

Two Paths for the Novel

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Netherland

by Joseph O’Neill

Pantheon, 256 pp., \$23.95

Remainder

by Tom McCarthy

Vintage, 308 pp., \$13.95 (paper)

1.

From two recent novels, a story emerges about the future for the Anglophone novel. Both are the result of long journeys. *Netherland*, by Joseph O’Neill, took seven years to write; *Remainder*, by Tom McCarthy, took seven years to find a mainstream publisher. The two novels are antipodal—indeed one is the strong refusal of the other. The violence of the rejection *Remainder* represents to a novel like *Netherland* is, in part, a function of our ailing literary culture. All novels attempt to cut neural routes through the brain, to convince us that down this road the true future of the novel lies. In healthy times, we cut multiple roads, allowing for the possibility of a Jean Genet as surely as a Graham Greene.

These aren’t particularly healthy times. A breed of lyrical Realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked. For *Netherland*, our receptive pathways are so solidly established that to read this novel is to feel a powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition. It seems perfectly done—in a sense that’s the problem. It’s so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait.

Netherland is nominally the tale of Hans van den Broek, a Dutch stock analyst, transplanted from London to downtown New York with his wife and young son. When the towers fall, the family relocates to the Chelsea Hotel; soon after, a trial separation occurs. Wife and son depart once more for London, leaving Hans stranded in a world turned immaterial, phantasmagoric: “Life itself had become disembodied. My family, the spine of my days, had crumbled. I was lost in invertebrate time.” Every other weekend he visits his family, hoping “that flying high into the atmosphere, over boundless massifs of vapor or small clouds dispersed like the droppings of Pegasus on an unseen platform of air, might also lift me above my personal haze”—the first of many baroque descriptions of clouds, light, and water.

On alternate weekends, he plays cricket on Staten Island, the sole white man in a cricket club that includes Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian wiseacre, whose outsize dreams of building a cricket stadium in the city represent a Gatsbyesque commitment to the American Dream/human possibility/narrative with which Hans himself is struggling to keep faith. The stage is set, then, for a “meditation” on identities both personal and national, immigrant relations, terror, anxiety, the attack of futility on the human consciousness and the defense against same: meaning. In other words, it’s the post–September 11 novel we hoped for.

(Were there calls, in 1915, for the *Lusitania* novel? In 1985, was the Bhopal novel keenly anticipated?) It's as if, by an act of collective prayer, we have willed it into existence.

But *Netherland* is only superficially about September 11 or immigrants or cricket as a symbol of good citizenship. It certainly is about anxiety, but its worries are formal and revolve obsessively around the question of authenticity. *Netherland* sits at an anxiety crossroads where a community in recent crisis—the Anglo-American liberal middle class—meets a literary form in long-term crisis, the nineteenth-century lyrical Realism of Balzac and Flaubert.

Critiques of this form by now amount to a long tradition in and of themselves. Beginning with what Alain Robbe-Grillet called “the destitution of the old myths of ‘depth,’” they blossomed out into a phenomenology skeptical of Realism’s metaphysical tendencies, demanding, with Husserl, that we eschew the transcendental, the metaphorical, and go “back to the things themselves!”; they peaked in that radical deconstructive doubt which questions the capacity of language itself to describe the world with accuracy. They all of them note the (often unexamined) credos upon which Realism is built: the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self.

Yet despite these theoretical assaults, the American metafiction that stood in opposition to Realism has been relegated to a safe corner of literary history, to be studied in postmodernity modules, and dismissed, by our most famous public critics, as a fascinating failure, intellectual brinkmanship that lacked heart. Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo, David Foster Wallace—all misguided ideologists, the novelist equivalents of the socialists in Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*. In this version of our literary history, the last man standing is the Balzac-Flaubert model, on the evidence of its extraordinary persistence. But the critiques persist, too. Is it really the closest model we have to our condition? Or simply the bedtime story that comforts us most?

Netherland, unlike much lyrical Realism, has some consciousness of these arguments, and so it is an anxious novel, unusually so. It is absolutely a post-catastrophe novel but the catastrophe isn’t terror, it’s Realism. In its opening pages, we get the first hint of this. Hans, packing up his London office in preparation to move to New York, finds himself buttonholed by a senior vice-president “who reminisced for several minutes about his loft on Wooster Street and his outings to the ‘original’ Dean & DeLuca.” Hans finds this nostalgia irritating: “Principally he was pitiable—like one of those Petersburgians of yesteryear whose duties have washed him up on the wrong side of the Urals.” But then:

It turns out he was right, in a way. Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you’re the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory’s repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course.

None of this means that I wish I were back there now; and naturally I’d like to believe that my own retrospection is in some way more important than the old S.V.P’s, which, when I was exposed to it, seemed to amount to not much more than a cheap longing. But there’s no

such thing as a cheap longing, I'm tempted to conclude these days, not even if you're sobbing over a cracked fingernail. Who knows what happened to that fellow over there? Who knows what lay behind his story about shopping for balsamic vinegar? He made it sound like an elixir, the poor bastard.

