

Zero Degree Everything: An Interview with Tom McCarthy

NICHOLAS HUBER

In this interview, Tom McCarthy considers his relationship to the novel and its history as a form, including the changing conditions of the contemporary literary world that have allowed for his existence within it. He provides a schematic for understanding the various modes of his own work and his interfacing with a set of “displacements” running through and around various “vanguards.” Along the way, he discusses dead media, money, sound, post-Snowden politics as a literary problem, and the financial utility of *Finnegans Wake*.

NICHOLAS HUBER: *How did you approach composing the talk for the Society for Novel Studies?*¹

TOM MCCARTHY: Well it's rather intimidating. I'm aware that I'll be in the company of people who dedicate their lives to thinking through questions around the novel in relation to global space, late capitalism, and colonial and postcolonial histories with an ever-increasingly sophisticated array of conceptual tools at their disposal. I really have nothing to tell them. I'm like a symptom, not the solution. So I thought I'd place a few symptoms on the table rather than offer any analyses; that's my approach.

NH: *The way you frame it there makes it sound like you think of yourself as strictly a “practitioner,” and I'm not sure that's accurate.*

TM: No, you're right. We're part of the same language community, if you like. There is no pure practice that's separate from a critical reflection or theory or whatever you want to call it, and I don't think there ever has been. This is not a postmodern state of affairs. I mean, if you read Sterne, half of *Tristram Shandy* is critical reflection. But at the same time, I think maybe the psychoanalytic model is kind of interesting in this respect, because there is a difference between analysis, on the one hand, and the production of symptoms on the other, even if they're drawing on the same reserve of language and experience and allusion and the same conditions of possibility. I think there is a kind of modal difference.

NH: *What is it that writing a novel makes available for you that writing criticism or, for example, a long essay on Tintin doesn't?*

TM: Well, the book on Tintin I wrote at the same time I was working on my novel *C*, shortly after I'd written *Remainder* but in fact before I'd published it, and I was

¹ On May 13, 2016, McCarthy presented a talk titled “Vanity's Residue” at the 2016 Society for Novel Studies Biennial Conference at the University of Pittsburgh. That talk is published in this issue under the title “Vanity's Residue.”

coming at lots of the same issues, situations, themes that I'd worked through in those two books: trauma, family histories, technology, empire, politics, violence, and so on. The Tintin book is an analytical book even if it's playful, but you're right that these things blur into one another. I love Peter Mendelsund's cover design for the hardcover of my novel *Satin Island*, where he has not just the grid but all these words on it, like "A Memoir," "An Essay," "A Manifesto," and they're all crossed out, and the "A Novel" label is just one of those terms. It's not in larger or bolder print, it's just the only one that's not crossed out. So it doesn't mean the novel is the thing that that book positively is, rather that the novel is the thing that it least *isn't* among all those other terms. It's kind of a memoir, a manifesto, a confession, but it's not really any of those, and I suppose *the novel* is what you call that space of unresolved in-betweenness which is different from other types of in-betweenness, maybe.

NH: *I'm glad you mentioned the cover designs, because each one almost seems as if you've personally selected it. Is that the case?*

TM: No, I'm just very, very lucky to get Peter Mendelsund assigned to my books every single time, because the guy is a genius. This is someone who, in his spare time, is a concert-level pianist. And he's incredibly well-read. When he read the manuscript of *C*, he was virtually the only one who could see exactly what I'd been reading; he said, "OK, you've been reading Abraham and Torok, the Wolf Man, Virginia Woolf's *In Between the Acts* . . ." He saw where I'd stolen it all from instantly. And he's brilliant at distilling and framing whatever's going on in the books. I did actually want it to say, "A Manifesto," "A Confession," and so on, but I'd imagined it on the inside page, and he brought it up to the cover and did that wonderful kind of crossing out and laying it out on a map.

