and his crew have meticulously rehearsed in a warehouse. This notion of the "fake hold up" may very well refer to one of the key texts that theorize the ways in which reality has been infiltrated by images and simulacra that no longer manage to complement that reality. In his classic essay "Simulacra and Simulations," Jean Baudrillard illustrates the postmodern inability to distinguish between reality and simulation by coining the idea of "a simulated hold up" (180).¹² According to Baudrillard, such a simulated hold up cannot avoid leaking into the realm of the real, as there can be no objective difference between a real and a simulated hold up: "the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements (a police officer will really shoot on sight; a bank customer will faint and die of a heart attack)" (181). In *Remainder's* variation on Baudrillard's possible scenarios, the simulation does not fail when it is confronted with the real, or even with the resistance of something substantial, but rather when the friction between the real simulation and the rehearsals for this simulation produce a material remainder. In the rehearsals, one of the reenactors always trips on a "kink in the carpet"; in the real reenactment of these rehearsals, there is no such

kink, and as the "half-trip" has become "instinctive, second nature" for the actor, he falls over when he fails to encounter the kink he had anticipated (267). The actor falls against another actor, and the clash sets off the latter's gun, which kills a third actor. The novel here offers another instance of its signature logic; a residue is generated through the friction generated by an attempt to cancel one reality by the imposition of another. The simulation generates real-world effects "Thanks to the ghost kink, mainly—the kink the other kink left when we took it away" (273). Even if the friction between the rehearsals and the reenactment is nothing substantial (such as a real, tangible kink in a real carpet), it does generate real-world effects. Here as elsewhere, "Everything must leave some kind of mark" (11).

Trauma without Psychology

The novel condenses the logic according to which frustrated expectation makes room for the unaccountable production of affect in two central scenes that uncharacteristically display (or at least name) emotions. Visiting a garage, the narrator asks the boys in charge to refill his car's empty windshield washer reservoir. After the boys fill up the reservoir, the liquid somehow seems to have disappeared. The narrator feels "wonderful" (159), even "elated and inspired" (160): it is as if "matter—these two litres of liquid—becom[es] un-matter—not surplus matter, mess or clutter, but pure, bodiless blueness" (159). On starting the car, the blue liquid, far from having disappeared, gushes all over him. This disappointment when "the scene of a triumphant launch" turns into "the scene of a disaster" (162) is perceived as "something very sad—not in the normal sense but on a grander scale" (161). Predictably, the narrator attempts to master this sadness at the traumatic encounter with the inevitability of matter through another reenactment. The reenactment drives home the idea that trauma takes shape as the generation of affect in the place of an evacuated subjectivity. Not only does the narrator not participate in the reenactment—he watches it from an especially constructed "raised viewing platform"—the reenactor displays a blank where we expect to see his face: "he wore a white ice-hockey goaltender's mask, so as not to overrun my personality with his—or, more precisely, so as not to impose any personality at all" (164). The reenactment generates "a mixed sensation" (165); it does not cancel the traumatic disappointment, it only translates it into the register of affect.

There is a final twist to the tensions between McCarthy's programmatic dismissal of psychological realism and the instantiation of that program in *Remainder*. As the novel progresses, the superimposition of psychological realism and its nonsubjective remainder

are no longer confined to particular moments but come to define the tone of the whole novel, if by tone we mean the work's "global or organizing affect, its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world" (Ngai 28). If *Remainder* officially wants to convey a tone of sturdy and affectless imperturbability in order to debunk the pieties of trauma fiction, such a reading is increasingly complicated as the narrator gets caught up in obsessively detailed reenactments of seemingly random scenes. This deployment of the narrative grammar of compulsive repetition without the motivation of a psychological trauma—the moments that are reenacted are decidedly nontraumatic, and the whole reenactment campaign is triggered by a seemingly insignificant moment of *déjà vu* at a party—is an obvious part of the novel's campaign against the psychological and ethical registers in which trauma is customarily rendered. Yet in spite of this decoupling of the grammar of repetition and the psychology of trauma, the novel does not manage to sustain its foreclosure of psychology until the end. In the last third of the novel, the schematism and formality of the reenactment plans begins to make way for the narrator's increasingly monomaniacal obsession with these plans, which completely alienate him from his social surroundings. The disjunction between the narrator's delusions and the normative social world is marked most clearly by repeated visits from a doctor. The narrator initially refuses the doctor's help, but soon finds himself "drifting into and out of trances" (203) while under observation by the same doctor, who diagnoses him with "the autonomic symptoms of trauma" (204).