This paragraph is structured like a recognized cliché (i.e., *We had come, as they say, to the end of the road*). It places before us what it fears might be a tired effect: in this case, the nostalgia-fused narrative of one man's retrospection (which is to form the basis of this novel). It recognizes that effect's inauthenticity, its lack of novelty, even its possible dullness—and it employs the effect anyway. By stating its fears *Netherland* intends to neutralize them. It's a novel that wants you to know that it knows you know it knows. Hans invites us to sneer lightly at those who are “prone to general observations” but only as a prelude to just such an observation, presented in language frankly genteel and faintly archaic (“so one is told and forlornly hopes”). Is it cheap longing? It can't be because—and this is the founding, consoling myth of lyrical Realism—the self is a bottomless pool. What you can't find in the heavens (anymore), you'll find in the soul. Yet there remains, in *Netherland*, a great anxiety about the depth or otherwise of the soul in question (and thus *Netherland's* entire narrative project). Balsamic vinegar and Dean & DeLuca in the first two pages are no accident. All the class markers are openly displayed and it's a preemptive strike: Is the reader suggesting that white middle-class futures traders are less authentic, less interesting, less capable of interiority than anyone else?

Enter Chuck Ramkisson. Chuck has no such anxieties. He is unselfconscious. He moves through the novel *simply being*, and with abandon, saying those things that the novel—given its late place in the history of the novel—daren't, for fear of seeming naive. It's Chuck who openly states the central metaphor of the novel, that cricket is “a lesson in civility. We all know this; I do not need to say more about it.” It's left to Chuck to make explicit the analogy between good behavior on pitch and immigrant citizenship: “And if we step out of line, believe me, this indulgence disappears. What this means...is, we have an extra responsibility to play the game right.” Through Chuck idealisms and enthusiasms can be expressed without anxiety:

“I love the national bird,” Chuck clarified. “The noble bald eagle represents the spirit of freedom, living as it does in the boundless void of the sky.”

I turned to see whether he was joking. He wasn't. From time to time, Chuck actually spoke like this.

And again:

“It's an impossible idea, right? But I'm convinced it will work. Totally convinced. You know what my motto is?”

“I didn't think people had mottoes anymore,” I said.

“Think fantastic,” Chuck said. “My motto is, Think Fantastic.”

Chuck functions here as a kind of authenticity fetish, allowing Hans (and the reader) the nostalgic pleasure of returning to a narrative time when symbols and mottos were full of meaning and novels weren't neurotic, but could aim themselves simply and purely at transcendent feeling. This culminates in a reverie on the cricket pitch. Chuck instructs Hans to put his Old World fears aside and hit the ball high (“How else are you going to get runs? This is America”) and Hans does this, and the movement is fluid, unexpected, formally

perfect, and Hans permits himself an epiphany, expressed, like all epiphanies, in one long breathless, run-on sentence:

All of which may explain why I began to dream in all seriousness of a stadium and black and brown and even a few white faces crowded in bleachers, and Chuck and me laughing over drinks in the members' enclosure and waving to people we know, and stiff flags on the pavilion roof, and fresh white sight-screens, and the captains in blazers looking up at a quarter spinning in the air, and a stadium-wide flutter of expectancy as the two umpires walk onto the turf square and its omelette-colored batting track, whereupon, with clouds scrambling in from the west, there is a roar as the cricket stars trot down the pavilion steps onto this impossible grass field in America, and everything is suddenly clear, and I am at last naturalized.

There are those clouds again. Under them, Hans is rendered authentic, real, *natural*. It's the dream that Plato started, and Hans is still having it.

But *Netherland* is anxious. It knows the world has changed and we do not stand in the same relation to it as we did when Balzac was writing. In *Père Goriot*, Balzac makes the wallpaper of the Pension Vauquer speak of the lives of the guests inside. Hans does not have quite this metaphysical confidence: he can't be Chuck's flawless interpreter. And so *Netherland* plants inside itself its own partial critique, in the form of Hans's wife, Rachel, whose "truest self resisted triteness, even of the inventive romantic variety, as a kind of falsehood." It is she who informs Hans of what the reader has begun to suspect:

"Basically, you didn't take him seriously."

She has accused me of exoticizing Chuck Ramkisson, of giving him a pass, of failing to grant him a respectful measure of distrust, of perpetrating a white man's infantilizing elevation of a black man.

Hans denies the charge, but this conversation signals the end of Chuck's privileged position (gifted to him by identity politics, the only authenticity to survive the twentieth century). The authenticity of ethnicity is shown to be a fake—Chuck's seeming naturalness is simply an excess of ego, which overflows soon enough into thuggery and fraud. For a while Chuck made Hans feel authentic, but then, later, the submerged anger arrives, as it always does: what makes Chuck more authentic than Hans anyway? It makes sense that Hans's greatest moment of antipathy toward Chuck (he is angry because Chuck has drawn him into his shady, violent business dealings) should come after three pages of monologue, in which Chuck tells a tale of island life, full of authentic Spanish names and local customs and animals and plants, which reads like a Trinidadian novel:

Very little was said during the rest of that journey to New York City. Chuck never apologized or explained. It's probable that he felt his presence in the car amounted to an apology and his story to an explanation—or, at the very least, that he'd privileged me with an opportunity to reflect on the stuff of his soul. I wasn't interested in drawing a line from his childhood to the sense of authorization that permitted him, as an American, to do what I had seen him do. He was expecting *me* to make the moral adjustment—and here was an adjustment I really couldn't make.