NH: *The manifesto is interesting, because it seems so tied to a particular historical moment and yet there has been a resurgence of more and less sincere manifestos in the last twenty years or so. In 1999 you released your own manifesto, for the International Necronautical Society, which you then proceeded to actually institute, appointing artists and philosophers to the First Committee and publishing other texts—proclamations, denunciations, and so on.*

TM: I'm really interested in dead media, like reel-to-reel tape or things like that. Crypts. I mean, all media are crypts, but dead media even more so since they don't work anymore. And the manifesto in a perhaps less material but equally kind of real way would be a wonderful example of dead media, since it so belongs to that early twentieth-century moment of political upheaval and artistic avant-gardes which align themselves either with the far Left or the far Right, in the case of Marinetti and so on; and that raises the question: what is the afterlife of the manifesto as a kind of defunct piece of media? That makes it doubly interesting for me. It's kind of like Duchamp's bicycle wheel, where it doesn't work as a bicycle wheel anymore, and by using it he triggers all these anxieties about meaning that wouldn't be triggered if the bicycle wheel were just doing its job and making a

bicycle go 'round. It doesn't work, and that kind of dysfunction actually sets it to work in terms of generating anxieties towards meaning. Same with the manifesto.

NH: *There's a tension that emerges here between, on the one hand, an interest in understanding modernism, for example, as a less restrained historical period and instead as something like a disposition, attitude, or a mode that is available from maybe Shakespeare's time to the present day, and, on the other hand, as the very real obsolescence of forms and media that are bound to material history. This is maybe an impossible question to answer . . .*

TM: Yes, it is an impossible question. I mean, you're right, and at the same time there is something patently ridiculous in distributing a manifesto in—well, 1999 is when I distributed the one for the International Necronautical Society—as though it were 1909. The context is not the same. By analogy: We could say we have always had technology and transport technology, but you'd look silly if in 1950 you turned up to a motorcar race with a horse. Nothing is categorically new; and yet, and yet . . . There is a kind of anachronism. In 1909 or even at the time of the Surrealist or Situationist manifestos, there is a direct, earnest engagement in politics that the manifesto is carrying out. The context in which I wrote that INS manifesto was late 1990s, end of communism, the rise of general neoliberal capitalism as the end of history and as the natural move beyond politics: history is over, politics is over, et cetera. And also the more direct influence was when I lived in Berlin in the 1990s, the group Neue Slowenische Kunst, who came out of Ljubljana in ex-Yugoslavia, and they were also this kind of semiparodic assemblage of an avant-garde with recognizable avant-garde tropes like manifestos and flags and uniforms, and they had their official philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, and their official rock band, Laibach, and they came and declared a state in Berlin, so to see them in the Volksbühne you had to go and get your passport stamped with a visa. So this is what really inspired me about them, that they were kind of playing out this idea of posthistory in a way that was absolutely saturated with irony, but in a way, it's no less political for that; it just has a different, less direct, more circuitous relationship with its political moment. Especially when its political moment is one of irony and subterfuge and nonpoliticalness. A more direct influence was the London-based group the AAA, the Association of Autonomous Astronauts, which, again—they would release all these manifestos about outer space, saying, "Why is NASA sending the military industrial complex, why isn't it sending poets, why aren't we doing sex research in space?" And they produced documentation that they'd squatted the MIR space station, they'd done sex experiments, and they meticulously produced this documentation as though it were scientific reports. I mean of course it's silly, but they also had all come out of media degrees, they knew their media history and their history of the avant-gardes, but they were also involved in Reclaim the Streets, Women against Rape, Cyclists against Traffic—those kinds of political engagements in contemporary urban space. They'd organized three-sided football games in Greenwich Park, which is a move directly from the Situationist playbook. So I don't think irony and some kind of political consciousness are at all contradictory, especially not in our era.

NH: *In what way do you understand your own work—the novels, in particular—as ironic?*

TM: Well, I think it's ironic in the sense that Paul de Man understands irony. One version of irony would be the kind of smug, self-satisfied smirk that so much of Brit Art has. You know, a kind of twee little repetition of Duchamp for which you get a million from Saatchi which you then go and spend on cocaine. That's a version of irony that I don't find particularly appealing. The other version of irony is the type that de Man in that essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" teases out of Baudelaire and Bergson, in which irony would name a total, radical *décalage* within experience: an unfixable split between action and consciousness, the subject and the world. Which is kind of subversive; it's utterly disruptive. Those things are both called irony, but it seems to me they're very different. I hadn't read that Paul de Man essay when I wrote *Remainder*, but I read it a couple of years later (when I was writing the Tintin book, actually), and thought, Yes! That's what I meant, that's what I was trying to do in *Remainder*.

