Literature's Blind Spot: Event and Remainder in Tom McCarthy's Fiction

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Abstract

Tom McCarthy writes against a mode of humanist realism that dominates contemporary fiction, which he calls "as laden with artifice as any other literary convention" (*Typewriters* 59). He rejects realism's claim to "objectively reflect, capture or report on historical events and mental activity" (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 59). This thesis explores the question of the blind spot in his work, the way in which his fiction, in contrast to this mode of realism, focuses not on content or narrative but on what cannot be represented. McCarthy's novels obsessively attempt to write the impossible—a facet of his work that critics consistently neglect. What is most compelling in literature, he maintains, is what "does not happen" (*Typewriters* 178). His fictional work is an endeavour to rethink the relation between literature and the event.

The thesis demonstrates that McCarthy's novels *C*, *Remainder*, and *Satin Island* undermine realist narrative techniques by reimagining the notion of the event. In *C*, language is linked to death and disaster through the way in which the novel enacts language's contingency and dispersal. *Remainder* shows disaster, and thus trauma, as a fundamental ontological condition and marks the impossibility of any authentic event, such as death. The novel decentres the human subject and instead privileges brute materiality—much like the *nouveau roman*, it constitutes an "encounter with *structure*" (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 185). Matter, which the novel posits as a force of originary inauthenticity and links to disaster, is both unavoidable and impossible to understand. *Satin Island*, in its fragmentary meditations, approaches the question of the nature of the literary work: the work as such is always in abeyance; the novel probes the idea that literature necessarily requires reference to an unreachable outside that defines it. McCarthy's thinking of the

event is read alongside thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. *Remainder*, for instance, enacts Blanchot's idea of the disaster, as well as Derridean concepts such as the trace, and the analysis of *Satin Island* draws on the aesthetics of Blanchot and Stéphane Mallarmé.

McCarthy's fiction reveals that at the core of literature is a kind of disaster, an aesthetic and representational failure. His writings for the International Necronautical Society suggest that contending with this disaster is an aesthetic imperative: art, the group writes, is "the consequence and experience of failed transcendence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223). Hence, art emerges as the remainder of catastrophe.

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Introduction

What is most captivating about literature is "what the culture cannot integrate", according to the literary critic Karl Heinz Bohrer (10). He points to the essays of Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schlegel as exemplary of this in their "understanding of cognitive acts as an event—an event that suddenly becomes aware of itself, an event that cannot be measured, not even logically, by what is already in existence" (10). Writing in the eighties, Bohrer was convinced that contemporary novelists could not convincingly write about their age, since their works were mired in a "naïve realism" and "montages of authenticity" (5). He commends Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose works stand in opposition to these tendencies. "No one reads Robbe-Grillet's novels anymore", Bohrer tells us, "but his uncompromising decision against realism, against 'content,' still has intellectual dignity" (5). No one reads Alain Robbe-Grillet anymore—but Tom McCarthy does. In his preface to Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, McCarthy praises Robbe-Grillet for his attention to what "cannot be seen": the "blind spot" (*Typewriters* 174). This blind spot is also what Bohrer is interested in: namely, what "resists aesthetic integration" (vii). In a similar vein to Bohrer, McCarthy writes against what he considers to be "naïve or uncritical realism dominating contemporary middlebrow fiction" and the prevailing "doctrine of authenticity" (*Typewriters* 64). He considers the fictions of Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert, which have the implicit aim to "faithfully and objectively reflect, capture or report on historical events and mental activity" to be misguided (*Typewriters* 59). McCarthy, like Bohrer, rejects the realist practices of the contemporary literature of his day—seemingly for very similar reasons.[1] Accordingly, his novels can be read as a response to the contemporary literary climate

[1] See also Gabriel Josipovici's book *What Ever Happened to Modernism?,* which argues that contemporary literature is a "disappointment" in comparison to modernist fiction (xi).

dominated by realism.[2] This seems to imply a re-enaction of modernist aesthetic practices, as has been noted by Justus Nieland: “McCarthy's work stands not as the empty resuscitation of an avant-garde idiom but as its crypt, as a way of presiding over modernism's death by reenacting it traumatically, by lingering in the remains of its most fecund catastrophes, which are also those of the twentieth-century itself” (570). Indeed, what McCarthy has said about modernism can be taken to be a kind of mission statement: “contemporary literature has to deal with the challenges laid down by modernism” (“The Q&A”). The challenge of modernism is precisely literature’s blind spot: as in Robbe-Grillet’s novels, what is important in McCarthy’s novels is what “does not happen” (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 178). This absence, that which literature cannot contain, has not been adequately addressed in the literature on McCarthy. Some critics, such as Nick Lavery, see in McCarthy’s novels notions of “a complexity that cannot be directly acknowledged” (163) but fail to mention that this concealed complexity is precisely what is at stake not just for McCarthy’s fiction but for serious literature in general.

McCarthy defends a view of literature that is in stark contrast to the realist, middlebrow tendencies of the mainstream. In his revolt against “humanism, sentimentalism, positivism and the whole gamut of bad *isms*” (*Typewriters* 197), McCarthy is, according to Pieter Vermeulen, declaring “the end of the novel” (19), which is perhaps the end of a certain kind of novel, namely the novel representing commercial middle-brow realism. First, it is necessary to show what middlebrow fiction is. It has been suggested that literary modernism stands in opposition to “the naïve, bestselling, realist cultural products of the middlebrow” (Farr and Perrin). This shows a conflict between a realist aesthetic that

[2] This has been noted by Zadie Smith: *Remainder* is a riposte to a “breed of lyrical realism” that “has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked” (71).

attempts to accurately describe the world, and a modernist aesthetic that is instead focused on what cannot be shown. McCarthy criticizes realism's claim to truthfully represent the world, quoting Roland Barthes: "realism (badly named, at any rate often badly interpreted) consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real" (qtd. in *Typewriters* 63). Realism is already artificial: the "disintegration of the sign", a hallmark of modernism, is also present in "the realistic enterprise", but in the form of "referential plenitude"—unnecessary description of "'futile' details" (Barthes 141, 148). Modernism, on the other hand, seeks to challenge "the age-old aesthetic of 'representation'" by "[postponing] its object indefinitely"—that is, by writing the impossible (Barthes 148). In another way, if, as Stendhal writes, the realist novel is a "mirror moving along a highway" (289), then perhaps the modernist novel admits the gaps that this mirror cannot capture. In this sense, McCarthy's project is closely aligned to modernist aesthetics.[3] McCarthy signposts this in his essay "Recessional—Or, the Time of the Hammer", in which he analyses several modernist texts and their attention to pause and suspension. Joseph Conrad's work, he writes, infers that something "has been withheld, removed to a location beyond normal reach" (*Recessional* 17). Modernist fiction like Conrad's, in contrast to the realism McCarthy opposes, is haunted by what is outside the text and what cannot be contained by it—it is interested in the impossible.

The International Necronautical Society (INS), an art group McCarthy co-founded with the philosopher Simon Critchley in 1999, shares this interest in the impossible. The group's documents are heavily influenced by Continental philosophy, particularly French

[3] McCarthy has said that "contemporary literature has to deal with the challenges laid down by modernism" and that the "most exhilarating and unsettling upheavals took place in the early 20th century, and to ignore them and go back to writing some kitsch version of the 19th-century novel is ostrich-like" ("The Q&A").

thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Georges Bataille. They reflect several of McCarthy's concerns—for instance death and communication—and serve to give us insights into what McCarthy's literary project aims to achieve. In one of the reports disseminated by this organisation, we read that it believes in

> the breach, the sudden, epiphanic emergence of the genuinely unplanned, the departure from the script. To put it in fashionable Badiouan, the Event. The INS believes in the Event—in the power of the event, and that of art, to carry that event within itself: bring it to pass, or hold it in abeyance, as potentiality. And, paradoxically, the best way that art can do this is by allowing itself to be distracted, gazing in the rear view mirror. (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Declaration on the Notion of 'the Future'" 276)

The INS seems interested in some kind of impossible event, which is something that "fails to take place, that occurs precisely because it doesn't happen" (McCarthy, et al., "Declaration on the Notion of 'the Future'" 275). Aesthetically, this can be read as a rejection of content and a corresponding privileging of absence.[4] McCarthy's scepticism towards content can be seen as part of his larger commitment towards a philosophy of anti-humanism, which he has expressed in the documents issued by the International Necronautical Society. "Being", the Society claims in the Joint Statement on Inauthenticity, "is not full transcendence, the plenitude of the One or cosmic abundance, but rather an ellipsis, an absence, an incomprehensibly vast lack scattered with debris and detritus" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 222). As such, authenticity is not possible—we are bound not by God but by "the brute materiality of the

[4] Elsewhere, McCarthy extolls the importance of Mallarmé's thought of the event as something that "cannot name itself, nor even find a solid time-platform to arise and stand on" (*Recessional* 26).

external world" which we can only navigate "inauthentically" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 224, 226). We are not individuals but divided subjects: the human is a "dividual" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 226). Art is a product of this: the "consequence and experience of failed transcendence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223). If the material world can never be authentically navigated, then perhaps this casts doubt on traditional realist ideas of narrative. The novel worth writing, for McCarthy, is one without centre[5]; one that is suspicious of the idea that events can ever be represented by fiction.

This scepticism towards representation aligns McCarthy with poststructuralist thought. But it is above all the work of Derrida that has influenced McCarthy's fiction in its insistence on an outside of representation.[6] McCarthy's work therefore continues and responds to the intellectual lineage of French theory. A guiding concept for this thesis is Derrida's idea of the trace, a remainder that is an "entire fundamentality hidden under the appearance of an empiricist or metaphysical text" (*Of Grammatology* 19); it thus resists analysis. A crucial text for McCarthy is Maurice Blanchot's book *The Writing of the Disaster*, which in part inspired McCarthy to write his novel *Remainder*, and which shares similar concerns. McCarthy has voiced his interest in the text's intimations of "ripples of an 'event' which has already happened, never happened, never stopped happening and is forever yet to come" (Thwaite). The event, then, for McCarthy, is "the unnameable, the

[5] McCarthy's idea of literature is influenced by thinkers such as Barthes and Derrida—in rejecting the humanist idea of self-expression, McCarthy asserts that serious writers have "nothing to say" (*Transmission* i). McCarthy is interested in what Derrida calls "différance"—a "space of unresolved difference" (*Recessional* 66). What is important about différance is that it "cannot be exposed" (Derrida, "Différance" 5). The term is useful in understanding McCarthy's ontology of inauthenticity: Derrida claims that différance has "neither existence nor essence" ("Différance" 6) in the same way that McCarthy's INS sees the self as having "no core" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 226). The same, I would argue, applies to his conception of the novel and the event.

[6] McCarthy openly acknowledges Derrida's influence: "Derrida is huge for me", he says (*Recessional* 68).

blind spot, the interval between repetitions: it's the remainder" ("Remainder by Tom McCarthy"). The disaster is forever beyond the reach of fiction: the "one thing that cannot be represented is the event" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 41). As Blanchot writes, "the disaster is unknown; it is the unknown name for that in thought itself which dissuades us from thinking of it" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 5). The disaster is not just something that shapes the plot, or non-plot, of *Remainder*; for McCarthy's INS, we are living in an ungraspable time of the disaster:

> It is this organization's strong contention that our current age—call it "modernity," "late capitalism," or the seventh phase of pre-thetan consciousness, according to your disposition—has to be understood through the lens of catastrophe. This is both necessary and impossible: how could we stand *outside* or *beyond* the catastrophe? Conversely, it is equally impossible to penetrate its core, experience it fully, merge with it. To phrase it in temporal terms: the time of the catastrophe is not easily graspable. (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Declaration on the Notion of 'the Future'" 269)

This passage contains an implicit aesthetic imperative: the serious writer has to find ways to write about the event, the disaster—that which cannot be written about. We can make an even stronger claim here, namely that literature is *constituted* by what Blanchot has called "disaster". In McCarthy's second novel, *Men in Space*, we read that "[b]eginnings – of journeys, nations, lives – are always violent, always involve death" (130). The novel describes this death as "a perpetual explosion, endlessly destructive – then the mess that's left behind: the scorched ground, fallen scaffolding" (130). Any point of origin is

unspeakably violent and ungraspable, leaving us only with its remainders. McCarthy proposes this when he says that "the event creates the whole field of the symbolic and yet, within the symbolic, it cannot itself have a place" (*Recessional* 41-2). Blanchot's disaster is both literature's possibility as well as its undoing, since literature cannot contain it.

McCarthy's conception of what literature is follows this logic of the disaster. In an interview, McCarthy says that literature is "an event. It's not something that you can contain and narrate, but it's like this seismic set of ripples that goes on through time, backward and forward" ("Interview with Tom McCarthy"). Since this event cannot be narrated, it constitutes an absent origin: it is a "set of signals that have been repeating, pulsing, modulating in the airspace of the novel, poem, play – in their lines, between them and around them – since each of these forms began" (McCarthy, *Transmission* i). To "talk of origins – beginnings – is always problematic" (McCarthy, *Transmission* ii). The event of literature is a kind of non-event, since we cannot access its source but only its remainders: the signals and ripples that are left over. Writing, for McCarthy, is in an important sense fragmentary, as it is in Blanchot's work. Modernists such as James Joyce, McCarthy says, knew that modernist writing is concerned not with wholes but with remainders; the modernist work is "no more than potentiality and fragment" (*Typewriters* 35-6). This is significant not only because it informs McCarthy's view of literature but because his novels perform this in terms of their narratives as well. All of McCarthy's characters seem to lack affect—they are, in effect, as "flat" as the world Serge Carrefax, the quasi-protagonist of McCarthy's novel *C*, sees, as he is continually fascinated by flatness and geometry, not by depth (McCarthy, *C* 25). Similarly, *Remainder*'s narrator feels distanced from the world; he is a seemingly anonymous and replaceable figure. This

points to McCarthy wanting to lead the reader away from content, from the mere narration of events, and to the space that Blanchot called the "neutral", the "absence of any center" (*The Infinite Conversation* 380). In this sense, the "disaster", which, as Ann Smock notes, is the "neutral" (x), fundamentally structures McCarthy's approach to narrative.

