The Phenomenology of Representation, Ritual, and the Sacred in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*

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Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* has attracted a great deal of academic attention. Its philosophical depth and intellectual challenges obviously demand a scholarly response. Published articles hitherto display considerable hermeneutic diversity. Media, technology, trauma, and the position of the novel in our contemporary media landscape are the most common topics critics tend to focus on. Christina Lupton, for instance, investigates what McCarthy's narrative says about the status of the novel in our times. By means of the "future anterior" concept (505), Lupton claims that *Remainder* is an example of novelistic fiction that contemplates itself and its place on our more and more multifarious and complex media scene. According to Lupton, *Remainder* investigates itself as printed medium and the relation between itself and other media forms (511), but she also suggests that it ponders the intricate relation between representation and reality more generally, since it "show-cases the limits of its narrator's mind" (510). Pieter Vermeulen sees McCarthy's work as a challenge to the traditional, psychologising novel that insists on realist subjectivity as a firm narratological ground. Instead Vermeulen propounds that *Remainder* forwards subjectless "dysphoric affects" as an alternative traumatic expression, thereby reviving the novel form by means of "a genuinely undead, improperly buried subject that cannot help but continue to transmit trackless, dysphoric affects" (564). In contrast, Daniel Lea contends that there still is a tension remaining in *Remainder* as concerns authenticity and subjectivity. He argues that McCarthy is not "willing to dispense totally with the idea of the irreducible self" (464). Clearly, the work opens up an array of philosophical questions about subjectivity, identity, the function of memory, and the possibilities and limitations of representation.

As indicated, the novel contests a number of well-established ontological distinctions. For instance, Jim Byatt traces a problematisation of yet another ontological border: that between life and death. He forwards the concept of "peritraumatic dissociation" as the moment on the threshold of death in which time is stretched out, providing a space for near-death experience in the form of narrative. According to Byatt, the whole of *Remainder* is, at least potentially, told from within this peritraumatic space. Like Sheherezade, the narrative holds death at bay and thereby at least temporarily transcends the seemingly rigid border between life and death. In addition, Sydney Miller uncovers the corroboration of other lines of demarcation. In focusing on the centrality of the accident in the novel, as a fall suspended in mid-air, Miller argues that Tom McCarthy challenges the distinctions between author and reader, as well as that between author and critic. He claims that the function of the accidental in *Remainder* takes away interpretative agency from the reader, but only to inexorably hand it back again: "[T]he confession that is *Remainder* challenges the form of the novel itself by collapsing the work of fiction with its critical apparatus, indulging in its own expository weightlessness while self-consciously scrutinizing its inevitable fall into explication" (658). Finally, *Remainder* has been situated in the context of film studies, which of course comes as no surprise considering the re-enactment's filmic qualities. Vincenzo Maggitti examines the novel in the context of film and memory as thematised in literature. He explores the idea that *Remainder* "resembles the making of a movie when the film of memory is no longer available" (64).

When regarding the scholarly diversity in this way, it becomes clear that *Remainder* is an experimental as well as deeply philosophical novel that by means of a patiently implemented *zetetic* (Socratic) method probes a number of ontological dilemmas. In all, McCarthy's novel poses questions about what the novel form—or more broadly, fiction or representation—is supposed to be in the cultural context of the early 21st century. Thereby it implicitly considers what possibly constitutes a human being. It might perhaps be convenient to see *Remainder* as part of an altogether anti-humanist project that posits the fragmented human as a helpless product of a fragmentised and technified society. However, in my view that would be to prematurely close down the vast hermeneutic scope that McCarthy's novel offers. Among the other themes highlighted above, *Remainder* actually investigates the limits of representation and thereby the very basis of human culture. If the readings to a great extent explore the contours of ontological distinctions, the following analysis seeks to uncover the collapse that follows another such problematisation, but here in terms of a transgression.