NH: *This same kind of temporal opening that you're referring to in the latter form of irony is treated from a different angle in your essay published as "Recessionary, or The Time of the Hammer." In that, recessionality is an alternative temporal mode that opens inside the dominant temporality, which is to say juridical clock time. And Remainder, from this perspective, I think stages a great political problem, which is that the recess from that dominant order of time—the rhythms of productive and reproductive labor—the recess is already accounted for by that dominant order . . .*

TM: Yes, like Google says, you've got to waste 20 percent of your time just day-dreaming and goofing around—because that's when you'll dream up something amazing, and we'll own it!

NH: *And that's what I think you get in the beginning of your recent introduction to Kafka's Letter to the Father, in which you point out that this recess is precisely the time when, for example, interest accumulates.*

TM: Right, that's what Naphta says in *The Magic Mountain* to Hans Castorp. You know, interest just means the monetization of the interval. It's what the *Merchant of Venice* is about also.

NH: *I was thinking that it's in this way that the reenactor/narrator of Remainder is a complete failure, again and again.*

TM: Because he never gets it right?

NH: *It's not that he never gets it right, it's that the excessive temporality he's working to open up is always anticipated and quashed by, for example, the volatile temporality of his financial investments, which spike and crash, or the procedural structuration of the bank at the end, which will have already had plans in place for the bank robbery scenario and will just carry on past the moment of violence. So maybe this opens onto a larger question about all your books, which is that even as they discreetly treat political questions, they remain suspicious of an outright political moment. Another example would be Madison's retraining*

and disillusionment in Satin Island: she starts out as a dissident, but after the demonstrations in Genoa and brutal police crackdown, she loses that radicalism.

TM: Yes, this is true. The revolutionaries, the first thing they want to do is smash all the clocks and create a year zero, and in fact this afternoon I'm going to talk about the project Rod Dickinson and I did, blowing up the Royal Observatory in London's Greenwich Park, where all time in the world is measured from. We remade the event that Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* is based on—this attempt to blow up the building and, by extension, time—by finding and reprinting and displaying all the newspapers from the weeks following the attempt in 1894. But we changed sentences in them here and there and inserted doctored photographs so as to remake the failed attempt into a success. In reality, the anarchist blew himself up ten feet from the observatory; but in our version, you see and read accounts of the building blazing to the ground. We made it that he *had* blown up the international time line. In documenting this event, we took this failure to the point where it succeeds. Revolution and time have this intimate closeness in creating this new year zero, an absolute now. And in *Remainder* that's what the hero wants—in fact, in all my books, there are all these characters in search of an absolute present tense that they can never quite find. They're always in the space of deferral. And I guess in one sense you could see that as a kind of political failure. Madison goes to Genoa to bring down capitalism and ends up entering this weird David Lynch, Kafka kind of labyrinth of weirdness.

NH: *Almost like fascist training camp.*

TM: It is. I was reading a lot of Sade. For that scene, but also for the whole of *Remainder*. But this is also the big political point in Kafka, and it's what [Gilles] Deleuze picks up on; it's not like in *Star Wars*, where you have the Death Star and there's this one point that if you can get the bomb there the whole thing blows up. In Kafka, the room is not the room, it's just the antechamber to the corridor to the other corridor beside the other atrium, waiting room, et cetera. And I love the way in Lynch, the films are always structured around this inner control room, and when you get to the control room there is always a telephone or a relay to somewhere else. So, the control room isn't a control room, it's just taking orders from somewhere else, and even if you got to that somewhere else there would always be somewhere *else*. What Madison's coming up against in that episode is that she's bringing an older model of political resistance, perhaps a slightly naive model, dare we say, and it just gets shipwrecked on networked supermodernity. I mean, there is no emperor within late capitalism. There is only the network. You kill the king, and it doesn't matter: it's not the king, it's the network. But at the end of *Satin Island*, U. is faced with this option that I lifted straight from Balzac's *Pere Goriot*. Balzac's character Rastignac stands on the hillside, and my guy stands at the port, but they're both at the edge of the city and could just go, "Fuck it, I'm going to leave it all behind and start again." But he doesn't; Rastignac turns back: "A nous deux" (me and you). He goes back into the machine and he carries all that unresolved anxiety back into the heart of it. He's like Dostoyevsky's underground man, whom Dostoyevsky describes as an insect in our system. I'm sure Kafka read that. You know, that idea of the bug,

the glitch: the operator itself is a bug, a piece of a glitch software. If the right conditions presented themselves, it could just erupt and blow the whole thing up; but they never quite do . . .

