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# The Literature of Melancholia

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## The Novel after Melancholia: On Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*

Pieter Vermeulen

Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.

(Michel Foucault)

Any understanding of the place of melancholia in contemporary culture must take into account the increasing currency of the notions of trauma and depression in the last quarter century. Indeed, the complex functioning of the notion of melancholia is to a large extent determined by its relation to these terms. While depression is undeniably associated with popular culture and the mass media, melancholia seems to reference the more lofty domains of cultural theory, literature and the arts, and to replace the 'commodified subjectivity' of popular discourses on depression with 'the promise of critical reinvention and reflection' (Toal 305). At the same time, the broad currency of these terms in different cultural domains signals a more pervasive mood of despondency and indolence that overrides these differences and constitutes a crucial affective dimension of Western culture in the last few decades. Since the 1980s, subjectivity and identity have increasingly begun to be articulated in relation to experiences of woundedness, survival and loss (Luckhurst 1–2). Jennifer Radden has remarked that the close connection between loss, on the one hand, and self-identity, on the other, has only been a fixture of theories of melancholia since Freud. In his seminal paper 'Mourning and Melancholia' from 1917, Freud defines melancholia as 'a narcissistic disorder of loss intrinsically directed toward the self' (Radden 44), and, even if Freud's work resonates with earlier discourses on melancholia, twentieth-century mobilizations of melancholia owe the conjunction of self-identity and loss to Freud (Radden 44–5). In such diverse fields as cultural theory, feminism, AIDS activism and identity politics, melancholia has been deployed to theorize a particular relation between loss, on the one hand,

and political agency or collective identity, on the other. More often than not, these uses of melancholia again follow Freud in explicitly or implicitly opposing melancholia to mourning, and thus to 'normal' ways of dealing with loss. Melancholia names a structure in which collective identities 'unite around the re-experiencing of their woundedness', instead of defining themselves through their careful and patient working-through of loss (Luckhurst 2).

In this essay, I begin by looking at the afterlife of Freud's work on melancholia in the field of critical theory, in order to trace (and critique) a dominant intellectual trend that is deeply suspicious of, if not openly antagonistic to, processes of restitutive mourning. This tendency has to a large extent 'naturalized' and 'depathologized' melancholia (Rae 16; Forter 139), not only in its *descriptions* of how subjectivities and identities are in fact constructed but also in its implicit and explicit *prescriptions* of what constitutes a commendable ethical and political stance. The main part of the essay assesses the impact of this politics of melancholia on the contemporary novel. I will argue that the generic features of the novel resist being mobilized for such a politics, and that recent innovations in the novel form can be understood as attempts to recover that generic resistance in order to articulate a post-melancholic politics. I look at two very different novels – David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999) and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) – in order to suggest the variety of the forms these responses can take. Indeed, not only are trauma and loss important themes in the contemporary novel but also the evocation of these notions contributes to strategies to assess the politics of the novel form as such and to redesign the novel as a vehicle for a productive and resolutely post-melancholic linkage of loss and identity. This position recognizes the inadequacy of traditional protocols of mourning, but insists that melancholia does not offer a viable alternative to them; it looks forward to a perspective that differs from both mourning and melancholia.

In Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia', the distinction between mourning and melancholia is essentially that between a normal, healthy response to loss and a pathological and self-destructive one. The normal process of mourning allows the subject, after a slow and painful process of detachment, to regain access to the energies that were invested in the lost object and to reinvest them in new relations with people and the world (Freud 243–5). The melancholic, in contrast, is unable to enter into a dynamic relation with new love objects, and even with the outside world more generally, as she fails to detach her energies from the object she has lost (248–51). For Freud, mourning presents the psychologically desirable approach to loss, while melancholy is a pathological deviation from normalcy. In the decades that followed, work that adopted Freud's categories in order to explore collective reactions to loss tended to continue the valorization of mourning as an eminently possible and socially and psychologically advisable strategy. The most famous example of this tradition is probably Alexander and

Margarete Mitscherlich's study *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* from 1967 (see Forter 134–43). The Mitscherlichs laid bare the social and psychological costs of post-war Germany's repression of its recent past, and assumed that it would be more productive to finally confront that past in order to be able to mourn the loss of National Socialism. In his book *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), Paul Gilroy has more recently retrieved the Mitscherlichs' work in order to analyse Britain's failure to engage with its colonial past and present.