Here, it becomes hard to resist reading the novel's narrator as (also) a pretty conventional modernist unreliable narrator and to classify the novel as (also) a modernist novel of consciousness. The studied flatness and neutrality of the narrative voice can retroactively be understood as an expression of posttraumatic numbing rather than as a radical revision of the novelistic paradigm of psychological depth as such. Even if such a psychological reading only really emerges as a possibility in the last third of the book, it prevents the novel from sustaining its affectless and irreverent tone; this tone is constantly shadowed by the possibility of reattaching *Remainder's* text to a subjective perspective, of reading it as the mimesis of a traumatic mind, and thus of reducing it to what McCarthy's official novelistic project would categorize as one more trauma novel. When the narrator begins to "drift into and out of trances" (203), the novel also begins to take the liberty to abandon the rigorous pace that accompanied the narrator's reenactments step-by-step before this moment in the story and begins to use more ellipses. Here again, it is possible to read these ellipses as a mimesis of an intermittently unconscious mind.

The routines of psychological realism are harder to shake off than McCarthy's programmatic statements seem to promise. The insistent possibility of a return to (traumatic) realism forces on the reader a continuous perception of its absence—a perception of nonfeeling that generates a dysphoric, nonsubjective affect. This affect is the material remainder of McCarthy's dismissal of psychological realism; far from being a mere replacement of such realism, *Remainder* renders visible the absence of emotional fullness and centered subjectivity, and generates affect by making this absence visible. It figures trauma as the evacuation of psychological depth and subjectivity that generates an affective remainder that is unable to disappear, and that is yet equally unconfined to the social, the somatic, the psychological, or any other discrete domain.

Improper Burials

In an essay exploring the interface between the modern novel and technology that was published in *The Guardian* in the summer of 2010, just before the publication of his third novel *C*, McCarthy notes that the novel's concern with the link between melancholia and technologies of transmission is firmly grounded in modern history. He recalls that the nineteenth-century emergence of phonographs and gramophones inspired a fad for recording children's voices, which, when these children happened to die a premature death (a common enough occurrence), turned the plate or roll where their voices survived into "a kind of tomb" ("Technology"). Communication technology, that is, inaugurated "a cult of mourning." McCarthy remarks that Laurence Rickels, on whose book *Aberrations of Mourning* he is drawing here, "even suggests replacing the word 'mourning' with the phrase 'the audio and video broadcasts of improper burial.'" For McCarthy, the literature that emerges in the wake of this cult of mourning—the modernism with which he has tirelessly affiliated himself—is "this cult's expression, its record, its holy script." In *Remainder*, McCarthy performs the deliberately "improper burial" of the novel—a genre unable to disappear and surviving itself in the transmission of affect that no longer belongs to a proper subject, and that tracklessly resonate in the empty crypt where the traditional novel has taught us to look for full-fledged subjects. In a typically contrarian statement in a 2007 interview, McCarthy remarks that "mainstream middle-brow fiction . . . pretends you can just go ahead and write without addressing the whole issue of impossibility and failure, and so, paradoxically, produces genuinely dead novels" (qtd. in Kuitenbrouwer). Where mainstream fiction inadvertently produces dead

novels while anxiously trying to keep the genre alive, McCarthy's own programmatic attempt to hasten the death of the novel (and the psychological realism that defines it) paradoxically inaugurates the afterlife of a genuinely undead, improperly buried subject that cannot help but continue to transmit trackless, dysphoric affects. In this way, it may be closer to trauma's nature as an unpredictable passageway and an unreliable connector than more canonical trauma fictions.

Notes

1. See especially his book *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* from 2006, which is both an original exploration of the work of Hergé and a meditation on some of the major figures in the French Theory canon.
2. For the consolidation of "trauma fiction" and the "trauma novel" as distinctive genres, see Craps and Buelens, Luckhurst 87–116, and Whitehead.
3. See Luckhurst 87–88 for the (strongly ethicized) "trauma aesthetic" that characterizes "and emergent international canon of writers and works."
4. While the phrase traumatic realism conveniently captures the idea that the rendering of a traumatized psyche often relies on the conventions of psychological realism, it is important to note that Michael Rothberg's book of that title problematizes this tendency to recuperate the formal features of trauma literature as, in the final analysis, a mimesis of the effects of trauma on the psyche. Rothberg underlines that he does not understand traumatic realism as a "passive mimesis" of the traumatic event, but rather as "an attempt to produce the traumatic event as an object of knowledge and to program and thus transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture" (103).
5. I use the term mimesis to refer to the power of literary form to offer an adequate representation of reality. In the study of trauma, the most famous link to mimesis is the one established by Ruth Leys in her study of the genealogy of the concept of trauma. Leys's account operates by describing the oscillations between what she calls mimetic and antimimetic accounts of trauma; she—rather counterintuitively—identifies the mimesis of trauma as "an experience of hypnotic imitation or identification" (8), as an embodied reenactment of the traumatic event. A reaction to trauma that manages to incorporate it in an adequate representation is, on this account, antimimetic. See Ingham for an illuminating sketch of the tensions between Leys and literary theoretical approaches to trauma.
6. In the study of the literature of trauma, Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement" has been extremely influential. In its reli-

ance on the kind of empathy (rather than full-fledged identification [78, 102]) that is crucial to the cultural work that the novel genre has traditionally done, this notion remains trapped in the novelistic paradigm that *Remainder* puts into perspective. In LaCapra's text, the proximity between empathic unsettlement and more traditional notions of empathy becomes clear in casual juxtapositions such as "empathy (or what I term empathic unsettlement)" (97). See Keen for a comprehensive exploration of the reciprocal imbrication of empathy and the novel.