NH: *They never erupt in the way that would be transformative but they erupt all the time in ways that are expected and predictable, ways that the order even relies upon. This is the story of 2008, among others.*

TM: Right, that's Naomi Klein's point about disaster capitalism, Katrina. Yeah, she's right, absolutely.

NH: *Could you speak a bit more to the connections between Remainder and Satin Island? The man in the labyrinthine basement with Madison in Satin Island, for example, reads as a resetting of Remainder's reenactor.*

TM: Well, Sade is really important to me, *One Hundred Twenty Days of Sodom* in particular. It seems so contemporary, especially after Abu Ghraib and the whole idea of the state of exception that [Giorgio] Agamben talks about. In Sade, they go extraterritorial; it's all about extraordinary rendition. They take these people out of the legal bounds of France in order to do these ritualized actions, and it's all about repetition; so the golden rule is nothing may be done unless it's already been done. They have some prostitute tell them, "One time I was screwing these three guys and one of them was on top of me," and then the people listening, the four guys who have paid for it, can go, "Oh that bit's good, let's redo it—but let's change it a little bit." So it's about modulating repetition, and they use all these kidnapped teenagers as extras in their endless movie. And they almost algorithmically run through all the possible combinations of perversity until everyone's dead. But it's also about the space of narrative, it's all about narrative; you're in this space of secondhandness, of something else being narrated. The prostitute does the talking, and within that space of narrative, for the privileged four libertines the game move is available to go, "That's good, let's do it," and then the others are just victims, they just get fucked and killed. That seems so contemporary and quite persuasive as a way of staging a conversation that's going on in global politics right now. Maybe that sounds a bit extreme. I mean, now I can say post–Abu Ghraib, Sade makes sense and reenactments and so on, and that's not untrue, but at the same time when I had the idea for *Remainder* I wasn't directly thinking about any of that stuff. I just had this idea: wouldn't it be fun if you could reconstruct this moment, where would you stop? Wouldn't it be fun if you could reconstruct the street and its events, but then continue scaling that upward, even to the point of everyone dying? It's kind of more intuitive.

And, of course, that logic of authority and repetition is something that, since being a child, I can identify with. You reenact the goal from the weekend football game, and you get your younger sibling to be the goalkeeper while you're Pelé or Kevin Keegan or Zidane. Or you reenact the scene from *Star Wars* where you're Luke Skywalker. Many kids can relate to that. And the kind of aesthetics of the action replay in sports, which I find absolutely fascinating. But a lot of this reasoning is quite post hoc. Which doesn't mean that those implicit structures aren't

implicit when you do it, but you only come to realize it later. So, to answer your question, I started *Satin Island* with a delay in an airport caused by this plane doing the figure of eight, which is an obvious allusion to the end of *Remainder*, and I was stuck writing. I got that bit about the delay up and running, and then I found it incredibly difficult to write, didn't know where to go next and kept going down one avenue and it didn't work, writing something and it didn't work. It wanted to become a satire or something that I didn't want it to be. So, in terms of method, the method is you just intuit your way towards certain things. And then of course you read a lot to give structure to that as it starts actually getting some energy. But it's quite organic—or, not organic, but you make it up as you go along.

