

**The London Consortium**  
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# What's Left Behind: An Interview with Tom McCarthy

Conducted by Roger Orwell

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After a near-fatal incident involving a mysterious, falling “something,” the traumatised and nameless protagonist of Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* uses his eight and a half million pounds of corporate compensation to stage a series of increasingly elaborate re-enactments. Triggered by a moment of *déjà-vu*, experienced while staring at a crack in a bathroom wall, these spectacular and obsessive reconstructions constitute an attempt to recover a mislaid sense of reality. “Ever since learning to move again,” the narrator explains, “I’d felt that all my acts were duplicates, unnatural, acquired.” Incorporating themes of memory, psychosis, agency, repetition, authenticity and death, *Remainder* is the contemporary catastrophic novel par excellence. Here, the author talks to Static co-editor Roger Orwell about the book and some of the ideas that encircle its narrative.

**Roger Orwell:** Tom, just to start with I’m going to quote something to you from Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of The Disaster*<sup>1</sup>: ‘Without language nothing can be shown. And to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible.’ Is *Remainder* a book that had to be written, that you had to write?

**Tom McCarthy:** Well, I’m not sure what it means to say that a book has to be written. I mean, I can’t imagine a world without *Ulysses*, for example. But, you know, I’m sure the world could have existed without *Ulysses*. Although in a way, you could say something like *Ulysses*, as this kind of eruption and becoming manifest of Modernism, is as inevitable as an earthquake after the build up of centuries of tectonic pressure. I have a theory that there are two types of books; and one type is very consciously willed, you know, forced from the author. They sit down to write a book and they play around with lots of ideas and then something develops. And then on the other hand there are books that just happen by accident. I’m sure that I can imagine the ‘eureka’ moment for Ballard’s *Crash*,<sup>2</sup> for example. I just picture him standing on a balcony above the Westway in west London (probably stoned or something) just looking at the traffic going by, thinking about sex, or having just had sex and then *suddenly* having this vision of technology and violence and speed and capitalism. And the book’s there [clicks his fingers]. And *Remainder* was really a *Crash*, ‘eureka’ book. I was at a party and saw a crack on the wall in the bathroom and had a moment of *déjà-vu* – exactly like the protagonist; and within twenty or forty minutes I’d written an outline of the whole book on the back of an envelope or something. It was really a happy accident.

**RO:** That’s an interesting link to the narrative itself because the book’s narrator is actually recovering from some form of brain damage caused by an accident. Could you say something about the research you did on psychological trauma?

**TM:** Well, actually, having said the whole book was there in the eureka moment, the only bit that wasn’t there was the trauma premise. I mean, the book kind of came out of this moment of *déjà-vu* and an idea of re-enactment: *wouldn’t it be good to re-enact this moment? Where would you stop if you could re-enact a whole building, a whole street, a whole event, a bank heist? What if you could re-enact death?* And I realised the protagonist would need a lot of money to do this, to hire all the people and the back-up people and the buildings to make these re-enactments possible. And so I thought, OK, how’s he going to get his money? How about compensation for an accident? So I started looking at not just the financial but the psychological aspects of that: post-trauma. And they fitted *exactly* with the kind of ‘grammar’, if you like, or the mode of repetition and re-enactment that I wanted.

**RO:** Post-trauma as Freud describes it?

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot (1995). *The Writing of The Disaster*. new edn, trans. Anna Smock. Lincoln & London: The University of Nebraska Press. (originally pub. 1980).

<sup>2</sup> J. G. Ballard (1995). *Crash*. London: Vintage. (originally pub. Jonathan Cape, 1973).

TM: Not only him. This is something that Freud and his totally empiricist opponents completely agree on (as far as I can make out, it's the *only* thing they agree on): trauma bequeaths a propensity to repeat, because the moment of trauma, this is absolutely Blanchotian – the event - is always erased. It's never recorded in memory *as* memory. So you have this gap that demands to be substituted or supplemented, as Derrida would say, with other data. So, you get this kind of stuttering, repeating, looping logic. It's a very creative condition, post-trauma. You wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy; but it's very, very creative.

RO: I understand you spent some time with trauma victims?