Gilroy's update is all the more remarkable since, as critics such as Greg Forter, Eric Santner and Slavoj Žižek have remarked, the valorization of mourning, which was still self-evident for the Mitscherlichs in the 1960s, has changed dramatically since then. In critical discourses informed by poststructuralism, mourning has often been decried as a hegemonic normalization strategy that enjoins us to just get on with life without letting that life be derailed by accidental losses. The work of mourning, that is, is 'closely and fatally identified with the imperative to do the work of getting and spending in a capitalist system' that remains perfectly indifferent to personal or minoritarian experiences of loss and injury (Rae 31). While Freud understood the process of mourning as a painful detachment from the lost object and a gradual rediscovery of the world, these critical discourses take mourning to task for its failure to hold on to the singularity of grief and the irreplaceability of each particular loss. Such a dismissal of restitutive mourning has often gone hand in hand with a defence of melancholia as a creditable form of resistance against such normalizing processes. Instead of a pathological *inability* to let go of a lost object, melancholy is often seen as a heroic *refusal* to surrender the lost object to a public space that dishonors its memory, or simply forgets to remember it.<sup>1</sup> A protracted melancholic attachment to loss is seen as a privileged way to resist the imposition of disciplinary demands that obliterate the specificity and validity of minoritarian perspectives. While the queer version of critical melancholia holds that 'homosexuals are those who retain fidelity to the lost or repressed identification with the same-sex libidinal object', the postcolonial or ethnic version assumes that the specific legacies of ethnic groups are threatened by their confrontation with capitalist modernity, and concludes that these groups should therefore retain their melancholic attachment to their lost roots, rather than *reroute* them through processes of mourning (Žižek 658).

Still, when we reconsider these critical revisions of Freud's distinction, we can begin to doubt whether melancholia is indeed an adequate strategy to counter the baleful effects of social imperatives of restitutive mourning. Three objections seem particularly relevant to the impact of the politics of melancholia on the novel genre, which is my main concern in this essay. First, the investment in melancholia is often informed by the idea that mourning automatically constitutes a betrayal of the lost object – as if the mourner who reinvests her energies in the world thereby simply forgets the lost object. This overlooks the fact that only a form of mourning that

consciously articulates the precise extent and nature of loss can form the basis of an adequate memory practice (Forter 139). Mourning, far from hastening the forgetting of the lost object, is a necessary part of the effort to give it a sustainable and rememberable form. When we consider that cultural forms such as the novel narrativize and temporalize loss and are thus 'foundationally a working through of traumatic disruption' (Luckhurst 84), such a misunderstanding of the uses of mourning may lead to the conclusion that the novel is generically a form of betrayal.

A second problem is that critical defences of melancholia fail to take into account the particular affect that constitutes melancholia – the fact, that is, that it is accompanied by 'self-loathing' and 'numbed disconnection' from other people and the world (Forter 139). The melancholic often suffers from a self-destructive inability to engage with a world that no longer holds any interest for her. Melancholia forbids dynamic object-relations and forecloses 'the capacity to experience new people and relations with spontaneity, with a receptivity to experience, to newness, to changes in oneself and others' (Moglen 162). This impoverishment of the world and of the self constitutes a challenge for a genre such as the novel that, in Ian Watt's classic formulation, 'is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment' (17–18). The novel, that is, seems to be constitutively anti-melancholic, in that its exploration of inner and outer worlds both assumes and promotes a palpable interest in these worlds, which is something melancholia resolutely forecloses.