NH: *Is that true for publication as well? You've said somewhere that C, for example, is disguised in a particular way that you thought might allow you some kind of purchase in the publishing world while you were waiting for Remainder to be picked up.*

TM: That's true, when I started C I had not found a publisher for *Remainder*, nor had I found a publisher for *Men in Space*, a version of which I wrote before *Remainder*. And then because C on the surface of it looks like a nineteenth-century bildungsroman, I thought *some* publisher's going to be fooled by this and agree to print it. But then by the time it was actually finished, things had changed, *Remainder* had opened everything up, and I could publish what I wanted. And writing C, I wasn't interested in writing a nineteenth-century bildungsroman; I was already sampling Marinetti and thinking about new media. So, it's a lot less strategic. After the books are written, it seems like there was a plan, but there really isn't; you just do what you can at the time. When I began C, I was doing this INS art project at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, where we had this radio transmission unit. It was modeled on [Jean] Cocteau's *Orphée*, it was modeled on William Burroughs's cut-ups, and I was reading a lot about the figure of the crypt and the relationship between new media and death and practices of mourning. This led me on this serendipitous route to think about [Howard] Carter, Egypt, and Tutankhamun, and then suddenly the idea for C came. But I could never have plotted that route, and I still find this is the case.

NH: *In your Tintin book there's a chapter organized around the flows of money. Money as a concept would seem to coordinate so many of your concerns: transmission, reception, encryption, problems of authenticity and deferral. And yet the only time money comes to the fore in your novels is in a few moments of Remainder.*

TM: Well, in C, Serge is tuning in to stock market prices when he's going through the radio dial, and I guess in *Satin Island*, U. is making money. He's making money for the man by repurposing critical theory and anthropology and Deleuze and everything else, but you're right. It's only in *Remainder* that it comes to the fore. The thing I'm just beginning to work on now is—I've just become interested in time and motion studies, but to cut a long story short, I haven't really properly begun it yet, but I'm looking at this correlation between the type of algorithms used in sports analysis and very similar ones used in developing financial derivatives. In

fact, lots of hedge fund people go to work in sports analysis and vice versa. It's all about patterns of movement and analysis of data. And temporality.

NH: *You wrote that piece for the Guardian that said a figure like Joyce today, if one existed . . .*

TM: Would be working for Google! Right. The *Guardian*, they wanted a sensationalist line. That was maybe a bit overstated, overprovocative.

NH: *I actually thought, maybe it was sensational, but at the same time it was only almost there. It really should have been a hedge fund; they're writing the world.*

TM: Oh, totally. Here's a funny story. I have a friend called Finn Fordham who's a Joyce scholar. I bumped into him somewhere and he was tearing his hair out because in order to justify his department's funding he had to write a document for these idiots, the accountants that run the university, like, "Why is it useful to teach *Finnegans Wake*," and he was going, "What the fuck can I tell them? What possible use has it got?" But the next night or two days later, I'm having a drink with my brother-in-law, who works in a hedge fund, and he'd been moved to recruiting, and he said, "I will never hire someone who's done a business degree. They're useless because they think in series. I like hiring English graduates because they think in parallel, they can think in terms of constellated, correlative sequences and systems," which is exactly what *Finnegans Wake* is! It's exactly what *Finnegans Wake* trains you to do, so I wanted to connect them together, to say, hey, Finn, here's your argument, this is exactly what you need to say: read Joyce because you'll be a really good hedge fund manager afterward. Which, incidentally, Joyce is aware of. *Finnegans Wake* is infused with the language of stock markets as well as monetary appreciation, depreciation, credit, and debt.

NH: *In the introduction to Letter to the Father, you emphasize that Kafka insisted to his father that the time he spent writing was not redeemable to the latter's work ethic but was totally, shamefully unproductive. And I think what we've just agreed on is that this situation has now been reversed, that writing is one of the most economically productive activities you can do and everyone does it all the time. You're still filling out bureaucratic forms, doing your taxes, writing memos and reports and so on, but now as in *Satin Island*, production and consumption are slowly, historically, becoming enmeshed and confused—from this perspective of writing at least. Like a human centipede of textual, cultural, ideological regeneration.*

TM: I suppose people younger than us are just blogging fifteen hours a day. They're free content providers. Yes, absolutely. This is what really interests me about digital culture. Politics becomes a very literary problem, especially in the wake of Edward Snowden. Democratic life boils down to the fact that every single thing we do leaves a mark, it is inscribed on some surface, it creates an archive, a book. And then the question of politics becomes a question of who gets to read what and who doesn't get to read what. These are basic questions of legibility.

