Negative Capability

Tom McCarthy reconsiders avant-garde fiction's response to power

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SATIN ISLAND BY TOM MCCARTHY NEW YORK: KNOPF. 208 PAGES. $24.

In her 2008 essay "Two Paths for the Novel," Zadie Smith devised an antagonism between Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, as an example of pious literary realism, and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*, a whorl of reflux lodged in that tradition's throat. As Smith saw it, *Netherland* indulged in the fantasies of the coherent self, with his or her explicable arcs toward epiphany. *Remainder*—in which a nameless narrator, newly wealthy, stages increasingly elaborate reenactments of made-up scenes from his past—signed up with an alternative literary tradition, with an altogether different way to view the self: not as a contained entity but as a behaviorist node. On the one hand: liberal humanism, sentimentalism, depth, energy; on the other: antihumanism, materiality, surface, entropy. If it seemed at times as though Smith had brought a knife to a fistfight, it's because her quarrel wasn't so much with O'Neill, whose book she seemed to rather admire, but with the critic James Wood.

For Smith, Wood at times acts as the mechanical apparatus that extrudes a literary monoculture. The Woodsy path leads from Austen to Bellow to O'Neill. Smith's second path, the "skewed side road," takes in Perec, Blanchot, and Ballard en route to McCarthy. McCarthy proselytes like to recite these litanies, arranging for him an increasingly robust genealogy. This act can feel, as it does in Smith's essay, explicitly defensive, as if McCarthy needs help speaking skewed truth to realism's straight power. It can also read as an homage to McCarthy's particular mode of networked thinking: His books train us to see him as a site of depersonalized transmission, a way station or signal router. We populate his network with links to fellow ciphers: Robbe-Grillet, Kobo Abe, Barthes, Debord.

These two traditions or paths, however, can look like the opposite sides of a coin. A polished surface can mimic depth. This isn't lost on Smith: If she can read *Netherland* against its own grain, i.e. theoretically, she can just as easily read *Remainder* psychologically. Wood responded to Smith with a modest shrug, remarking that perhaps *Netherland* is a little more radical than Smith suspects, *Remainder* a little more conservative.

McCarthy, too, is aware that an avant-garde stance is not inherently radical, and that the line between realism and antirealism isn't always so sharp: In his omnibus *London Review of Books* essay on the Belgian nouveau nouveau romancier Jean-Philippe Toussaint, McCarthy says he has no choice but to conclude with the cliché that he wonders what Toussaint will do next: Will he turn out, ultimately, to have been deconstructing literary sentimentalism or sentimentalizing literary deconstruction? Those who have made a career of deconstructing literary sentimentalism believe that the realist novel is little more than a collection of gimmicks, a mannered formalism that can be easily disassembled. But what Smith, Wood, and McCarthy all seem to concede, in their more generous moments, is that the conflict is itself mannered. It's not two paths toward two destinations but merely the swing of a pendulum.

Frankly, the whole thing begins to feel not only predictable but boring. Yet it's a back-and-forth that continues to play out, the argument becoming less about what gets published and praised than about the relationship of artistic production to power: Both sides think they offer a mode of resistance. The avant-garde has proposed that if you replace an old view of the self as something with essence and depth with a new view of the self as the sum of its networked relationships, you've done something to protect yourself, or your work, against the subtle and coercive forces of literary tradition. But this only obtains if you believe that power operates—as nationalism, for example, does—via appeals to an authentic core self.

For the postwar avant-garde that McCarthy so admires, this was a reasonable proposition. McCarthy has long acknowledged his debt to such writers as Perec and



Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013, digital video, color, sound, 13 minutes.

Robbe-Grillet, but in fact his antihumanist inheritance ranges widely. He owes an equally great debt to non-novelist proponents of surfaces and systems and networks and transmissions: artists such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Tehching Hsieh, and On Kawara. (As for contemporaries, one might add Douglas Gordon, Philippe Parreno, Omer Fast, and David Levine.) His novels *Remainder* and *Men in Space*, with their sly humor and antic artifice, are closer in spirit to Douglas Gordon than to the humorless Robbe-Grillet. *Satin Island*, his latest book, implicitly enlists a new host of antecedents, the prophets of distributed computing: Claude Shannon, Norbert Wiener, Paul Baran, and Tim Berners-Lee.

With *Satin Island*, McCarthy has cast a new light on the debate about avant-garde and realist novels. Whereas *Remainder* confronts ideas about the authenticity of the self by destabilizing notions of selfhood, the new novel recognizes that such a confrontation is not enough. Power carries on, no matter how much one writes against it. McCarthy's cherished midcentury avant-garde assumed that networks and transmissions would resist the forces of romantic reaction; the hope was that, in a world deprived of essences, power might be neutralized. So much, *Satin Island* jokes darkly, for that idea. In the 1950s, artists worried about the concentration of power in hierarchies. They worried about the political effects of appeals to the authentic. Now we understand all too well that power functions pretty well in networks, too. You can have a very sophisticated theory of the self, and that won't stop power from going about its business.