The novels

McCarthy has written four novels: *Remainder*, *Men in Space*, *C*, and *Satin Island*. I will meditate on different inflections of the event in three of McCarthy's works, namely *C*, *Remainder* and *Satin Island*, since these novels most accurately reflect McCarthy's literary and theoretical commitments. McCarthy's novel *C* is a quasi-historical novel set in the late 19th and early 20th century that follows its protagonist Serge Carrefax from childhood and adolescence to combat in the First World War, and later the tombs of Egypt. The novel, if it is about anything, is about the (non-)event of language and of speech itself. Here, we see McCarthy writing against illusions of content and authenticity, against the idea that individuals can ever have an authentic relation to language. Since the novel is about the mystery of language as such, it follows the modern intellectual tradition that "no longer requires positing God as the Other but instead displaces the Other into the aesthetic act of exploratory language itself" (Bohrer 10). Literary language is bound by what the International Necronautical Society calls "failed transcendence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223). Our ontological condition is one of inauthenticity, absence and disappointment, and in *C*, this applies to language and transmission. Language, like death in the novel, is not something we can authentically capture: it is "like a signal, dispersed" (McCarthy, *C* 105). The novel enacts this through

two crucial points of absence: the absence of the speaker, which causes language to speak itself, and the absence of meaning. The novel repeatedly erases or decentres the speaking subject by focusing on language that seems to come from outside the subject. The subject, then, becomes a mere vehicle for language. This, for thinkers like Maurice Blanchot and Martin Heidegger, is the event of language which "speaks itself" (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 41). But language, while speaking itself, says nothing. Language is not able to provide an accurate account of events or narrate them. The novel not only performs this with its decidedly cryptic language but also directly references this failure at multiple points. Furthermore, the novel complicates the question of language's authenticity as *C* follows the conception of communication outlined by Derrida in his essay "Signature Event Context" in that communication always co-exists with noise: there is no signal without static in the novel. Serge's experiments with radio technology always involve a degree of noise as well as signal; he senses "vague impressions of bodies hovering just beyond the threshold of the visible, and corresponding signals not quite separable from the noise around them" (McCarthy, *C* 85). As Derrida argues, a communicative event "includes the capability to be formed and to function as a reference that is empty or cut off from its referent" (*Limited Inc* 11). The "non-serious" cannot be sundered from "ordinary language" (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 18). As such, the novel plays with gaps, as many sections of Serge's life are "not narrated" (Eve 187). Instead, *C* seems to focus on the remainder of language, or language as remainder. Radio static in *C* may be, as Simon Critchley writes, an "aural marker of a cosmic emptiness, an experience of the void" (291). *C*, then, alerts us to the outside of language.

If language is haunted by what is beyond it, then perhaps something similar is at stake for our being in the world, which will be shown in a reading of *Remainder*. The novel concerns a nameless protagonist who, after an unknown accident, receives a hefty monetary settlement and goes about re-enacting vague memories in order to recapture the authenticity that he believes to be missing from his life. These re-enactments are then obsessively repeated, until they culminate in a moment of violence, when the narrator re-enacts a bank heist. The important thing about *Remainder*, of course, is what remains, what cannot be captured by fiction.[7] However, the most significant remainder is the narrator's accident. We as readers are not privy as to what happened to the anonymous, neutral narrator of the novel, and neither is he. *Remainder* is a novel built around events that effectively never happen. In this sense, the novel is not about some singular moment of disaster; rather it is an ontological allegory. We are haunted by our own state of being inauthentically fixed in the material world. The "disaster" is not so much a singular event as it is emblematic for matter's continual intrusion on the life of the narrator. Matter, the narrator says, is his "undoing", what ensures that he cannot be authentic (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17). Critics who have written about *Remainder* tend not to frame the novel in theoretical terms, but it is crucial to see the novel as a kind of enactment of Derridean deconstruction. The iterability or repeatability of the event, as well as its impossibility of representation, gives it a spectral inflection that is essential. Furthermore, the narrator cannot be in the present, since he occupies the interregnum between the disaster that is no longer and the disaster that is to come—two events which bookend the narrative while being outside of it. *Remainder* also traces another crucial element of McCarthy's oeuvre:

[7] This remainder is what is left over of lyrical realism: as Smith writes, the novel "works through the things we expect of a novel, gleefully taking them apart, brick by brick" (84).

his interest in the future as something endlessly deferred, for which we can only wait. There has been scant critical attention to the novel's striking ending, which resists any sort of neat conclusion. The novel's narrator hijacks a plane, which he then instructs to fly in a loop until it will presumably crash. Sydney Miller writes that McCarthy's first two novels, *Remainder* and *Men in Space*, are notable for the "suspended nature of their endings" (654). This state of suspension not only enacts, as in Blanchot, the impossibility of narrating events such as death but it is also a conscious narrative response to contemporary trends in realism. Importantly, the suspended ending of *Remainder* allows for the possibility of a circular reading of the novel—so that not only the events in the novel follow a structure of repetition but also the novel.

Waiting also plays a crucial role in McCarthy's novel *Satin Island*. As in *Remainder*, we are always left waiting for some event that is forever out of reach. This future is the future of the literary work. It is Stéphane Mallarmé's Book, *le livre*, a totalizing project that would contain everything: "everything exists in order to be in The Book that is to come" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 67). It would mean the end of literature, the "orphic explanation of the Earth" (Mallarmé 3). But the Book, McCarthy says, should not come about: a "sense of incompletion is incredibly important and the whole of literature depends on the Book not being written" (*Recessional* 69). *Satin Island*, as we shall see, is a meditation on precisely this infinite deferral of the Book: U., a corporate anthropologist, is tasked with writing a mysterious and nebulous work called the Great Report which is intended to sum up the present age. This work, however, is never completed: instead, we end up with *Satin Island* as a remainder of that project. The novel shows us this vestigial quality of literature by stressing seemingly insignificant events around the production of

the Great Report—extended passages that detail U.'s procrastination, for instance. In an interview with Ivan Callus and James Corby, McCarthy alludes to Thomas Bernhard's *Concrete*, saying that in *Satin Island* "what you read is the off-cut, the crap, the waste of this other Platonic book that never came into being" (139). This Platonic book may be what Wayne Stables, in his writing on Thomas Bernhard's *Auslöschung*, calls a "gaping void"—an absence that nonetheless "drives the work" (46). The literary work depends on an unachievable event held in abeyance, and results from a failure to reach this event. The consequence, then, is that *Satin Island* asks the question of what the work as such *is*: McCarthy further seeks to complicate the question of any literary text's singular identity by enacting an art installation in an attempt to "tease out a certain logic, not of the book, but *around* the book" (McCarthy, Corby and Callus 137). The book as such is both an impossibility and the possibility of literature—it is, properly speaking, its mere remainder.

McCarthy's novels show clear engagement with literary theory, since they seem to be "a case study in the application of theory to fiction" (Deresiewicz). As we have seen, they also represent an intellectual position against "the default mode dominating mainstream fiction and most culture in general: this kind of sentimental humanism", as McCarthy says (Rourke). The elements of repetition in his novels are markers of a stance against events as they are conventionally understood and realist narrative. Art, to the INS, is not about authenticity or originality, but about "the repetition of the copy" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223). As we shall see in the following chapters, an important way in which his fiction accomplishes this aesthetic goal is by dealing with the idea of the event and of narrative in a way that radically diverges from the mainstream realist mode of writing. By refusing the realist paradigm and instead

acknowledging literature's crisis of representation, McCarthy's work seeks to stage a literary event of its own. McCarthy attempts to write about the event as the limit of literature—he acknowledges that "really significant literature grapples with and tries to speak from that place—which it cannot, but it tries anyhow" (*Recessional* 42). In other words, literature must take this crucial step, a *movement* towards the impossible.

Chapter 1:

Language and Death in *C*

Several critics have observed that McCarthy is “happily obsessed with the notion that literature, like all forms of transmission or communication, is inherently occulted and cryptographic” (Hart et al. 657). This chapter will reflect on precisely this quality of language through a reading of McCarthy’s novel *C*, a novel that might be read as a meditation on the mysterious nature of language. In this sense, the event of transmission and communication will be shown to be intrinsically compromised. An element of linguistic failure is essential to McCarthy’s fiction, as “failure to communicate, virus, error and glitches, deviation, disorganisation, imperfection and anti-purpose become productive, meaningful and full of subversive potential” (Groes 7). The novel can be read as literature’s attempt to contend with these absences, and in this it continues and responds to literary modernism.

The event of communication, McCarthy says in the tradition of French thinkers such as Barthes and Blanchot, involves an element of loss, a kind of death. “When I sit at a transmitter”, he writes in *Transmission and the Individual Remix*, “both my words and I dissolve into the aether” (ix). Here, McCarthy points to two crucial disappearances or absences that structure communication: the disappearance of the sender, and the disappearance of language’s ultimate meaning. In the same vein, McCarthy’s novel *C* intimately connects communication with death. As we know, the novel, which chronicles the life of a man named Serge Carrefax from birth to death, shows our fraught relationship with communication. It narrates Serge’s itinerary from his childhood in England, to his conscription as a soldier in the First World War, to his exploration of the tombs of Egypt.

Set in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, its setting is, as McCarthy says, "the great period of literary modernism" ("The Q&A"). Serge is interested in radio technology from early on in his life: the novel charts "the period of radio's emergence" ("The Q&A"). Radio communication, as we shall see, helps us to understand both McCarthy's view of literature and the nature of language. Contemporary literature, McCarthy insists, "has to deal with the challenges laid down by modernism", a period of the "most exhilarating and unsettling upheavals" ("The Q&A"). In *C*, with its emphasis on crackle and radio technology, this challenge is the challenge of language. Literary modernism is suspicious of language's ability to definitively signify anything and to represent the world. Barthes signposts that the movement's aesthetic mission is to "empty the sign and infinitely to postpone its object" so as to resist "the age-old aesthetic of 'representation'" (148). "Everything", Gibson says, "is dead already in *C*" (240).[8] In the novel, we shall see that what is already dead is not only the originary speaker but language itself, since it loses the capability to definitively signify anything. At the same time, language is the only thing that can speak in the absence of the speaker. Language speaks itself but it says nothing because it is inherently subject to distortion and the breakdown of information. Lastly, the impossibility of meaning contains the possibility of literature.

The Death of the Speaker

Let us first focus on the novel's dead originary speakers. McCarthy, like Blanchot, is interested in a link between language and death. As Blanchot writes, "when I speak: death

[8] This connects to the INS's interest in the connection between language and death: "All code is burial, and to dwell within the space of code is to be already dead" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 173).

speaks in me" ("Literature" 43). In his essay "Literature and the Right to Death", Blanchot asserts that language "can only begin with the void" (43). We "do not speak to say something, rather a nothing demands to speak" (Blanchot, "Literature" 43). Speech is connected to an event of negation. In *C*, emergent communications technology functions as a figure for communication's spectrality and imperfection. Serge's father is interested in the advances in communications technology and their promise of transmission over long distances. But Serge is skeptical of this technology, seeing in transmission a kind of death: "whatever vibrant immediacy this might possess, all Serge can see is death" (McCarthy, *C* 141). Later, Serge explores a tomb in Egypt, and is confronted with stelae, which, as his guide Laura explains, "were placed one level up from the grave proper, as a kind of visual portal to it. They carried pictures of the deceased's old life to the underworld, and conveyed back up from there ones of the new life he was living—which, of course, was a better, more refined version of the old one" (McCarthy, *C* 368). Serge connects this information to what he thought about telecommunications earlier: "'Two-way Crookes tubes,' Serge murmurs; 'death around the world'" (McCarthy, *C* 368). Here, McCarthy seems to reference Jeffrey Sconce's book *Haunted Media*, which charts a cultural link between technology and the dead. Sconce writes that advances in telecommunications technologies brought a world in which "nameless thousands could die through technological success" as these technologies brought an "electronic kinship with an invisible, scattered audience" (62). Communication brought with itself a "fantasy of disembodiment" (Sconce 63). The modern period, Sconce argues, "linked wireless communication with death" (15). This death means that the individual subjects of communication become de-centred in favour of the network of communication they inhabit. Sconce's link between modern technology and the uncanny

is precisely, following Barthes, what is at stake for modernist literature: modernist writers grappled with the unrepresentable and the spectrality of the self. McCarthy sees this decentring and de-individualisation as a larger theme in his novels: "the more books I write", he says, "the more convinced I become that what we encounter in a novel is not selves, but networks" ("Technology and the Novel"). McCarthy, in this sense, shares the modernist credo of the self as a contingent entity, a "spectral voice thrown or ventriloquized across distances of time and space, and across boundaries of otherness" (Nieland 581).