Disregarding the theme of trauma, the reading presented here will instead zoom in on the more primordial cultural aspects of the narrative. If *Remainder* stages the fact that "transcendence is denied" (Lea 468), it also inevitably contains an

immanent resistance to this move. Traces of that resistance can, for instance, be seen in Lea's suggestion that there are residues of an irreducible self in the narrative. It shall be argued that this selfhood is made manifest in the form of ritualised repetition, which is a stronger version of the repetition of any signification practice. The concept of the ritual will be further defined and specified below, but even a rather plain explanation secures its relevance for *Remainder*. The *OED* stipulates that ritual is "[a] ritual act or ceremonial observance" but "[a]lso in later use: an action or series of actions regularly or habitually repeated" (*OED Online* S.v.: "Ritual"). As we shall see, both of these wordings fit the re-enactments displayed in McCarthy's novel. Ritual makes manifest the identity of the protagonist over and against the sacred object of the ritual that is present in its absence.

The argument below will first explain and establish the relevance of the generative anthropologist Eric Gans's primary and secondary hypotheses, and then go on to claim that the narrator's re-enactments may be regarded as rituals in which the sacred as absence attracts and provokes the protagonist to the degree that he feels an urge to reify it. That reification is then argued to be fatal in that it leads to the collapse of representation and thereby the move symbolically obliterates the foundation of human culture. This trajectory is mirrored in the protagonist's obsession throughout the narrative.

Eric Gans's theory about the originary scene of representation is attractive in its minimalist precision. The deferral of conflict concerning the originary appetitive object—by means of representation and signification—presents a prolific cognitive structure for anyone interested in contemplating the centrality of art and fiction in any culture. Four related components in Gans's theory are essential in the inquiry that follows: the cultural memory of the originary scene, desire, ritual, and the sacred. These concepts will be scrutinized through a phenomenological analysis of Tom McCarthy's novel. Before turning to the novel, we need to establish an understanding of the key concepts.

The originary scene of representation serves as a fundamental unit in the hypothesis we examine here. The founding cultural event is based on an abortive gesture. This gesture frees the energy and repeatability of signification processes.

> The original scene of representation . . . requires no external motivation, although such activities as hunting generate plausible settings. Fear of conflict is the sole necessary motivation for the abortion of the original gesture of appropriation. The minimality of our hypothesis indeed requires that this "abortion" be in its origin no more than a *hesitation* sufficiently marked to designate the object. The activity of appropriation can then proceed, but on a new basis. For the hesitation will have sufficed to make

each member aware not merely of the appropriative intentions of the others but of their renouncement, expressed in the designating gestures, of *merely* appetitive (that is, "instinctual") appropriation. Thus the act of representation, however brief, must lead to a nonviolent communal division or sharing of the object. (Gans 20; emphasis in original)

Thus, representation holds the group together in two interrelated ways: to avoid conflict and to bind together in signifying practice. If we jump a few steps we understand the central position of narrativity and acting. Language makes possible more elaborate practices of representation. Immediately linked to the originary scene is also the concept of desire. Desire arises as the imaginary compensation for the aborted appetitive object. Gans's definition of desire is "as appetite mediated by the appearance of its object on the scene of representation" (24). The realm of imagination is closely tied to desire as such. The inaccessibility of the appetitive object enhances its importance within the imaginary.

> The scene of representation is real, but it is also reproduced in the mind of each participant as the origin of what we may call his *desiring imagination*. The public significance attributed to the object makes his private representation of it a form of imaginary possession that not merely augments its appetitive attraction [...] but radically transforms this attraction into a phenomenon of potentially general significance. (Gans 26; emphasis in original)

The scene of representation and imagination serves to accomplish the deferral of appropriation of the appetitive object. But if we take the whole thing one step further we realize that the referential function of language is nevertheless effectual. Thus, the reproduction of the original event is according to Gans equal to a ritual in which the object is sacred.

> The sign, reproduced on the scene of representation, suffices to effect the deferral of appropriation of the designated desire-object and thereby to avoid conflict. *But the reproduction of the event as a whole takes place not on the scene of representation but in the real world*. It is this reproduction that we call ritual, and the status of the object in it, sacred. (43; emphasis in original)

In all, the hypothesis outlined here posits the appetitive object as the basis for the subsequently elaborated levels of cultural practice. But what if the desired object is obscure and fragmentised by amnesia and trauma? What if the object is a non-entity that has only its gravity of unknowing as attraction? What if the desiring subject is forced to desire representation itself? What if that desire turns into an

obsession, which subsequently turns into ritual that eventually becomes "real" and collapses the whole system? It should be mentioned that in the analysis that follows, Gans's hypotheses are initially treated with an emphasis on their synchronic aspects. The diachronic dimension of cultural evolution will become more prominent towards the end. This may come out as a certain amount of theoretical violence, but hopefully the argument that follows has some creative value if regarded holistically.