In other words, our Franzen problems, these days, are pretty minor. We don't have to worry that Chip Lambert's hand-wringing is going to reinforce the old, realist modes of romantic reaction. But we do have to worry about what happens to attempts to resist those modes. Power has not merely untoothed the language of the avant-garde, it has learned to speak it. The real problem is Facebook.

Perhaps not Facebook, actually, because we more or less know what Facebook does, and the deal we've made with it. Perhaps Palantir, an altogether fuzzier organization

> laboured, moving around like ants, their circuits forming patterns on the sand; patterns that, in their amalgam, coalesced into one larger, more coherent pattern, just as the meandering, bowing, divagating stretches of a river delta do when seen from high enough above.

One of the Company's IT guys explains the project in more theoretical terms. It isn't about buildings at all: "It was a feat, rather, of what he called *network architecture*. He went on for a long time about networks, convergence, nodes and relays, interstices—it was very abstract."

Convergences, nodes and relays, interstices: This is precisely the lexicon of the midcentury avant-garde McCarthy once found so useful and influential. But where this abstract-concrete thinking—whether espoused by nouveaux romanciers reacting against the bourgeois subject of the novel, minimalists and conceptualists reacting against the big-swinging-dick cult of the Abstract Expressionists, or computer researchers building communicative infrastructures that might avert dangerous national centralization—once seemed urgent and perhaps even politically salient, now it just seems like cliché. Actually, worse than cliché: commercial and pernicious. The avant-garde's work has been inherited by the corporation. Where it once fell to ethnographers like U. to discover human patterns, now "those networks are being mapped, that task performed, by the software that tabulates and cross-indexes what we buy with who we know, and what they buy, or like, and with the other objects that are bought or liked by others who we don't know but with whom we cohabit a shared buying- or liking-pattern."

U.'s Koob-Sassen brief is to write a Great Report, a state-of-the-global-union along the lines of *Tristes Tropiques*, the masterwork of his anthropologist hero, Claude Lévi-Strauss. But U. knows, for reasons that Lévi-Strauss himself explained, that any Great Report is a kind of self-consuming artifact: Lévi-Strauss's attempt to articulate, in Western terms, the encroachment of monoculture across the native globe ends up, on some level, serving and participating in that crypto-colonial project. It is an inherent problem with the reduction and translation required by communication itself: We all wind up speaking the compromised language of the market. U. writes, "The machine could swallow everything, incorporate it seamlessly, like a giant loom that reweaves all fabric, no matter how recalcitrant and jarring its raw form, into what my hero would have called a master-pattern—or, if not that, then maybe just the pattern of the master." What do you do when the master pattern becomes the pattern of the master? How do you challenge a technocracy without coming off as a romantic-reactionary flake or mystic?

McCarthy is a terrific satirist, and he's wonderful at describing what not to do. Somehow there are often cats involved. McCarthy's cats are always falling to their death from a high roof. There's Schrödinger's cat, which represents the fantasy that science itself contains an uncertainty that might be wielded against it—that power, in other words, might invariably contain the seeds of its own undoing. Then there's the cat that ends *Tristes Tropiques*, in which Lévi-Strauss concludes that there may yet be some transcendent "essence . . . in the wink of an eye, heavy with patience, serenity, and mutual forgiveness, that sometimes, through an involuntary understanding, one can exchange with a cat." This is akin to the promise of some radiant quietist retreat beyond the limits of expressibility. It's rather like Rilke's proposal that the only truth is in simple nouns: "Perhaps we are here in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window." McCarthy finds the idea seductive, but he can't quite take it seriously. The Declaration on Inauthenticity of his International Necronautical Society has responded, barely suppressing its smile: "Jug. Bridge. Cigarette. Oyster. Fruitbat. Windowsill. *Sponge.*" The third option U. entertains, in *Satin Island*, is the promise of a Micronesian death cult: Each New Year's, the Vanuatuans ride around shooting their arrows into the air until one of them is culled at random. This blunt, ritualized death-by-stochastic-process is supposed to remind us that networks degrade, and that, no matter the promises of any comprehensive system, they are not immune to randomness and entropy.

McCarthy seems to worry, as Foucault did, that to propose an alternate system is simply to extend our participation in the current one. But McCarthy reserves some muted appreciation, dead cats notwithstanding, for the possibility of nondiscursive resistance. U. imagines that the effective anthropologist of the contemporary would look something like Vito Acconci: He hopes for "cells of clandestine new-ethnographic operators doing strange things in deliberate, strategic ways, like those conceptual artists from the sixties who made careers out of following strangers." By the end, *Satin Island*, in its modular, fissiparous, encyclopedically undermining self-presentation, reminded me less of other contemporary novels than it did of the French artist Camille Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue*, a thirteen-minute video work that was shown at the last Venice Biennale (which took, as its McCarthyesque theme, grand failures in systematic knowledge). Henrot's work shows a rapid succession of windows opening and closing on a desktop computer, some featuring films she shot as part of a natural-history residency at the Smithsonian, others scrolling through Wikipedia entries, and still others showing disembodied hands, their nails manicured in a 1970s TV-den palette, manipulating, as aesthetic props, decontextualized trinkets. The effect of the film, which is set to a kind of faux-tribal spoken-word mythology, is a comprehensive euphoric nausea, a bleary, spiraling, aspirational knowledge intoxication.