Once the possibility of Chuck's cultural authenticity is out of play, a possible substitute is introduced: world events. Are *they* the real thing? During a snowstorm, Hans and Rachel have the argument everyone has ("She said, 'Bush wants to attack Iraq as part of a right-wing plan to destroy international law and order as we know it and replace it with the global rule of

American force”), which ends for Hans as it ends for many people, though you get the sense Hans believes his confession to be in some way transgressive:

Did Iraq have weapons of mass destruction that posed a real threat? I had no idea; and to be truthful, and to touch on my real difficulty, I had little interest. I didn’t really care. But this conclusion is never in doubt: even as Rachel rages on, Hans’s mind wanders repeatedly to the storm, its specks of snow like “small and dark...flies,” and also like “a cold toga draped [over] the city.” The nineteenth-century flaneur’s ennui has been transplanted to the twenty-first-century bourgeois’s political apathy—and made beautiful. Other people’s political engagement is revealed to be simply another form of inauthenticity. (“World events had finally contrived a meaningful test of their capacity for conscientious political thought. Many of my acquaintances, I realized, had passed the last decade or two in a state of intellectual and psychic yearning for such a moment.”) The only sophisticated thing to do, the only literary thing to do, is to stop listening to Rachel and think of a night sky:

A memory of Rachel and me flying to Hong Kong for our honeymoon, and how in the dimmed cabin I looked out of my window and saw lights, in small glimmering webs, on the placeless darkness miles below. I pointed them out to Rachel. I wanted to say something about these creaturely cosmic glows, which made me feel, I wanted to say, as if we had been removed by translation into another world.

This sky serves the same purpose as another one near the end of the novel in which “a single cavaliering cloud trailed a tattered blue cloak of rain” and to which a “tantalizing metaphysical significance” attaches, offering Hans “sanctuary: for where else, outside of reverie’s holy space, was I to find it?” Where else indeed? These are tough times for Anglo-American liberals. All we’ve got left to believe in is ourselves.

In *Netherland*, only one’s own subjectivity is really authentic, and only the personal offers this possibility of transcendence, this “translation into another world.” Which is why personal things are so relentlessly aestheticized: this is how their importance is signified, and their depth. The world is covered in language. Lip service is paid to the sanctity of mystery:

One result [of growing up in Holland], in a temperament such as my own, was a sense that mystery is treasurable, even necessary: for mystery, in such a crowded, see-through little country, is, among other things, space.

But in practice *Netherland* colonizes all space by way of voracious image. This results in many beauties (“a static turnstile like a monster’s unearthed skeleton”) and some oddities (a cricket ball arrives “like a gigantic meteoritic cranberry”), though in both cases, there is an anxiety of excess. Everything must be made literary. Nothing escapes. On TV “dark Baghdad glitter[s] with American bombs.” Even the mini traumas of a middle-class life are given the high lyrical treatment, in what feels, at its best, like a grim satire on the profound fatuity of twenty-first-century bourgeois existence. The surprise discovery of his wife’s lactose intolerance becomes “an unknown hinterland to our marriage”; a slightly unpleasant experience of American bureaucracy at the DMV brings Hans (metaphorically) close to the war on terror:

And so I was in a state of fuming helplessness when I stepped out into the inverted obscurity of the afternoon.... I was seized for the first time by a nauseating sense of America, my gleaming adopted country, under the secret actuation of unjust, indifferent powers. The rinsed taxis, hissing over fresh slush, shone like grapefruits; but if you looked down into the space

between the road and the undercarriage, where icy matter stuck to the pipes and water streamed down the mud flaps, you saw a foul mechanical dark.

To which one wants to say, isn't it hard to see the dark when it's so lyrically presented? And also: grapefruits?

In an essay written half a century ago, Robbe-Grillet imagined a future for the novel in which objects would no longer "be merely the vague reflection of the hero's vague soul, the image of his torments, the shadow of his desires." He dreaded the "total and unique adjective, which attempt[s] to unite all the inner qualities, the entire hidden soul of things." But this adjectival mania is still our dominant mode, and *Netherland* is its most masterful recent example. And why shouldn't it be? The received wisdom of literary history is that *Finnegans Wake* did not fundamentally disturb Realism's course as Duchamp's urinal disturbed Realism in the visual arts: the novel is made out of language, the smallest units of which still convey meaning, and so they will always carry the trace of the real. But if literary Realism survived the assault of Joyce, it retained the wound. *Netherland* bears this anxiety trace, it foregrounds its narrative nostalgia, asking us to note it, and look kindly upon it:

I was startled afresh by the existence of this waterside vista, which on a blurred morning such as this had the effect, once we passed under the George Washington Bridge, of canceling out centuries.

The centuries are duly canceled. What follows is a page of landscape portraiture, seen from a train's window ("Clouds steaming on the clifftops foxed all sense of perspective, so that it seemed to me that I saw distant and fabulously high mountains"). Insert it into any nineteenth-century novel (again, a test first suggested by Robbe-Grillet) and you wouldn't see the joins. The passage ends with a glimpse of a "near-naked white man" walking through the trees by the track; he is never explained and never mentioned again, and this is another rule of lyrical Realism: that the random detail confers the authenticity of the Real. As perfect as it all seems, in a strange way it makes you wish for urinals.

Halfway through the novel, Hans imagines being a professional cricketer, lyrically and at length. He dreams of the ball hanging "before me like a Christmas bauble," of a bat preternaturally responsive by means of "a special dedication of memory," and after he's done, he asks for our indulgence:

How many of us are completely free of such scenarios? Who hasn't known, a little shamefully, the joys they bring?

