



# Men in Space

The novelist of disenchantment finds meaning.

By David Marcus

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THE ENGLISH NOVELIST TOM MCCARTHY got his start as a writer in the late '80s. Thatcher's Britain, like much of the North Atlantic, was in the midst of a decade-long recessionary spiral. To get people off the dole, Thatcher's

administration came up with a rather inventive solution—the “Enterprise Allowance Scheme,” which provided individuals with a weekly stipend to start a business and then become their business's sole employee. It was a way for

the Iron Lady and her successor, John Major, to provide much-needed relief while also keeping the unemployment numbers down. Over 300,000 people received grants, including many artists who were encouraged to apply.

McCarthy was awarded a stipend through the scheme shortly after graduating Oxford and headed off to Prague. It was just after the Velvet Revolution; the country was run by a rag-tag group of dissidents and intellectuals—including its president, the absurdist playwright Václav Havel. “You'd go to a gig in a bar,” McCarthy recalled, “and the drummer smoking a joint with five earrings in his ear was, like, the minister of whatever.”

McCarthy found a large, drafty apartment and a girlfriend, and spent most of his time drinking and burning unused furniture to stay warm. What he did write—a novel about doubles and forgeries—was laced with opaque references to Christian iconography and French surrealism. Its plot, as he later confessed, was “more or less lifted straight from *The Broken Ear*,” a volume in Hergé's *Adventures of Tintin* series, and the



novel was rejected by every publisher that considered it. McCarthy called it *Men in Space*.

*MEN IN SPACE* WAS EVENTUALLY published under the same name more than a decade later as a follow-up to McCarthy's first published novel, *Remainder*. McCarthy, at that point, had moved on to more marketable subjects: bank heists, Victorian love triangles, crypts on the Upper Nile, the haze of interwar Europe. *Remainder* was critically acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic—Zadie Smith hailed it as “a glimpse of an alternate road down which the novel might ... travel forward”—and *C*, his magic mountain of a third novel, was shortlisted for the Man Booker.

essays on literature, to the arch ephemera that he and Critchley produced, McCarthy has focused on the “acute sense of being cut off” that he believes is at the center of modern experience. As he and Critchley argued in an INS petition, “We begin with the experience of failed transcendence ... [with] an absence,” with the realization that in today's disenchanted world all we have is “an incomprehensibly vast lack.”

THIS SENSE OF FAILED TRANSCENDENCE is at the center of McCarthy's latest book, *Satin Island*. A novel that follows a “corporate ethnographer” as he drifts from one North Atlantic capital to the next in the hope that he will find something to anchor him to our “negative

*flaneur*—his movements are not for pleasure but out of pecuniary necessity; U. moves only because his employer and his employer's employer insist on it.

U. was trained as an ethnographer; he is one of the many “fallen” academics—Chip Lambert in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*; Ted Wilson in Joseph O'Neill's *The Dog*—who are beginning to populate contemporary fiction and who are representatives of the growing diaspora of Ph.D.'s forced to find gainful employment outside the academy. Like his hero, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, U. believes that we are at the end of history, at least for anthropology. Its raw material—the unexamined *anthropos*—has all but dried up. The world's mysteries have been revealed; we are all—in some way—enlightened, disenchanted, *modern*. As U. observes, “Even the exotic's not exotic.”

Instead U. works in the field of everyday life. Like Lévi-Strauss, who turned away from the exotic in *Tristes Tropiques* and became “a traveler of our own day,” U. has become a master of what he calls “present-tense anthropology.” His current project—which he calls with Platonic zeal, “the Project”—is for a mysterious multinational that specializes in what U. opaquely labels “network architecture.” Like his dissertation work as a (very active) participant-observer in London's coke-blown discotheques, this new project is a bit hard to pin down. It is unclear what the multinational does, and it is also unclear what U. does for them or what, for that matter, they want him to do for them. In part, this is because, like the unnamed narrator in *Remainder*, U. is bound by a nondisclosure agreement. But one suspects that this is also because U. has very little sense of what he does—that his job is, itself, full of blocked meanings and “failed transcendence.”