Satin Island tries to create the same sort of effect, but as McCarthy knows, a book is still ultimately a discursive precinct, a zone of the writable. And McCarthy, whether he likes it or not, is a writer and an exceptionally talented one. That, in its own way, is part of the problem. U. reveals, at a certain point, that the collated notes in your hand are in fact merely the "offslew of the real, unwritten manuscript"—in other words, that the book in our hands is merely the by-product of a failed attempt to describe a comprehensive system. The book returns again and again to images of its own slurry, its own runoff, its own entropic remainder; in the passage that gives the book its name, U. imagines a companion place for his ant metropolis of minarets and patterns. This one is a Ballardian hell of industrial waste heat in the form of a pun on the remaindered dumping ground Staten Island:

> These buildings—huge, derelict factories whose outer walls and rafters, barely intact, recalled the shells of bombed cathedrals—ran one into the next to form a single giant, half-ruined complex that covered the island's entire surface area. Inside this complex, rubbish was being burnt: it was a trash-incinerating plant. Giant mountains of the stuff were piled up in its great, empty halls, rising in places almost to where the ceiling would have been. They were being burnt slowly, from the inside, with a smouldering, rather than roaring, fire. Whence the glow: like embers when you poke them, the mounds' surfaces, where cracked or worn through by the heat, were oozing a vermilion shade of yellow. It was this glowing ooze, that hinted at a deeper, almost infinite reserve of yet-more-glowing ooze inside the trash-mountain's main body, that made the scene so rich and vivid, filled it with a splendour that was regal. Yes, *regal*—that was the strange thing: if the city was the capital, the seat of empire, then this island was the exact opposite, the inverse—the *other* place, the feeder, filterer, overflow-manager, the dirty, secreted-away appendix without which the body-proper couldn't function; yet it seemed, in its very degradation, more weirdly opulent than the capital it served. . . . *Satin Island.*

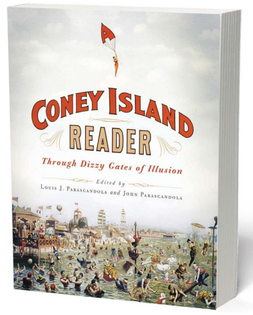
In the wake of this feverish hallucination, U. hears, from the woman he's dating, the terrible story of her stylized torture as an arrested protester at the antiglobalization protests in Genoa in 2001, whose memory was almost instantly effaced by 9/11. This is a new thing in a McCarthy book: actual politics.

What McCarthy ultimately presents here is a vivid, symbolist version of Jaron Lanier's description of what he calls Siren Servers, the pattern masters who use informational asymmetries and economies of scale to suck up all the resources of the network: "You can create a local shield against entropy, but your neighbors will always pay for it." Satin Island is the place where the neighbors are paying for it. The self might not be real, but the waste-burning furnaces of Satin Island, with all their heat and toxic slurry, are. You can come up with philosophical notions of the self, but that won't stop dissidents from being tortured and enduring pain. When nodes suffer, they feel like selves.

The stakes are clearer now. *Satin Island* has no truck either way with *Netherland*. The humanist has been theoretically undermined but remains our practical ally. Lévi-Strauss called for a "concrete humanism." Ballard stranded an antihero on a *Concrete Island*. McCarthy's island is concrete described in its slippage as satin. At the end of the novel, U., on a trip to New York, decides not to venture to the real Staten Island: He finds himself, wading back against the crowd streaming toward the ferry, "suspended between two types of meaninglessness." It's the cliché of the holding pattern. One can't help but return to McCarthy his own cliché, and wonder, perhaps even with such hopelessly bourgeois sentiments as exhilaration and hope and solidarity, what he will do next. □

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is the author of *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful* (Riverhead, 2012) and the e-book *No Exit: Surviving a Modern Gold Rush* (Kindle Singles, 2014). (See Contributors.)

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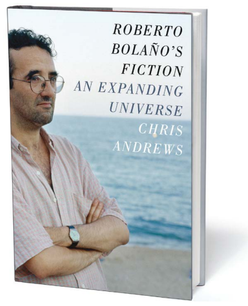
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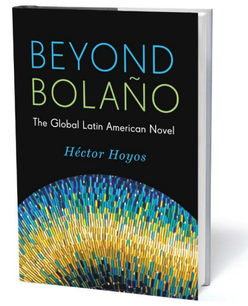
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