It's a credit to *Netherland* that it is so anxious. Most practitioners of lyrical Realism blithely continue on their merry road, with not a metaphysical care in the world, and few of them write as finely as Joseph O'Neill. I have written in this tradition myself, and cautiously hope for its survival, but if it's to survive, lyrical Realists will have to push a little harder on their subject. *Netherland* recognizes the tenuous nature of a self, that "fine white thread running, through years and years," and Hans flirts with the possibility that language may not precisely describe the world ("I was assaulted by the notion, arriving in the form of a terrifying stroke of consciousness, that substance—everything of so called concreteness—was indistinct from its unnameable opposite"), but in the end *Netherland* wants always to comfort us, to assure us of our beautiful plenitude. At a certain point in his *Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek passes quickly and dismissively over exactly this personal fullness we hold so dear in the literary arts ("You know... the wealth of human personality and so on and so forth..."), directing our attention instead to those cinematic masters of the anti-sublime (Hitchcock, Tarkovsky, David Lynch) who look into the eyes of the Other and see no

self at all, only an unknowable absence, an abyss. *Netherland* flirts with that idea, too. Not knowing what to do with photographs of his young son, Hans gives them to Chuck's girlfriend, Eliza, who organizes photo albums for a living:

"People want a story," she said. "They like a story."

I was thinking of the miserable apprehension we have of even those existences that matter most to us. To witness a life, even in love—even with a camera—was to witness a monstrous crime without noticing the particulars required for justice.

"A story," I said suddenly. "Yes. That's what I need."

I wasn't kidding.

An interesting thought is trying to reach us here, but the ghost of the literary burns it away, leaving only its remainder: a nicely constructed sentence, rich in sound and syntax, signifying (almost) nothing. *Netherland* doesn't really want to know about misapprehension. It wants to offer us the authentic story of a self. But is this really what having a self feels like? Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they not sometimes want its opposite? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really Realism?

In the end what is impressive about *Netherland* is how precisely it knows the fears and weaknesses of its readers. What is disappointing is how much it indulges them. Out of a familiar love, like a lapsed High Anglican, *Netherland* hangs on to the rituals and garments of transcendence, though it well knows they are empty. In its final saccharine image (Hans and his family, reunited on the mandala of the London Eye Ferris wheel), *Netherland* demonstrates its sly ability to have its metaphysical cake and eat it, too:

A self-evident and prefabricated symbolism attaches itself to this slow climb to the zenith, and we are not so foolishly ironic, or confident, as to miss the opportunity to glimpse significantly into the eyes of the other and share the thought that occurs to all at this summit, which is, of course, that they have made it thus far, to a point where they can see horizons previously unseen, and the old earth reveals itself newly.

And this epiphany naturally reminds Hans of another, that occurred years earlier as the Staten Island Ferry approached New York, and the sky colored like a "Caran d'Ache box" of pencils, purples fading into blues:

Concentrat[ing] most glamorously of all, it goes without saying, in the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers going up above all others, on one of which, as the boat drew us nearer, the sun began to make a brilliant yellow mess. To speculate about the meaning of such a moment would be a stained, suspect business; but there is, I think, no need to speculate. Factual assertions can be made. I can state that I wasn't the only person on that ferry who'd seen a pink watery sunset in his time, and I can state that I wasn't the only one of us to make out and accept an extraordinary promise in what we saw—the tall approaching cape, a people risen in light.

There was the chance to let the towers be what they were: towers. But they were covered in literary language when they fell, and they continue to be here.

If *Netherland* is a novel only partially aware of the ideas that underpin it, Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* is fully conscious of its own. But how to write about it? Immediately an obstacle presents itself. When we write about lyrical Realism our great tool is the quote, so richly patterned. But *Remainder* is not filled with pretty quotes; it works by accumulation and repetition, closing in on its subject in ever-decreasing revolutions, like a trauma victim circling the blank horror of the traumatic event. It plays a long, meticulous game, opening with a deadpan paragraph of comic simplicity:

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.

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. I have vague images, half-impressions: of being, or having been—or, more precisely, being *about* to be—hit; blue light; railings; lights of other colours; being held above some kind of tray or bed.

This is our protagonist, though that's a word from another kind of novel. Better to use *Enactor*. This is our Enactor. He has no name, he lives in Brixton, and recently he has been hit on the head by some kind of enormous *thing*. For a long time he was in a coma, his mind “still asleep but getting restless and inventing spaces for me to inhabit...cricket grounds with white crease and boundary lines painted on the grass.” After a time, he recovers, though he has to learn to move and walk again. But there is a remainder: it appears that the “parties, institutions, organizations—let's call them the *bodies*—responsible for what happened” are offering him a settlement on the condition of his silence (though he can't remember what happened). His lawyer phones to tell him the amount. It is £8.5 million. The Enactor takes his hand from the wall it is on and turns suddenly to the window, accidentally pulling the phone out of the wall:

The connection had been cut. I stood there for some time, I don't know how long, holding the dead receiver in my hand and looking down at what the wall had spilt. It looked kind of disgusting, like something that's come out of something.

