



Erin Hartman

TOM MCCARTHY

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an interview with  
T O M M C C A R T H Y

Conducted by Matthew Hart and Aaron Jaffe, with  
Jonathan Eburne

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**B**orn in London in 1969, Tom McCarthy is a well-known operator in the world of conceptual and performance art and, most famously, the author of three novels: *Remainder* (Metronome, 2005), *Men in Space* (Alma, 2007), and *C* (Cape, 2010). He has also written a nonfiction book, *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (Granta, 2006), the title of which combines a fan's homage to Hergé with the suggestion that it will unlock the dark truth of the literary enterprise. This is a typical McCarthy gesture. Happily obsessed with the notion that literature, like all forms of transmission or communication, is inherently occulted and cryptographic, his writings combine big ideas with a Beckettian sense—repeated often by his philosopher friend and collaborator Simon Critchley—that, in the end, artistic meaning amounts to very little, almost nothing.

Consider the Booker Prize-nominated *C*, which begins at the end of the nineteenth century, amid the invention of radio, and ends in the 1920s, with the death of its protagonist, Serge Carrefour, from an insect bite suffered inside an ancient Egyptian tomb. Serge has journeyed to Egypt so as to help build the Empire Wireless Chain of radio transmitters. His fate is sealed during his journey into a rubbish-filled grave in which “[e]verything’s written on: pottery, bandages, even the walls themselves” (296). As McCarthy discusses in our interview, Serge’s story yokes together a Victorian bildungsroman narrative of maturation with a Marinetti-inspired smashup through the future ruins of the early twentieth century. Telecommunications, pageant plays,

spiritualism, aerial warfare—let a thousand modernist studies dissertations bloom. The crucial thing, as McCarthy explains, is that for all its debt to the novel of development and the master tropes of modernity, Serge's trajectory is resolutely antiprogressive. His birth and death crash together the newest and the most ancient technologies of transmission. Although the creature that bites his ankle and infects his blood is only implied, never seen, we cannot help but think of the scarabs Serge earlier sees in a New Kingdom tomb, stone beetles to which the living would confess their secrets before dying—"so that they won't come out at judgement and weigh down the heart" (290)—but which are carved with spells that censor the very information with which they have been encoded. Spoken into being by the living in anticipation of their own death, simultaneously recording and obscuring the truth of a human heart, the scarabs embody McCarthy's sense that language and literature resist the very communicative function by which they are nevertheless defined. If this is a novel of and about modernity, then it is one that, as McCarthy and Critchley wrote in a 2009 declaration, is "interested in the way that the modern has always, and very self-consciously, been devoted to failure" ("The Tate Declaration: Joint Statement on Inauthenticity").

C is therefore poised between two apparently contradictory notions of "how literature works"—a phrase we place in quotation marks because it serves as the subtitle to McCarthy's short e-book, *Transmission and the Individual Remix* (Vintage, 2012). There is the idea of literature as a radio network, a technology that helps us listen "to 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." And then there is literature as crypt, an occult zone within which, as Nicolas Abram and Maria Torok argued in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1976), inadmissible or unsayable losses are encoded and preserved.

Transmission and entombment. Broadcast and burial. These seeming antinomies come together because, for McCarthy, the crypt is not so much a space of silence as it is the deathly "non-place" in which meaning is mutilated and, therefore, made—

what he calls a “hidden fold or enclave from which coded transmissions come but that itself remains out of earshot” (*The Mattering of Matter* 179). Likewise, the radio network is no figure for pure communicability. When *C*’s Serge plugs himself into “the vast sea of transmission,” his first experience is of the sheer materiality of radio static, which he feels in his body as “the sound of thought itself” (63). The radio ether is filled with jargon, acronyms, codes; the network’s sounds and signals are shaped and interrupted by the weather, by the physics of Serge’s antennae, and by astronomical events. Serge imagines sound as matter, “its ripples snaking through the sky, pleats in its fabric, joins pulsing as they make their way down corridors of air and moisture” (66). The radio heavens are, like an Egyptian crypt, filled with death and language: Serge listens to the distress calls of sinking ships; the air is full of Prufrockian “[w]ireless ghosts [that] come and go” (67).

*C* is not, then, just any novel about “technology and mourning”—the terse phrase that McCarthy used to describe it in an interview the year before publication (*almabooks.com*). It’s a novel of ideas that inhabits the genre of historical fiction (it was short-listed for the 2011 Walter Scott Prize) so as to argue that, in the words of a manifesto we shall return to shortly, “there is no beauty”—no literature, no meaning—“without death.”

This is a sentiment that readers might recognize from authors such as Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, or Francis Ponge—frequent reference points in McCarthy’s essays. It is also highly redolent of the heterogeneous but broadly anti-Platonic brand of thought associated with the likes of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida. Most particularly, it draws on the “base materialism” of Georges Bataille, for whom idealist philosophies of being and meaning always trip up on the “non-logical difference” embodied in physical things, especially in the obstinate fact of human mortality (*Mattering* 72). McCarthy is not bothered about his debt to Bataille and company. Building on T. S. Eliot’s dismissal of the literary value of “personality,” McCarthy declares in *Transmission and the Individual Remix* that “no serious writer” has anything “to say.” Scornful of anti-intellectualism, he flaunts his deep investment in that body of speculative thought

often identified by the dread label “theory.” *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* began, he told an interviewer, with an editor at Granta inviting him “to write a book on Freud or Derrida or someone like that,” and the realization that “if I write about Hergé I can [also] write about Freud, Derrida and whole bunch of other people—plus it’ll be much more fun.” Here is an example—pervasive in McCarthy’s writing and talk—of what he calls, with evident distaste for English insularity, his “continental bent” (*viewfromheremagazine.com*). Here, also, is an example of the humor and playfulness that have helped this uncompromisingly philosophical novelist achieve a level of renown that seemed unlikely when *Remainder*, completed in 2001 but long ignored by commissioning editors, was first published by the Parisian art press Metronome.