What U. does with all of his free time is also a mystery, at least for the reader. A sensitive, perhaps *too* sensitive, observer of the everyday, U. finds patterns everywhere and composes large, almost encyclopedic dossiers on various epiphenomena. There is an oil spill that

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McCarthy also wrote two rather accomplished, if quixotic, works of literary criticism—*Tintin and the Secret of Literature* and the T.S. Eliot-inspired *Transmission and the Individual Remix*—and continued to produce a set of playful, mock-serious manifestos for the International Necronautical Society (INS), an avant-garde group of which he and his friend, the philosopher Simon Critchley, are quite possibly its only living members. (In one of their many high-jinx stunts, they purged one of their members for “not being dead.”)

But the theme of men stranded in space—of dislocated figures cut off from all previous sites of spiritual and moral meaning—remained at the beating heart of all of his work. From the haunted and emotionally flat protagonists of *Remainder* and *C* to his book-length

world,” it is also a work of fiction that captures the ways in which we stubbornly still try to give the world's absences meaning.

U., our protagonist, is a figure frequently caught between places, waiting in airport lounges and moving between hotels. He has a girlfriend—well, a frequent sexual partner (more on this later)—and a steady job. But almost everything else in his life is a blank, a space. We don't know where and to whom he was born, in what decade or, for that matter, in which country. We have very little sense of his desires and ambitions. His life is given its shape by his work in the burgeoning field of “paradigm advancement” and by his various peregrinations from London to Paris to Turin to New York City. But unlike his nineteenth-century counterpart—the



U. compulsively follows, believing that it is suggestive of new patterns in human communication. He spends days contemplating a parachutist's death—was it a murder? A suicide? An accident?—and comes to the conclusion that his death is part of a broader conspiracy. He frequently circles back to a South Pacific island and the cultural history of its occupants—the Vanuatans—whom he believes capture our own late-modern tendencies, worshipping certain technologies as if they're gods.

All this sounds like the territory of Thomas Pynchon and William Gass, who are masters of what might be called the "information novel"—novels that attempt to capture the chaos and confusion of late-modern life by overwhelming their readers with data. But there are some significant differences. McCarthy does not really provide us with information; rather he captures U. *performing* it. We hear him speaking vaguely about "social logics," corporation tribes, coded messages scripted into everyday life—and yet, most of the time, we really aren't sure what U. is talking about. It's almost all grad-seminar babble—"feeding vanguard theory ... back into the corporate machine"—and very little substance. For U., information is a way to draw him back into a world from which he feels permanently alienated and disconnected. Like Serge Carrefax, the lonely protagonist of *C*, who scans his wireless's frequencies in the hopes of discovering Morse code, U. seeks out meaning, hope, a sense of humanity in the crackling, whirring static of information. "Beneath [its] vagueness," U. hopes there is "something forming—something important and beautiful and momentous."

OF COURSE, KNOWLEDGE ALONE—AS U.'s great humanist hero, Lévi-Strauss, would have reminded him—is not enough. There is also the question of ethics, of human interaction and community, of the meaning generated not only from a performance of knowledge but from the act of knowing another. Of this kind of knowledge, U. has very

little. He speaks of his boss, a man named "Peyman," but rarely speaks *with* him. During his breaks, he spends time with colleagues watching films in silence. He appears to have one friend—a man named Petr—in whom he takes only an anthropological interest.

Then there is Madison, the woman with whom he spends a good third of the novel in a kind of simulacrum of a romantic relationship. They sometimes go for dinner, they often text, but most of the time they have sex and then spend their post-coital moments staring at the ceiling. One does not need D.H. Lawrence here, but the clinical descriptions of their love life—"When I arrived at Madison's, we had sex." "Later that

Skyping Madison from the Turin airport, and Madison remarks that she's also been to the airport before. U. doesn't think much of this aside at the moment, but like the mystery of the parachutist's death, her comment festers, and U. keeps coming back to it, hoping that the story might blossom into some deeper truth.