For the first fifty pages or so, this is *Remainder*'s game, a kind of anti-literature hoax, a wind-up (which is, however, impeccably written). Meticulously it works through the things we expect of a novel, gleefully taking them apart, brick by brick. Hearing of the settlement he “felt neutral.... I looked around me at the sky: it was neutral too—a neutral spring day, sunny but not bright, neither cold nor warm.” It's a huge sum of money, but he doesn't like clothes or shoes or cars or yachts. A series of narrative epiphany McGuffins follow. He goes to the pub with a half-hearted love interest and his best friend. The girl thinks he should use the money to build an African village; the friend thinks he should use it to snort coke off the bodily surfaces of girls. Altruism and hedonism prove equally empty.

We hear of his physiotherapy—the part of his brain that controls motor function is damaged and needs to be rerouted: “To cut and lay the new circuits [in the brain], what they do is make you visualize things. Simple things, like lifting a carrot to your mouth.” You have to visualize every component of this action, over and over, and yet, he finds, when they finally put a real carrot in your hand, “gnarled, dirty and irregular in ways your imaginary carrot never was,” it short-circuits the visualization. He has to start from the top, integrating these new factors.

All this is recounted in a straightforward first person which reminds us that most avant-garde challenges to Realism concentrate on voice, on where this “I” is coming from, this mysterious third person. Spirals of interiority are the result (think of David Foster Wallace’s classic short story “The Depressed Person” in which a first-person consciousness is rendered in an obsessive third person, speaking to itself). *Remainder*, by contrast, empties out interiority entirely: the narrator finds all his own gestures to be completely inauthentic and everyone else’s too. Only while watching *Mean Streets* at the Brixton Ritzy does he have a sense of human fluidity, of manufactured truth—the way De Niro opens a fridge door, the way he lights a cigarette. So natural! But the Enactor finds he can’t be natural like De Niro, he isn’t fluid. He’s only good at completing cycles and series, reenacting actions. For example, he gets a certain tingling pleasure (this is literal, he gets it in his body) from having his reward card stamped in a certain “themed Seattle coffee bar,” on the corner of Frith Street and Old Compton. Ten stamps, ten cappuccinos, a new card, start the series again. He sits at the window people-watching. He sees inauthenticity everywhere:

Media types...their bodies and faces buzzed with glee, exhilaration—a jubilant awareness that for once, just now, at this particular right-angled intersection, they didn’t have to sit in a cinema or living room in front of a TV and watch other beautiful people laughing and hanging out: they could be the beautiful young people themselves. See? Just like me: completely second-hand.

The clubbers, the scene gays, the old boys heading to their drinking clubs—all formatted. Then suddenly he notices a group of homeless people, the way they take messages up and down the street to each other, with a sense of purpose, really seeming to own the street, interacting with it genuinely. He makes contact with one of them. He takes him to a local restaurant, buys him a meal. He wants to ask the boy something but he can’t get it out. Then the wine spills:

The waiter came back over. He was...She was young, with large, dark glasses, an Italian woman. Large breasts. Small.

“What do you want to know?” my homeless person asked.

“I want to know...” I started, but 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. Because, in fact, the homeless are just like everyone else:

They had a point to prove: that they were one with the street; that they and only they spoke its true language; that they really *owned* the space around them. Crap: total crap.... And then their swaggering, their arrogance: a cover. Usurpers. Frauds.

Large breasts. Small. The narrative has a nervous breakdown. It’s the final McGuffin, the end of the beginning, as if the novel were saying: *Satisfied? Can I write this novel my way now?* *Remainder*’s way turns out to be an extreme form of dialectical materialism—it’s a book about a man who builds in order to feel. A few days after the fake homeless epiphany, at a party, while in the host’s bathroom, the Enactor sees a crack in the plaster in the wall. It reminds him of another crack, in the wall of “his” apartment in a very specific six-story building he has as yet no memory of ever living in or seeing. In this building many people lived doing many things—cooking liver, playing the piano, fixing a bike. And there were cats on the roof! It all comes back to him, though it was never there in the first place.

And now *Remainder* really begins, in the mission to rebuild this building, to place re-enactors in it re-enacting those actions he wants them to enact (cooking liver, playing the piano, fixing a bike), doing them over and over till it feels real, while he, in his apartment, fluidly closes and reopens a fridge door, just like De Niro. Eight and a half a million quid should cover this, especially as he has entrusted his money to a man much like Hans van der Broek—a stock trader—who makes money for the Re-enactor (for that's what he is now) almost as quickly as he can spend it.

To facilitate his re-enactment, the Re-enactor hires Nazrul Ram Vyas, an Indian “from a high-caste family” who works as a facilitator for a company dedicated to personal inauthenticity: Time Control UK. They take people's lives and manage them for them. Nazrul is no more a character (in Realism's sense of the word) than I am a chair, but he is the most exquisite facilitator and it is through him that every detail of the re-enactment is processed. He thinks of everything. In place of the pleasure of the rich adjective we have an imagined world in which logistical details and logical consequences are pursued with care and precision: if you were to rebuild an entire house and fill it with people re-enacting actions you have chosen for them, this is exactly how it would play out. Every detail is attended to except the one we've come to think of as the only one that matters in a novel: how it *feels*. The Re-enactor in *Remainder* only ever has one feeling—the tingling—which occurs whenever his re-enactments are going particularly well.

The feeling is addictive; the enactments escalate, in a fascinating direction. A black man is shot by two other black men near the Re-enactor's house. The Re-enactor at once asks Naz to “lay the ground for the re-enactment of this black man's death. I think I'd have gone mad otherwise, so strong was my compulsion to re-enact it.” In this re-enactment, the Re-enactor himself assumes the role of the “dead black man” (who is everywhere referred to like this). His tingling goes off the charts. It's so good, he begins to fall into trances. It's impossible not to note here that the non-white subject is still the bad conscience of the contemporary novel, obviously so in the Realist tradition, but also more subtly here in the avant-garde.