Following enthusiastic reviews online and in print, *Remainder* was republished by Alma Books in the U.K. (2006) and Vintage in the U.S. (2007). From circulating as an occult classic distributed only to art gallery and museum bookshops, it secured a coveted spot on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*, won *The Believer* magazine’s 2008 book award, and served as a central example in Zadie Smith’s influential *New York Review of Books* essay “Two Paths for the Novel” (2008), in which Smith celebrates that fact that *Remainder*’s “theoretical foundations prove no obstacle to the expression of a perverse, self-ridiculing humor. In fact, the closer it adheres to its own principles, the funnier it is.”

Because that’s the thing about reading McCarthy—and, we discovered, talking to him. He can be severe about the “aesthetic of ‘self-expression’” he associates with “commercial middle-brow” novels (*biblioklept.org*). He’s sincere in his love of theory and generally highbrow even in his popular cultural choices. (Hergé’s *Tintin*, not René Goscinny’s *Asterix*; Lewis Carroll, not Charles Kingsley; Kraftwerk, not Jean Michel Jarre.) But he is neither pious nor priggish. Even his critique of philosophical idealism is, as might also be said of Beckett, tribute to an essentially comic vision of the universe. “We want to go up to the heavens as heroes,” he says in an interview with Critchley, “but we trip over our shoelaces and piss ourselves” (*Mattering* 73).

McCarthy doesn't see this as a tragedy; it's the slapstick of everyday life.

Humans die and fail and make a mess. In *C*, the pages of rhapsodic meditation on radio we quoted from earlier are interrupted by the notion, expressed in good free indirect style, that one of Serge's farts might also carry signals, "odour-messages from distant, unseen bowels" (66). The novel is suffused with toilet humor, with the result (as in Joyce) that it sometimes risks bathos. *Men in Space*—the earliest of McCarthy's novels, although the second published—contains a great conceptual joke about the cosmonaut as cosmic waste product. Already in orbit before the collapse of the Soviet Union and having left the second world, he splash-lands on a world (supposedly) without history altogether. Above all, McCarthy's comic vision underlines *Remainder*. This novel's narrator is an unnamed young man who, some time before the story begins, is hit on the head by a falling object. He takes months to recover, the resulting brain injury having forced him to relearn such basic tasks as eating and walking. As the novel begins, however, his major problem is not so much physical as existential: he feels inauthentic, as if all his actions are secondhand. *Remainder* narrates his attempts to transcend this sense of inauthenticity, which our hero soon realizes is less the consequence of his accident than a condition of being itself. He's not unusual, just "more usual than most" (25). When he is awarded millions of pounds in compensation for his injury, he suddenly has the means to attempt to become "seamless, perfect" (67). He tries, impossibly, to escape "[his] undoing: matter" (17).

Smith isolates one of *Remainder*'s many instances of deadpan verbal wit, pointing out how characteristic it is of a novel that can sound pompous in paraphrase. More than that, *Remainder* is constructed around the basic narrative irony that the hero's answer to his feeling of inauthenticity is to "re-enact," in progressively more ambitious and antisocial ways, events that he at first thinks he remembers but which, we soon realize, most often never happened to him at all. From such modest beginnings as a compulsion to repeat his walk across an ordinary stretch of South London, the narrative action encompasses the purchase

and redevelopment of a whole apartment block in Brixton; the hiring of multiple co-reenactors, on call 24/7, who perform such acts as tinkering with motorcycles, frying liver, and playing the piano; the recruitment of a professional logistics manager, Naz, whose mania for systems and data matches the hero's longing to transcend materiality; and the expansion of the reenactment project into cordoned-off streets, into a vast industrial space, and finally—violently—into the real world. By the end of the novel, we've moved from a first-person novel of existential crisis into the narrative terrain of the action thriller. It's an absurd plot trajectory in every sense of the word. It's bizarre and darkly hilarious yet carries—not always lightly, but never less than enthrallingly—the weight of its philosophical argument.

That *Remainder* should operate in this way would have surprised no one familiar with McCarthy's art projects, which share his novels' mordant wit and tendency to inhabit, or haunt, different genres and media. Prior to *Remainder's* publication, McCarthy had already made a name for himself as a facilitator and provocateur within the London art scene. His central artistic vehicle was, and continues to be, the International Necronautical Society (INS), within which he occupies the post of general secretary. The INS was announced in 1999 by the publication of the "INS Founding Manifesto," a series of four numbered paragraphs (and one footnote) that begins by declaring, "death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonize, and, eventually, inhabit" (*Mattering* 53). The INS is, on one level, deadly serious. The manifesto's commitment "to bring death out into the world" and "chart all its forms and media" is consistent with the themes and formal practices of McCarthy's writing. *The Mattering of Matter* (Sternberg, 2012), contains over 250 pages of learned essays, interviews, and polemics by McCarthy and his collaborators, including Critchley (INS chief philosopher) and the artist Anthony Auerbach (INS chief of propaganda). The volume is introduced by the eminent French art theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud and documents an impressive body of work—simultaneously aesthetic and speculative, often taking place at major institutions such as London's Institute of Contem-

porary Arts—about what the founding manifesto dubs the beauty and immanence of death.