One anticipates a variety of banal answers—the same kind of banal answers one suspects lie behind almost all of the mysteries that dog the endlessly inquisitive U. But in this case there is something more. In 2001, Madison had traveled to Genoa for an anti-globalization protest. There was a G-8 Summit, and everyone stayed in an empty school

McCarthy has made a career out of writing about men who drift through a world that refuses to give them meaning, but here is something else. The emotional plane is beginning to tilt.

evening I saw Madison again. Again we had sex."—are so lovelorn and mechanistic that one wants to look away.

This is not uncommon in a McCarthy novel. Sex for him is despair, an act of mourning and melancholia. It is an effort to recover the past, as in the case of *Remainder*, or a lost sibling, as in the case of *C*, or, more generally, to rehearse the touch and feel of human contact.

But with U. and Madison, one senses from the beginning that there will be something more than just the realization of mutual solitude. McCarthy, of course, won't give us the emotional and moral release of transcendence. But there is something in the works for U. and Madison—a growing sense of intimacy. In the novel's opening scene, U. is

building. "The gathering had the air of a carnival, a circus of ideas." "Sounds fun," U. says. "It was," Madison answers, "until the police arrived." They kicked down the school's doors early in the morning and then beat everyone. Then they dragged the protesters to a police station, where more beatings and public humiliations took place. Madison was separated from the group, and her passport was confiscated. She was put in a car and taken to a different location, a hotel of some sort. There was a man in the hotel who seemed to be important. He was in a nice suit and, at first, courteous. Madison was relieved. Then she noticed a wand, a "plasticky-metallic kind of pointer." The man put on a glove, picked up the pointer,

and then put it against her side. It was a cattle prod.

Having pushed her to tell him her story, U. realizes what he's done. He at first blurts out: "What the fuck?"—to the beatings, the breach of civil liberties, the cattle prod. But then he settles on something altogether different: U. feels compassion. After a long pause, he asks: "Did it hurt?" "Yes, U.," Madison says, "it hurt more than anything."

Of course this is not enough—sympathy, that is. But it is a beginning. Something has broken down as a result of Madison's story. If McCarthy has made a career out of writing about men in space, drifting through a world that refuses to give them meaning, then here is the emergence of something else. The emotional plane is beginning to tilt; our protagonist is taking on a more human angle. We may all still drift in the zero gravity of "failed transcendence." But if all we are left with is its lost icons and codes, then sympathy—a symbol of ethics—is a start.

AS THE NOVEL COMES TO AN END, U. acquires a new obsession: Staten Island. He dreams of it, reads about it, and writes a lengthy dossier about it, and then, on a business trip, finally has a chance to visit it. Standing at the ferry's gate, full of jittery energy, our hero believes that he might at last be on the precipice of meaning. The orange hull of the ferry comes into view, moving across the dull gray harbor like Phlegyas's raft. It slides into port, and people around him pick up bags, get ready to board. U. moves forward, people pushing him toward the ship. But as he gets closer to the boat, he pauses.

He has a realization: On or off the ship, in Staten Island or Manhattan, there is no release from our age of nontranscendence—no escape to another, more mysterious, meaning-giving place. We are all "suspended," he realizes, "between two types of meaninglessness"—between despair and hope. But if anything will save us, it will not be by escaping to a fantasy island, no matter how appealing, but in the crackling human whirl of the city. As McCarthy writes—paraphrasing Tennyson—in *C*, "Of faith: let it grow." ●

*David Marcus is co-editor of DISSENT.*

## Speech Acts

By Rae Armantrout

**Something's going around.**

**The crows**

**started it.**

**No language**

**can tell us**

**which crow.**

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**You who**

**in the**

**mama turnpike**

**sexy tough shit**

**steady state**

**thought bubble song**

**churn**

\*

**What's new? Presence**

**as fad.**

**Humans**

**photo-bomb the planet,**

**pop up everywhere**

**because incongruous**

**is funny**

**and we want you**

**to know**

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*Rae Armantrout's latest book is ITSELF (Wesleyan, February 2015). Her book, VERSED, won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.*

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