A third problem lies in the conviction that the memory of loss or trauma is directly linked to identity, which fosters forms of identitarian thinking that exclude people who happen not to have shared these particular losses. Melancholia withdraws privileged memories from circulation and enlists them for the construction of group identities that are cordoned off from other people's experiences. As such, it forecloses what Michael Rothberg calls the 'multidirectionality' of memory, the idea that, even if '[o]ur relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present', it never does so 'straightforwardly and directly, and never without unexpected or even unwanted consequences that bind us to those whom we consider other' (5). It suppresses the fact that loss and suffering in a globalized world are always articulated beyond the bounds of pre-established communities and nations, and it precludes intersubjective and intercultural dimensions that may be productive in promoting solidarity across borders. Melancholia, that is, places a check on 'the inescapable hybridity and intermixture' of memories and identities (Gilroy, *Black* xi).<sup>2</sup>

While critical melancholia is entirely justified in resisting the disciplinary social ideals that traditional protocols of restitutive mourning all too often support, its unintended fall-out is, first, a failure to bring loss to

consciousness, second, an impoverished world to which a self-loathing mind is unable to connect and, third, a foreclosure of dimensions of relationality that could help convert loss into agency or insight. One can of course argue that such a refusal of relationality is a strategic necessity: after all, it has often been remarked that, in the last two centuries, relationality and hybridity have been thoroughly absorbed into an increasingly abstract and financialized capitalism, in which everything that does not melancholically resist globalized capital is reduced to the status of an indifferent part of 'a financialising, decorporalising logic of equivalence' (Baucom 6). This is the argument of Ian Baucom's book *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005), one of the most sophisticated defences of critical melancholia to have appeared in the last few years. For Baucom, the only thing that can oppose the trivialization of loss is 'a politics of ascriptive melancholy, of unsurpassable attachment' (179). Such a melancholic politics 'resists the exchange of life for death by seeking to return dead things to life and insisting on the affective reality of the exemplary ghosts it calls from the vasty deeps' (46). Baucom's case rests on the familiar opposition between a melancholia that refuses integration and relation, and an implicitly disparaged mourning that is complicit with the dictates of finance capital. For Baucom, 'mourning exchanges, melancholy encrypts' (257).

I already noted that critical melancholia offers a direct challenge to the novel genre. Baucom's book is helpful in that it opposes the melancholic politics it advocates to the cultural work done by the novel. For Baucom, the genre of the novel is entirely complicit with the dematerializing logic of finance. Finance capitalism depends on the capacity to abstract from the singularity of things and to assert the equivalence of non-identical things, that is, to exchange 'the "real" for the "theoretical" life of things'; as such, it depends on cultural forms that simulate 'the real existence of theoretical abstractions' (46). For Baucom, the novel is such an apparatus that trains 'society's members to credit the existence of the abstract, imaginary, speculative values and things that ... dominate social life' (67); finance capital depends on a 'system-wide determination to credit the existence of imaginary values', and this amounts to 'the "novelization" of a collective imaginary' (16–17). Baucom allows us to see that, for critical melancholia, the novel is essentially an anti-melancholic genre; through its imaginative and narrative operations, it reconnects the losses that it recounts to a collective imaginary in a way that, from the perspective of the advocates of melancholia, amounts to a 'betrayal' of the singularity of these losses.

There is a crucial tension between melancholia and novelistic development: while melancholia insists on the refusal to develop and integrate loss, the novel is a genre that temporalizes loss and makes it transmissible (Luckhurst 80). The paradox is that the novel attempts 'to animate and explicate trauma that has been formulated as something that exceeds the possibility of narrative knowledge' (Luckhurst 79). The same goes for

melancholia which, like trauma, is precisely defined through its resistance to narrative or therapeutic elaboration and integration. As Roger Luckhurst has demonstrated, the result of this constitutive paradox is that many novels in the last few decades are characterized by formal tensions 'between discordance and concordance' (85) that have become nearly formulaic in postmodern, postcolonial and trauma fiction. The proliferation of ghosts, a focus on 'the politics of oppressed communal identity' and 'a style of narrative distention' (97) are some of the features that pervade much of late twentieth-century fiction and that reflect attempts to reconceive the novel as a vehicle for a melancholic politics. This also means that novels that want to break with this politics of melancholia must break with these recent additions to the novel's repertoire.