Still, one cannot leave it at that. After all, the INS is often described as a “semi-fictitious” avant-garde organization. Its invocation of the technologies of the historical avant-garde (manifestos, polemics, byzantine internal politics, occasional purges) doesn’t attempt to escape irony. The INS is semifictitious because nobody more than half-believes in the avant-garde these days. It’s semifictitious because, like the original Vorticists, the INS is more brand than movement. The INS is not, however, mere parody; it’s no burlesque. As Bourriaud argues in his introduction, the “fictional” quality of the INS should be read not in opposition to “truth” but as “the current form of the modernist claim of autonomy, the will to not depend on a social context” (*Mattering* 47). Just as *C* is poised between the modernity of transmission and the occult censorship of the crypt, so do the projects and publications of the INS depend upon maintaining an exquisite balance between high seriousness and evacuation. And why shouldn’t it be thus? In the “INS Declaration on the Notion of ‘the Future’: Admonitions and Exhortations for the Cultural Producers of the Early-to-Mid-Twenty-First Century,” the general secretary (if we can trust that it *was* him) intoned to his audience at the Royal College of Art, “It is this organization’s strong contention that our current ago—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” (*Mattering* 269). What better vehicle for an investigation of catastrophe than an avant-garde network that exists somewhere between fact and fiction, solemnity and comedy, utility and futility, life and death?

We interviewed Tom McCarthy in New York City on the afternoon of December 11, 2012. Our friend and colleague Jonathan Eburne joined us in conversation. We edited the interview transcript and then emailed it to McCarthy for revision and approval. We thank Tom McCarthy for his enthusiasm, hard work, and patience. *Cras ingens iterabimus aequor.*



Q. You just spent several months in New York. Specific cities—London, Paris, Amsterdam, Sofia, Prague, Cairo—often come up in your work. Has your time in New York been useful to your writing?

A. I don't know if I have anything to say about any one city. I can't really say any particular sociological thing about London, for example, where I've lived for most of my life. There will be a scene in my next novel that takes place in New York; but whether it presents some kind of revelatory vision of the city, I'm much less certain.

Q. It seems that you approach the city not as a setting—a specific kind of novelistic space—but as a space for navigation, a trope that runs through a lot of your work. Could *Remainder* take place in any other city?

A. It could easily take place in another city. The main thing that characterizes the London of that novel is gentrification: Seattle-themed coffee outlets, black areas becoming more white, and so on. You could find this in any major Western city. People like Andy Warhol and J. G. Ballard understood that cities are the same: every city is the Terminal City. The Infinite City. It's one giant thing.

Q. So the investigation of space gets separated from setting?

A. Totally. When I think about space I think much more phenomenologically. Heidegger's definition of space is "that for which room has been made." You have a perimeter. The *peras* [boundary line] is not where something ends; it's where something "begins its presencing." Space is not some sort of "natural" expression of the soul of a location; instead, it's a formal quantity, best represented or embodied by a baseball field, a cricket pitch. In *Remainder*, the narrator continually constructs space not as an expression of London but as an almost Platonic idea of what space might be, and as a springboard or matrix for events—or even, maybe, *the* event.

Q. If space is just another medium among others—the water in the tank, in a sense—why focus on the medium rather than the cartography or the navigation?

A. Space as a medium or field is really important for me. I think of time as being, in a literary sense, embedded *within* space. There's a brilliant conceit in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* where Quentin says, "Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished." And he goes on to describe "happen" as being like ripples moving across the surface of a pool that's connected to another pool by a little umbilical water cord—and there could, in theory, be a third pool and so on. The pebble that caused the ripples in the first place didn't drop in the pool that we actually see; it dropped in another pool lying further back—but the ripples are moving through all pools with "the same ineradicable rhythm." This is Quentin's way of thinking about generational time. It's totally topographic. Georges Perec does much the same in "An Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris." He sits observing a square and there are buses going to and coming from other places—Montmartre, Gare du Nord, or wherever. He can only see the ones passing across the square, but he understands that if one is full, another somewhere else must correspondingly be empty and vice versa. He invokes the theory of communicating vessels—another water analogy, just like Faulkner.

Q. Is there any particularity to cities as spaces for your work? Do you draw a distinction between space and what Marc Augé would call nonplaces?

A. Not really. The novel I'm working on now opens in an airport lounge, I suppose. But I am interested in space's degree zeros. I made an art piece with Rod Dickinson that's showing in both Pittsburgh and the Hayward Gallery in London right now called *Greenwich Degree Zero*. It's an installation piece in which we depict the 1894 attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory that gave rise to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. There was a real attempt—a guy blew himself up ten feet away from the Observatory, and it was almost certain that he was trying to destroy this building, which is the degree zero of time. I grew

up in Greenwich. This is a very significant place for me. I used to skateboard across the prime meridian every day. The line used to be in Paris until the 1880s, then it was wrested away to London at an international conference—there was a lot of politicking. It's not like the equator, which has to be where it is, because that's where the Earth hinges: the longitudinal zero-line is entirely arbitrary. In fact, you can even say it's a fiction. It's literally written: there is a line carved into the ground. It's an act of writing. And the appeal of this poor, dead anarchist—to me—is the sheer poetry of his endeavor. You know, he tried to blow up time by attacking this bit of space, and he blew up himself instead! He became Orpheus: he disintegrated at the limit point. Now, in *Remainder* the hero becomes obsessed with this drug dealer's death in his neighborhood. He goes to the exact spot where the guy was shot. He doesn't duplicate the location (I think it's the one time in the whole book that he doesn't replicate a space elsewhere): he goes to the *actual* spot where the guy died and reenacts this death with an almost religious devotion. This is the Hill of Calvary for him, this phone box where this guy got shot and the puddle that his blood flowed into. It's the ground zero of a traumatic event. So, I suppose, in that sense, specific locations are important to me, despite what I said earlier.