NH: *Speaking of legibility, I wanted to ask another question related to your talk here today, given that it is a keynote at the Society for Novel Studies conference. A few years ago, after Remainder had been passed on by a number of publishers, you quipped that it used to be that you had an art career that you didn't want and no literary career that you did want. It seems that you now emphatically have the literary career, and I'm wondering what you think are the conditions that have allowed for that change.*

TM: Good question. First, I'd separate the publishing world from academia. I think academia is a genuinely interesting space for critical reflection about literature, and I think that's a good thing and something that academia should hang onto. And beware the bloody creative writing program! I think the merging of English departments with creative writing departments threatens that criticality, given that most creative writing programs are just bringing writing in line with the demands of the market, trying to turn out something that is pliant and digestible. This should be quarantined away from a zone of critical reflection, which is always difficult and subversive, inherently by its very nature subversive. Even if you're studying Renaissance philology, it's still significant that this space is somehow configured differently than a market-driven space. But I was always surprised that I couldn't publish *Men in Space* and *Remainder* when I wrote them, because they seemed to me extremely literary novels in the sense that they're clearly plugging into a kind of literary gene pool. *Remainder* is so dependent on [Samuel] Beckett, [J. G.] Ballard, *Tristram Shandy*, and anything that involves reenactment, like Hamlet when he reenacts his father's death. Those things are so clearly pulsing through it that I thought this is just a straight-up novel. And then you interface with the contemporary publishing industry, which has become a very illiterate space in the sense that it's not actually a space in which literary history is resonating. It's become much more of a middlebrow, commercial market—the print wing of the entertainment industry. This was definitely the case in the UK in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and I think it still is, in the UK at least. The legacy of literary modernism and maybe of literary history tout court is being played out in the art world. Artists, they've all read Beckett and Stein, they've all read the *nouveau roman*, they've all read Burroughs, whereas most publishers haven't. So that was kind of odd. I found a complete stonewalling in the publishing world, and then all my friends who were artists were passing *Remainder* on to other people, and they just totally got it. And then the woman to whom I owe so much, Clémentine Deliss, published *Remainder* in her Metronome Press edition. She was doing a curating residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, and she discovered Olympia Press, from the 1950s, which published Beckett and Burroughs and Nabokov and made its proceeds from porn. She wanted to kind of reenact this as a semi-ironic curatorial project by publishing unpublishable novels, distributing them through the art world, and commissioning porn as well. I don't know if you've ever seen the first edition of *Remainder*, but it looks exactly like an Olympia Press edition, typographically and everything. Full of typos as well. So, again, through this curatorial project, it was really the art world that became a home to me as a writer. And then it was America. Marty Asher at Vintage in New York read *Remainder* after Clémentine published it, because it was getting a lot of press as well. Marty got wind of it and decided to

publish it in a mass-market edition, so then I was kind of slotted into the conventional publishing world too. But I think America's a bit different. Within big corporate publishers like the Random House Group, they're publishing not just my work but people like Ben Marcus, Ben Lerner, Shelley Jackson, and they're finding sizable audiences for them. The publishing world in America, for all its super-corporatism, is actually providing quite a healthy environment for—I don't want to say "avant-garde"—vanguard forms of literary endeavor to take place.

NH: *I'm curious about that appellation, avant-gardist, and the distinction you're making here between avant-garde and vanguard.*

TM: Well, this goes back to what we were saying about manifestos a few minutes ago. For me, *avant-garde* names a historical set of possibilities from the early twentieth century. But as Alain Robbe-Grillet said in the 1950s, the term *avant-garde* is now used by conservative journalists just to try and sideline writing that's not middlebrow. Robbe-Grillet's writing is utterly classical. It's where Sophocles ends up, in an Alain Robbe-Grillet novel, not in a Philip Roth novel or whatever. So in a strict intellectual sense, someone like Robbe-Grillet is actually totally the mainstream, he's the trunk inheritor of a literary tradition; but at the same time, I think it's legitimate to call someone like him vanguard because he's genuinely working out ways of—I don't want to say "new" because that inscribes it within this narrative of progress, which it's not—but I think he's finding dynamic forms of possibility that maybe have not yet been found, and there's something important about that. Which doesn't mean having fewer commas or fewer full stops and more breathless sentences. This is the problem with creative writing programs. They spend an afternoon teaching you Beckett as a style rather than as a whole ontological set of disturbances, and then people write rather boring novels, very conservative novels but breathless and with fewer full stops, and they think that's avant-garde. Avant-garde becomes a style. This is a very reactionary turn. Look at someone like Kafka: there's nothing particularly experimental—in the novels at least—in the prose. They're very conventional sentences. He doesn't experiment with words like Joyce does, and yet he's utterly vanguard; there's something absolutely radical about Kafka which I would call vanguard rather than avant-garde.