7. Such a perceptible elision of an expected emotion has also been associated with the species of late-twentieth-century fiction that James Annesley has labeled "blank fiction." Associated with authors like Dennis Cooper and Bret Easton Ellis, blank fiction tends to focus on extreme violence and sexuality without providing the proper psychological and emotional framing for such events. Here is Annesley on one of Cooper's stories: "The text's blank response to corporeality compels the reader to reflect on this blankness and encourages a search for the elements that have been displaced in the narrative's attempt to appear empty" (34). While *Remainder* does develop into an orgy of mindless violence and killing, one notable difference is that McCarthy also manages to stage the kind of blank affective scenarios Annesley describes without needing extreme events, which makes clear that his main interest is in the link between form and affect, rather than violence. One of the shortcomings of Annesley's study is that he does not dissociate violence from scenes that are about violence and fails to observe the affective yield of narration itself. For a necessary corrective, see Abel.
8. This link is routinely associated in much of the contemporary literature on feeling with Fredric Jameson's famous thesis on the postmodern "waning of affect," which seems to presuppose that the traditional subject with its "psychopathologies" (15) is a condition for feelings and emotions. See Abel (49–50), Beasley-Murray (125–26), Ngai (4), and Terada (2). For Jameson, the postmodernist era has replaced emotion and affect with what he terms "intensities" (29), which he tends to associate with "euphoria" (32). One of the problems besetting Jameson's account is that he fails to leave room for dysphoric affects (or, in his terms, dysphoric intensities) that do not fold back into decidedly pre-postmodern experiences of anxiety or alienation.
9. In spite of the programmatic declaration that McCarthy's novel is the "strong refusal" of lyrical realism, both Smith's and McCarthy's accounts are in fact open to such a logic in which it is precisely the friction or superimposition between the two traditions that accounts for what goes on in the novel. If Smith keeps insisting on the separation between realism and the French connection, her own logic—impeccably echoed by McCarthy himself—tends toward the idea that novels in the critical tradition subsume the realist tradition they criticize. In what amounts to a crypto-Hegelian hierarchy, they simply inhabit a higher degree of self-consciousness than even so embarrassed and self-critical a realist novelist as O'Neill. Even if

"*Netherland* plants inside itself its own partial critique," it remains "a novel only partially aware of the ideas that underpin it, [while] *Remainder* is fully conscious of its own." McCarthy's "brutal excision of psychology," in its turn, only makes sense against the background of a less self-conscious tradition for which psychological depth was both an assumption and a goal. Far from remaining indifferent to the tradition it departs from, it "meticulously . . . works through the things we expect of a novel, gleefully taking them apart, brick by brick." Smith's "two traditions" can more fruitfully be understood as two opposing forces at work in the same novel; her remark that "Friction, fear, and outright hatred spring up often between these two traditions" is then an unwitting recognition of the affective yield of that very confrontation in McCarthy's work.

10. Of course, the experience that spontaneous actions feel "second-hand" (26) and have stopped being self-evident has little to do with the symptomatology of trauma. It is an index of McCarthy's indifference to the psychology of trauma that he couples the grammar of trauma with the thematics of inauthenticity by adding the symptoms of deafferentation (the destruction of sensory nerve fibers) to the narrator's injury. The book's second chapter begins by recounting how, as the part of his brain that controls the motor functions has been damaged, the narrator has to consciously relearn basic movements such as "lifting a carrot to [his] mouth" (19). In line with the novel's preoccupation with material remainders, the attempt to restore spontaneity runs aground on the carrot's "gnarled, dirty and irregular" materiality (20).
11. McCarthy has himself launched the idea that "failed transcendence" is at the heart of his work. *Men In Space*, the novel following *Remainder*, especially draws on this idea through the central image of an astronaut who keeps orbiting the earth and is unable to land, as the country that launched him into space (the Soviet Union) has ceased to exist during the time of his trip. Also see the International Necronautical Society's "Declaration on Inauthenticity."
12. The affinities between McCarthy's and Baudrillard's concerns are especially clear when the narrator motivates his decision to stage a bank heist in the following terms: "Yes: lifting the reenactment out of its demarcated zone and slotting it back into the world, into an actual bank whose staff didn't know it was a reenactment: that would return my motions and my gestures to ground zero and hour zero, to the point at which the reenactment merged with the event" (244-45). Baudrillard emphasizes that the fake heist cannot but provoke a confrontation with the real (180-81); McCarthy, for his part, underlines that this doubling of reality produces a material remainder.

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