Q. I'm drawn to the parts of *Remainder* that foreground space as a field of repetition and rehearsal, such as when the bank robber Samuels is there rehearsing the bank heist with the unnamed narrator and you write that the bank robber's aim is "to carve out enough time for yourself to get in, out, and away again."

A. Yes, to make a bit of space within time . . .

Q. Right. And the language you use there is very suggestive: you write of how robbers use violence and shock to create "a little enclave, a defile" within time.

A. The defile, exactly. Well, earlier the narrator has contemplated sports people. He's watching football—amateur football—and the coach is saying, "create space for yourself to move

in." He understands that this is a temporal thing. The man or woman who can run 100 meters faster than anyone else is simply expanding every second so that they can cover more ground in it; or the boxer who can do the same so that he can read what's coming at him and prepare a countermove. Muhammad Ali says this in *When We Were Kings*: "For me a second is like 20 seconds. It's bigger." So time becomes a field that you can manipulate. Another image that the hero of *Remainder* keeps using is that of elasticity. Time is stretching like elastic. Again, time becomes a topographic surface in which he can find cracks and partitions and enclaves and defiles.

Q. So, then, to link this to the narrator's project of becoming authentic, becoming identical with himself, at this point his fantasy takes the form of thinking, "if I can just fill space with enough time"?

A. That's right. Except that it never leaves him the authenticity he seeks. What he's encountering are endless other lacunae and gaps and cracks. More and more inauthenticity, if you like.

Q. Athletes think spatially in a lot of interesting ways. I'm thinking of David Winner's *Brilliant Orange* and its discussion of footballers such as Johan Cruyff and Dennis Bergkamp who know how to make space on the pitch. The Footballer God is length, width, height, and depth. There's a lot of sport in *Remainder*, right from the start.

A. The hero keeps coming back to cricket, which is all about repetition and replay. In Test cricket, for the last ten or fifteen years, they have these big screens in the stadium, and in between each ball they replay the previous ball in slow motion, and often the batsman will reenact—in tandem with the replay—the shot he's just played, maybe modifying it slightly. The idea being that he's thinking, "I should have done it more like that, or that." That is, "Revisiting this moment in this way will help me improve." But I think it's *really* pure aesthetics, or ontology. The batsman wants to reinhabit this moment endlessly, in a kind of

Beckettian way—someone else, incidentally, who was into cricket.

Q. This connects to something that the hero of *Remainder* really resists—the presence of cameras. He'll only allow one camera into his house and that's the set designer's Polaroid. That's it. So as they're recording and perfecting the reenactments, they have all these situations where there are telescopes and nautical patterns of communication . . .

A. Walkie-talkie radios . . .

Q. But the thing that the hero resists is the possibility that these reenactments will eventually turn into cinema.

A. Yes. I mean, he's taking his cue from cinema. The hero has this obsession with Robert De Niro's—as he sees it—perfect authenticity in *Mean Streets*, in a movie. And that's already ridiculous. My hero wants to “be” in some kind of movie *without there being a movie*. So he has an obsessive and paradoxical relationship to media and mediation—as does Serge in *C*. You know, one thing I really had in mind as a template while I was writing *Remainder* was the character of Don Quixote, who has this similar obsession with media. For him it's the penny romances, the chivalric pulp fiction of his time, that he wants to emulate. There's an incredible scene when Don Quixote sets out on his first, effectively, reenactment (we can call it that), which, like my guy, he does in order to feel “real” rather than inauthentic. And then he starts saying, “When the novel comes to be written of *this* moment, it's going to begin like this”—and he starts writing the novel in his head. You know, “Scarce had Phoebus spread her feathery fingers o'er the earth, and those soft minstrels of the grove, the pretty birds, begun their song, than noble Don Qixote set out . . .”—that kind of thing. In order to experience, in a supposedly “unsecondhand way,” the *nowness* of his present moment, he has to divert it through its putative future mediation. It's an astonishing situation—because he's more mediated than than ever.

Q. Thinking about rules in space, your great piece in *The Guardian* on Steven Spielberg's *Tintin* not only critiques the ideology of his version but also dismantles that long CGI action sequence in which all these amazing things happen but somehow the rules are all wrong. By contrast, your novels orchestrate the events that happen in fictional space exquisitely, so that for all their experimental, avant-garde qualities, the events have a kind of density and weight.

A. Aristotle says that plausible impossibilities are better than implausible possibilities. There's a level of basic consistency that any piece of writing, whatever its "mode," must have. If you like, there are game rules that have to be adhered to.

