



'I'm not trying to be a modernist', declared Tom McCarthy in 2010, 'but to navigate the wreckage of that project' ('The Avant-Garde Can't be Ignored', *The Observer* [Sunday 1st August]). To what extent does McCarthy's aim apply to other twenty-first-century writers? Write an essay that explores the various ways in which two twenty-first-century writers have responded to their modernist heritage.

Isabel Roth

In referring to the 'wreckage' of the modernist project, Tom McCarthy implies that modernism has in some way failed. The contemporary novelist's task is to 'deal with'¹ this problematic legacy. This task is taken up in two very different twenty-first century novels, McCarthy's *Remainder* (2006) and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), with contrasting results. Yet there are areas of intersection in the novelists' approaches: in order to move forward from the modernist project, both McCarthy and Hollinghurst look to their literary pasts. The 'semi-fictitious' International Necronautical Society (INS), an 'avant-garde network' of which McCarthy is General Secretary, has 'vehemently' rejected the 'presumptions and ideologies' linked to the 'lazy' general perception of "The Future", 'in the name of the sheer radical potentiality of the past and of the way the past can shape the creative impulses and imaginative landscape of the present'.² But which past shapes *Remainder*? At first glance McCarthy's novel seems indebted to late modernism, particularly to the work of Samuel Beckett. The nameless protagonist's constant re-enacting of events recalls Beckett's theme of 'the death of a certain kind of historical, patrilineal transmission':³ the sense, as in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), of time moving 'not forward, but rather[...] in a loop'.⁴ Meanwhile, Hollinghurst's use of form looks to the foundations of modernism, paying homage to the literary impressionism of Henry James. In fact, *Remainder* also shares some elements of this early project, particularly of the work of Marcel Proust. The cultural 'wreckage' of literary impressionism, like that of modernism itself, is all around us. As Jesse Matz asks, 'If modernism has gone bad so thoroughly, what modernism has gone bad worse than Impressionism?'⁵ What was once a highly cultivated artistic movement has evolved into 'an absolute, inarticulate, instantaneous culture of impressions, the total triumph of superficial form, the exhaustion of culture'.⁶ The main divergence in Hollinghurst and McCarthy's reactions to literary impressionism is that in order to push the novel forward, Hollinghurst focuses mainly on form, whereas McCarthy strips this back to hone in on effect.

¹ Tom McCarthy, 'To ignore the avant-garde is akin to ignoring Darwin', James Purdon interview. *The Observer*, 1 August 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/01/tom-mccarthy-c-james-purdon>> [Accessed 15 December 2010]

² INS 'Declaration on the Notion of "The Future"'. *The Believer*, November 2010.

<http://www.believermag.com/issues/201011/?read=article_necronautical> [Accessed 15 December 2010]

³ Peter Boxall, 'Since Beckett', *Textual Practice*, 20(2), 2006, 301-317 (p.313)

⁴ INS Declaration on "The Future"

⁵ Jesse Matz, 'Cultures of Impression' in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 298-330 (p.300)

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.301

Throughout *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst channels the stylistic features of James' literary impressionism. In this example, Nick Guest gazes out of the window of the wealthy Fedden family's French holiday home:

The bathroom window looked out across the forecourt and the lane at the other, unmentioned view, northwards: over rising pastures towards a white horizon- and beyond that, in the mind's distance, northern France, the Channel, England, London, lying in the same sunlight, the gate opening from the garden to the gravel walk, and the plane trees, and the groundsmen's compound with the barrow and the compost heap. It came to Nick in a flash of acute nostalgia, as though he could never visit that scene of happiness again.⁷