TM: My agent's best friend had been in a motorbike crash; and another friend had been in a car crash. And I spent hours with each of them, taking copious notes. That's where I got lots of the stuff about being buffeted by winds just before the accident, or the thing about riding in an ambulance and thinking, 'damn, I'm missing the experience of riding in an ambulance, 'cause I can't see myself'. It's exactly the same logic you get in Proust, when he's in the clock tower saying 'I can see the town but I can't be in it any more. I wish I could do both'. I also read fascinating studies that were done in the wake of Vietnam in the 70s and 80s about traumatized veterans who had this syndrome that my hero has, of nothing being real. It's like Warhol said, 'After I was shot I just felt I've been watching TV for the rest of my life'. They have the same thing: nothing is real, this is all fake. And some of them would also reconstruct events. I read a case history of one Vietnam vet who'd lost all his buddies in some awful battle and became a bank robber. And there was a formal similarity to lots of the bank robberies he'd do; you know – there would be a wall over here, a grassy knoll here, recreating the layout of the battlefield: he reconstructed and replayed the battle that he couldn't actually remember!

RO: So, that seems to feed into this idea of logistics that's present in the book. Reading it I found that there is a kind of luxurious immersion into some of these considerations. It seems to become poetic and almost sensual. Could you comment on that?

TM: Yeah, the logistics thing is something that became more and more interesting to me, and more and more *funny*, in fact, as the book progressed. I mean, I realized right from the outset that in order to stage these elaborate re-enactments, in which twenty, then fifty, then two hundred people have to be working together, the hero needs a very good right-hand man. As soon as I realized that, this figure sprung to my mind - from *Moby Dick*, actually. Ahab (who, like my hero, has a kind of pathological obsession with doing just this one thing), he's got a side-kick, Fedallah – this dark, Indian, turbaned character that - in this nineteenth-century, kind of racist way - embodies the darkness of his obsession. But he stuck in my head; so my protagonist's right-hand man, Naz, started out as Asian, just came in my mind as Asian. Then I thought: India now, modern India, is about logistics. It's where all of the UK's tax and banking logistics is actually carried out. If you phone your bank, you'll get through to a call centre in India - endless rooms of people managing data.

RO: For Naz and his team, logistics becomes almost religious...

TM: Yes. I stole this line from Bataille when he describes Sade going through all the different configurations of sexual possibilities, he says he's like a 'Gnostic monk toiling away before the divine mystery, trying to list all the names of God'. I borrowed that image for Naz. He's similarly obsessed. It becomes a mystical activity. Then the hero starts seeing his staff, and the back-up people, and the back-up-back-up people, as kind of like saints in a stained-glass window in a church; or like the high priests that are executed when the pharaoh dies and have the honour of being buried with him, like an eternal retinue. You know; so his

secretariat does become kind of *aufgehobt* – transubstantiated into this divine realm of angels and arch-angels.

**RO:** I'm very interested in the novelization of theory and the way philosophical concepts can be developed in fiction. Could you say something about the theoretical background to this book? It educes some very interesting ideas of Freud's 'death drive'. Did you carefully and consciously plan these foundations?

**TM:** Well, here's the thing. For me, the boundaries between theory or philosophy on the one hand and fiction on the other are very porous. You take, for example, someone like Blanchot, who was a very big influence on this book. His fiction is extremely philosophical, his philosophy is extremely fictive. Or Derrida, someone I've loved since I was about eighteen; I mean, he's an extremely creative writer, who deploys all the devices of fiction. *The Postcard*<sup>3</sup> is kind of a love novel; the closest thing I could compare it to would be something by John Donne. I think especially in France over the last century, all the major thinkers that would have been novelists in the nineteenth century, who would have been the Zolas and Flauberts of their era, became philosophers – Derrida, Barthes, Deleuze – these are the most creative writers of the twentieth century. Similarly for me, when I read a Freud case history, it's as baroque and gothic as some of the best gothic fiction, something like *Jane Eyre* or Edgar Allen Poe. I mean all these things were in there, Freud and 'the death drive' was in there. I didn't really have one feeding pool of theory and one feeding pool of fiction. They all just merged together.

**RO:** What about the fiction that's influenced *Remainder*? When I read the book I felt there was a strong sense of this work being a logical extension of Ballard's narrative scope and aesthetic – particularly in the relationship between the characters of Vaughan and Ballard in *Crash*, and its meta-narrative of reproduction and authenticity. Does that make sense?