Why is the greatest facilitator of inauthenticity Asian? Why is the closest thing to epiphany a dead black man? Because *Remainder*, too, wants to destroy the myth of cultural authenticity—though for purer reasons than *Netherland*. If your project is to rid the self of its sacredness, to flatten selfhood out, it's simply philosophical hypocrisy to let any selves escape, whatever color they may be. The nameless “dead black man” is a deliberate provocation on McCarthy's part, and in its lack of coy sentiment there is a genuine transgressive thrill. Still, it does seem rather hard to have to give up on subjectivity when you've only recently got free of objectification. I suppose history only goes in one direction.

But to *Remainder*'s provocation it's tempting to answer with another: that beneath the conscious ideas of this novel, a subconscious trace remains, revealing a faint racial antipathy that is psychological and social rather than theoretical. (If *Netherland* can be read against its own grain, which is to say, theoretically, why not read *Remainder* psychologically?) For though these novels seem far apart, their authors are curiously similar. Similar age, similar class, one went to Oxford, the other Cambridge, both are by now a part of the publishing mainstream, share a fondness for cricket, and are subject to a typically British class/race anxiety that has left its residue. A flashback-inclined Freudian might conjure up the image of two brilliant young men, straight out of college, both eager to write the Novel of the Future, who discover, to their great dismay, that the authenticity baton (which is, of course, entirely phony) has been passed on. Passed to women, to those of color, to people of different

sexualities, to people from far-off, war-torn places. The frustrated sense of having come to the authenticity party exactly a century late!

3.

Aspects of this constructive frustration were aired publicly at the Drawing Center in New York, on September 25, 2007, when two men, Tom McCarthy and the philosopher Simon Critchley, sat at a table in semidarkness and took turns reading “The Joint Statement of Inauthenticity,” latest manifesto of the International Necronautical Society (INS). The men identified themselves only as the society’s general secretary and chief philosopher. Their voices were flat, nasal, utterly British; they placed sudden emphasis on certain words. It was like listening to a Smiths song.¹

“We begin,” announced the general secretary, “with the experience of failed transcendence, a failure that is at the core of the General Secretary’s novels and the Chief Philosopher’s tomes. Being is not full transcendence, the plenitude of the One or cosmic abundance, but rather an ellipsis, an absence, an incomprehensibly vast lack scattered with—“ and here the General Secretary tripped over his tongue, corrected himself, and continued,

—with debris and detritus. Philosophy as the thinking of Being has to begin from the experience of disappointment that is at once religious (God is dead, the One is gone), epistemic (we know very little, almost nothing; all knowledge claims have to begin from the experience of limitation) and political (blood is being spilt in the streets as though it were champagne).

On the scratchy live recording, the audience coughs nervously and is silent: there is not much else to be done when someone’s reading a manifesto at you. The Necronauts continue: through the brief (by now traditional) faux demolition of the Greek idealists, specifically Plato and Aristotle, who believed form and essence to be more real than anything else, and therefore perfect. But “if form is perfect,” asks the general secretary,

if it is perfection itself, then how does one explain the obvious imperfection of the world, for the world is not perfect *n’est-ce pas*? This is where matter—our undoing—enters into the picture. For the Greeks, the principle of imperfection was matter, hyle. Matter was the source of the corruption of form.

Necronauts, as you might guess from the name, feel differently. They are “modern lovers of debris” and what is most real for them is not form or God but the

brute materiality of the external world.... In short, against idealism in philosophy and idealist or transcendent conceptions of art, of art as pure and perfect form, we set a doctrine of...materialism....

So, while Dorian Gray projects his perfect image into the world, Necronauts keep faith with the “rotting flesh- assemblage hanging in his attic”; as Ernest Shackleton forces his dominance fantasy onto the indifferent polar expanse, Necronauts concern themselves with the “blackened, frostbitten toes he and his crew were forced to chop from their own feet, cook on their stove and eat.” And so on. Like Chuck Ramkissoo, they have a motto: “We are all Necronauts, always, already,” which is recycled Derrida (as “blood like champagne” is recycled Dostoevsky). That is to say, we are all death-marked creatures, defined by matter—though most of us most of the time pretend not to be.

In *Remainder*, the INS general secretary puts his theoretical ideas to lively yet unobtrusive use, for the Re-enactor himself does not realize he is a Necronaut; he is simply a bloke, and, with Naz facilitating at his side he hopes, like the rest of us, to dominate matter, the better to disembody it. To demonstrate the folly of this, in the middle of the novel *Remainder* allows itself a stripped-down allegory on religion, staged in an auto shop where the Re-enactor has gone to fix a flat tire. While there, he remembers his windshield washer reservoir is empty and asks for a fill-up. Two liters of blue liquid are poured into the reservoir but when he presses the “spurter button” nothing spurts. The two liters haven’t leaked but neither do they appear to be in the reservoir:

They’d vaporized, evaporated. And do you know what? It felt wonderful. Don’t ask me why: it just did. It was as though I’d just witnessed a miracle: matter—these two litres of liquid—becoming un-matter—not surplus matter, mess or clutter, but pure, bodiless blueness.