Q. Within constraints?

A. Within the repertory of moves the game allows for.

Q. Is the problem, then, how Spielberg composes in this strange digital medium?

A. No, not at all: Lynch does that in *Inland Empire* and it's brilliant. Spielberg's film is a crock of shit because it's basically a manifesto for a sentimental type of authenticity: be yourself, be true to yourself. The wonderful thing about Hergé's *Tintin* is that the books enter these labyrinths of inauthenticity—counterfeit coins, counterfeit identities, counterfeit worlds—that multiply and replicate and become virtually unnavigable. This is a point that I try to make in *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*, by reading *Tintin* via De Man and Derrida—that this is to a large extent what literature is all about. It's a labyrinthine entry into a realm of inauthenticity; or, if you like, a surrender to a fact of being always inauthentic.

Q. Can we talk about space in the context of *C*? When Serge is in the Army Air Corps he says he sees space in terms of "surfaces and lines and the odd blind spot." So Serge has this capacity to understand things in a simplified geometry.

A. "Geometry" is the vital word here.

Q. To put a bright line under this, is it two-dimensional geometry? Pushing away from perspectivism and all the attendant ideologies about subjectivity, Cartesianism, and depth?

A. Exactly. It's a rethinking of personality, character, and so on, as a set of surfaces and planes. Like how Deleuze thinks in terms of planes, plateaus, or vectors. Or a bunch of other philosophers we could mention. In *C*, I guess the idea came to me because I'd been thinking about Egyptian aesthetics, which is utterly flat, two-dimensional, everything in profile, and then about cinema, which is also about sequences crossing a flat surface. I was reading Laurence Rickels, who writes about technology and psychoanalysis: his work helped hone or focus a bunch of things I was trying to think about. In *Aberrations of Mourning*, Rickels makes the same link between Egyptian funerary arts and cinema. And he kind of says that with the advent of cinema we finally are back where we should be: we've found our way back, after several centuries of annoying humanism and perspectivism, to perfect flatness.

Q. That's the point you make in *C* about the filmstrip the army uses to locate artillery batteries by showing the time-lapses between their sounds—that it doesn't know the difference between time and space.

A. That's right, we're back to Faulkner's communicating pools: time is space. In *C*, the mechanism that location-finds the German artillery is a set of harp strings, a kind of Orphic lyre. The shell explodes, which makes the strings kick, and that's captured on a strip of film on which you can judge distance in relay. It's all surfaces, and lines and arcs on surfaces. Any depth in *C* is archaeological depth, like layers of Troy, or layers of acetate—you know, those transparencies you used to put on overhead projectors. You could stack seven layers up, but each one was still a two-dimensional surface, and the image they produced on the screen was two-dimensional, too.

Q. How does your notion of archaeological depth relate to affect?

A. It's a nonhumanist type of depth. A Foucauldian type of depth. An archaeology of the present moment which goes back into the past through a series of interconnecting surfaces.

Q. In other words, this Necronaut does not navigate depth or volume but plunges through a series of different layers?

A. Exactly right.

Q. It's not a secret return to the human behind the veil . . .

A. No. What's behind the veil in *C* is a scarab. [Laughter.] But Serge is doing, in a blundering, druggy, sex-fueled way, an archaeology of the present moment. It's an intellectual enterprise. In Egypt he's quite discursive: he's learning stuff about the origins of writing. And by the way, it all does come down to *writing*; even as an archaeology of new media and transmission, it comes down to the primal act of making a mark. In *Remainder* as well, the mark-making is the fundamental thing. The hero keeps saying, "Everything must leave some kind of mark." And the Greenwich art piece: it's about a line cut on the surface of the Earth, which is the literal meaning of "geography."

Q. May I ask a genre question? Isn't *C* drawing on the tradition of the modernist *Bildungsroman*, the novel of development? Yet Serge is a brute materialist; he repeats and changes but doesn't *grow* as such. You just crash him through that series of planes.

A. Sure. Serge is born with a caul like Charles Dickens's David Copperfield, and *C* has an obvious tribute to Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* in the middle of it. But there's no sense of development. In fact, it's the opposite; I'm interested in regression. As time goes on, Serge regresses—by the end, he's just this fetal, quivering insect. In epochs, too: he starts with modernity, in the twentieth century, and ends up in Egyptian antiquity. He starts with the invention of radio and ends up with the origin of writing at the end of the second millennium B.C. Similarly, in *Remainder* there's a set of regressions. In *Men in Space*, too. We start with the birth of Europe's future in 1989 with the fall of the Iron Cur-



tain, and we end up with some pre-Christian saint. It's totally regressive. In my twenties I got really into Beckett's plays, and that's what you get there: things don't progress, they regress. In the first act of *Happy Days*, we see Winnie half-emerging from the sand, and in the second act, far from fully emerging and going on to do other stuff, she's sunk right down to her neck: it goes backwards, gets worse. You could say the same thing about King Lear regressing from the throne to the cave, I suppose.

Q. The co-articulation of the rise of the novel and the rise of subjectivity often goes without saying these days, but your deep interest in Beckett—or Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, for that matter—points to a sense that crucial countertraditions might be wired into literature. My question here is about the afterlives of literary saints shot through so much of your work—which is to say, all the literary-philosophical *names*. When I teach your stuff in my classes, some of my students always remark how much you seem to want them to read. Might we think of your swath of references as a kind of *literary* remainder?

A. I suppose we could think of those as remainders. Harold Bloom writes about influence being Oedipal; you off the fathers and take the crown. But if we're going to look at a psychoanalytic model for how influence works in literature, then I'd be much more drawn toward Abraham and Torok's idea of a crypt and its attendant motifs of encryption and coding, so other writers are becoming encrypted in one's own work and leaking out—like zombies. It's a kind of haunting.