The subject, then, disappears, becoming a coherer or a radio set, which links to the question of Serge's agency in the novel. Serge, I would argue, figures as a kind of non-character radically stripped of subjectivity or interiority. Described variously as a "witness" (McCarthy, *C* 151) and "good observer" (McCarthy, *C* 158), Serge seems to function more as a vehicle through which the novel's narration runs than a character in any "proper" sense. As we shall see in more detail later, Serge stands in for the radical neutrality of narration. He sees himself not as an individual but as a "dummy chamber, and a moving one at that, being slowly dragged across the surface of events" (McCarthy, *C* 350). This idea of Serge as a dummy appears earlier in the novel: when he is in a prison camp, "the landscape seems to penetrate his skin and grow inside him, replacing viscera and brain with heather, lavender and fern, as though he really were no more than a stuffed dummy" (McCarthy, *C* 233). The novel's further allusions to the absence of the speaking self can be seen in the deaf children that Serge's father teaches to speak. They serve as examples of how McCarthy seeks to de-emphasise the speaking subject. Serge realises that speaking does not emanate from the subject but rather comes through the subject. Language comes from the outside. Of Timothy, one of the deaf children, Serge thinks that his words "seem to

issue not from him but rather to divert *through* him—as though his mouth, if it formed and held the correct shape for long enough, received a sound spirited from another spot, some other area, eerie, ear" (McCarthy, *C* 24). Similarly, when the deaf children are described playing early in the novel, "laughter ricochets around the orchard, but it's hard to tell which child it's coming from" (McCarthy, *C* 4). It sounds distorted, "ventriloquised almost, as though piped in from somewhere else" (McCarthy, *C* 4). Language, these quotes show, exists outside of anyone to speak it. "In the beginning", Serge Carrefax's father tells the children, "was the Word" (McCarthy, *C* 17). At the origin, which, as McCarthy writes, is "no more than a point of disappearance" (*Transmission* vii), is not the speaker but discrete, disembodied language, which renders the speaker dead, or undead. A "certain kind of spectrality is intrinsic to the speaking subject", writes Mark Fisher in *The Weird and the Eerie*—the speaking subject is "composed of the undead, discorporate stuff of language" (109). A spectral speaker emerges: we feel as though we are in the condition of "*knowing* that all subjectivity is reducible to matter … but of nonetheless being unable to experience oneself *as* pure matter" (Fisher 109). The sensation of experiencing oneself as matter is alluded to in *C* when Beswick, one of Serge's fellow soldiers during the First World War, dies in a plane crash. Steadman, another soldier, muses that "his memories, and everything he ever thought or did", will be "reduced to battery chemicals" (McCarthy, *C* 162). In response, Serge asks, "Why not?... It's what we are" (McCarthy, *C* 162). To Serge, we seem to be nothing but matter. But at the same time, this thought is betrayed the moment we utter a word, and use language, that which is somehow inherently "eerie" (McCarthy, *C* 24). The subject is rendered spectral by language, by the supplement that makes it unable to consider itself mere matter. Fisher argues that this sensation of the eerie arises when

there is “something present where there should be nothing”, or “nothing present when there should be something” (61). Fisher’s idea of the eerie as a “failure of absence” recalls Derrida’s idea of hauntology. If the specter is “some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name”, being “neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 5), is this elusive specter that Derrida speaks of not perhaps language itself? If the act of speaking necessitates the spectrality of the speaking subject, then the only thing that is left is for language to speak itself. Language, then, becomes a remainder of the process of speech.

Language Speaks Itself

The idea of language speaking itself is fundamental to the novel. Hence, McCarthy’s literary project echoes and builds on Blanchot’s idea of the neutral. It is crucial here to mention Blanchot’s discussion of Stéphane Mallarmé: “The poetic word is no longer someone's word. In it no one speaks, and what speaks is not anyone. It seems rather that the word alone declares itself” (*The Space of Literature* 41). In the poems of Mallarmé, it is “language which speaks itself” (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 41). This “speaking” without source constitutes a kind of event, an encounter with absence and the impossible. We see this spectral quality of language reflected in the novel’s references to literature, for instance the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, which haunts Serge while he is stationed as a soldier. “Nah ist // Und schwer zu fassen der Gott…” are the opening lines of Hölderlin’s “Patmos” (“Near is // And difficult to grasp, the God”; qtd. in McCarthy, *C* 190; Hamburger 245). Serge hears this poem while engaged in battle, and thinks about it in relation to himself:

> He feels the *schwer* inside his stomach, tightening like gravity; the *Nah* is a kind of measuring, a spacing-out of space in such a way that distant objects and locations loom up close and nearby ones expand, their edges hurtling away beyond all visible horizons to convey and deliver the contents of these to him. The *Gott's* not a divine, Christian Creator, but a point within the planes and altitudes the machine's cutting through—and one of several: the god, not God. And *fassen … fassen* is like locking onto something: a signal, frequency or groove. (McCarthy, *C* 190)

What does this passage tell us about language? Language, and all communication, is, to Serge, something at once "nah" and "schwer zu fassen"—it is at once close and difficult to grasp. The fact that he feels the word "*schwer* inside his stomach, tightening like gravity", signals that words have a certain kind of materiality (McCarthy, *C* 190). At the same time, they are ungraspable. When Serge's sister Sophie dies, Serge compares death to communication as being "elsewhere: like a signal, dispersed" (McCarthy, *C* 105). Death, in a Blanchotian sense, is an ungraspable, untheorisable entity[9]—and language, following McCarthy, is akin to death. The signals Serge hears when he operates his experimental wireless station early on in the novel are similarly cryptic. The transmissions that Serge hears are at once immediate and in his "bedroom" (McCarthy, *C* 79) but they are also from "Bergen, Crookhaven, Tarifa, Malaga, Gibraltar" (83). Serge notices that the sound is "present too, material" (McCarthy, *C* 83), yet at the same time distant and seemingly unreachable. This casts language as spectral: present yet absent. Serge, who translates the German word *fassen* as "locking onto something" (McCarthy, *C* 190), locks (*fassen*) onto

[9] Blanchot says that death is an "impossibility" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 121).

frequencies that are at once indelibly material and hard to grasp (*schwer zu fassen*). Language is always haunted by its own impossibility: even when it is *nah*, it is *schwer zu fassen*. Language, as something that is outside of empirical enquiry, is in a significant sense also outside the subject. When Serge is in Versoie, he hears the word *fassen* he heard earlier again: he feels "the air that screeches along his cheeks the word *fassen*, although this modulates amidst the noise sometimes to become *fast* or *faster*" (McCarthy, *C* 243). This is language that nobody speaks: rather, it comes through the air, without a sender. Language, furthermore, is not the language of God, of transcendence. It is "the god, not God" (McCarthy, C 190). The Hölderlin poem Serge thinks about possibly does not contain the language of God—the INS tells us that "God is dead, the One is gone" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 222). As McCarthy might say, this is the language of the "dividual", of contingency and rupture.

The section at the end of the novel serves to emphasise these concerns, and makes it clear that what is at stake is the question of narrative, of who narrates *C*. Serge is on a ship to Cairo, hallucinating due to an illness, and imagines himself merging with a radio set, finding himself "connected to everywhere, to all imaginable places" (McCarthy, *C* 376). He lapses into a dream involving him getting married to his dead sister Sophie, after which he dies. The following exchange occurs between him and officers and the ship he is on:

> The young man concentrates his face again and manages to say, beneath his breath:
>
> *"Dummy chamber."*
>
> "Where?" Martinov asks.

"Everywhere," replies the man. *"What's not?"* (McCarthy, *C* 387)

Left without its protagonist, the novel shows its status as a "dummy chamber" (McCarthy, *C* 387) and completely discards the idea that novels need characters to narrate them. The novel describes the ocean, on which a wake is disappearing: "The wake itself remains, etched out across the water's surface; then it fades as well, although no one is there to see it go" (McCarthy, *C* 388). No one sees the wake fade from view yet the novel still narrates it—which renders the novel's language as speaking itself through a ghostly, absent narrator. Language, we see again, exists radically outside of any subject, and therefore becomes a remainder, something that cannot be grasped or contained. The novel displays an ostensible critique of narrative, in that language is not able to provide an accurate account of events. When Serge is instructed to provide a "flight narrative" of what his team has done in a mission during the First World War, he says that "we went up; we saw stuff; it was good" (McCarthy, *C* 180). As Gibson notes, the "word 'narrative' appears in *C* only ironically" (238). It is at points like these where the novel seems to give access to its mechanics, where it is self-conscious of its own nature of being a text, that the lie of narration, of fiction, is exposed. During the dream in which he marries Sophie, Serge sees a "smooth and constant thread", and he can hear "these *very* words" "a smooth and constant thread" (McCarthy, *C* 382). Here, as in the scene involving the wake at the end of the novel, the text intimates and gestures towards an outside: an outside which implies that the text as such is accessible to Serge as a character, making him a kind of reader, a reader of a text written by someone else, perhaps written by language itself.

Language's Inauthenticity

The elusive outside of language, which both threatens it and makes it possible, is what the novel ultimately aims to demonstrate: language speaks itself—but it is unable to express anything. When Serge is in Egypt, he is tasked with "compiling a report, or reports, that, in ways not yet entirely clear to him, assessed, abetted or advanced, or at least paved the way for the advancement of, the (still largely prospective) Empire Wireless Chain" (McCarthy, *C* 303). In addition, one of his father's friends, Widsun, wants him to write an "appendix", a "lost chapter" (McCarthy, *C* 304). Yet when the time comes to send this appendix to Widsun, Serge decides against doing so, and "slides the report out again and, in its place, inserts the Horticultural Society's illustrated menu-card: the 'Metamorphosibus Insectorum,' the sick palisade, the hungry and rapacious grubs and moths that scrape and prod at words and world alike with their blunt carapaces and sharp antennae" (McCarthy, *C* 344). We witness a dual subversion of language: the report is not sent to its addressee; in its place is a representation of insects that, it seems, destroy words. This idea, we shall see, is programmatic for the way in which *C* plays with language. In *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*, McCarthy sees Blanchot's work as theorising a space where "language itself comes to grief, losing its capacity to signify directly" (12). In addition to the "death" of the speaking subject, language is entangled with another kind of death, the death of its ultimate meaning, which is linked, in the thought of Blanchot, to the disintegration of the literary work itself. Blanchot, McCarthy writes, sees the purpose of the literary work in its own *désœuvrement*, "un-working", "an unravelling from within through which the very content that the work purports to convey or recover becomes lost"

— "signal ebbs away to noise" (*Transmission* vi). The work, we might say, is predicated on disaster, on its own shattering.[10]

The novel enacts this "disaster" by focusing not on meaningful language but on language that contains errors and glitches, and on the figure of radio static. We have seen that *C* explores language's absent source, and I would further suggest that this absent source is the condition of language's existence. In this, *C* enacts what Derrida has called the trace. When speech occurs in the novel, this speech-event tends to co-exist with a mark of its own absence, or its own impossibility. As Derrida says, "there is 'language of the other' whenever there is a speech-event. This is what I mean by 'trace'" ("Living On" 168). Expressing this thought in a different way, Derrida says that "the possibility of the negative (in this case, infelicities) is in fact a structural possibility, that failure is an essential risk of the operations under consideration" (*Limited Inc* 15). Because of this, "meaningless" language always haunts "meaningful" language. The novel enacts this haunting of language when at the funeral of Sophie, Serge's sister, the choir sings, and "even when the words come out correctly, they seem like a mispronounced version of something else, other sentences that are trying to worm their way up to the surface, make themselves heard" (McCarthy, *C* 98). Similarly, Serge notices that the "estate's layout, too, seems to be withholding something—some figure or associative line inscribed beneath its flattened geometry, camouflaged by lawns and walls and gardens" (McCarthy, C 98). One of Serge's lessons with his tutor Clair lets us infer something along these lines:

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[10] In his essay on *Ulysses*, Tom McCarthy says that "modern writing" is fragmentary, "no more than potentiality and fragment" (*Typewriters* 35-6). This, we might say, means that writing can only ever give us fragments—and thus no ultimate meaning, only shards and leftovers. Of interest here is McCarthy's discussion of James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a novel in which everything "is a by-product of something else" (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 33)—everything is already a remainder.

> He sees letters streaming through the air, whole blocks of them, borne on currents occupying a zone beneath the threshold of the comprehensible, and tries to pluck and stick them to the page as best he can, but it's an imprecise science: by the time he's got a few pinned down, the others have floated on ahead or changed their meaning, and "Manchester" 's "chest" has turned into an old oak coffer, the king's "coronation" into a flower, a carnation. While Sophie scribbles neatly and assiduously, and always faultlessly, inscribing each word as it emerges from Mr. Clair's mouth, Serge, bathing in the phrases' afterglow, usually gives up after a few lines and just lets the words billow around him, losing himself in their shapes and patterns, bright and alive in front of Clair's grey skin. (McCarthy, *C* 47-8)

Letters, the passage implies, occupy a "zone beneath the threshold of the comprehensible" (McCarthy, *C* 47). As such, trying to approach language methodically is "an imprecise science" (McCarthy. *C* 47). Language, Blanchot writes, is "a totality that is exceeded and untheorizable", and in turn inherently mysterious (*The Writing of the Disaster* 136). The "general meaning of language", Blanchot tells us in "Literature and the Right to Death", "is unclear: we do not know if it is expressing or representing" (59). As such, Serge, seems to embrace the indeterminacy of language and "just lets the words billow around him" (McCarthy, *C* 48). To Serge, language becomes non-signifying, with words seemingly removed from their referents. This idea of language as non-signifying, as merely something left over, is seen earlier in the novel, when a young Serge Carrefax plays with wooden blocks, surrounded by labels, some of which are attached to toys, some of which are

"unattached to objects"—a "debris of words" (McCarthy, *C* 24). This contingency of language becomes clear when later, Serge hears a jazz band, imagining the music he is listening to as a set of signals: "When Serge closes his eyes, the signals become images: words and shapes being written out in light against a black void, then erased, then written out again, worlds being made and unmade …" (McCarthy, *C* 266). Language functions as something that contains the potential for its own destruction, its own failure. Transmission, this passage implies, has a necessary component of loss and degradation. Language un-works itself.