Melancholia also offers a second challenge to the contemporary novel. Novel theory has long noted that the novel is a technology for resolving the paradoxes of bourgeois morality. This morality is grounded in the rights of the individual, whose individuality is defined by her 'deviation from some social role, norm, or stereotype' (Armstrong 349–51), yet, in order for individuality to be able to express itself in the society that it founds, bourgeois morality at the same time requires constraints on the individual's deviations from the norm. The novel is a device that aims at 'the reconciliation of the problematic individual ... with concrete social reality' (Lukács 132). The novel resolves the tension between individuality and normality by fusing 'external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity' (Moretti 16); the demands of normality merge 'with everyday activities and relationships, exercising itself in ways that are natural and unnoticeable' (Moretti 53).<sup>3</sup> The novel genre's unprecedented investment in psychological depth and in the detailed mapping of its characters' environment – that is, its psychological and social realism – allows it to do the cultural work it is required to do: it allows the novel to manage its readers' affects and to streamline them with social norms, and as such it helps to disseminate and normalize particular protocols for negotiating individual freedom and identity. This means that the novel's realism also has the capacity to normalize particular ways of dealing with loss. When this power is mobilized in order to embody a melancholic posture, we encounter a second paradoxical tension between melancholia and the novel form: the novel's celebrated psychological and social realism now becomes a vehicle for a politics of melancholia that, as I noted, does not promote the reciprocal enrichment of interior and exterior spaces, but instead leads to an impoverishment of the world and a disabling self-loathing that refuses new forms of relationality. When the novel becomes a vehicle for melancholia, in other words, realism turns against itself. Critical melancholia not only affects the novel's intrinsically anti-melancholic propensity for narrative and affective resolution, but it also compromises the workings of its almost definitional realism.

Contemporary novels that want to avoid the pitfalls of the politics of melancholia must develop strategies to recover the materiality of reality and to open up new relational possibilities. In the rest of this essay, I want to suggest the variety of responses that the contemporary novel has come up with in response to this challenge by looking at two novels that have revised the traditional formal features of the novel in order to retrieve the genre for a critique of melancholia. David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* use formal means to recognize the limitations of critical melancholia – which does not mean that they propose a simple return to traditional protocols of restitutive mourning. While *Remainder* demonstrates what a novelistic critique of melancholia means for the genre's psychological and social realism, *Ghostwritten* already gestures toward a more affirmative recreation of a decidedly post-melancholic relationality.

*Remainder* is Tom McCarthy's first novel and was, after a frustrating career of publisher rejection, finally published in Paris in 2005 before it became a critical success on both sides of the Atlantic. McCarthy is not only a novelist: he is also a conceptual artist, as well as the General Secretary of the only half-serious International Necronautical Society (of which the philosopher Simon Critchley is Chief Philosopher). True to their name, these necromancers aim to conceive of death as a type of space that they 'intend to map, enter, colonize and, eventually, inhabit' ('First Manifesto'). This ambition is part of McCarthy's larger aim to retrieve the world in its materiality and to record the material remainder of things that resists every attempt at abstraction or spiritualization. He aims to use cultural forms in order to, in his own words, '[send] the world back to itself with double the force' (McCarthy, 'Mise en abîme'). This (essentially phenomenological) undertaking is crucially related to the question of the possibility – or the impossibility – of the novel form. The failure of much middlebrow fiction to address the question of the death of the novel, for McCarthy, 'paradoxically, produces genuinely dead novels' (McCarthy, 'Mise en abîme'). In perfect accordance with the logic I have outlined, *Remainder*'s concern with the (im)possibilities of the novel form and its ambition to retrieve the material world combine in an uncompromising dismissal of the culture of melancholia and of the novelistic means that have bolstered that culture.

From its very first line, *Remainder* exposes the devices through which melancholia exercises its hold over the novel genre – which is the condition with which the novel sets out to break. As the melancholic novel has to combine the seemingly irreconcilable claims of a genre that is intent on narrative development and of a grief that resists narrative resolution, it tends to mobilize the genre's realist resources for the detailed evocation of psychological nuance and depth in order to only gradually reveal the contours of an initially unspeakable loss. Whether it aims at closure or not, the melancholic novel requires that the traumatic event that triggers it only reluctantly reveals itself and initially withdraws itself from full articulation.