Transubstantiated.

A few minutes later, the engine catches, matter has its inevitable revenge (“It gushed all over me: my shirt, my legs, my groin”), and transubstantiation shows itself for what it is: the beautiful pretense of the disappeared remainder. In the later re-enactment of this scene (which Naz restages in an empty hangar at Heathrow, running it on loop for weeks) the liquid really disappears, sprayed upward into an invisible fine mist by the Re-enactor’s hired technicians.

McCarthy and his Necronauts are interested in tracing the history of the disappeared remainder through art and literature, marking the fundamental division between those who want to extinguish matter and elevate it to form (they “try and ingest all of reality into a system of thought, to eat it up, to penetrate and possess it. This is what Hegel and the Marquis de Sade have in common”) and those who want to let matter *matter*:

To let the orange orange and the flower flower... We take the side of things and try and evoke their nocturnal, mineral quality. This is, for us, the essence of poetry as it is expressed in Francis Ponge, the late Wallace Stevens, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and some of the personae of Pessoa, of trying (and failing) to speak about the thing itself and not just ideas about the thing, of saying “jug, bridge, cigarette, oyster, fruitbat, windowsill, sponge.”

That “failing” there is very important. It’s what makes a book like *Remainder*—which is, after all, not simply a list of proper nouns—possible. Of course, it’s not unusual for avant-garde fiction writers to aspire to the concrete quality of poetry. Listening to the general secretary announce his list, emphasizing its clarity and unloveliness, I thought of Wisawa Szymborska, in particular the opening of “The End and The Beginning”:

After every war

someone has to clean up.

Things won’t

straighten themselves up, after all.

Someone has to push the rubble

to the sides of the road,

so the corpse-laden wagons

can pass.

Someone has to get mired
in scum and ashes,
sofa springs,
splintered glass,
and bloody rags.

Someone must drag in a girder
to prop up a wall.

Someone must glaze a window,
rehang a door.

Even those who are allergic to literary theory will recognize the literary sensibility, echoed in this poem, of which the INS forms an extreme, yet comprehensible, part. The connection: a perverse acknowledgement of limitations. One does not seek the secret, authentic heart of things. One believes—as Naipaul had it—that the world is what it is, and, moreover, that all our relations with it are necessarily inauthentic. As a consequence, such an attitude is often mistaken for linguistic or philosophical nihilism, but its true strength comes from a rigorous attention to the damaged and the partial, the absent and the unspeakable. *Remainder* reserves its finest quality of attention for the well-worn street surface where the black man dies, its “muddy, pock-marked ridges,” the chewing gum, bottle tops, and gum, the “tarmac, stone, dirt, water, mud,” all of which forms, in the mind of the narrator, an almost overwhelming narration (“*There’s too much here, too much to process, just too much*”) that is yet a narration defined by absence, by partial knowledge, for we can only know it by the marks it has left.

Remainder recognizes, with Szyborska’s poem, that we know, in the end, “less than little/And finally as little as nothing,” and so tries always to acknowledge the void that is not ours, the messy remainder we can’t understand or control—the ultimate marker of which is Death itself. We need not ever read a word of Heidegger to step in these murky waters. They flow through the “mainstream” of our canon. Through the negations of Beckett. The paradoxical concrete abstractions of Kafka. The scatological thingy-ness of Joyce at his most antic. The most famous line of Auden (“Poetry makes nothing happen”). They flow through our own lives in the form of anxiety, which is, in Freud’s opinion, the only real emotion we have.

For those who *are* theory-minded the INS manifesto in its entirety (only vaguely sketched out here) is to be recommended: it’s intellectually agile, pompous, faintly absurd, invigorating, and not at all new. As celebrations of their own inauthenticity, the INS members freely admit their repetitions and recycling tendencies, stealing openly from Blanchot, Bataille, Heidegger, Derrida, and, of course, Robbe-Grillet. Much of what is to be found in the manifesto is more leisurely expressed in the chief philosopher’s own “tomes” (in particular *Very Little, Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*²).

As for the general secretary, within the provocations of the INS he is a theoretical fundamentalist, especially where the material practicalities of publishing are concerned. In

2003, he expelled two INS members for signing to publishers, charging that they had “become complicit with a publishing industry whereby the ‘writer’ becomes merely the executor of a brief dictated by corporate market research, reasserting the certainties of middle-brow aesthetics.” It will be interesting to see what happens to these ideas now that McCarthy’s material circumstances are somewhat changed: in 2007, *Remainder* went to Vintage Books in America and picked up a Film Four production deal.

Still, that part of the INS brief that confronts the realities of contemporary publishing is not easily dismissed. When it comes to literary careers, it’s true: the pitch is queered. The literary economy sets up its stall on the road that leads to *Netherland*, along which one might wave to Jane Austen, George Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Yates, Saul Bellow. Rarely has it been less aware (or less interested) in seeing what’s new on the route to *Remainder*, that skewed side road where we greet Georges Perec, Clarice Lispector, Maurice Blanchot, William Burroughs, J.G. Ballard. Friction, fear, and outright hatred spring up often between these two traditions—yet they have revealing points of connection. At their crossroads we find extraordinary writers claimed by both sides: Melville, Conrad, Kafka, Beckett, Joyce, Nabokov. For though manifestos feed on rupture, artworks themselves bear the trace of their own continuity.