Q. Bloom's model of influence as killing the literary father works by avoidance, but you make no secret about name checks, names you think people should be reading.

A. For me, the best model for thinking about this is radio transmission. Think of literature as a set of billowing transmissions picked up and warped and mutated into something else. Caliban in *The Tempest* talks about the isle being full of noises and sounds and sweet airs and thousands of twangling instruments—transmitted by an Ariel, no less! He could be describing radio three

hundred years early. But Caliban is not unlike Serge in *C*, sitting at his radio picking up a thousand voices. And though Serge is not a writer—he's just some teenage kid—that moment for me is a kind of *mise en abyme*; it's a manifesto, almost, of what it is to be a writer. He's not originating the signals. He's receiving and tuning and refining and transcribing and reworking. If you could read what Serge is actually writing at that point, his transcript would probably read like one of Ezra Pound's cantos—a mixture of world news, stock market prices, sports results, and everything else.

Q. The work of the writer is that tuning?

A. Exactly, that tuning and refining.

Q. Pound has a line about the writer being the antenna of the race.

A. Yeah, if you removed the race stuff . . .

Q. Okay, Pound's got problems [*laughter*]*—*but, generously, he meant the human race, right?

A. Sure. For me, this is why radio is more interesting for thinking about this stuff than more Kittlerean kinds of props—record players or magnetic tape. These are fixed objects; but radio is billowing—fluid—although no less material. It turns everything into a material plane that gets inhabited and then, within that billowing, there are moments of crystallization, constellation. I'm no expert in Walter Benjamin, but I'm really taken with his idea of constellation—sudden moments of clarity that work across time. The way that would work for me in terms of your question is that, as a writer, there are moments of clarity when a whole set of literary genealogies and transmissions gets constellated into some pattern that is rich and vivid. This is the way writers are working. It's not merely about name-checking or reference.

Q. There's an interesting longing in that—a melancholy. I'm thinking about Sophie as a character created by that same

method. What's striking about Sophie is that at a basic level—the level of bad humanist lit crit, perhaps—she has to work as a character in space so as to make this longing real.

A. Sophie almost literally becomes a radio transmitter. The way she stands planted in the garden, repeating all these fragments of phrases, as she's going mad, is explicitly compared to the way a radio receiver works. After she's dead, she becomes a signal—dispersed. She's always doing the same thing, either poisoning Serge or seducing him. That's how she operates as a character. I think Jean-François Lyotard says that character is just a node within a network, an intersection point of certain trajectories. This is what a literary character has always been. The strongest characters are precisely the ones that command the strongest nodes or points of intersection.

Q. Let's bracket your take on character and go more directly into the question of media. I'd like to explore something Kate Marshall reminded me about. A better translation from the German title of Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks* is "Recording Systems." Storage systems, in effect. With all the concern with remix and transmission and broadcast media in your work—the way they resonate in our own rapidly changing media system—what happens to the problems Kittler underscores about recording systems?

A. Yes, there are traces, marks, and stains—things that remain. Amidst all the billowing transmissions of *C*, Serge still ends up hunting down the central archive, crypt, or chamber where it's all written down—stored or recorded, as you're suggesting. I love Freud's notion of the mystic writing pad, where the top surface is constantly getting erased and rewritten, but the base layer retains everything—that's his model for memory. But perhaps there isn't such a fundamental, categoric difference between transmission and storage. Towards the end of *C*, Serge's father expounds his theory that every transmission ever, from Marconi's first S-es to yesterday's weather report, are still floating around the ether—and, scientifically, he's right. There are aliens listening to 1930s radio shows as we speak. The air is one

giant storage system. For me, Kittler's work and all its implications for thinking about new media today find their place and resonate within the framework of the fundamental proposition that's set out so forcefully and brilliantly by Derrida—that it's all writing, everything.

Q. Thinking about your accounts of the literary past—and the Eliotic homage you do in your recent e-book essay "Transmission and the Individual Remix"—can you say something about your relation to modernism? Not so much modernism as a period, but as a longer, more broadly construed interface of artwork and theoretical experiment. Isn't there a mainstream consensus, however bogus, that readers today are not interested in the antimimetic, antihumanist side of things?

A. There may be, but it's a dumb one. The problem with the mainstream is that it's gone off into some kind of naturalist, head-in-the-sand, ostrichlike hidey-hole—some kind of residual, consoling, retro-humanist fantasy of saying, "No, it's all about self-expression: you bring the truth to language," as if the truth weren't being continually made and unmade *in* language.

Q. Doesn't that leave something out? The options are not just modernistic transmission or humanistic naturalism. Aren't there other alternatives?

A. I'm not saying that every writer needs to allegorize transmission and archiving endlessly and write characters like my Serge or Beckett's Krapp. There are many routes to go down, but I think that the naturalist route is simply a false trail. It's false consciousness. I don't think it's a genuine possibility that opens up in our world.

Q. One of the unusual things about you as a writer is that so many of your collaborators are artists and philosophers. Do you have a sense of a literary peer group, the writers of your own generation whom you see as doing work that is consistent with yours?

