



Pieter Vermeulen,
*Contemporary Literature
and the End of the Novel:
Creature, Affect, Form*

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by Laura Colombino

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the state of postmillennial literature has already become a crowded critical terrain as well as a matter of concern. Anxieties and expectations seem to arise about the ability of literature to reaffirm its value in the aftermath of cultural relativism, to respond to the ethical and political challenges posed by globalization, to find solid speculative foundations in the age of post-theory and, finally, to state its relevance in the new and omnipresent media environment. Debates on the contemporary novel also focus on questions of periodization. Is today's novel a weary prolongation of the postmodern one? Or is it rather the expression of a neo-modernist phase? And is the traumatic experience of 9/11 a particularly defining moment in the recent evolution of fiction? The obvious danger in trying to answer these and other similar questions on contemporary cultural phenomena is to condemn one's critical reflections to obsolescence. But it is certainly a risk worth taking.



Pieter Vermeulen's *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form*, which engages with many of these issues, is clear enough evidence of the excellent insights we may gain from this hermeneutic exercise. In an age where the novel seems to have lost its traditional function of privileged guide to modern subjectivity, and speculations on its approaching death are everywhere, Vermeulen argues that the works analyzed in his book do not attempt to revive traditional forms but acknowledge the death of the novel and play imaginatively with the idea of its afterlife, in ways that anticipate (rather than actualize) a renewal of the form. He explores this notion through the careful analysis of a sample of postmillennial texts by Tom McCarthy, David Shields, Lars Iyer, J.M. Coetzee, Teju Cole, Dana Spiotta, Hari Kunzru, Russell Banks and James Meek, which mobilize the idea of the enervation of the novel in order to "disturb the emotional scenarios through which the novel form traditionally operates".

Vermeulen's selection of authors and novels is perhaps too narrow to substantiate his claims about contemporary (Anglophone) fiction, and one is left to wonder to what extent these works may, in fact, be truly representative of contemporary novelistic tendencies at large. Nevertheless, Vermeulen brings evidence from more "wide-ranging studies of postmillennial writing" to show that his conclusions integrate with those of other scholars, who also contend, in his words, that contemporary literature, with its "inchoate and open-ended nature", voices the urgency of new coordinates to "imagine ethical, political and embodied life".

The opening chapter of Vermeulen's study revolves around the idea of the impossibility of burying the corpse of the novel. It does so through a close reading of McCarthy's *Remainder* complemented by the analysis of literary manifestos by Shields and Iyer. Vermeulen elaborates on the idea that in *Remainder* subjectivity and codified emotions (above all the "customary pieties" mobilized by trauma fiction) are ruthlessly debunked to leave space for the emergence of subjectless dysphoric affects that exceed signification. If this is not a particularly original claim, one of the strengths of Vermeulen's analysis, here as elsewhere in his study, lies in his ability to find meaningful resonances between different texts. This quality can already be appreciated in the second part of the chapter. Here Vermeulen suggests that if the intention of Shields' manifesto *Reality Hunger* is to "sound the death knell of the novel form" — a feature common also to McCarthy's novel — the text belies this declared intent, by using a "novelistic" shape in the attempt to retrieve a semblance of reality. The same impossibility of burying the novel is detected also in Iyer's "Nude in Your Hot Tub, Facing the Abyss: Literary Manifesto after the End of Literature and Manifestos". This text "embraces the reality of belatedness", by exploring the farcical, pathetic dimensions of existence, the "remainders of life that can no longer be heroically transformed or redeemed".

In the second chapter, Vermeulen moves on to discuss Coetzee's *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* as fictions that stage the protagonists' "descent from subject to creature". Two key terms Coetzee uses for capturing this condition are "flesh" — which Vermeulen sees as "the excess of life that cannot be organized in a body" — and "care", of which Coetzee's vulnerable subjects are in constant need. At this stage, the



connection between Vermeulen's first and second chapter becomes clear. His intent is to establish an association between three aspects: the inchoate, non-signifying affectivity that remains after the death of emotions (shown in McCarthy's novel), the creatural and farcical abjection of the flesh after the demise of "the integrated and desirable body" (as found in Coetzee), and, finally, the strange, elusive afterlife of the novel "after the almost total subtraction of everything that used to characterize that form" (evident in both writers).

If emotions and the body are the victims of the postmillennial demise of the realist mode, in Vermeulen's view, the aim of Cole's *Open City* is to question the recent attempts at reanimating the novelistic form under the auspices of cosmopolitanism, a discourse frequently mobilized by literary criticism to argue for the enduring and renovated "relevance of literature". As Vermeulen argues convincingly in his third chapter, Cole's novel reveals that "approaching these realities requires affects and scales that strain the limits of the human, as well as those of the novel form". In particular, psychogeographical practices are revealed in the novel as delusive in their attempt to offer "a paradigm for distant and multiple connectivity" and for authentic intercultural encounter. Cole's intent, argues Vermeulen, is to undermine the optimistic belief in the possibility of human empathy and understanding on a global scale, to be achieved by means of wide geographical explorations and the interrogation of multiple cultural memories.

The fourth and final chapter analyzes Kunzru's *My Revolutions*, Spiotta's *Eat the Document* and Bank's *The Darling*, three novels that "evoke the memory of political activism and terrorism in the 1960s and early 70s in order to map political and cultural developments in the last few decades". Vermeulen discusses how these works stage the demise of yet another quality usually attributed to the novel: the use of the personal sphere as "a vehicle for [...] imagining the social world". He argues persuasively that these novels sabotage the possibility for the protagonist to function as *typical*, that is, to carry a collective meaning.

The Coda further elaborates on the ethics of interconnectedness and the limits of the human as a social agent. In his analysis of Meek's novel *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent*, Vermeulen shows that the protagonist's attempts to reach out to other populations and express solidarity are undermined by an overriding sense of shame for the disparities of power that, in spite of good intentions, such attempts inevitably imply. Here Vermeulen succeeds in associating this sense of failure and consequent shame with the humiliation of the creatural dimension found in Coetzee. Moreover, Vermeulen sees the novel's engagement with scales beyond the human as further evidence of his hypothesis of a crisis of representation.

Vermeulen's intelligently contrived and concisely written book brings together concepts drawn from different theoretical fields — studies on affectivity, vulnerability, the creatural, the ethics of care and the anthropocene — as well as persistent discourses in social and cultural studies, such as those on human rights, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. The skillful orchestration of all these hermeneutic paradigms is functional to his aesthetic concern for the novel as *form*, a preoccupation which is particularly prominent in his study and which seems itself to



have returned uncannily from the past, after the many recent attempts to bury it in a number of ways.

The intent of the book is to show that “a cluster of literary strategies” have been used in postmillennial fiction to register a paradoxical misalignment: “the relevance” of the novel “for a present with which it cannot coincide”. Vermeulen couches this sense of temporal asymmetry and belatedness in a rhetoric of spectrality (a language of deaths and corpses, desacralizations and reanimations) through which he succeeds in creating a convincing narrative of the present state of the novel as poised between dissolution and resurrection. His elaborate methodology and ambitious theoretical scope but also his engaging and insightful close reading of a small selection of texts testify to the originality and distinction of this book, which is timely and essential reading for anyone interested in the postmillennial novel.

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I raccomandati/Los recomendados/Les recommandés/Highly recommended
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