The problematisations outlined above indeed constitute the premises for Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*. The unnamed protagonist has had an accident involving some kind of technology falling from the sky. But "the event [is] a blank: a white slate, a black hole" (McCarthy 5). The narrator receives 8.5 million pounds compensation for his injuries on condition that he not speak at all about the incident. Apart from other physical damage, he suffers from severe memory loss. Therefore he at first spends most of his time and money on trying to reconstruct fragments of his memory. He creates a scene with hired actors in order to get at each memory fragment. The first big project is to recreate a block of flats where the protagonist used to live at some point in time before the accident. The setting has to be perfectly in accordance with his memory down to the minutest details. Parts that are blank in the memory have to be blank in the re-enactment scene too. The protagonist is just supposed to walk down the stairs on his way out and what he sees has to perfectly match his memory.

> Here the sensations started returning: the same sense of zinging and intensity. My concierge was standing as instructed—standing quite still in the middle of the lobby with her white ice-hockey mask on. Behind her, to her left—my right—there was a cupboard; beside that, another strip of white, neutral space. As I walked around her in a circle, looking at her from all sides, her stumpy arms and featureless face seemed to emanate an almost toxic level of significance. (McCarthy 133)

The near poisonous level of meaning is reached when the narrator comes close to an accurate match between the memory and the representation. If he desires the actual memory or the actual past, he cannot know exactly what he desires. Thus, the desire partly shifts towards the representation. He clearly covets being *inside* the re-enactment.

The "white, neutral space" that recoils from representation is the most significant phenomenon in the present reading. Since the protagonist could potentially fill the space with memory substance, should his memory return, it does not seem to be an absolute nothingness. However, here it functions as the sacred. An unfilled space seemingly devoid of meaning still carries meaning in the overall signification

process. It simultaneously marks the empty space that creates the suspense for the protagonist and thereby for the whole narrative. To fulfill its ontological function it must remain as a powerful emptiness. As rituals, all the re-enactments are underpinned by an unknown variable that the protagonist attempts to reify in order to reify himself over and against the object's materialisation. This is the desire that turns into a monomania.

As the narrative progresses, the obsession increases as well. In the re-enactment of the block of flats he has a pianist rehearsing as the aural backdrop. The pianist has to practice and make mistakes, only to repeat the passage until he gets it right. On one occasion he catches the pianist in the hallway while the music is playing. It is obviously a recording, which makes the protagonist furious. He presses the pianist for answers.

> "But there are mistakes in it!" I said. "And loopbacks, and…"

> "A recording of me. I made it myself, especially. It's the same thing, more or less. Isn't it?"

> It was my turn to go white now. There were no mirrors in the building, but I'm sure that if there had been and I'd looked in one I would have seen myself completely white: white with both rage and dizziness.

> "No!" I shouted. "No, it is not! It is absolutely not the same thing!"

> "Why not?" he asked. His voice was still monotonous and flat but was shaking a little.

> "Because… It absolutely isn't! It's just not the same because… It's not the same at all." (McCarthy 141)

The protagonist's fury matches his inability to explain the differences between the two levels of representation, which makes him end up in a tautology. That the recording does not reach the level of authenticity required goes to show that the re-enactments are closer to the "real" in whatever sense of that word we prefer. The scene reveals that the protagonist does not want to accept some kind of Baudrillardian ontology of the hyperreal (endless repetition without an original). It is rather a situation that comes closer to ritual. Since the essence of ritual is built on repetition, the re-enactment too has to be suffused with repetition. But the narrator has to know for certain that his imagination is backed up by the pianist really playing. Mere signification is not enough. The physical sensation of "zinging and intensity" that the protagonist experiences in the actual re-enactment has to be triggered by the real-world existence of ritual as the substitution for the originary

scene of representation. Without the pianist really playing, the whole set-up collapses. The re-enactment of memory fragments does not challenge Gans's theory of the originary scene. Its structure could underlie the protagonist's desire for authenticity by means of access to his lost past. The challenge rather comes from the obsession with repetition and ritual. The irony planted into this passage is that—when upbraiding the piano player for destroying the component of the real—the narrator sees himself from the outside as a character going white with rage within the scene. He remains a prisoner within representation while trying to escape it by means of his invented quasi-ritual.