A. To some extent. There are people whose work I'm excited by. Shelley Jackson I like a lot. I wrote recently on Jean-Philippe Toussaint; he's a bit older but I think a very interesting writer. I could name a few other people, but your point is true: I guess the most dynamic area of contemporary culture, for me, is the art world. And this has been the case for the last ten or fifteen years. The art world has become a very expanded place where lots of different modes or practices can enter and find a platform. For example, *C* came out of this art project that my International Necronautical Society did at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. We had a radio transmission unit that looked like a James Bond villain's HQ, with all these assistants harvesting phrases from other media (newspapers, Internet, telephone conversations, or whatever) and projecting them onto the walls; then a central desk would reconfigure the phrases into new ones (sometimes in sonnet or sestina form, or just blank verse), and the scripts would go up to a transmission booth and be read out over FM radio. This was a totally literary exercise—a kind of Burroughs cut-up. But art is the only place where you can actually *do* that. It's the only cultural arena where you can turn up and say that you need forty grand's worth of equipment and a radio license and thirty assistants; and although the end product has no value, and you can't sell it to a collector, it still somehow *needs* to be done. There are people and institutions in the art world who will go, "Yes, you're right. It should be done. Let's do it."

Q. Let's get more thoughts on how the institutions of the art world support a type of experiment that interests you. And how is that missing from the writing world?

A. Well, this ties in with the humanism/antihumanism discussion. The art world has properly inherited the legacy not just of modernism but of centuries of culture that have been telling us again and again (and in an accelerated way in the twentieth century) that to be human is not to be some kind of abstract, free, spiritual "essence" that then gets "expressed"; on the contrary, it is to be enmeshed within language and history and to be bound up in a set of relationships with the Law and desire and all the

rest. The art world has inherited that understanding in a way that is productive. Artists work from the moment they come out of art school at self-consciously negotiating the symbolic structures of their day, and at self-consciously negotiating their relationships with dead ancestors—referencing other work, sampling other stuff from the past or the present. There's an operational logic there that is basically the *right* one. Overall, the literary world, the world represented by today's publishing world and its attendant institutions and media, has got the wrong operational manual. It's got a kind of humanistic, idealist one that is just no good. It's not going to produce anything interesting. It's become a branch of the entertainment industry.

Q. This connects to your work with the philosopher Simon Critchley. I wonder how you think the possibility for a certain kind of experiment or play within the institutional rules is particularly linked to conceptual work: I think the formula that recurs most in the INS is navigation as a way of thinking. As you point out, the institutions of the publishing world seem not to be as friendly to that kind of thinking in fiction. But is there a bridge to be made between the art world and the theory world? Those are two institutional homes that are not your homes but that you like to engage with.

A. Sure. But the gazes of the art world and the theory world are both firmly focused on literature. This is the paradox. Almost all of what we call "theory" comes out of some brilliant readings by Derrida—and Heidegger before him—of Hölderlin, Rilke, Ponge, and Joyce. So literature is the feeder, the sounding board for theory—and, by extension, given the strong influence of theory on contemporary artists, for art; and yet oddly, paradoxically, perversely, it's the hardest current space to actually operate in in the type of way that people like me want to.

But the relations between literature, art, and philosophy are complex. I met Vito Acconci a few years ago, the seminal 1960s artist who became famous with that *Seedbed* piece where he masturbates beneath the gallery floor. He was tied in with the whole Fluxus/Yoko Ono moment in contemporary art. When I met him he told me, "Oh yeah, a writer, huh? I was in the first intake in

the Iowa writing program." This is a program that's now synonymous with a kind of sub-Carver-style realism. And he tells me that he was getting along fine there until he read Mallarmé—he read *A Throw of the Dice*—and he realized that it's just not enough to write stories anymore; the key thing is the experience of space and distance, splattering language across the void and so on. After he read Mallarmé, he started to physically move around his studio, his work space, iterating stuff. Lots of his artworks from the 1960s and 1970s are precisely this: he moves around a space, shouting and repeating and going up and down stairs and so on. Now, he's an architect. His trajectory has taken him from literature, to visual or performance art, to architecture. There's a set of migrations that's very difficult to map or fix. But basically, they tie art and literature and philosophy together endlessly—and always will.

Q. In his introduction to *The Mattering of Matter*, Nicolas Borriaud claims that there are two dominant tendencies in twentieth-century artistic production, documentation and appropriation. Then comes (as you mentioned) Fluxus, conceptual and performance art, and you get a third, reenactment—which, of course, chimes with the story you just told. Could we describe your novels as an attempt to think through reenactment within the novel form?

A. I think we could. But when *Remainder* first came out, one of the earliest reviews of it said: "Oh, it's an allegory of contemporary art. This guy reenacts stuff." So I said to my friend Rob Dickinson, with whom I did the Greenwich project—his art has often been about reenactment (he famously reenacted the Milgram experiment and the Jonestown sermons, and he's friends with Jeremy Deller, who did the reenactment of the Battle of Orgreave, and Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, who also do reenactments of Cramps concerts; there's a whole movement)—anyhow, I said to Rod: "What do you think of this? Do you think this critic is right?" And he said: "No, he's absolutely wrong. Because if *Remainder* is an allegory of being an artist, then it

would just describe a day at the office!" At one point a mysterious "short councilor" appears in the book and proposes to the hero that he might be some kind of artist, and the hero is adamant that no, what he's doing has nothing to do with art. The whole point is that there is no category that can contain, or legitimate, what he's doing. At one point he says that he and his entourage were like followers of a cult that hasn't been invented yet. The messiah hasn't reappeared; he hasn't even appeared in the first place. So they're enacting all the pathologies and all the patterns that could be associated with performance art or religion or a certain type of political activity or criminal activity—Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army or whatever—but without the structure in place that would redeem it, make it "useful."