*Remainder*'s very first lines immediately expose this convention for what it is – as much a strategy for cashing in on loss as the mark of an authentic negotiation of it.

About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing. It involved something falling from the sky. Technology. Parts, bits. That's it, really: all I can divulge. Not much, I know. (5)

This blunt and unceremonious opening reduces the moment of traumatic impact to a mere structural device – a ploy that provokes a certain blockage in the speaker's mind on which the narrative can capitalize. Yet as the blunt and affectless style of these lines – which is carried through with remarkable consistency until the end of the novel – signals, *Remainder* refuses the conventions of psychological realism (or of what Zadie Smith, in her review of the novel, calls 'lyrical Realism'), as if to suggest that, for the novel to overcome its melancholic affliction, such realism has to go.

*Remainder* does not develop its initial moment of blockage by mobilizing the novel's psychological repertoire in order to carefully and asymptotically revisit this underarticulated moment. The speaker's inarticulacy is not just the reflection of a disturbing event on an afflicted mind – it is, quite simply, an execution of the script of melancholia that *Remainder* is taking apart. The novel's name for this script is 'the Settlement' – a huge financial settlement between the speaker and 'the parties, institutions, organizations – let's call them the bodies – responsible for what happened' (5) that grants the speaker 8.5 million dollars as long as he promises to remain silent about the accident. This compensation is the very possibility condition of the events that make up the novel, and thus of the novel itself, as the speaker will use this money to organize the re-enactments of his life that fill the book. Indeed, the very settlement that requires the speaker to remain silent about the accident *generates* the novel, in the same way that the conventions of inarticulacy and discordance make possible the traumatic or melancholic novel. The speaker notes that 'the Settlement was held up to me as a future strong enough to counterbalance my no-past, a moment that would make me better, whole, complete' (6). His refusal of this script for the conversion of loss into wholeness goes together with the novel's refusal of the psychological realism that normally conveys such an interior journey.

As I noted, such a refusal of melancholia is motivated by an attempt to reclaim the world from a realism that has tended to impoverish it, and thus to come up with a different realism that is more true to the materiality of the world. The speaker spends obscene amounts of money on having scenes from his life re-enacted in excruciating detail, in order to save that reality from its inauthenticity, from its 'second-hand' nature (15, 24). By liberating events and matter from their inclusion in the protocols of everyday life, he hopes to retrieve the 'record' and the 'mark' they have left (11), their status

as 'a leftover fragment, a shard of detritus' (9). The speaker's exercise is not therapeutic, as the novel consistently refuses to register the affective and psychological effects of these re-enactments; at most, they give rise to an intensified perception of reality, or to a vague 'tingling' sensation in the protagonist. *Remainder* is a remarkably consistent and precise attempt to break free from the temptation of melancholic self-centredness and to recover the nonhuman significance of a world that such self-centredness obstructs. In a particularly successful re-enactment, the scene seems 'to be silently zinging'; it is 'infused with [a] toxic level of significance' (261). The book's ambition is to 'fill time up with space' (221), to abandon the trappings of interiority and to recover space, matter and the stuff of reality. Yet *Remainder* is not for all that an anti-novel that simply breaks with the novel tradition. Instead, it exploits the genre's narrative and descriptive resources in order to overcome the melancholic impasses of the genre and to map and explore the materiality of reality with a renewed intensity and precision. It radically brackets the novel's psychological and characterological possibilities in order to retrieve its capacity to recover an outside reality. The detour through the novel genre is an essential element in the recovery of the materiality of an otherwise second-hand reality – and this is what makes it an event *in* the history of the novel – just as the restoration of the material world requires its detailed re-enactment.