This brings us to the next step in the investigation. As the novel develops, the narrator drifts away from his original plan of re-enacting memory fragments and picks up concrete events. First he re-enacts his experience at a tyre repair shop when he has his windshield-washing fluid refilled and it gushes out all over him into the interior of the car. The narrator becomes fascinated by the possibility of the washing fluid disappearing, transubstantiating into thin air. He has his crew build an exact replica of the car repair shop and he hires several teams of re-enactors who re-enact the series of events in a continuous loop. The next phase in the main character's series of obsessions is with a set of shootings. A drug related shooting is the only one that gets re-enacted. The protagonist himself plays the victim and the actual space of the re-enactment becomes sacred ground.

> The spot that this had happened on was the ground zero of perfection—all perfection: the one he'd achieved, the one I wanted, the one everyone else wanted but just didn't know they wanted and in any case didn't have eight and a half million pounds to help them pursue even if they had known. It was sacred ground, blessed ground—and anyone who occupied it in the way he'd occupied it would become blessed too. And so I had to re-enact his death: for myself, certainly, but for the world in general as well. (McCarthy 178)

It gradually becomes obvious that not even ritual is enough for the narrator's compulsive behaviour. What holds up ritual and distinguishes it from ordinary representation is the prevalence of the referent. The referent is here the actual event of the victim dying in a certain spot. What the protagonist wants to achieve is something impossible. He wants to revive or relive the "real" event to attain something of its "realness". There are at this point two discordant features in relation to Gans's minimal and secondary hypotheses. Firstly, according to the theory, representation should appear as a form of release from the appetitive object. But gradually, the protagonist becomes imprisoned within the representation itself. He becomes secured within the representation-dimension of the ritual. It is as if the objective of restoring his memories gets lost on the way. But

instead of actively working on memories in order to regain his identity, he instead turns towards ritual in order to reach for something that is real and by means of which he himself should become real, or differently put, to amalgamate with the sacred object. Secondly, the re-enactment is according to the secondary theory supposed to preserve the referential object, which is always real somewhere else. The narrator attempts to transgress these boundaries and become one with the referent through his obsession with the event's spatial location. This goes to show that the attempt at reversing the originary scene of representation is doomed to failure and that the protagonist's trajectory actually collapses the signification system that makes fiction possible.

This development comes to full fruition in the final re-enactment project, the re-enactment of a bank heist. At first the planning is done as before. They build a replica of a particular bank and rehearse the robbery in every miniscule detail. But when the ex-bank robber hired as an expert tells the protagonist that they used to pre-enact the robberies in advance of the real hold-up, the narrator changes his mind about the whole thing. He wants to do the robbery in the real bank, a point which he makes to his companion Naz.

> "But what about the staff? We'll have to replace the real staff with re-enactors."
>
> "No we won't!" I told him. "We'll just stand our staff re-enactors down and use the real staff."
>
> "But how will they know it's a re-enactment and not an actual hold-up?"
>
> "They won't!" I said. "But it doesn't matter: they've been trained to do exactly what the re-enactors have been trained to do. Both should re-enact the same movements identically. Naz? Are you there?" (McCarthy 233-34)

The protagonist has become addicted to the component of the real in the ritual. His goal has shifted from trying to re-live memories to becoming real in the re-enactment. The closer the ritual gets to reality, the more the narrator feels real himself. He wants to move towards "the point at which the re-enactment merge[s] with the event" (McCarthy 236). There are at least two consequences of this move. The appetitive object amalgamates with the sacred object of the re-enactment itself. Thus, the ritual cannot fulfil its function as the repetition of the event in which the object is substituted with a repeatable object of signification. The real bank fills the position of the appetitive object. The addictive trajectory of the protagonist seems to want to reverse the secondary hypothesis into the originary scene. This also means that the ethical component that arises in the ritualised phase disappears too. The protagonist completely lacks ethical awareness. His monomania

has one single telos.