Q. I recommended *Remainder* to my cousin, who's a neurosurgeon. He took it absolutely straight and said, This is all correct. It's exactly what happens with certain brain injuries. The stuff about reteaching yourself to hold a carrot and so on. He took it as absolutely real—hyperreal even. I told him that you knew your stuff, but I didn't come to *Remainder* that way at all. I thought of it as an experimental novel—a thought-experiment about a real-modernist remainder, even. You're so clearly interested in the real, in matter—in letting matter matter, to allude to the title of your INS book. But as a novelist, you want to explore other ways of getting to the real besides realism.

A. To track back to one of the things we were talking about earlier, the literary landscape sometimes gets laid out—by intelligent people—in terms of a Scylla and Charybdis landscape: on the one hand, there's this middlebrow realism; and on the other hand, there's the avant-garde. We need to be really suspicious of this schematic. Realism, as a literary convention as full of artifice as any other, has no more purchase on the *real* than anything else. When William Burroughs was asked about his cut-up technique and how weird it was, he just said, "No, life is like that." And he's right: just walking down the street you're inhabiting a cut-up. So there's that on one side. On the other side of this



opposition that I'm trying to unpick here is this term *avant-garde*. Obviously, I'm fascinated with the historical *avant-garde*, and the INS comes out of a playful engagement with certain moments of that. But I think there's another kind of trap that some well-meaning people fall into, whereby they think, "Okay, well the only thing to do now, after Cage has done 4.5 minutes of silence, is to do 5.5 minutes of silence!" Or "I love Marinetti, so let's do some even more typographically extreme shit splayed across the page!" I think this is wrong, too. For a start, it's tied up with a bogus narrative of progress, an Enlightenment, linear sense of what cultural time is—something that progresses, even from extreme to more extreme. But I don't think that aping or even upgrading the mannerisms of a previous vanguard moment is that interesting. I'm also suspicious of the idea of finding a "middle way" between two already-dodgy landmarks. I'm not really interested in middle ways. The task, as I see it, is to be genuinely radical. It means pushing experience right up against language, and against the fact of its embedding within language, and affirming the primacy of desire, and putting desire and the Law on collision courses, again and again and again, and affirming the death drive, and a whole bunch of other stuff that we could talk about. But to answer, finally, your question: to approach the Real, which would not be some empirical, positivist, or preexisting real but would be precisely what Michel Leiris calls the Bull's Horn—the point of the Bull's Horn that threatens to tear and rip and rupture a certain harmony of a crafted plane . . . Wallace Stevens talks about "the real that wrenches." That's a disruptive real. To be radical would be to come near that—but this can't be reduced to "writing styles."

Q. It's interesting that with this realist/*avant-garde* schema there's an idea of some continuum that's also an opposition. Your work—all three novels—has this duck-rabbit quality. You can take *Men in Space* as a narrative about the dislocations of post-1989 Europe, *Remainder* as a novel about brain injury, *C* as historical fiction—if you want to.

A. Yes. I mean, *C* was on the Booker Prize short-list. Someone must have read it as a kind of historical novel.

Q. Right, but then one kind of reader just resists. That's what I meant by bringing in Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit; both alternatives exist, but you can never be captured by both at once.

A. As Zadie Smith said in her essay about my work and Joseph O'Neill's, there are some people whom both camps try to claim as their own. She gives Nabokov as an example, which is a good one. But then I was rereading *Great Expectations* recently. Dickens is meant to be the apogee of realist, character-filled writing, but the first passages of *Great Expectations* are totally deconstructionist. Pip is in this Bataille, murky mud-plane kneeling in front of a tombstone running his finger along the incisions, the carvings in its surface—names which are his family's—and meditating on the identity of things and looking at the horizon. It's completely conceptual, modernist, structural writing. This is De Man's point, isn't it? With the really good stuff, it's not like there's deconstruction-compatible writing and humanist-compatible writing. It's always already deconstructed in itself. We just don't know how to read it properly.

Q. Radical literature isn't simply about putting on the right generic outfit. One of the things my students said about *Remainder* is how very readable it is. I sold it to them as a novel of high concept, and they were surprised by the sheer enjoyment of following this unlikely hero through an increasingly absurd and wild and ultimately, on some level, pathos-filled series of inventions. The same is true of *C*, though Serge provokes stronger reactions.

A. *C* is an adventure story! At Columbia I have my students read John Updike's *Rabbit* books, which I rate highly. I don't like all that perfectly crafted but ultimately banal stuff that he wrote for *The New Yorker* year after year, but I do rate *Rabbit*. But I make the students read the *Rabbit* books *after* reading Mallarmé and Blanchot—which Updike read, too—and it's kind of interesting because in the first book, *Rabbit, Run*, there's this almost knowing nod toward Mallarmé, when he talks about stars and constellations scrolling across the space of a car windscreen. Then in the second book, *Rabbit Redux*, the hero has become a typographic

spacer. He's a typesetter at a printing plant. He realizes his wife is having an affair when he sees her and her lover in a booth in a restaurant and there's not enough space between them; the scene, and its accompanying revelation, is rendered typographically. The point is, I agree with you about the ducks and rabbits. In Updike at his best you see certain literary backstories working themselves out in a way that is not recognizably avant-garde. I suppose it is recognizably realist. But when you start picking at it a bit, when you look beneath the hood, you see all of these other histories at play there. Again the issue is not writing one way or the other, but navigating a set of histories and possibilities.