From the very first chapter of the novel, it is clear that in *C*, McCarthy places a noteworthy emphasis not on the authenticity of language—that is, language that works—but rather the distortion of language. McCarthy enacts what he considers crucial to Hergé's work in his book *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*: when "language fails to deliver" meaning (105). Like the comics of Hergé, *C* is perhaps driven by the "principle of negation, of the non-event, of meaning's cancellation" (McCarthy, *Tintin* 115). Accordingly, language is revealed to contain ellipses and absences. At the beginning of the novel, Mr. Dean and Dr. Learmont visit the Carrefax estate in order to deliver Serge Carrefax, the novel's protagonist. Trying to find the main house, they ask an old man where it is, who does not speak but only gestures—Dr. Learmont calls him "[s]ilent as a tomb" (McCarthy, *C* 4). Silence, not speech, assumes a privileged position from the onset. Language, furthermore, is analogous to a tomb, a crypt. The absence of language recurs in the following pages. The ellipsis, a prominent motif in McCarthy's novel *Men in Space*, truncates the dialogue among *C*'s characters. The following passage serves as an example:

> He’s looking at Learmont’s yellow paper, his eyes glowing with excitement.
>
> “I was a little confused …” Learmont begins, but the man grabs the paper off him and begins to read aloud:
>
> “ ‘… expected next twenty-four hours’ … good … ‘parturient in labour since last night …’ Excellent! ‘Parturient,’ each letter crystal clear!”
>
> “We weren’t quite sure as to the provenance …”
>
> “What—provenance? Hang on: what’s this? ‘Doctor refuested as soon as …’? ‘Refuested’? What’s that for a damn word?”
>
> “Sir!” Maureen says.
>
> “She’s heard much worse,” he barks. “ ‘Refuested’? I’ve been … That blasted key!” (McCarthy, *C* 7)

Serge’s father, who is the man reading the letter, delivers the letter’s content in fragments that are separated by ellipses, which testify to absences. The word “requested” is deliberately misspelled, as are other words throughout the text. According to Dennis Duncan, Gibson sees “errata” as an “integral part of McCarthy’s project” (13). Gibson sees the novel as interested in “formalisms”; as a study of “systems, arrangements, networks, codes…” (235). This privileging of networks is facilitated by its author’s disavowal of “plot, characters, subjective perception”, the “staples of narrative representation”, instead being committed to detached, “generalized description” (236-7). This decentred language, however, is itself “subject to a glitch” (Gibson 237), which becomes clear in the above passage in the fragmentary delivery of the letter, as well as its “uncorrected spelling mistakes” (Gibson 237). The very act of reading, the above passage implies, is an

engagement with fragments. The telegram read by Serge's father also has an unknown source; it constitutes a kind of remainder, a fragment without origin. It "didn't originate in the post office down the road in Lydium, yet it seemed to come down the same line" (McCarthy, *C* 8). This alerts us to the absent origin of communication itself. In his critical writing, McCarthy notes that "writing has no origin" (*Transmission and the Individual Remix* vi). This observation glosses Blanchot, who writes that the "uncertainty of the origin" is the work's condition of possibility (Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* 174). Serge notices something like this in *C* when he operates his experimental wireless station: he not only picks up signals that are intelligible; he also senses "vague impressions of bodies hovering just beyond the threshold of the visible, and corresponding signals not quite separable from the noise around them" (McCarthy, *C* 85). It is as though signals need noise in order to be heard. Signal and noise are not distinct; instead, *C* draws our attention to the way in which static conditions, and indeed makes possible, the act of transmission.

Radio Static

The novel's sense of something being essentially withheld yet hinted at persists when Serge is in Cairo later: Serge hears music but also, "less audible but equally persistent, a rustling, hissing noise that animates the city at all times" as the city's "air's electric, harsh with static" (McCarthy, *C* 314). It seems to Serge that in the city's air

> there lurks some kind of unrequited longing. This is what he hears in the muezzin's chants threading meshed balconies, or in the cries of tradesmen and the wails of beggars filtering through palm trees. More than anything, it's what he hears in Petrou's voice, its exiled, hovering cadences—and

> what he sees in Petrou's face and body, his perpetual slightly sideways stance: a longing for some kind of world, one either disappeared or yet to come, or perhaps even one that's always been there, although only in some other place, in a dimension Euclid never plotted, which is nonetheless reflecting off him at an asymptotic angle; and reflecting, it increasingly seems, straight towards Serge. (McCarthy, *C* 314)

Again, McCarthy's focus is not on language itself, Petrou's voice itself but rather language's other, an "unrequited longing" (McCarthy, *C* 314). Serge, it seems, focuses not on music, or language per se but instead its undercurrent, the static that, while impenetrable and seemingly meaningless, nonetheless "animates the city at all times" (McCarthy, *C* 314). Therefore, static is language's condition of existence, its fundament. It is spectral in that it is neither present nor absent: it signifies the absence of a signal, yet is in itself audible. Radio static is precisely the "language of the other" that Derrida identifies as a trace, a mark of something that is absent ("Living On" 168), and in this sense, it is a remainder. As Serge's father says,

> "Wireless waves don't die away after the ether disturbance is produced: they linger, clogging up the air and causing interference. Half the static we've just waded through is formed by residues of old transmissions. They build up, and up, and up, the more we pump them out." (McCarthy, *C* 245)

Static is an analogue for what literature is for McCarthy: garbled messages that come from "all over", yet importantly, not from "now" (McCarthy, *C* 245). McCarthy sees literature as a "set of signals that have been repeating, pulsing, modulating in the airspace of the

novel, poem, play – in their lines, between them and around them – since each of these forms began" (*Transmission* i). The transmissions Serge intercepts involve "loads of little stations sending fully formed, audible words out to who-knows-where: songs, personal messages, phrases whose nature and purpose Serge can't work out but has spent hours listening to nonetheless" (McCarthy, *C* 244). Serge does not understand the transmissions but in McCarthy's view of literature, he does not have to. McCarthy writes that the characters in the films of Mark Aerial Waller, as well as Beckett's Krapp, are "playback junkies": what they desire is not to understand the cryptic transmissions' static but to "be near it, with it, in it, again and again" (McCarthy, "Navigation Was Always a Difficult Art "149). The gaps and omissions inherent in transmission and dissemination become crucial. Language no longer is purely functional or utilitarian but rather embraces its own imperfection. Literature, then, works because it does not work.[11] If the declarations issued by McCarthy's INS are based on "repetition of an art that is not art, a craft that does not work", then perhaps the same can be said of McCarthy's fiction (McCarthy, "Navigation Was Always a Difficult Art" 151).[12]

The transmission of radio static is the non-event of language; the signifier without signified. It constitutes a kind of non-signal that does not carry meaning, and presents the impossibility that haunts the possibility of transmission, as there is no transmission without static. In *C*, communication arises out of the absence of communication, out of the hiss and crackle of absent signals. Radio static, to Serge, appears to carry the "sound of thinking"

[11] McCarthy says this explicitly: "it only works because (as Blanchot so profoundly understood) it doesn't work" (*Transmission* vii).

[12] Indeed, McCarthy suggests as much in *Transmission and the Individual Remix*. Literature, he says, must be "profoundly useless in a way it devalues use itself" by reflecting on "its own interruptedness, its disarticulation" (vi).

(McCarthy, *C* 79). Static, the absence of a meaningful signal, the impossibility of communication, harbors the potential for thinking and in turn the event of communication. But the novel not only uses literal radio static as a figure for this necessary linguistic impurity. The novel persistently alerts us to non-linguistic sounds that always exist in the place of silence, sounds that seem to attest to the outside of language: in the novel's first chapter, after Serge is born, the room is "silent but for the hiss of the chloroform" (McCarthy, *C* 12). Similarly, later, "the room is silent but for the clicking lips of the sucking baby and the copper buzzing rising from the garden" (McCarthy, *C* 16). When Serge and Sophie play their father's wax cylinders, they sometimes let them run after they are finished, "playing and replaying the same stretch of silence—silence which in fact is anything but silent, bursting as it is with a crackle and snap" (McCarthy, *C* 53). Again, these examples show that *C* is a novel that deals with Derrida's trace: and by repeatedly focusing on the buzz and hum that underlies communication and language, the novel seems to amplify this Derridean "language of the other" (Derrida, "Living On" 168)—it is as if McCarthy is attempting to make it audible. In his essay "Technology and the Novel", McCarthy makes an even stronger claim. What we "hear in poems", he writes, is "not signal but noise." In this statement, there is a suggestion why *C* so insistently enacts static in all its forms—perhaps, it is the source of literature.

It is at this point that we should consider the way in which *C* supports McCarthy's aesthetic concerns. The ultimate instability and meaninglessness of language enacted by *C* is an aesthetic move of revolt against the middle-brow realism McCarthy opposes. Static is a sonic version of the remainder, the thing that Stendhal's "mirror moving along a highway" cannot capture (289). *C*, then, is not set in "the great period of literary modernism"

("The Q&A") by accident: rather, it is part of McCarthy's decisive project to continue what the modernists knew about representation. Literature, McCarthy insists, grapples with a sense of the real that is ultimately inaccessible and unrepresentable, a "catastrophic real" that is aesthetically unassimilable (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 68). The writer's goal, McCarthy says, is not to represent this real in any naturalistic way but to write towards it "in the full knowledge that, like some roving black hole, it represents … the point at which the writing's entire project crumples and explodes" (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 69-70). Reading this passage, it becomes clear why in *C,* McCarthy so decisively directs the reader's focus towards linguistic and typographical errors, cryptic passages, and communicative failure: he seeks to demonstrate that by approaching the real, the writer is opening language up to its own denaturing and destruction. The novel's treatment and use of language points to the conclusion that language is fundamentally organised, or rather disorganised, by catastrophe. In the following chapter, we will see that this interest in the catastrophe takes a very similar form in McCarthy's novel *Remainder*—if disaster is, as we have seen, at the root of language, then it is possibly also at the root of being.

Chapter 2:

Remainder and the (Non-)Event

McCarthy's *C* shows language as fundamentally inauthentic and linked to disaster and contingency. It is precisely this inauthenticity that is at stake in *Remainder*, a novel that posits that the human subject exists in relation to an outside world that cannot be understood or analysed. McCarthy's novels, like his critical work, theorise a splitting, an essential spectrality that conditions the subject, and *Remainder* reveals disaster as a fundamental ontological condition, an ontology that is not really an ontology at all but an experience of rupture and contingency. Again, we see the importance of Derrida and Blanchot for McCarthy as thinkers who help us understand his investment in the impossible: he has cited Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* as an inspiration for *Remainder*, a book about an "'event' which has already happened, never happened, never stopped happening and is forever yet to come" (Thwaite). What is at the core of existence is a traumatic event—Blanchot would call this "disaster"—that, in *Remainder*, roots us in the material world and also isolates us not only from an authentic relation to matter but from ourselves. Existence, following Blanchot and McCarthy, orbits an unreachable, traumatic event, and being as such is unthinkable. We are always both inside *and* outside of matter—we cannot escape it, yet cannot understand it. Matter always returns to ruin any authentic connection we attempt to have with the world. Death does not offer respite from this inauthentic condition, because it cannot be authentically experienced. Finally, since authentic events such as death are not possible, the only thing that is left to do is to wait, to submit to passivity—which, as McCarthy argues, is fundamental to fiction.

The Accident

Remainder begins *in medias res*, after an accident that has occurred outside of the novel's narrative. A nameless, anonymous narrator tells us he has been in an accident he cannot remember, which is the first sign that this is a novel of unknowns, as the novel's first page contains its narrator's confession of his extreme ignorance of what befell him. He knows very little about the accident, only being able to tell us that it involved "something falling from the sky" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5). However, that is "all [he] can divulge" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5). The narrator's epistemic crisis is an absence that nonetheless conditions the narrative. He cannot "remember the event", to him, it is "a blank: a white slate, a black hole" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5). The accident, since it is not narrated, may represent an event of originary trauma that cannot be articulated, which alerts us to the absent origin of the novel's narrative. At the same time, it may also be the origin of its protagonist. As Arne de Boever writes, the accident may be read as a "moment of near-dying that function[s] as a kind of re-birth" (132). Blanchot stresses the impossibility of narrating this originary moment: the term "primal scene" is "ill-chosen, for what it supposedly names is unrepresentable, and escapes fiction as well" *(The Writing of the Disaster* 114). In *Remainder*, this moment quite literally "escapes fiction" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 114) since it is completely outside of the novel's narrative as a point one cannot write from. At the same time, it happens: it is clear that some accident has befallen the narrator. Therefore, the accident is at once a central part of the novel's narrative, while completely eluding it: it is both the novel's radical *outside* and its condition for existence, what informs its narrative, which perhaps brings us closer to what Blanchot means when he says that there "is disaster only because, ceaselessly, it falls short of disaster" (*The*

Writing of the Disaster 41). Blanchot's disaster, as Ann Smock notes, is when "there neither is, nor is not, disaster" (x). Disaster, then, is inside the narrative while being entirely outside of it. It is radically outside of a dialectical system and cannot be contained by it: "outside being *and* not-being, presence and absence, consciousness and unconsciousness" (Smock x).

A further absent origin is exemplified in the scene in which the narrator, after seeing a crack in a bathroom wall, has a "sense of déjà vu" which inspires him to re-enact (McCarthy, *Remainder* 58). This "event", as he calls it, is not a singular event but a re-enactment of a memory he nonetheless cannot place "at all" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 58-9). McCarthy has been explicit about this lack of origin: the "one thing that cannot be represented is the event" (*Recessional* 41), and it is also a synecdoche for our narrator's perceived lack of authenticity, which he becomes aware of after the accident. Disaster is fundamentally linked to inauthenticity. After his accident, he realises that he has "always been inauthentic;" his movements are "all fake" and "[s]econd-hand" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 22-23). As he watches other people, the novel's protagonist notices that not only he but also other people are inauthentic. They are "models acting out different roles, different identities", the narrator considers them "self-conscious, stylized, false" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 26), which may imply that the narrator's accident has merely made him aware of a universal human condition and not truly changed him in any profound sense. Watching the film *Mean Streets*, he laments the fact that he cannot be as authentic as Robert De Niro, whose movements he considers seamless and perfect. What, then, is the narrator to do, having established inauthenticity to be a generalised condition? He re-enacts: in a bid to secure authenticity, he uses the substantial financial settlement of 8.5 million pounds

he has received in order to stage vague memories, and in doing so reconstruct some authentic version of his life. The problem for the narrator, however, is that no such authentic version exists. Rather, *Remainder*'s narrator always circles the authentic event and can never achieve it. His goal is to "become fluent, natural, to cut out the detour that sweeps us around what's fundamental to events, preventing us from touching their core" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 236). Here, it is almost as if the narrator knows that we cannot reach the core of events but wants to try anyhow. Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* implies this eternal orbit around the event when it describes the disaster as a circle "eternally bereft of a center" (2). The fact that the narrator is as disconnected from his everyday actions as he is from his accident indicates that *Remainder* is not about some singular event or accident. Rather, *Remainder*'s "disaster" is an ongoing, iterative and fundamentally ontological process.