In a fleeting moment spent gazing at sunlit French countryside Nick has an impression, 'in the mind's distance', of the same sunlight stretching towards London, then filtering in to a particular corner of Kensington Park Gardens, evoked in a synaesthetic listing of 'the gravel walk', 'the plane trees', 'the compost heap'. This, the reader will recall, is the site of Nick's first sexual experience, returning to him 'in a flash of acute nostalgia', a pang of emotion that in turn leads to the lingering feeling that 'he could never visit that scene of happiness again'. This fleeting perception, a 'pictorial description of shifting light and colour'⁸ that gives way to a moment of interior reflection, is typical of James' literary impressionism. Conversely, in *Remainder* the nameless protagonist or 'Enactor' seems to have lost his capacity for interior reflection following an 'accident' that 'involved something falling out of the sky'.⁹ He can 'say very little' about the accident, not only because of the strict terms of a lucrative compensation settlement, but also because the trauma has left him with nothing but 'vague images, half-impressions' (*Remainder*, 5). When the Enactor is awarded eight and a half million pounds in compensation he simply states 'I felt neutral' (*Remainder*, 10), denying the reader an insight into how this really feels. This initial 'neutrality' could at first be dismissed as emotional numbness, a state of shock brought on by a life-altering piece of news, but when the Enactor looks to the sky as if for some kind of inspiration, McCarthy sets up the expectation for an emotional reaction. However, these expectations are immediately thwarted when, unlike for Nick in the French bathroom, the sunlight does not provoke any 'flash' of emotion: 'I looked around me at the sky: it was neutral too- a neutral spring day, sunny but not bright, neither cold nor warm' (*Remainder*, 10). This goes further than a 'half-impression', working as a kind of anti-impression, in which we are denied the kind of emotional description or epiphanic moment we might expect. Indeed, throughout the novel, the Enactor avoids giving fully subjective accounts of how he feels. He describes positive emotion in basic terms: 'This was good- very, very good' (*Remainder*, 195); 'On the whole it went well- very well' (166). As for negative emotion, we glimpse the Enactor's sense of frustration through short pieces of dialogue full of exclamations, rather than through interior description. For example, when he discovers that one of his 're-enactors' has been deceiving him, he exclaims 'give him hell! Really bad! Hurt him!' (*Remainder*, 148).

Meanwhile, in *The Line of Beauty* Nick's epiphanies are more subjectively described. At the novel's climax, Nick walks in on a conspiratorial moment between Rachel Fedden and her brother:

⁷ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004), p.349 [Henceforth *LoB*]

⁸ Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.3

⁹ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books, 2006), p.5 [Henceforth *Remainder*]

Rachel was standing by the mantelpiece, Lionel sitting in an armchair, and for a second Nick thought of the scene in *The Portrait of a Lady* when Isabel discovers her husband sitting while Mme Merle is standing, and sees at once that they are more intimate than she had realized[...] And Nick, setting down the tray, saw that though he hadn't chanced in on a secret he had caught the note of an older, more unguarded friendship than he'd heard before, the shared intelligence of brother and sister. (*LoB*, 446)

In another of Nick's Jamesian fleeting impressions, Rachel and Lionel's position in the room 'for a second' evokes a scene from *The Portrait of a Lady*, which in turn leads to an interior revelation about their relationship. At key moments of *Remainder*, however, McCarthy again thwarts our expectations at potential moments for epiphany. When the Enactor sees a crack in the wall at a party, he has a 'sudden sense of déjà vu' (*Remainder*, 60) that leads him to 'remember' a building in which all of his movements 'had been fluid and unforced' (*Remainder*, 62). This revelatory moment sets up the action for the rest of the novel, becoming the driving force behind his 're-enactments'. Although at first this moment seems to produce a typical effect of literary impressionism, it is undercut and complicated when the Enactor adds 'I remembered this with all the force of an epiphany, a revelation' (*Remainder*, 62). The use of the word 'epiphany' itself distances the moment from the 'pictorial description' and interior reflection of Jamesian impressionism employed by Hollinghurst. Furthermore, it appears that the Enactor is experiencing some other vague, unnamed sensation that has 'all the force of an epiphany' but, crucially, is not.