**TM:** Totally. I was very consciously thinking of *Crash*. I mean, Vaughan re-enacts car crashes. He re-enacts these stylized, violent moments and Ballard (the character) makes it clear that the reason he's doing this is a bid for authenticity. Ballard says: 'Only the car crash is real'; in this alienated world where we've got all these screens in front of us, events in the world just become narratives on TV. The only real thing is lived violence, i.e. the car crash. And there're seven or eight passages in the book where he says: 'this was the only real moment I've had in years. I wanted to be real again.' I don't think Ballard invented that - I think you find exactly the same tendency and compulsion in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Here's a guy in 1605 who feels inauthentic: modern life is alienating; we can't be heroes any more; we're just kind of schmucks. So he literally re-enacts stylized moments on the highways. He gets on a horse and says: 'I'm doing that bit in *Don Belianos of Greece* where he rides at the guys.' And he always fails, just like Vaughan actually, failing to die perfectly in the head-on collision with Elizabeth Taylor. Quixote falls off his horse, and the people he's attacking kick the shit out of him while he lies in a mess on the floor. And I mean you can trace the history of re-enactment *way* back. Hamlet re-enacts his father's death scene in front of the whole court in this one moment of authenticity – in *The Mouse Trap*, the play - against this giant lie that they're living.

**RO:** Coming back to Blanchot, what role does language play in all this? The protagonist moves along a clearly defined contour, a development of words and ideas. Is it something that you handled really carefully – that language?

**TM:** He's very concerned with language. When there's a word that intrigues him he gets his staff to look it up. So, Naz, his right-hand-man, will text someone who sits in some back-up room full of dictionaries and they'll look it up and fax or text the definition through. And the words become very central to the whole way he

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida (1987). *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (originally pub. 1979).

kind of ends up conceptualizing and also performing the stages of his eventually psychotic and catastrophic trajectory. For example, the word 'speculation': his stockbroker explains that speculation is what makes your money go up within a stock market, and that this is based not on what stocks are worth in the present but on what they might be worth in an imaginary future. So, it's about a laying out of time along the trajectories of capital. But then he has the word 'speculation' looked up and he finds out it's also to do with the contemplation of the heavens - astronomy. And then he's lying in his stairwell experiencing time, looking at the flecks of dust floating in the sunlight and he pictures them as stars; and he realizes that one day, when the sun goes, they will fall. And the stocks end up falling and in fact the whole novel ends with a vision of universal catastrophe, of the stars collapsing. So, even that one term manages this whole planetarium of his imaginary, which becomes the real of everyone else. He's killing people because of definitions in the dictionary by the end!

**RO:** There's this passage in Derrida's *Archive Fever*<sup>4</sup> where he cites Yosef Yerushalmi and suggests that the opposite of forgetting is not remembering, but *justice*. Would you say your protagonist feels he has cheated death and, in a way, justice?

**TM:** No, I think he's an agent of justice! I don't think it's a cautionary tale. I think this guy genuinely is a hero. And I think where this really comes out is the scene where he re-enacts the death of a drug dealer who's been shot by another drug dealer in Brixton. He stumbles across the original shooting, which is all cordoned off like some sacred space by police tape, and he bribes people to find out what happened. Then he hires the stretch of street two weeks later, as though for a film set (although there'll be no filming) and has it re-enacted. I think what horrifies him is forgetting - that within an hour of a life being taken the blood can be cleared away, the forensics will have done their job and the street can just be re-opened to traffic and commerce as though nothing had happened. And this is what he refuses. He keeps re-iterating this mantra: 'everything must leave some kind of mark.' It's a very Derridean thing, the idea of marks and traces. What he does is to return to that mark again and again, going over the bike's handlebars himself and falling in the puddle while the assassins point their guns at him, just like the real victim did - not just once but seven, eight, nine, ten times. He's trapped in this moment - in this absolutely traumatic repetition of it.

**RO:** So the narrator's trauma actually becomes a kind of ethical position?

**TM:** Absolutely. I hadn't read Levinas when I wrote the book, but I did shortly afterwards, and I just thought - yes! That's what I meant! Levinas's vision of justice is precisely this refusal to forget. I mean he talks about drawing up traces of surprised forgetting, re-finding. It's quite Heideggerian - re-finding, the *Merkmale*, as Heidegger says - you know - the tracks laid down by other things, returning to them, almost like a needle returning to the groove. Levinas talks about this as a kind of diachronic ambivalence, this staggering of time, letting the past inhabit the present. And that's what ethics is. So I would say, yes, my protagonist is an agent of an ethical consciousness. I mean of course, at the same time he's a fascist, he's a mass murderer - human lives are as cheap as cats that fall off roofs. And when he shoots someone, he just pokes his finger into the flesh and looks at the aesthetic layout of the wound. So it seems like a perverse claim to say that he's an ethical subject, but I make the claim nonetheless, absolutely without irony. I think he really is, for that reason - because he refuses to forget.

*Golden Lane, London, UK, 10.45, May 21st 2008.*

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida (1996). *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press. (originally pub. 1995).