Crisis of Presence

The narrator's inauthentic mode of being manifests itself in a crisis of presence that is both spatial and temporal. It is spatial because the narrator cannot ever feel authentically present in the world, and temporal because in *Remainder*, the present as such does not exist. It is helpful to situate the narrator's crisis of presence using Derridean terms. His state of being might be explained not as ontology but as what Derrida calls "hauntology." Hauntology seeks to address the limitations of ontology. It is "larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being", and seeks to deal with that which is normally "incomprehensible", such as the co-existence of presence and absence (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 10). This idea describes *Remainder*'s narrator in the sense that he occupies a

liminal space in which he can never be truly present in the world, since he cannot occupy the present temporally. Let us first dwell on the spatial dimension of this crisis. The narrator, as we have seen, feels cut off from the world, and there are multiple instances in which the narrator's alienation becomes clear in purely spatial terms. The financial security he has attained with the monetary settlement makes him surmise that he can

> go and stand on almost any street, any row, any sector, and buy it—buy the shops, the cafés, cinemas, whatever. I could possess them, but I'd still be exterior to them, outside, closed out. This feeling of exclusion coloured the whole city as I watched it darken and glow, closing ranks. The landscape I was looking at seemed lost, dead, a dead landscape. (McCarthy, *Remainder* 46)

The narrator feels like there is an intangible, insurmountable wall between him and what he considers the "authentic" world. He is "explicitly worried about his relationship to landscape" (Marshall 648). Compare this passage to how he describes feeling when he used to be with his girlfriend at an earlier stage in his life: he remembers that he felt more "natural, more in-the-moment. Inside, not outside—as though [they had] penetrated something's skin: the city, perhaps, or maybe life itself" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 24), which presents both the spatial as well as the temporal dimension of the narrator's alienation. The passages show the narrator's desire for an unattainable sense of presence but he is both unable to authentically be in the moment and physically in the world. *Remainder* matches the anti-humanist credo outlined by McCarthy's International Necronautical Society: in its "Joint Statement of Authenticity", the organisation stresses our fundamentally inauthentic mode of being, which it calls "failed transcendence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint

Statement on Inauthenticity" 223). To the INS, "the self has no core, but is an experience of division, of splitting" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 226). The human subject is not whole and authentic, but divided. Being involves an "essential lack of self-coincidence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 230), a kind of spectrality. The INS emphasises the non-presence of a centre, of origination:

> Thinking begins with disaster – or, more precisely, with the forgotten origin of a trauma that clefts the self in twain and in whose ripples all subsequent thinking must find its contours. That is, thinking awakes in the wake of something unthinkable. (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 232)

Disaster, as an unreachable and impossible event, is at the beginning of thinking. What is called "disaster" is both the absent origin of trauma, as in the case of *Remainder*'s narrator, and what conditions all subsequent actions in the world. For if disaster is the beginning of thinking, then it is surely also the beginning of being.

The temporal component is in the novel's focus on repetition, and the disappearance of the present. The present, to Derrida, cannot be grasped, as it always slips into the past. At the same time, Derrida stresses an uncertain future that "resists thinking" and can never truly arrive (*Without Alibi* xxxiii).[13] This future, Derrida says, is spectral, it "can only be for ghosts", and as we shall see in a later section of this chapter, the novel enacts this unthinkable future (*Specters of Marx* 45). We can only see the present in relation to what is "no longer" and "not yet" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* xviii). Therefore, we could say, it

[13] Tom McCarthy has said that what fascinates him about Derrida's thought is his insistence on "deferral and imminence and to-come-ness" and the emphasis that events occur "not now" (*Recessional* 46).

becomes a "virtuality" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 48). The present, then, is what Blanchot would call the time of disaster, a "time without present" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 89).[14] The narrator can never be in the present because his life is based on re-enactions of the past. The re-enacted events themselves never truly happen, which the narrator ostensibly becomes cognisant of towards the end of the novel. Of a re-enaction of a bank heist, he says that "it had never happened—and, this being not a real event but a staged one, albeit one staged in a real venue, it never would. It would always be to come, held in a future hovering just beyond our reach" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 251). The event, in a Derridean way, is never now; it is always pending. And since it is just a re-enaction, it can never truly happen in the present.

The Disaster of Matter

The narrator, as we have seen, wants to be present in the world and live authentically. Much like idealist works of art, he seeks to "extinguish matter and achieve authenticity as a hypnotic, monotonous, endless recurrence of repetition" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 233). This process "produces the trance-like stasis and intense psychic tingling that we sometimes think of as aesthetic pleasure", as McCarthy's INS proclaims (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 233). When the narrator re-enacts, he experiences precisely this tingling sensation. His ideal of being present in the world is tied to a fantasy of being freed from matter and not being bound to the order of the material. The attempt at an escape from matter is expressed in recurrent

[14] In his essay "18 Semiconnected Thoughts…", McCarthy considers the transience of the present moment. He encourages the reader to "try to say now", which is "just not possible" as the "now" has to be narrated, and is therefore always "already late, and in its lateness, false" (*Typewriters* 239).

figures of weightlessness: when he stages his re-enactions, the protagonist feels like "an astronaut taking his first steps—humanity's first steps—across the surface of a previously untouched planet" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 127). In other moments, he feels "weightless" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 129), which reveals that the narrator fetishises not only a separation from matter—the astronaut appears as an entity for whom the laws of gravity do not hold—and the idea of an origin. These steps the narrator takes, he feels, are like "humanity's first steps" on a floor that is "fired up, silently zinging with significance" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 127). The notion of an origin embodied in the "first steps" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 127) is a source of meaning for *Remainder*'s narrator.

The feeling of transcendence and weightlessness the narrator desires ultimately cannot truly materialise. *Remainder* theorises existence not as the realm of the sovereign individual but the subject conditioned, as in the *nouveau roman*, by an "encounter with *structure*", as McCarthy says in his essay on Jean-Philippe Toussaint (*Typewriters* 185). There exists a kind of disaster in the form of matter that pulls us back into the material world and makes transcendence from matter impossible. McCarthy's INS stresses this necessary primacy of matter in one of its declarations: "what is most real for us is not form, or God, but matter, the brute materiality of the external world. We celebrate the imperfection of matter and somatize that imperfection on a daily basis" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 224). Matter, to the INS, is linked to Heidegger's idea of "originary inauthenticity": "The thought is that human existence is formed in relation to a brute material facticity that cannot be mastered. Any attempt at authenticity slips back into an inauthenticity from which it cannot escape, but which it would like to evade" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 227).

In *Remainder*, this inevitable return to inauthenticity happens repetitively, as every time the narrator tries to authentically inhabit the world or the moment, his plans are foiled by matter. Matter is linked to the narrator's crisis of presence, which is fundamentally a predicament of being tethered to the material world. For instance, he describes a "leftover shard" being stuck in his kneecap after the accident, "inflaming nerves and muscles" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 9). The narrator is frustrated by this material remainder, "surplus to requirements", this fragment that renders him imperfect (McCarthy, *Remainder* 9). Matter, then, is messy: as the INS insists, the material world is inherently imperfect, impure. Sam Slote agrees with this function of the fragment, writing that the remainder is the "thing that gets in the way" of authenticity (134). Material remainders "threaten to jam the smooth articulation of the world's joints, its fluency" (Serpell 257).[15]

Matter, like the disaster the narrator suffered, is a symbol of extreme exteriority, while also not allowing the narrator to transcend it. It is a figure of impossibility: the narrator is inside matter, since he cannot extricate himself from it but exterior to it because it is impossible to parse. The only thing the novel's protagonist can tell us about his accident is that it involved "[p]arts, bits" and "something falling from the sky" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5): his accident is a traumatic encounter with matter—but matter that, while oppressive, cannot be described or metaphysically defined. We see a clear sign of this epistemic insufficiency when he feels unable to describe matter with any fidelity to detail

[15] This repeated problematic of "failed transcendence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223) that McCarthy is interested in, of things always falling "back to earth" (Critchley, "Afterword" 293), of disappointment, is performed in the novel's conclusion. The airplane, hijacked by the narrator and flying in loops, where "gravity need not apply" (Michaels 73), constitutes part of the narrator's revolt against matter. Here, in the sky, he can feel "very happy", unconstrained by the material forces of gravity (McCarthy, Remainder 269). But of course, the plane quite literally "falls back to earth" (Critchley, "Afterword" 293). Gravity functions as a figure for a kind of negative aesthetics: art is not intended to produce "aesthetic pleasure" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223) but rather exists to testify to our condition of inauthenticity.

as it overwhelms him: “There’s too much here, too much to process, just too much” (McCarthy, *Remainder* 180). The material remainders in the novel can be examined via the thought of Derrida. As proposed by C. Namwali Serpell, *Remainder*’s narrator “sees the remainder as something left over, what Jacques Derrida might call a trace” (257). The trace is the “unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance”; it is what something is not, and is contained in the thing (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 65). If everything, in a Derridean sense, can only be identified by identifying what it is not, then everything “bears the trace of those other elements” (Bennington 75). This trace, admits Derrida, cannot be shown, as it is an “entire fundamentality hidden under the appearance of an empiricist or metaphysical text” (*Of Grammatology 19*). Authenticity, Derrida might say, always already contains inauthenticity, which the novel presents as matter. At this point, is helpful to link back to Blanchot, who links Derrida’s trace to the disaster: it is “the improperness of its name and the disappearance of the proper name (Derrida); it is neither noun nor verb, but a remainder which would bar with invisibility and illegibility all that shows and is said—a remainder which is neither a result (as in subtraction), nor a quantity left over (as in division)” (*The Writing of the Disaster* 40)[16]. The remainder acts as the disaster. It is “unknown” (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 5), and the “[p]arts, bits” that the narrator cannot definitively describe or name stand in for this unknowable disaster of matter (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5).

Matter cannot be empirically captured, and in its inauthenticity, seems to haunt the narrator, which makes it in a significant sense spectral. The novel demonstrates this

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[16] McCarthy has explicitly referred to the accident as a remainder: “The accident is the unnameable, the blind spot, the interval between repetitions: it’s the remainder” (“Remainder by Tom McCarthy”). In this statement, McCarthy echoes Blanchot.

spectrality of matter when the narrator repetitively encounters cumbersome material residue that renders the world imperfect. Near the novel's beginning, he gets distracted by an escalator whose steps have been "dis-articulated" and are "lying messily around a closed-off area of the upper concourse" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17). By being disarticulated, these steps become fragments, remainders—which is important, because the remainder, as we have seen, functions to interrupt the world's smoothness and perfection. Precisely because he focuses on these steps, the narrator gets on the wrong escalator, and, "black grease [gets onto his] sleeve and stain[s] it" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17). This black grease is "messy, irksome matter that [has] no respect for millions, [does not] know its place" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17). Due to not knowing its "place", matter is interruptive, cropping up in places where it is not supposed to be. Later, in a dream, these "old, greasy escalator parts" return, throwing the dream's events "out of kilter" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 138). The novel repeats this figure of black matter in other forms, such as oil and coffee being spilled. Matter is like a ghost or a specter—something that returns to haunt the narrator.[17] Matter here also serves to decentre the human: it having "no respect for millions" implies either that matter has no respect for the millions of humans on earth, or that matter does not care that the narrator is now millions of pounds richer: he is still inauthentic (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17). It plays the dramatic role of reminding the narrator of the haunting quality of the material world, as it is the narrator's "undoing" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17).[18] What

[17] Interestingly, this idea of matter as a kind of ghostly figure coincides with what McCarthy considers a ghost to be: a thing that is somewhere where it is "not meant to actually sit", but has "a dramatic role" ("Foreword" 2). The grease on the handrail, for instance, is clearly not intended to be there; it is merely a remainder of physical processes, something that does not "know its place" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17) because it impinges on spaces it is not meant to enter, much like a ghost would.
[18] Here, the novel glosses McCarthy's INS, which writes that matter is "our undoing" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223).

seems like a minor everyday incident is in this way a kind of disaster: it is the reminder of the narrator's own "fatal embeddedness in materiality" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 227). This appearance of matter as a carrier of "disaster" is more explicitly invoked at another point in the novel. The narrator, increasingly frustrated with matter, wants his car's windshield wiper fluid to disappear, to be "not surplus matter, mess or clutter, but pure, bodiless blueness" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 153), but it still appears. The "miracle" of the disappearance of matter, the narrator muses, has "failed utterly, spectacularly, its watery debris crashing down to earth, turning the scene of a triumphant launch into the scene of a disaster, a catastrophe" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 155-6), implying a link between matter and the novel's original disaster.

The disaster is merely a trace of some primordial catastrophe: matter, the narrator understands towards the end of the novel, is merely a remainder of the world's originary scene, the first disaster. The disaster in *Remainder* is iterative; it repeats. Blanchot describes it as "the repetition—the affirmation—of the singularity of the extreme" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 5-6). Matter, then, is the remainder of this extreme event that is outside experience. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator ponders that "matter's what makes us alive—the bitty flow, the scar tissue, signature of the world's very first disaster and promissory note guaranteeing its last" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 272).[19] Here, the novel is explicit about the inherent repetitiveness of matter. The word "signature" is of interest, since it connects matter to what Derrida calls a "signature". Matter is rooted in some elusive original event, and it is like a signature, which necessitates its iterability, as Derrida

[19] McCarthy has alluded to this originary disaster: the novel, he insists, is not just about its protagonist but also "the world, matter, this shard left over from some unnameably violent disaster - a remainder" (Thwaite).

theorises in his essay “Signature Event Context”. The signature, says Derrida, implies the “empirical nonpresence of the signer” (*Limited Inc* 20). The original disaster is not here; it is absent. Like matter, signatures can be repeated: “In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form”, Derrida informs us (*Limited Inc* 20). Note how the figure of the black goo is iterative in the novel—matter, we see, is repetitive while bearing witness to an absent point of origin. Matter is a remnant: repetitive matter is all that is left of the event.