The moment of intertextuality when Nick catches 'the note of an older, more unguarded friendship' between Rachel and Lionel evokes the spirit of James' literary impressionism at a key point in the plot: it comes just before Nick is finally asked to move out of the Feddens' house. Moments like this, along with the plot detail of Nick choosing to write a PhD thesis on 'James and style', combine with the stylistic features employed by Hollinghurst to tie *The Line of Beauty* to James' legacy. Likewise, McCarthy hints at the legacy of Proust in his novel, but with a subtler form of intertextuality. When rehearsing the bank heist re-enactment, one of the robber re-enactors 'tripped on a wrinkle in the carpet and fell over. Everyone laughed, but I said: "Do that each time"' (*Remainder*, 238). When the wrinkle eventually gets straightened out, the Enactor has a piece of wood placed beneath the carpet 'so that it would kink and Robber Five could semi-trip each time' (*Remainder*, 238). This episode brings to mind a key moment in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913), in which Marcel gets an obscure feeling of pleasure from tripping over uneven paving stones and 'prolongs his staggering, hoping that tripping again will reproduce the pleasure'.¹⁰ The act of tripping recalls the memory of a past experience in Venice, and seizing the impression allows Marcel to discover 'lost sensations' as he finds that 'the pleasure of doing so somehow restores joy to life'.¹¹ For the Enactor, ensuring the robber 'semi-trips' each time adds to the authenticity of his re-enactment: it feeds into the aim shaping all of his actions since he saw the crack in the wall, 'to be real, to become fluent, natural, to cut out the detour that sweeps us around what's fundamental to events, preventing us from touching their core' (*Remainder*, 244).

Furthermore, in calling our attention to Proust at this key moment in the text, McCarthy links *Remainder* to the relationship between impressionism and death. When the Enactor decides to move the bank heist away from a reconstructed version of a bank to a real one, the robber re-enactor anticipates a kink, but it is no longer there. He falls over, accidentally shooting and killing one of the other re-enactors. This death is the first of

¹⁰ Matz, *Literary Impressionism*, p.4

¹¹ *Ibid.*

several, both described and implied, throughout the rest of the novel. The reactions of other characters, focalized through the Enactor, give a sense that this is the point at which events begin to spiral out of control. The re-enactors, who were once compliant and willing to carry out the Enactor's requests, 'moaned and wept and yelped and shrieked' (*Remainder*, 274). Naz, the 'Facilitator' who had eagerly organised the re-enactments down to the smallest detail, is now shocked into inaction: 'he just stood there, locked up, closed down, vacant' (*Remainder*, 277). For the Enactor however, the deaths are the best possible outcome, as inauthenticity has finally been stripped away. Death, for him, is not shocking but simply 'beautiful' (*Remainder*, 269), because it is real. This sense of death's beauty again recalls Proust, for whom 'the impression is an experience freed from external imperfection, attached to its true counterpart in another time and place, and, in that connection, a paradise',¹² as 'paradise' represents immortality. When an impression is in progress, the past and present are combined so Marcel, like the Enactor who immerses himself in its 'beauty' right up to the novel's final moments, does not fear death. Having boarded a plane and coerced its pilot into flying around in an unchanging figure of eight, the Enactor 'felt really happy' and, although he has just reassured the aeroplane's crew "Don't worry at all. I won't let us die" (*Remainder*, 284), he seems casually to accept impending death. The Enactor states bluntly that 'eventually the sun would set for ever' and reduces the end of the universe to a 'pop', with the unthreatening simile of its running down 'like a Fisher Price toy' (*Remainder*, 284). This recalls the final, bathetic lines of T.S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' (1925): 'This is the way the world ends | Not with a bang but a whimper',¹³ again drawing the reader's attention to the novel's modernist legacy. The Enactor, by immersing himself in the beauty of death like Marcel immerses himself in impressions, brings himself closer to it and is able to touch the 'core' of 'what's fundamental to events'. This sense of immersion also connects to the first INS manifesto, which called for us to 'deliver ourselves over utterly to death, not in desperation, but rigorously, creatively, eyes and mouths wide open so that they may be filled from the deep wells of the Unknown'.¹⁴