So it is with *Remainder*: the Re-enactor’s obsessive, amoral re-enactments have ancestors: Ahab and his whale, Humbert and his girl, Marlow’s trip downriver. The theater of the absurd that *Remainder* lays out is articulated with the same careful pedantry of Gregor Samsa himself. In its brutal excision of psychology it is easy to feel that *Remainder* comes to literature as an assassin, to kill the novel stone dead. I think it means rather to shake the novel out of its present complacency. It clears away a little of the dead wood, offering a glimpse of an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward. We could call this constructive deconstruction, a quality that, for me, marks *Remainder* as one of the great English novels of the past ten years.

4.

Maybe the most heartening aspect of *Remainder* is that its theoretical foundations prove no obstacle to the expression of a perverse, self-ridiculing humor. In fact, the closer it adheres to its own principles, the funnier it is. Having spent half the book in an inauthentic building with re-enactors re-enacting, the Re-enactor decides he needs a change:

One day I got an urge to go and check up on the outside world myself. Nothing much to report.

A minimalist narrative refusal that made me laugh out loud. *Remainder* resists its readers, but it does so with a wry smile. And then, toward its end, a mysterious “short councillor” appears, wearing this same wry smile, like one of David Lynch’s dwarfs, and finally asks the questions—and receives the answers—that the novel has denied us till now. Why are you doing this? How does it make you feel? In a moment of frankness, we discover that the Re-enactor’s greatest tingle arrived with his smallest re-enactment: standing in a train station, holding his palms outward, begging for money of which he had no need. It gave him the sense “of being on the other side of something. A veil, a screen, the law—I don’t know....”

One of the greatest authenticity dreams of the avant-garde is this possibility of becoming criminal, of throw-ing one’s lot in with Jean Genet and John Fante, with the freaks and the lost and the rejected. (The notable exception is J.G. Ballard, author of possibly the greatest

British avant-garde novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, who raised three children in the domestic tranquility of a semidetached house in Shepperton.) For the British avant-garde, autobiographical extremity has become a mark of literary authenticity, the drug use of Alexander Trocchi and Anna Kavan being at least as important to their readers as their prose. (The INS demands that “all cults of authenticity...be abandoned.” It does not say what is to be done about the authenticity cult of the avant-garde.)

In this, the Re-enactor has a true avant-garde spirit; he wants to become the thing beyond the pale, the inconvenient remainder impossible to contain within the social economy of meaning. But no: it is still not quite enough. The only truly authentic *indivisible* remainder, the only way of truly placing yourself outside meaning, is through death, the contemplation of which brings *Remainder*, in its finale, to one of its few expressionist moments. It also enacts a strange literary doubling, meeting *Netherland* head-on:

Forensic procedure is an art form, nothing less. No I'll go further: it's higher, more refined, than any art form. Why? Because it's real. Take just one aspect of it—say the diagrams.... They're records of atrocities. Each line, each figure, every angle—the ink itself vibrates with an almost intolerable violence, darkly screaming from the silence of white paper: something has happened here, someone has died.

“It's just like cricket,” I told Naz one day.

“In what sense?” he asked.

“Each time the ball's been past,” I said, “and the white lines are still zinging where it hit, and the seam's left a mark, and...”

“I don't follow,” he said.

“It...well, it just is,” I told him. “Each ball is like a crime, a murder. And then they do it again, and again and again, and the commentator has to commentate, or he'll die too.” In *Netherland* cricket symbolized the triumph of the symbol over brute fact (cricket as the deferred promise of the American Dream). In *Remainder* cricket is pure facticity, which keeps coming at you, carrying death, leaving its mark. Everything must leave a mark. Everything has a material reality. Everything happens in space. As you read it, *Remainder* makes you preternaturally aware of space, as Robbe-Grillet did in *Jealousy*, *Remainder*'s obvious progenitor. Like the sportsmen whose processes it describes and admires, *Remainder* “fill[s] time up with space,” by breaking physical movements, for example, into their component parts, slowing them down; or by examining the layers and textures of a wet, cambered road in Brixton as a series of physical events, rather than emotional symbols. It forces us to recognize space as a nonneutral thing—unlike Realism, which ignores the specificities of space. Realism's obsession is convincing us that time has passed. It fills space with time.

Something has happened here, someone has died. A trauma, a repetition, a death, a commentary. *Remainder* wants to create zinging, charged spaces, stark and pared-down, in the manner of those ancient plays it clearly admires—*The Oresteia*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Antigone*. The ancients, too, trouble themselves with trauma, repetition, death, and commentary (by chorus), with the status of bodies before the law, with what on earth is to be done with the remainder. But the ancients always end in tragedy, with the indifferent facticity of the world triumphantly crushing the noble, suffering self.

Remainder ends instead in comic declension, deliberately refusing the self-mythologizing grandeur of the tragic. Fact and self persist, in comic misapprehension, circling each other in space (literally, in a hijacked plane). And it's precisely within *Remainder*'s newly revealed spaces that the opportunity for multiple allegories arises: on literary modes (*How artificial is Realism?*), on existence (*Are we capable of genuine being?*), on political discourse (*What's left of the politics of identity?*), and on the law (*Where do we draw our borders? What, and whom, do we exclude, and why?*). As surface alone, though, so fully imagined, and so imaginative, *Remainder* is more than sufficient.

1. 1

This can be heard at www.listen.to/necronauts. ↵

2. 2

Routledge, 2004. ↵