Death

After a while, it becomes clear to the narrator that transcendence from matter, his ostensible path to authenticity, may involve his own death. At a certain point in the novel, he becomes interested in firearms. “No beauty without violence, without death”, he comments (McCarthy, *Remainder* 171). The implication that death is a marker of authenticity becomes clearer when the narrator hears of a man who has died in a gang-related shootout. The man becomes a “symbol of perfection” for him (McCarthy, *Remainder* 177). The man, the narrator thinks,

> merged 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. Cut out the detour. Then both mind and actions had resolved themselves into pure stasis. The spot that this had happened on was the ground zero of perfection. (McCarthy, *Remainder* 177-8)

The narrator begins to think that death may prove to be a source of authenticity, of "pure stasis"—presumably, an idea of presence (McCarthy, *Remainder* 178). As a consequence, the dead man has achieved the perfection the narrator "wanted, that everyone else wanted" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 178). Since the man's death embodies perfection, the narrator seeks to universalise this perfection, to "re-enact his death: for [himself], certainly, but for the world in general as well" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 178). The novel presumably satirises the search for a Heideggerian, authentic death. For Heidegger, the awareness of one's own death creates one's authentic being. It is "that potentiality-for-Being which is one's ownmost", and the only authentic death is one's own (295).[20] The narrator re-enacts the man's death casting himself as the man, and this series of re-enactments seems like a bizarre way to practise the moment of his own death—perhaps he attempts to make "death possible", as Blanchot writes of the philosophical thought of Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger (*The Space of Literature* 96). *Remainder*'s narrator more explicitly imagines his own death as an authentic moment when he plans to hijack a plane at the end of the novel. He seemingly confirms this idea of death when he envisages "a plane bursting open and transforming itself into cloud;" the plane becomes a "pillow ripping open, its stuffing of feathers rushing outwards, merging with the air" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 246), which seems to be a fantasy of his own death. Death as an authentic moment further arises when the narrator ponders the demise of the man who was killed: the tarmac on which the man died is like a "like a quilt, a handmade, patterned quilt laid out for this man to take his final steps across and then lie down and die on: a quilted deathbed" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 191). It

[20] McCarthy and the INS reject this view of death: in a conversation with Simon Critchley, McCarthy says that the INS's intention is "exploring the opposite to the heroic idea of death that you find in the futurists, Ernst Jünger or Heidegger, where death is an act of virile self-assertion, of shattering oneself against death, which then becomes the possibility for authenticity" (qtd. In Critchley, *How to Stop Living* 103).

strikes the narrator that "the world, or chance, or maybe death itself if you can speak of such a thing, must have loved this man in some way to prepare for him such a richly textured fabric to gather and wrap him up in" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 191).

The narrator's designation of death as a kind of non-thing, as "maybe death itself if you can speak of such a thing" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 191) is crucial for the kind of relation to death that McCarthy writes towards in the novel. Death, the novel shows, is not a source of authenticity. Instead, death in *Remainder* follows the thought of Blanchot, who rejects Heidegger's idea of an authentic relation to one's own death.[21] It is precisely not possible to "speak of such a thing" as death (McCarthy, *Remainder* 191). Instead, Blanchot stresses "our own ever improper death" as something that cannot ever be experienced or understood (*The Writing of the Disaster* 26). When we approach death, and try to understand it, we "approach a perilous threshold, a crucial point where we are abruptly *turned back*" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 7). We are turned back because death, in Blanchot's view, is "an anonymous product, an object without value" (*The Space of Literature* 123), and death is as such something that we cannot authentically experience. I would like to dwell on the way in which the novel performs this turning-back from death, how we cannot ever reach the centre or core of this event. One way in which this happens is that *Remainder*'s narrator is constantly pulled away from the experience of death. Jim Byatt notes that McCarthy has alluded to the possibility that *Remainder* is an account of a death" (247): "as Blanchot points out, the word 'disaster' comes from des astre, 'from the stars'. It's fate, it's gravity, it's time and, of course, death" (Thwaite). But if the disaster, and the narrator's accident, are in some way linked to death, then, following Blanchot, the

[21] Blanchot rejects Heidegger's notion of "death as power" and reverses Heidegger's idea of death as the "possibility of impossibility *into the impossibility of every possibility*" (The Writing of the Disaster 70).

novel shows death as an impossibility. The novel begins and ends with a disaster, as Sydney Miller has noted: "*Remainder* is a novel suspended in time and space between two unnarrated, and unnarratable, accidents" (636). In a Derridean sense, the novel finds the narrator between two states of death: the accident in the beginning and the death that is *no longer*, and the death by airplane crash that is to come and *not yet*. This temporal juncture makes the novel's narrative occupy a liminal space, an interregnum between two moments of death that escape narration: one of these is the narrator's averted death in the novel's beginning after the narrator has encountered "something falling from the sky" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5). The other event of death, *if* it happens, happens after the end of the novel, when the narrator hijacks an airplane and orders it to fly in loops until it runs "out of fuel" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 275). During this scene, it is implied that the narrator's death is impending: "Eventually the sun would set for ever—burn out, pop, extinguish—and the universe would run down like a Fisher Price toy whose spring has unwound to its very end. Then there'd be no more music, no more loops. Or maybe, before that, we'd just run out of fuel" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 275). But the novel ends without the narrator's death occurring, which once more posits death as an event that cannot be experienced. Before that, however, the narrator will have his brief experience of authenticity, of "weightlessness" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 275), just before the plane crashes.

What happens after the plane crashes is up to conjecture. Even if the narrator dies, there is the possibility that "perhaps a bit of debris might even fall on someone and leave [him] an heir" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 272). Since the narrator lacks clear and marked distinguishing features, being a kind of "Everyman" (Miller 635), the possibility of the accident occurring to an infinite series of generic and interchangeable narrators is open.

The narrator suspects that he was hit because of where he was positioned in the world, "standing on grass, exposed, just like a counter on a roulette table's green velvet grid, on a single number, waiting" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 57). The idea of a "roulette table" is striking in its implication that the accident could have happened to anyone, meaning that the novel's narrative can endlessly run on a loop. The other possibility, as Byatt has ventured, is for the narrator to survive the accident. The narrator's death is "doomed to fail, the act of 'falling from the sky', if indeed it occurs, closing the loop of the text and resetting the character's situation to where he was at the start of the novel" (257). The novel functions, in the narrator's words, as an "eternal detour" around the event (McCarthy, *Remainder* 21). The narrator, in this reading, is endlessly reborn, essentially, as the INS says, dying "badly, incompletely" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 229).[22] This reading is supported by the fact that the narrator, when the grease from the handrail stains his sleeve early in the novel, has, "right to this day, a photographically clear memory" of that event, which makes it possible that he survived the accident after the end of the novel (McCarthy, *Remainder* 17). Following either of these readings, the event has always already happened in an infinite regress—as an eternal repetition of the remainder. The titular "remainder" is either, as McCarthy has said, the accident itself, or it is the novel as remainder of the accident, since we are left not with the event but with what remains of it.[23]

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[22] Because of this, *Remainder* perhaps enacts what Blanchot considers crucial in Franz Kafka's fictions: "the curse of being reborn: you die, but you die badly" ("Literature" 56).

[23] The novel, then, implies that art is a remainder of some process. The narrator remembers this notion from art class, where his objective was not "to create the sculpture" but to remove the "surplus matter" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 82). Stripping away this surplus matter, however, also renders the final product as a remainder. The creative process, as we shall see in *Satin Island*, is a negotiation with fragments.

The novel's narrative, to follow this line of thought, is a fragment of an event, and as we have seen earlier, *Remainder* is also a novel of fragments. Death, as we have seen, is the remainder of experience, a fragment that experience cannot capture. At a formal level, Sydney Miller notices the novel's interest in the fragmentary in "the excessive use of dashes, colons, and semicolons as perpetrators of fragmentation" that McCarthy's writing contains (646). The first example of fragmentation comes in the narrator's assertion that his accident involved "[p]arts, bits" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 5), of which Serpell writes, "This fragment describes itself: the lines *in medias res* are as partial, fragmentary, and suspended as the falling particles they depict" (240). Trauma, we can infer, is an encounter with vestigial parts. The disaster, since it cannot be remembered, is a fragment, it "escapes us" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 19). Even what can be remembered is recalled fragmentarily: the narrator's memory returns "like a film run in instalments, a soap opera"—that is, bit by bit (McCarthy, *Remainder* 21). The narrator's experience of the world as fragmented intensifies in his vertiginous hallucinations caused by his compulsive need to re-enact. Late in the novel, when the narrator is in a delirious state, he imagines anonymous people having fragmented conversations. These conversations arrive in the form of "bits of memory" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 205). Two ambulance drivers discuss the accident: "'History,' said one. 'It's lethal, all this debris. Look: propeller, head.' 'Flotsam,' said the other. 'Jetsam. All these little bits, repeating. The real event he can't even discuss'" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 206). These conversations, incoherent and incomplete, contain gaps and omissions, seemingly emphasising the impossibility of testifying to an event. The relation to disaster, and to death, is always a scattered, incomplete one that is constituted by the remainder. As such, the novel is an example of fragmentary writing, which, for

McCarthy, is characteristic of modernist writing. He suggests that in Joyce's *Ulysses*, writing becomes "no more than potentiality and fragment" (*Typewriters* 36). Documenting the event is an imperfect enterprise that involves the shattering and splintering of the text and of writing. The event, writes Blanchot, "escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 7). *Remainder*, as we have seen, is an attempt at writing towards and about the impossible.

Waiting

If authentic events such as death cannot happen, then perhaps the only option left is to wait. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator waits: he imagines "people—dancers, maybe, or soldiers—crouching, set, waiting for some event to start" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 6). This experience of waiting, I would wager, is instructive. Like these people, we as readers of *Remainder* await an impossible event, an event that has always already happened, and is always portending, not in the moment. The novel can be read in terms of Blanchot's distinction between death and dying, a distinction which McCarthy alludes to in his own critical writing: death, for Blanchot, is impossible, an "unrealizable fantasy", while dying is "a neutral, uncontainable, unmasterable drifting, a movement of absenting" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 18-19). Blanchot's notion of dying is crucial for the time of waiting that structures *Remainder*'s temporality. Consider the novel's ending, which resists closure and instead invites endless deferral, as the narrator's death fails to occur and the reader is confronted with the non-time of waiting. *Remainder* is consequently about patience: about "time of time's absence, or time returning never present, the time of dying" (Blanchot, *The*

Writing of the Disaster 18). The reader joins in the work of waiting that is done by the narrator, who is open about the fact that he is waiting for an event, which at one point he frames in decisively messianic terms: "I and the other re-enactors were like a set of devotees to a religion not yet founded: patient, waiting for our deity to appear, to manifest himself to us, redeem us; and our gestures were all votive ones, acts of anticipation" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 251). The narrator's claim of a "religion not yet founded" brings to mind a Derridean future of uncertainty (McCarthy, *Remainder* 251). This future is characterised by a futural ambiguity that is precisely what Derrida calls a "messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism" (*Specters of Marx* 74).

The time of waiting, like the fundamentally inauthentic human condition the novel traces, is imagined in material terms, as the waiting subject becomes engulfed by brute materiality. The bank heist at the end of the novel is an attempt to bring about an authentic future event, one which the narrator and his crew of re-enactors patiently await:

> They were handing the sacks of new notes to the cashier; the cashier, in perfect imitation of our stood-down cashier re-enactor, was preparing a receipt for them and calling up the bags of old notes from the vaults downstairs, the ones we wanted. They were waiting; we were waiting; the guard in the van was waiting, and so were its pobbled steps, its indicators and exhaust; the street was waiting: yellow and white lines, kerbs and pavements were all waiting, waiting while the lift emitted its little electric whine, its cables taut with the strain of bearing these lumps up from the

> building's insides, shoving them out into the world. (McCarthy, *Remainder* 254)[24]

It is not just the narrator who is waiting but rather the world—matter. This matter is not only the cause of the narrator's missed death, as his survival of the accident is also his inscription in the material world, but also the same thing that condemns him to wait. This disappearance of the narrator in the order of the material means that he becomes a neutral figure, unable to act with any sense of agency. Blanchot's disaster "exposes us to a certain idea of passivity" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 3). We can see this passivity in the way in which he is both tethered to the material world and unable to authentically live in it—he is present *and* absent, as we have seen in the narrator's crisis of presence earlier in this chapter. In his text *The Step Not Beyond*, Blanchot explicitly links dying to an experience of exteriority: "*Dying—dying in the cold and dissolution of the Outside: always outside oneself as outside life*" (97). In this trance-like state, the present disappears, and slips into the past: "We were standing, and still standing—then I was back in my bath, watching hot steam swirl around the crack. Then I was being lifted, held, laid down. Then nothing" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 202). The narrator's re-enactments transport him back to the events of his past: the crack in the bathroom wall and his vague memory of being "being lifted, held above a bed of some sort" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 194).[25] The resulting temporal arc nullifies the present, as it turns into "nothing" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 202). Thus, he achieves precisely the opposite of the sense of presence and authenticity that he wishes for. After awakening from his coma in the beginning of the novel, the narrator feels

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[24] This passage resonates with Emmanuel Levinas' idea of the *il y a*, the general passivity of being. "The anonymous current of being", Levinas writes, "invades, submerges every subject, person or thing" (52).

[25] Derrida notes this event of the present becoming past: every present "is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element" ("Différance" 13).

"neutral" and the sky is "neutral too—a neutral spring day, sunny but not bright, neither cold nor warm" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 10). But the sense of the neutral cannot be surmounted by the narrator's re-enactments. During the re-enactment of the man being shot, the narrator, fainting, notices that the ground is "neutral – neither warm nor cold" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 194). It is implied that the novel's disaster, by repeating, will always pull the narrator back into this state. In these situations, we see an encounter with the disaster, that is, with impossibility and stasis: the narrator is in a completely neutral, liminal space of passivity. Here, the narrator describes himself as "infinitely patient" (McCarthy, *Remainder* 194). *Infinitely patient*—in the sense that the disaster will not come; "it does not happen" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 5). Blanchot tells us the disaster is a "time without present which we endure by waiting" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 21). This time of waiting is defined by its lack of a present—to wait, for Blanchot, is to be in the "interim", the time "between *no longer* and *not yet*" (Smock xi). Time, like the narrator himself, disappears in the passivity of the narrator's experience, an ontological state left over from what cannot be experienced. The fact that *Remainder* so explicitly enacts this temporal mode of waiting and suspension makes sense in the context of McCarthy's understanding of literature when we consider that he calls waiting, or being in an "interim", the "time of fiction" (*Recessional* 29). *Remainder* is a text that alerts us to the incompletion that accompanies the impossible—which, perhaps, is precisely the condition of the literary work.