This call to immerse or 'deliver ourselves over utterly to death' again recalls the effects of impressionism. For the Enactor, a man shot dead in the street becomes 'a symbol of perfection' because 'in dying beside the bollards on the tarmac he'd done what I wanted to do: merged with the space around him[...] He'd stopped being separate, removed, imperfect' (*Remainder*, 184-5). The idea of fully 'merging' with a space occurs throughout the novel, again as a way for the Enactor 'to cut out the detour that sweeps us around what's fundamental to events'. Just as the Enactor wishes to merge with the space around him in order to stop 'being separate, removed', so impressionism merges different moments, in order to move toward 'a kind of utopian compensation for modern alienation'.¹⁵ Indeed, in James' work the impression rarely represents 'unmediated sensory experience', rather, like when Nick gazes through the bathroom window, a 'mingling of perceptual moments'.¹⁶ It is through this 'merging', 'mingling', or 'mediating' that the characters in both *Remainder* and *The Line of Beauty* begin to piece meaning together. If McCarthy evokes the legacy of Proust in order to call our attention to wider themes of death in the novel, Hollinghurst's Jamesian style has a different effect. Nick, as the gay, middle class focalizer through which events are coloured, allows Hollinghurst to explore his contemporary political concerns. He refreshes James' experiments with form, using Nick as an updated Jamesian reflector of the heteronormative, wealthy world he moves in. By employing the techniques of literary

¹² *Ibid.*, p.5

¹³ T.S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men' in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp.65-70 (p.70, l.97-8)

¹⁴ 'INS Founding Manifesto 1999'. <http://necronauts.net/manifestos/1999_transcript.html> [Accessed 15 December 2010]

¹⁵ Matz, *Literary Impressionism*, p.14

¹⁶ Matz, 'Cultures of Impression', p.312

impressionism, Hollinghurst distances himself and his characters from post-modernist *literature*, transporting the reader back to a more distant literary past. However, Nick's ambiguous reaction to the post-modern *culture* of 1980s Britain complicates this. Initially, Nick is defined as a 'James man' (*LoB*, 54) and later as an 'aesthete', labels that in the context of the growing consumerist culture of Margaret Thatcher's Britain operate as 'a symptomatic reaction to the "vulgarity" of the contemporary'.¹⁷ However, Nick's responses to this culture are ambivalent, and Hollinghurst ties Nick to the developing political context as his actions become increasingly self-serving over the course of the novel. For example, in the second part, Nick has a mixed response to the expensive, 'random cultural allusions' (*LoB*, 199) of his lover Wani's house: 'Of course the house was vulgar, as almost everything post-modern was, but he found himself taking a surprising pleasure in it' (*LoB*, 200). Even early on in the novel, an impression Nick experiences while gazing at Wani demonstrates this uneasy mingling of pleasure and disgust:

Nick had a moment of selfless but intensely curious immersion in his beauty. The forceful chin with its slight saving roundness, the deep-set eyes with their confounding softness,[...] the cruel charming curve of his lips, made everything else in the house seem stale, over-artful, or beside the point. (*LoB*, 91)

While Wani's features are 'forceful', 'confounding' and 'cruel', they are also soft and 'charming'. This ambiguous, 'intensely curious immersion' is so strong that it makes everything else at the party seem 'stale' and even 'beside the point'.

By the end of the novel, Nick has descended into a lifestyle of excessive consumption, throwing himself more and more into sex and drugs. Indeed, for all their differences in theme and style, *The Line of Beauty* and *Remainder* end on similar notes. Not only do the characters' desires spiral out of control; they also immerse themselves in impressions, and eventually find beauty. While the Enactor sees this beauty in death, Nick, 'overwhelmed by a love of the world that was shockingly unconditional' (*LoB*, 501), sees it in a street corner. This time for Nick, it is not the aesthetics of this street itself that provoke pleasure or disgust; rather it is 'the fact of the street corner at all that seemed, in the light of the moment, so beautiful' (*LoB*, 501).