> And me? Why had I decided to transfer the robbery re-enactment to the bank itself? For the same reason I'd done everything I'd done since David Simpson's party: 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: the detour that makes us all second-hand and second-rate. I felt that, by this stage, I'd got so close to doing this. Watching the re-enactors' movements as they practised that day, their guns' arcs, the turning of their shoulders, the postures of the prone customers and clerks—watching all these, feeling the tingling moving up my spine again, I had the feeling I was closing in on this core. (McCarthy 236)

Of course the real re-enactment goes wrong and one of the re-enactors gets shot by mistake. The whole thing falls apart. But for the narrator it is all beauty. For him the aesthetic dimension reaches perfection when signification and what builds human culture collapses. As an aesthetic object, *Remainder* ultimately draws attention to the impossibility of being authentic in the way the protagonist imagines. That which most clearly emphasises this fact is that the cultural reversal ends up in violence and death. According to the originary hypothesis, the abortive gesture is introduced in order to avoid conflict and violence. The protagonist attempts to get rid of signification and representation in order to get at the "real." The consequence is that violence is introduced as the naked core of events.

Phenomenologically speaking, there are at least two conspicuous things to consider at this point. I shall present these in the order of increasing complexity. The first and perhaps most obvious stratum is the paradoxical ontology of the fictionalisation of the dissolving of fiction. Seen through the lens of Gans's hypotheses, this is achieved through an attempt at reversing cultural evolution through the insistence on the ritual form. If it were in any way possible, the protagonist would want to violently seize the appetitive object itself. But since this can only be achieved on a fictional level, the protagonist remains imprisoned in the cage of representation. It is as if the novel attempts to give fictional form to the painful birth of the posthuman by means of the prehuman in the originary scene.

The other level I wish to emphasise is more elusive and complex, but it also concerns another aspect of the ritual form. If the modern society depicted in *Remainder* is an example of our advanced culture, it phenomenologically plays out the persistence and centrality of ritual itself. In order for the sacred to remain sacred, it can never be obtained. So what is sacred in the 21st century? What is the remainder of *Remainder*? From a more theologically oriented phenomenological perspective (e.g., Paul Ricoeur), the philosophical tragedy of the narrative consists

of its mistake in construing the sacred as a lack that has to be filled. In contrast, the sacred could be seen as akin to the blank spaces in the protagonist's first re-enactments, but then rather as a form of charged space that should *not* be filled, in order for it to retain the potential of driving thought as well as narrativity. I claim that this type of sacredness actually is a remainder in the open ending of the novel.

If *Remainder* investigates the status of the novel form and the phenomenology of representation more generally, it most certainly has a very radical response. Not because it brings something new, but because what it draws attention to is so primordial that it tends to go unnoticed. The protagonist's blank memory and the blank spaces in the re-enactments are withdrawals from representation but also paradoxically still part of them. In a similar way, the sacred gives energy to any cultural system and the elimination of it collapses the equilibrium of desire, imagination, and representation. Paul Ricoeur summarises an existential dimension that may very well function as a description of what the protagonist in *Remainder* goes through:

> We exist because we are seized by those events that happen to us in the strong sense of this word—such and such entirely fortuitous encounters, dramas, happinesses or misfortunes that, as one says, have completely changed the course of our existence. The task of understanding ourselves through them is the task of transforming the accidental into our destiny. The event is our master. Each of our separate existences are like those communities we belong to—we are absolutely dependent on certain founding events. They are not events that pass away, but events that endure. In themselves, they are event-signs. To understand ourselves is to continue to attest and to testify to them. (34–35)

The narrator gets drawn into a violent construal of this existential call. Instead of patiently living through the enduring event he attempts to act on it. He pushes these actions all the way to the collapse of representation and the elimination of the power of the sacred, but only to experience its renewal. In any case, we can read the ending as a form of redemption. On the escape aircraft after the failed robbery, the narrator forces the pilot to keep flying away and back in the flight form of an eight, that is, by graphically manifesting the sign of infinity, the lemniscate, onto the thin air.

> Our trail would be visible from the ground: an eight, plus that first bit where we'd first set off—fainter, drifted to the side by now, discarded, recidual [sic], a remainder. . . . I liked this turning back and forth in mid-air, this banking one way, straightening, then banking back another, the feeling of weightlessness, suspension. I didn't want it to stop. (McCarthy 274)

To be suspended is to endure the experience of never reaching the object of desire or the sacred object of the ritual. In terms of representation and literature it is to accept suspense as an inevitable component of its basic structure. *Remainder* makes manifest the sacred as the powerful transparency of the air that surrounds us.

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