The recovery of the world is also connected to the renewed possibility of the relationality and connectedness of identities and memories. Even if *Remainder* does not develop this dimension at any length, it hints at the restored possibility of connectedness beyond the limits of one's own community in one significant passage. Near the beginning of the novel, the main character is still contemplating what to do with his money. When a friend suggests he invest it in development in Africa, he fails to feel a connection to Africa:

I wanted to feel some connection with these Africans. I tried to picture them putting up houses from... housing kits, or sitting around in schools, or generally doing African things, like maybe riding bicycles or singing... I wanted to feel genuinely warm towards these Africans, but I couldn't. Not that I felt cold or hostile. I just felt neutral... (36–7)

This deliberately provocative passage clearly indicates what a melancholic failure of relationality consists in. It is only when the protagonist re-enacts the murder of a black man (with himself in the role of the victim) that a sense of connection is being suggested – and, remarkably, it is the restoration of the materiality of the real world that makes this possible. The protagonist is fascinated with the black man because in his death he has managed to merge 'with the space around him, sunk and flowed into it until there was no distance between it and him – and merged, too, with his actions, merged

to the extent of having no more consciousness of them. He'd stopped being separate, removed, imperfect' (184–5). Relationality is restored because the man's death has forced him to abandon his distinct humanity and to become a merely spatial entity; and as the novel is dedicated to the recovery of the materiality of space, it is this reduction that allows the speaker to overcome his characteristic affectlessness and to intuit the possibilities of new relations. It is the liberation from psychology and history that makes relationality possible.<sup>4</sup>

David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* presents a much more exuberant spectacle than McCarthy's studied minimalism. While McCarthy radically exposes the infrastructure of the melancholic novel, *Ghostwritten* allows novelistic devices to survive themselves by liberating them from melancholic recuperation; it uses the descriptive and narrative devices of the novel in order to redefine the novel as a genre that can embody relationality and connectedness. The novel consists of ten chapters narrated by different I-narrators spread around the world, from the Japanese island of Okinawa over Mongolia and Petersburg to New York. These ten chapters touch on a rich variety of themes, including many that are tied to loss and dispossession: the novel evokes the Tokyo gas attack, the imbrication of science and the military, the disasters of twentieth-century geopolitics, fanaticism, globalization, and so on. *Ghostwritten* uses many different genres to tell these tales: one of the chapters is written as a thriller, others as science fiction or romances (Griffiths 89).

Yet *Ghostwritten* is not for all that a conventional postmodern novel. It depicts the narrators of the different chapters as fully individuated characters, and their different stories function independently of any overarching theme or organizing instance. Indeed, the only thing that makes these stories add up to a novel, rather than to a collection of short stories, is that these stories, for all their independence, are precisely not self-contained. The different narrators make short and often insignificant cameo appearances in each other's chapters, often disappearing in the very same paragraph in which they appear. These casual and inconsequential interactions are too minimal to suggest an underlying design that connects these individuals; at the same time, they are not systematic enough to activate a discourse of ghostliness and hybridity. Instead, they serve as a reminder that the different identities, stories and memories that the novel presents are not absolutely self-contained; by marking points of contact between apparently separate histories, they suggest that identities are deeply implicated in each other, and that it is possible to open up 'the separate containers of memory and identity that buttress competitive thinking' (Rothberg 18). Together with the novel's vast geographical span, they remind us that identity and subjectivity in a globalized world are always constituted through cross-cultural relations. Yet by refusing an organizing narrative instance, the novel also allows its different chapters and characters to be fully individuated; this suggests that the

affirmation of relationality in a world governed by global finance – a major theme of the novel – does not, *pace* Baucom and the politics of melancholia, automatically confirm capital's dematerializing logic. Especially the chapter that is situated at the Holy Mountain in China and that is narrated by a woman who has suffered the violence of twentieth-century Chinese history shows that memory and identity cannot melancholically withdraw from history and capitalism, because they have always already been implicated in it. The novel's construction makes it impossible for losses and injuries to be consolidated as melancholic possessions: it makes clear that memory and experience are always articulated in intercultural and intersubjective dialogue with other perspectives.