Hollinghurst is a twenty-first century writer who has written a work of historical fiction, using literary impressionism to reflect the evolving political landscape of the 1980s, in terms of society's attitudes to sexuality and class, and in terms of a burgeoning culture of success and over-consumption. While mediating moments and emotions through Nick, Hollinghurst also mediates Jamesian style with 1980s culture. This juxtaposition is an impression in itself, highlighting certain ambiguities and nuances of the novel's setting. McCarthy, meanwhile, merges the contemporary moment with influences from literary history. In *Remainder* the impression comes from effect rather than form, occurring not as the stylised Jamesian moments that we find in *The Line of Beauty*, but rather as a state of mediation between life and death. As a literary style, impressionism itself mediates 'between the advent of modernity and its latest alienations', intervening '(historically) between romantic unities and modernist fragmentation, and (conceptually) between utopianism and social critique',¹⁸ making it, for both writers, an apt choice of literary past with which to 'shape the creative impulses and imaginative landscape of the present'. However, the authors' different choice of literary legacies within impressionism is illuminating. While James was

¹⁷ Andrew Eastham, 'Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian aestheticism and post-modern culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', *Textual Practice*, 20(3), 2006, 509-527 (p.516)

¹⁸ Matz, *Literary Impressionism*, p.2

experimental, he had no ‘conscious avant-garde attitude’,¹⁹ whereas Proust represents more of a break with his past. In *Remainder*, subtle references to Proust mingle with thematic nods to Beckett. This indicates McCarthy’s avant-garde ambitions for the novel, for if ‘Beckett marks an endpoint’²⁰ in modernism, to inherit his legacy ‘is to occupy a time that is after the end and before the beginning’.²¹ Throwing Beckett into the mix intensifies the sense that McCarthy is merging the ‘end’ and the ‘beginning’, in order to push the novel forward. If ‘impressionism has gone bad’, if all that remains is ‘wreckage’ and ‘the total triumph of superficial form’, both novels offer initial responses to this, through the merging not only of moments, but of literary genres and historical periods. McCarthy, through the Enactor strips away inauthenticity; while Hollinghurst, through Nick, strips away the wreckage of post-modernism, transporting us back to modernism’s foundations. Impressionism begins to become, for both novelists, a way to mediate and piece together the wreckage not only of modernism, but of the contemporary moment.

¹⁹ Sally Sears, *The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the novels of Henry James* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p.47

²⁰ Boxall, p.302

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.304

Bibliography

Boxall, Peter, 'Since Beckett', *Textual Practice*, 20(2), 2006, 301-317

Eastham, Andrew, 'Inoperative Ironies: Jamesian aestheticism and post-modern culture in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', *Textual Practice*, 20(3), 2006, 509-527

Eliot, T.S., 'The Hollow Men' in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961)

Hannah, Daniel, 'The Private Life, the Public stage: Henry James in Recent Fiction', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30(3), 2007, 70-94

Hollinghurst, Alan, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004)

INS, 'Founding Manifesto 1999'. <http://necronauts.net/manifestos/1999_transcript.html> [Accessed 15 December 2010]

INS, 'Declaration on the Notion of "The Future"'. *The Believer*, November 2010. <http://www.believermag.com/issues/201011/?read=article_necronautical> [Accessed 15 December 2010]

Matz, Jesse, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

-----, 'Cultures of Impression' in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 298-330

Mitchell, Kaye, 'Alan Hollinghurst and Homosexual Identity' in *British Fiction Today*, ed. by Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 40-51

McCarthy, Tom, *Remainder* (London: Alma Books, 2006)

Purdon, James, 'To ignore the avant-garde is akin to ignoring Darwin' (Interview with Tom McCarthy). *The Observer*, 1 August 2010. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/01/tom-mccarthy-c-james-purdon>> [Accessed 15 December 2010]

Sears, Sally, *The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the novels of Henry James* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968)

Smith, Zadie, 'Two Directions for the Novel' in *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), pp.71-96