Chapter 3:

Satin Island and the Absence of the Book

For McCarthy, as we have seen, the most captivating literature is invested in approaching some inflection of the impossible. In his novel *Satin Island*, this idea takes a radical form, as the absence the novel theorises is the absence of the literary work itself. The literary object, the novel shows us, is both temporally deferred and undefinable. To illustrate this, the novel will be read alongside Maurice Blanchot and Stéphane Mallarmé's conceptions of literature and aesthetics. Mallarmé's idea of "The Book", a virtual work perpetually in abeyance, is especially important for this reading of the text. Ultimately, I suggest that literature's necessary status as the remainder of an ideal work, and its own inability to match up to this work, is what ensures its survival and makes it possible.

The novel begins with a scene of waiting. U., a corporate anthropologist, waits for a flight that has been delayed at the Torino-Caselle airport. While waiting, he distracts himself by browsing the internet, "clicking through news sites and social pages, meandering along corridors of trivia, generally killing time" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 5). This begins a trend in the novel's narrative: U. tends to do things that distract him from what he is supposed to be doing, which we shall see more of later. The novel deals with divagations and diversions—remainders, essentially. As we have seen in *Remainder*, the uncertainty of the future means that temporally, something is left over, cannot be captured. Precisely this absence is alluded to a little later in the novel, when U asks his girlfriend Madison, who was at the airport at a different time, what she was waiting for:

> Okay, I said, Torino-Caselle: what were you doing there? Waiting, she said, just like you were. What for? I asked. A plane, she said. What else do people wait for in an airport? (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 23)

U. wonders: what *was* Madison waiting for? Perhaps U., in the beginning of the novel, is not waiting for a plane. Indeed, if the plane were to arrive, this would not be the future proper. Derrida, we know, sees the future as something unthinkable, it "resists thinking" (*Without Alibi* xxxiii). This sense of the future is crucial for literature. Critics like Bohrer, as we have seen, have noted that this intractable remainder is precisely what constitutes literature. It is what gives a work like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* its power, as McCarthy has implied: the "event cannot happen and if it did that would be redemption" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 33).

One of the novel's prominent figures of waiting is buffering, the process in which we wait for information to get downloaded. Buffering, McCarthy says, exposes us to the uncertainty of the future: "buffering is fascinating because everything stops, that circle spins, you get extremely anxious because that airline ticket you are buying is going to cost 200 euros more when it comes back, or maybe even the airline has just gone out of business, or your bank has crashed, or the server itself has blown up" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 45). Buffering, I would like to propose, serves as a blueprint for *Satin Island*'s temporality. McCarthy says that buffering is "not ultimately a technological situation, it's a theological situation" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 35). Here, he implies that there is a messianism inherent in the process. Buffering, McCarthy stresses, exposes us to the tenuousness of the future: it "places you inside the universe of information and effectively Being, but it's also incredibly anxious because you haven't *got* it yet; it's *coming*" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 36). It is a state of waiting. At the same time, buffering nullifies the present, continually turning it over to the past: we "require experience to stay ahead, if only by a nose, of our consciousness of experience" to "narrate it both to others and ourselves" (McCarthy, *Satin*

Island 85). Buffering, I would argue, is a temporal figure for the disappearance of the present.

Since *Satin Island* can be classified as a novel about waiting, it is also a novel that is marked by what is withheld—a book "about nothing – whose style would be so totalising its content dissolves" (Stinson). A novel without content, then— "*events*!" quips U early in the novel, "If you want those, you'd best stop reading now" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 16). Indeed, in *Satin Island*, we see McCarthy's most powerful attempt to escape "content" and instead put literature itself into question. As we shall see, the novel is concerned with the question of the book. Perhaps, then, what U. is truly waiting for at the airport and during phases of buffering is something that by necessity cannot arrive—which, I would like to suggest, is the book.

The Book and Materiality

The novel probes the elusive state of "literature" by investigating both the work of literature as such and the process by which this work comes into being. The sensation of uncertainty that the novel's scene of waiting begins with is the very condition of the literary work itself. From the beginning of *Satin Island*, we are put in a position where we do not know things, where they are kept beyond our knowledge. U. works for a corporate conglomerate that runs a project called the Koob-Sassen Project. This project is at once unknowable—he cannot "give an exegesis, overview, whatever, of it"—and "important": "there's probably not a single area of your daily life that it hasn't, in some way or other, touched on, penetrated, changed; although you probably don't know this" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 14-5). The project, then, is something that both cannot be known, and has far-reaching effects.

It is “at once both present—omnipresent—and elusive” (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 78-79), which again shows McCarthy’s debt to Derrida and Blanchot. Like matter in *Remainder*, the Project represents an unreachable outside that nonetheless conditions existence. The same can be said for the Great Report, a venture that U. is instructed to undertake as part of this project. U. does not really know what to say about the Great Report when his co-workers ask him about it: that the project is “finding its form” is the extent of what he can offer (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 45).

At the same time, the Great Report is intended to be a momentous work—a book that leaves “format of the book itself behind”, a “book-beyond-the-book” (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 146). This figures the Great Report as a version of what Mallarmé has called *le livre* or “The Book.” McCarthy has said as much: the idea for the Great Report, he says, comes “straight from Mallarmé” (McCarthy, *Recessional* 67). We also see this in the novel itself, as Peyman, one of U.’s superiors, explicitly calls the Great Report “the Book” (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 70). Reading the Great Report like Mallarmé’s Book, then, allows us to approach the claims that *Satin Island* makes about literature. Mallarmé sees the Book as a project that is to be the culmination of all literary pursuits, and it was not merely a personal project for him. In an 1885 letter to Verlaine, he writes: “I would go even further and say *the* Book, convinced as I am that in the final analysis there’s only one, unwittingly attempted by anyone who writes, even Geniuses” (3). This book, so Mallarmé, would be a totalizing project and would spell the end of all literary endeavours, since it would amount to nothing less than the “Orphic explanation of the Earth” (3).

In one of his critical essays, McCarthy describes the Book as a sort of event, as a book “for which the term ‘book’ no longer suffice[s], since its creation would demand the

escalation and expansion—or, better put, the evisceration and reconfiguring-otherwise—of all our current notions of what books are" (McCarthy, *Typewriters* 225). The Book, however, must not be written: "the whole of literature depends on the Book not being written" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 69). The existence of literature, in this way, involves the unworking of the Book; the absence of Mallarmé's Book is the condition of literature. The Great Report, then, like Mallarmé's Book, will remain forever unwritten, as U. later realises that the Report is "fundamentally, essentially, inherently unwritable" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 145).

U's failure to write is based in materiality. In *Satin Island*, McCarthy directly links the idea of matter to writing. Matter both enables writing—the novel "stresses the material aspects" of the process (Weaver 114)—and renders it impossible, creating a kind of catastrophe. This catastrophe, as it is in several of McCarthy's other works, is a catastrophe of matter. While trying to write the report, U. stretches the blank document so that it fills his computer screen but as he does this, his finger slips off the laptop's glide-pad: "just as the document's expanding lower boundary reached the bottom of my screen, my finger momentarily lost contact with the glide-pad; when the finger made contact again, it caused the applications docked invisibly at the screen's base to pop up, impinging on the clean neutrality both of the screen and of my mind" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 112). Material forces in the world cause failure, in this case U.'s finger slipping off the glide-pad. These exist to foil narratives of absolute presence and transcendence. As in *Remainder*, material forces are what McCarthy has called "the *Unheimliche*, the Uncanny"—the "figure of the stranger lodged within the home" (*Typewriters* 206). Trying to hide the applications, U unwittingly opens a news page, which "like some malicious genie", stretches itself over

the screen (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 112). This causes “all the extraneous clutter, all the world-debris” to clutter his screen and ruin his progress (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 112). This scene figures pieces of clutter—remainders—as the undoing of the writing process. After this, U. watches footage of an oil spill and compares the oil spill on the snow to writing: “sitting at my desk, looking down at the laptop, at the picture on its screen, the streaks and clusters taking shape as oil spread slowly inland, I saw ink polluting paper, words marring the whiteness of a page” (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 113). The novel is about writing *as* the disaster. Ann Smock notes that “‘[t]he writing of the disaster’ means the writing that the disaster—which liquidates writing—is, just as ‘knowledge of the disaster’ means knowledge as disaster, and ‘the flight of thought’ the loss of thought, which thinking is” (ix). There is, furthermore, a striking similarity between the spectral disaster of matter, or remainder, that continually impedes the authentic being of *Remainder*’s main character and the encroaching “world-debris”, which is itself something left over, that ruins U.’s writing (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 112). While Milly Weaver argues that the writing scenes in *Satin Island* show the novel’s “wish to foreground the concrete scene of writing” (115), I would like to argue that in addition to this, the novel shows the event of writing, of the production of the work as an impossibility, which the novel posits as being due to the existence of a material facticity.

Process and Remainder

The impossibility of writing the Great Report makes U. question the role of the writer:

> Even when I reasoned these last, deranged notions back out to the fringes of my mind, I was still left with the immovable fact of the thing’s un-

> writability. This filled me with anger, and a feeling of stupidity, and sadness, too—grief not for an actual loss but, worse, for a potential or imaginary one: this beautiful, magnificent Report; this book, the Book, the fucking Book, that was to name our era, sum it up; this book that left the format of the book itself behind, this book-beyond-the-book; and, beyond even this, the tantalizing and elusive possibility of transubstantiated now-ness, live-ness it was to inaugurate—the possibility, that is, of Present-Tense Anthropology™. All that was gone. Which, in turn, raised the question: What was I still there for? (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 146-7)

An "imaginary" loss (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 146)—since the book was never truly there. What is U. still there for, if the Book cannot be written? This conundrum, perhaps, leads us to what Mallarmé has called the "insane game of writing" (qtd. in Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 422). The "madness" of writing, Blanchot says, is predicated on the relation "between the act of writing and the absence of the work" (*The Infinite Conversation* 424). As such, the madness of writing is perhaps that one writes towards something that will never appear. *Satin Island* contains a figure for this in the form of the fall of the Tower of Babel. Peyman, seemingly the most important figure in the company U. works at, says that "[w]hat actually matters isn't the attempt to reach the heavens, or to speak God's language", but "what's left when that attempt has failed" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 54). Literature, in this view, becomes a remainder of the Book. As Blanchot puts it: "The book: a ruse by which writing goes toward *the absence of the book*" (*The Infinite Conversation* 424). The book always becomes something that it is not, something outside of itself, it is "not that to which it is destined" (Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* 424).

Let us dwell on the status of the book as remainder, or the remainder of the book. When Blanchot quotes Mallarmé's dictum that there "is no explosion except a book" (qtd. in Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 124), he takes this to mean that "the book is not the laborious assemblage of a totality finally obtained, but has for its being the noisy, silent bursting [without which] the book would not take place" (The *Writing of the Disaster* 124). Literature, then, is produced by absence and negativity. McCarthy notes this when he calls negativity "a generative space" (*Recessional* 60), comparing literature to "photography where it's the negative that produces the photo" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 60). *Satin Island*'s opening describes the Shroud of Turin in this way, as something visible only "in the negative" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 3). The Shroud of Turin is not what it seems to be, it is something different: "A few decades later, when the shroud was radiocarbon dated, it turned out to come from no earlier than the mid-thirteenth century; but this didn't trouble the believers" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 3). This absent "real" form of the Shroud of Turin is also what is at stake for the book.

Satin Island can be read as an attempt to chart a space beyond or outside the book, a space that, following Mallarmé, necessitates the book's "explosion". If the book is a kind of "explosion", then it can be argued that this is reified in the novel's fragmentary structure: the "explosion" of the novel *Satin Island* leaves us with remainders in the form of the numbered fragments that make up the novel. The ideal book *Satin Island* has detonated, leaving us with its vestiges. Derek Attridge has written about the novel's structure that it "gives the text a certain quality of *writing*" (31); the fragmentary form seems to mimic writing itself. These fragments testify to disaster, to absence. Perhaps, it is the radical absence of the Book, the book that, as Mallarmé tells us, explodes. The status of *Satin*

Island as a work of fragmentary remainders links it to detachment, detachment from something that cannot be named—the fragments are separated, perhaps, "from everything, including detachment" (Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* 12). The second way in which the idea of the "explosion" of the book is important for the novel is that it stresses the process of the book's creation rather than the book as a final product. U., the anthropologist, McCarthy asserts, is a "stand in for the figure of the writer" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 51). But U., despite being a writer, gets very little writing done. Tasked with writing the mysterious project called the Great Report, he instead spends his time researching his private obsessions, such as a series of unexplained parachutist deaths. McCarthy, for his part, has said that distraction is necessary or productive for the writer.

> You hear these famous writers saying that they have to turn the internet off if they want to write and that the distraction introduced by our technological media is all bad, but I just think it's wonderful: this drifting around Wikipedia where you start looking up Mallarmé (for example)… In a way these continual interruptions are a very productive thing. (McCarthy, *Recessional* 37-38)

Writing, then, involves something outside of writing, as the novel emphasises the processes outside the book, which Blanchot calls a "noisy, silent bursting" (*The Writing of the Disaster* 124). The work itself has no centre, as U. suggests: his Great Report, it seems, is not contained in a document but instead in the photographs he pins in constellations around his room. To his boss, Tapio, who finds this confusing, he explains: "what powers the thing isn't some internal engine, since it doesn't have one but rather the way its structure, due to the way it's, you know, structured, generates kinetic energy as everything around it—in

this case, the air—passes through it" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 99). The way in which U. seems to stammer and resort to the filler phrase "you know" is telling of the fact that he himself is not sure what the Great Report is. This scene, through its focus on photographs as an extra-textual element making up the report and orbiting its absent centre, its lack of an "engine", attests to a method of creation outside the writing process. U.'s aim is to "produce a report that is as de-mediated as possible, so that the sources are themselves the final product" (Weaver 118). One hint of this is in U.'s thoughts about how the distinction between anthropological "field" and "home" work: "field" work involves "immersing yourself, sometimes at great personal risk, in a maelstrom of raw, unsorted happening", while "home" involves the creation of a work, "something meaningful" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 27). But U. thinks that these fields are not necessarily easy to separate: "Where (I asked, repeatedly) does home end and field begin?" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 27). The novel shows this in that it highlights not events or the event of the book itself but diversions and remainders, which is evident in U.'s description of the ethnographic book he has published. This book is itself a product of another process: it started "first as a doctoral thesis, then, two years later, with [U.] in [his] mid-thirties, as an actual book that real people could buy" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 26). U. observes that what "was generally found to be most notable about it" by readers was not the ethnographic research itself but the book's "frequent and expansive 'asides'" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 26-27). This observation contains a claim about literature: what is truly compelling about literature is not its content but its gaps and omissions.