*Ghostwritten* also codes this shift from melancholia to interconnectedness as a revision of the genre of the novel. Through this revision, the novel emerges as a medium that can embody a form of relationality that does not just affirm the logic of interchangeability. The fifth chapter is situated in Mongolia and is narrated through a virus. This virus has the capacity to 'transmigrate' between different human beings and to read (and to a certain extent direct) the memories and the minds of the people it intermittently inhabits. Yet this virus needs to inhabit a living body at any time – if its carrier dies, it dies along with it (163). As such, the virus allegorizes the novel genre's dependence on its characters (the virus also describes itself as a 'parasite', 153). The Mongolian virus's trajectory through different human beings is motivated by its desire 'to find the source of the story that was already there' (158) at the beginning of its remembered life. Its attempt to recover 'the source of the story it was born with' (165) inspires a trajectory during which it also briefly encounters narrators of other chapters in the novel. If we continue to read the virus as an allegory for the novel genre itself, we see that it is the virus (or the novel's) desire to retrieve the event in which it originated that almost in passing generates the multidirectional web of relations that makes up *Ghostwritten*. The search for a defining experience or an initial trauma is gradually overwritten by a promiscuous web of interrelation that, Mitchell suggests, is a vital feature of the novel genre. It is in pursuing its one defining memory that the virus discovers the nature of memory: 'I experience memories like networks of tunnels. Some are serviced and brightly lit, others are catacombs. Some are guarded, yet others are bricked up. Tunnels lead to tunnels, deeper down. So it is with memories' (168). Even if the genre of the novel tends to favour resolution and closure, *Ghostwritten* reminds us that the novel also has the capacity to escape such resolution – something that the history of the genre, from Sterne to Joyce to Pynchon, has of course amply borne out.

It has often been noted that our ideas of modern individuality and humanity have historically developed in parallel with the novel genre. The virus, as an allegory of the genre, understands that it can be considered as the 'ghostwriter' of human life. It calls itself 'a nonhuman humanist' (163),

and realizes that it cannot be entirely sure that 'there aren't *noncorpa* living within me, controlling my actions' (184) because after all, that is what humans also think. Yet *Ghostwritten* exploits rather than condemns the novel's capacity to 'ghostwrite' human lives. After all, it relies on the novel's resources of psychological realism, plot, characterization and so on to allow the virus to expose the novel's nearly invisible hold over the reader's life. Its discovery of a new relationality and of an intensified interconnectedness is emphatically an achievement of the novel genre, and not a result of the neutralization of its literary history. The virus exposes the machinations of the medium on which it depends for its existence; it is itself equally ghostwritten as the lives it infects. *Ghostwritten* does not aim to dismantle the novel genre, because it knows that its retrieval of the world and of intercultural relationality depends on the genre's work of ghostwriting. Its exuberant and affirmative mode suggests that the lack of an authenticating original event does not need to lead to insecurity, loss of identity and a dispersion that is powerless to resist global capital – as the politics of melancholia would have it – but can also lead to an affirmation of the material world and the relations that ghostwrite us, and that we ghostwrite in our turn. Like *Remainder*, it exploits the resources of the novel in order to break with the politics of melancholia and to liberate the world and human relations from their fateful impoverishment at the hands of such a politics.

## Notes

1. For the mediating role of poststructuralist theories in this changed appreciation of mourning and melancholia, see especially Forter 135–7, which focuses on the work of Paul de Man, and Rae 16, which mentions Lacan, Lyotard 'and other postmodernist writers' as proponents of a melancholic subjectivity.
2. Incidentally, this connection between melancholia and the foreclosure of relationality can explain that Paul Gilroy is both one of our most vocal critics of melancholia and one of the most important theorists of relationality.
3. The quotation from Lukács comes from a passage of *The Theory of the Novel on Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, while those from Moretti come from his study of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. While this may suggest that the point I make only pertains to that novelistic subgenre, both the Moretti and the Lukács passages in fact consider the *Bildungsroman* as exemplary of the operation of the novel as such – as 'the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization' (Moretti 10).
4. McCarthy's second novel can be read as an attempt to test the possibilities of affirming relationality in the novel form. *Men in Space* extensively maps the relations between a very diverse set of people who find themselves in Prague in the interval between the fall of Communism and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Prague is presented as the site of a renewed relationality, yet this goes together with the novel's remarkable elision of history and, indeed, trauma. Again, it seems that a recovery of one of the novel's generic capacities is only possible through a critique of the linkage of the novel with trauma.

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