NH: *The most visible tendency in the contemporary novel right now, I think, is this kind of life-writing, memoir fiction. Is it surprising that the sensibility you're affirming as vanguard has a home in this climate?*

TM: I suppose if life-writing is wedded to an ideology of authenticity and self-expression, it's not interesting—but then look at Proust. That's life-writing, and it's totally about disjunctions within language, signs and representation, all that funky stuff that we're interested in. Or Michel Leiris, for example. Or Tao Lin, I think, is really interesting, or Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti. On the surface of it, they're just writing about "what I did last year," but they're actually writing about networks and capitalism and so on. I think the subject matter itself is almost secondary to

what kind of ontological, epistemological, and ideological displacements are going on. That's what would make something interesting and dynamic—or vanguard—or not.

NH: *Let me finally ask you about sound, which comes at the question of materiality from a different direction in that sound seems not to leave a mark. But, to the contrary, your novels, in particular, register sound abundantly and self-consciously.*

TM: C is very much about sound. The protagonist spends a lot of time just listening to ssssssskkkhhhhxxx, just static on his headphones. But I see sound as writing. I'm a total materialist. So with Joyce there's a whole bunch of people, mainly who haven't read *Finnegans Wake*, who go, "Oh, to understand it, to appreciate it, you need to hear it. It's not about the text; it's all about the music," which is total bullshit. In fact it's all about textual process and reading and writing and hieroglyphics and decoding and transcribing material marks, and the sonority of it comes out of that. It's like this idea of the "grain of the voice," as in [Roland] Barthes. Rilke has this beautiful—I don't know whether to call it an essay or a prose poem—called "Primal Noise," "Ur-Geräusch." He remembers in school he had a good teacher who showed them that you can put a record needle on anything, you could put it on this table, and it would play. You could drag it down the street. Later, when he's a medical student and he sees a skull, he thinks of playing the groove of the skull. The point is that sound in that situation is the product of a trace, of a mark, of reading, of a stylus going through a groove, and I think even when we're talking about sound over the air or through headphones, the air has been marked. The air has been scored. This is not a metaphor, it has quite literally been scored into lines and waves. So I think there is a total, scriptural materiality about early radio, and for me, sound in its entirety is a subcategory of writing. I'm a total Derridean absolutist in that sense. Everything comes down to the trace.

NH: *Right, not only is sound the result of a trace but the traces it leaves are then . . .*

TM: Oh yeah, they inhabit space forever. There are aliens listening to 1930s radio broadcasts as we speak. It's this endless kind of archive to which schizophrenia corresponds very well. It's like what Caliban's describing in *The Tempest*: the air is full of sounds and sweet airs.

NH: *Which makes it very striking that each of your novels ends in silence.*

TM: Yes. A dribble out into silence. Sonic dribbles at the end of C. [Pauses to listen to the café radio.] AC/DC. Brilliant! "Highway to Hell." You should put this in the . . . somehow have a sidebar to say what tune is playing.

NH: *I'll request a hyperlink for the online version so people can listen to it as they read.*

TM: So, even at the end of C, when you've got this sonic explosion that kind of surges through him [Serge], that blows his circuitry, the very final image is the wake inscribed in the water that the boat makes and the detritus, the residue thrown into the water. It's about an inscription on the water. And in *Remainder* there's the vapor

trail, which is moving and shifting and maybe disappearing. And all the wakes of the boats in *Satin Island* at the end. It's a tricky one. Silence would be a kind of degree zero of audibility, legibility, writability, everything. And then the book's over. Then you're done.

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