The novel contains extended passages detailing U.'s procrastination. When he tries writing, his attempts focus not "the Report per se, but rather its schema, prolegomena,

what-have-you" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 107). But not even this gets written: later, no "Report ha[s] been commenced, no frame or outline set up" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 109). At one point, U. describes attempting to align "wallpaper-fragments" on his wall in order to form some semblance of a coherent whole (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 167). Yet this fails, as the images seem "to resist all incorporation into any useful or productive screed" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 167). As Blanchot writes in his essay "The Absence of the Book", to "write is to produce the absence of the work" (*The Infinite Conversation* 424), and McCarthy shares this idea of writing as a negative operation: "writing is this kind of not writing. Writing is the thing that makes writing impossible" (*Recessional* 38). The book itself, the Great Report itself, never appears. As U. tells Tapio, the Project "has to be conceived of as in a perpetual state of passage, not arrival—not *at*, but *between*" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 100).

The idea of the Great Report as being in the interim between two points stresses literature's liminality and messiness. As we have seen, *Satin Island* charts literature as a residual part of the creative process, not as its end goal. Milly Weaver has noted that there is an overlap between U.'s and McCarthy's writing processes. The novel "looks back to the thought process of its author" (Weaver 117). Like U., McCarthy's process involved extra-textual elements, "projecting images of oil spills onto huge white walls and gazing at them for days on end" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 221). Thus, *Satin Island* may be read as much like a report of the novel being written as like that novel itself. We also see this idea of art as the remainder of a process, not as a final product in the novel itself, as *Satin Island* uses Claude Lévi-Strauss as an example of a writer who became an anthropologist despite wanting to be something else. U. notes that Lévi-Strauss only became an anthropologist by

accident: Lévi-Strauss "spent most of his life wanting to be somebody or something else: a philosopher, say, or novelist, or poet" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 34). The novel uses Lévi-Strauss as a figurehead for the creative process as somebody who produces art by accident, art as remainder. Weaver notices that the novel is built around an "extended metaphor of anthropology as narrative" (115), which can be seen as a device to blur the lines between anthropology and literature, and fact and fiction. Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, McCarthy says, is "better as literature than almost all of the fiction that was produced in France at that time" (*Recessional* 49).[26] *Tristes Tropiques*, then, due to not strictly being an anthropological work, shares some quality of literature with fiction. This is presumably because of Lévi-Strauss's own background, which does not neatly fit into any category.

McCarthy says that he considers a "messy unresolved *between*" state to be the "space of literature", likely echoing Blanchot (McCarthy, *Recessional* 50). The novel contains allusions to literature as something intractable: U. describes his way of working on the Great Report as involving "scraps of paper stuck around [his] walls, with lines connecting them and annotations, legible only to [him], scrawled at their margins", which he calls "personal whimsy-dossiers" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 41). He describes how dossiers for clients are more orderly but also recognises that sometimes "a whimsy-dossier would suddenly and without warning overlap with a client-one, or with a previous whimsy- or client-one, or several of both, in quite unexpected and surprising ways, parities and conjunctions appearing between contexts that, on the surface of things, seemed to have nothing in common" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 41). This is an intimation of literature's

[26] McCarthy praises the work of Lévi-Strauss as "infused with meditations on the very act of writing – the blindspots that it opens up, the traps or pitfalls that it sets" ("The Death of Writing"). Again, we see literature as necessarily contending with the impossible.

indefinability. If U. is a kind of writer, then through U.'s actions McCarthy refuses to ascribe any definite qualities to literature, to say what literature is. Literature is always something to come; like the Great Report, is always in abeyance, perpetually "finding its form" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 45).

Literature is something that cannot be classified—U. describes how Claude Lévi-Strauss at one point wrote a play on the reverse side of his anthropological report: "On one side, scientific, evidence-based research; on the other, epic art" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 144). This thought makes him question the relation between the written and unwritten work: "If my Report had come to be completed, which side of the paper would it have been written on? More to the point: to which side does this not-Report you're reading now, this offslew of the real, unwritten manuscript, belong? Perhaps to neither side but to the middle: the damp, pulpy mass that forms the opaque body at whose outer limits, like two mirages, the others hover" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 144).[27] McCarthy stages a rejection of the literary object as a discrete entity, which becomes more pertinent if we consider that McCarthy reprises entire passages of *Satin Island* in his online article "The Death of Writing". The reiteration of entire passages is in this case clearly intentional—McCarthy here not only performs the INS's credo that art is nothing but the "repetition of the copy" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223) but this iteration of elements, of entire sentences causes the disappearance of the literary work as such, the work in itself and as itself.

Such a disappearance demands an answer to the question of what exactly *Satin Island* is. We can see this beginning, for instance, in the way in which it seems impossible

[27] McCarthy has called this mass the remainder, "the thing that's always there no matter how much you systematize it and think it; it's still just there, messy and unassimilable" (*Recessional* 70).

to say what genre it belongs to. It could be classified as a novel but also, to varying degrees, as a theoretical piece or a kind of report. Timon Beyes picks up on this: “A version of *Satin Island*’s cover already plays with the novel’s ‘open form’ and its shifting boundaries with other textual genres: Scattered across the page are both coloured dots of different shapes and sizes and possible ‘qualifiers’ or denominators of what the book ‘is’, all of them crossed out: ‘~~a treatise~~’, ‘~~an essay~~’, ‘~~a report~~’, ‘~~a confession~~’, ‘~~a manifesto~~’. Only ‘a novel’ is (momentarily?) not crossed out” (230). The suggestion might be that *Satin Island* is all of these things, and none of them. One possibility here is that *Satin Island* is a kind of article, since it contains many of the same elements as McCarthy’s essay “The Death of Writing” but this is restrictive and ignores the novel’s other features.[28] Perhaps *Satin Island* is a report of some type—a report of the failed writing of the Great Report, a remainder of that project. To borrow Wayne Stables’s words, the book “fails to reach the conclusion its protagonist desires, yet its author leaves us with the residue of the attempt” (48).[29] The literary work as such, in Stables’s reading of Thomas Bernhard’s *Auslöschung*, is a virtual “gaping void” (47). This recalls Blanchot, whose writings suggest that since every text is by necessity incomplete, all texts are “always already a waiting for what has yet to occur” (Hill 114). In a similar vein, the text of the novel at one point implies that U. could, in the future, produce more books like *Satin Island*, more remainders. When he talks about the Company’s ventilation system, U. says that it “deserves a book all of its own” (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 17). Because of this, *Satin Island* certainly reads like a collection of outtakes. It is interesting to note that McCarthy has voiced his interest in “outtakes”—leftovers, in

[28] Duncan has, interestingly, referred to the novel as an “essay” (8).
[29] McCarthy has alluded to U. as being “almost like a Thomas Bernhard character” (McCarthy, Corby and Callus 139).

effect: what remains from the creative process. He claims that outtakes may constitute the real work of art: of Andy Warhol, he says that "He thinks that outtakes of movies are what things should really be about" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 63). With outtakes effectively becoming the work in the absence of an ideal, literature, as we have seen, dissolves.

Living On

The non-presence of the Book, which renders literature a mere spectral remainder, poses the question of where literature is to go. We shall see that this uncertainty around where literature "goes" is precisely what allows it to exist and exist on. With the Great Report established as un-writeable, U. decides to visit Staten Island after having had a mysterious dream about it earlier in the novel. At first, he views this visit as a potential source of meaning, expecting an event harboring "a prospect, with an overwhelming promise, of significance" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 204). He anticipates that "something [will] happen if [he goes] to Staten Island" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 204). While he waits for the Staten Island ferry, he feels like he is on the "verge of something rich, strange and miraculous" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 210). However, he soon registers that there would be no point in him going to Staten Island. At this juncture, the novel rejects an ultimate meaning, in the same way that a work of literature as such cannot be completed. U. narrates this thought process as follows:

> To go to Staten Island—*actually* go there—would have been profoundly meaningless. What would it, in reality, have solved, or resolved? Nothing. What tangible nesting space would I have discovered there, and for what concrete purpose? None. Not to go there was, of course, profoundly

> meaningless as well. And so I found myself, as I waded back through the relentless stream of people, struggling just to stay in the same place, suspended between two types of meaninglessness. Did I choose the right one? I don't know. (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 213)

The failure of the appearance of the Book, the ruined Great Report, is mirrored by U.'s lack of resolution in his personal life. This is not to say that U. remains in this state, because he *does* make a decision, yet it is a decision that opens the text's future up to ambiguity. U. decides not to go to Staten Island: "I didn't let myself be carried through the doors, though: at the last instant, I held back" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 212). At the very end of the novel, he goes "back into the city" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 217). McCarthy has stressed the importance of U. seeming to go back into the corporate world, the necessity that U. "continues to be this Kafka-like bug at the heart of the machine, the glitch" (*Recessional* 58). The novel's ending, if we can call it that, implies a possible future for the narrative and therefore a future for literature. The novel, with its suspended, cliff-hanger conclusion, enacts the "sense of incompletion" that McCarthy considers "incredibly important" for literature (*Recessional* 69). With U.'s future in an indeterminate state, the end of the novel, like Mallarmé's Book, is held in wait. *Satin Island*, then, resists a clear message, which is, for McCarthy, what literature must do—perhaps nothing at all:

> I never make work that's polemic, or that has a message. That's not what art's there for. What's genuinely radical about good art is that it detonates a kind of ambiguity-bomb at the heart of the polis. ("The Q&A")

Literature is then not the Great Report, not some "great momentous work" but rather the messy set of signals, as McCarthy might say, that happens around it (McCarthy, *Satin*

Island 107), while the work as such is in abeyance. But the uncertainty that literature finds itself in as a result of the catastrophe that is the absence of the Book is precisely what allows it to carry on. Literature is continual, it exists to further its own survival, and the vagueness we find at the end of *Satin Island* is there to secure the living-on of literature. As Derrida would say, literature "neither lives nor dies, it lives on" ("Living On" 129).

The idea of literature "living on" allows it to move beyond the confines of a "work", which manifests itself if we consider McCarthy's artistic output outside of his novels. As I have noted, he is not just a novelist but also General Secretary of the International Necronautical Society, an art group whose documents, declarations and events show many of the same concerns as his fiction. This designates his literary project as not restricted to the form of the novel but maybe rather, as Mallarmé envisioned the Book, as a kind of performance: "It will be a book, but it also won't; it will be on and off the page" (McCarthy, *Recessional* 67). McCarthy has expressed an interest in "taking the text beyond the text", discussing an exhibition based on *Satin Island* in which "a set designer is building an office as a kind of functional, or at least semi-functional space, and it will be covered in the diagrams and associative paranoid maps that U., *Satin Island*'s corporate-anthropologist protagonist, makes" (McCarthy, Corby and Callus 137). The "idea is to try to tease out a certain logic, not of the book, but *around* the book", McCarthy tells us (McCarthy, Corby and Callus 137). *Around* the book: in saying this, he seems to speak precisely of the instability of the idea of the book—and implies that the book, or the text as such, is something that cannot truly be captured. He elaborates:

> So this would be a good example of a multi-authored and (most importantly) unpredictable network of unfolding interpretations around a

> text – it's not like there is a fixed thing that is being represented. It is about creating a forum for a set of interventions. Within parameters – it's not a free-for-all. And then, at the ICA, the book re-enters that environment as an embedded text because people can buy the book as the 'Annual General Report' of the company whose office they are supposedly entering. So the book-as-object re-enters as a fiction within this bigger fiction which has itself emerged from the book: it's a bit like a Möbius strip eating its own tail. (McCarthy, Corby and Callus 138)

We see again that McCarthy mounts resistance to the book as singular object—much in the same way that it seems impossible to say to what "genre" *Satin Island* belongs, if it is a report, a novel, or something altogether different. Instead, when talking about the INS installation, McCarthy describes the novel as forming the basis of an extra-textual event. The text, then, as Derrida has said, is "no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces" ("Living On" 110). Literature, then, is precisely about the "blind spots" that McCarthy considers so important, and the literary work exists not to provide answers but to open up networks and questions. McCarthy suggests this when, in the Acknowledgements section of *Satin Island*, he recognises the display of "hospitality from the Center for Fiction in New York, who lent [him] a spacious office in which to sit and think about the general impossibility of writing a novel about the general impossibility of etc" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 221). He proposes two things with this statement: that the work *as such* is impossible, and that the process—

to “sit and think” (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 221)—takes precedence over the final product. The ultimate outside of literature is the literary work itself due to its own impossibility.

Conclusion

McCarthy's corpus of fiction theorises Blanchot's disaster as the unthinkable at the root of the literary project. His novels show a preoccupation with catastrophe, with the scattering and rupture of meaning and the self. As the International Necronautical Society contends, there is a necessary failure inherent in serious literature: recall its claim that art is the "consequence and experience of failed transcendence" (McCarthy, Critchley et al., "Joint Statement on Inauthenticity" 223). The chapters of this dissertation have suggested that this failure is found in literature's inherent representational limits. We have seen this in McCarthy's obsession with the remainder, or what Derrida would call the trace. McCarthy's novels, while stylistically distinct from one another, all share this concern: his project, I wager, is an attempt to write this remainder, as a figure of the impossible, to approach that which escapes assimilation. As we have seen, the logic of the remainder conditions language, ontology, and the literary object.

Ultimately, what is at stake for McCarthy, as for Blanchot, is an aesthetics of anti-realism, one that pays attention to the mysterious quality of literature—McCarthy's work, by letting literature be a "question", as Blanchot puts it ("Literature" 21), insistently makes ambiguous its identity as literature. When McCarthy invokes Derrida on the idea of the secret—that "kept in reserve by any text … is a secret 'eternally unreadable, absolutely indecipherable, even refusing itself to any promise of deciphering or hermeneutic'"—this seems to sum up McCarthy's literary investments (qtd. in McCarthy, *Tintin* 146). Literature, as Derrida tells us, contains a "secret whose possibility assures the possibility of literature" (*Given Time* 153). This secret will remain concealed. Literature will live on.

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