Impersonalising the We-Narrative: Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13*

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1. Jon McGregor is one of Britain's most innovative contemporary novelists. From the beginning of his career, he has consistently renewed the craft of the novel, producing formally distinct narratives with the dual purpose of exploring the recesses of human vulnerability while designing the most appropriate formal innovations to conduct his investigations. His first novel, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002), uses the circadian structure favoured by famous modernist predecessors (Joyce and Woolf spring to mind) to evoke the quiet relationality of the anonymous inhabitants of the same street, living under the benevolent, attentive gaze of the narrators. *So Many Ways to Begin* (2006) combines a traditional quest narrative following the male protagonist, a museum employee, as he sets out to find his biological mother while his wife sinks into depression. The story explores the shock produced by the silence of denial in the psyche of a child or young adult. It also tackles head-on the issue of violence against working-class women and the way in which micro-traumas emerge through the exposure to daily violence and plunge the victims into the prison of repetition and re-enactment (Onega n.p.). His fifth novel, *Lean Fall Stand* (2021), continues this exploration of human vulnerability by tackling the issue of linguistic incapacitation caused by a massive stroke. It takes up the challenge of finding the right words to represent the hesitations, distortions and silences affecting the protagonist's language – in other words, a different way of communicating that emerges, gropingly, during his months of rehabilitation. It is also a text about the role of carers, in a context where a stretched NHS is increasingly relying on the individual responsibility and involvement of citizens (Ganteau 2023, 138-150). For McGregor, practising the art of the novel therefore amounts to digging the furrow of committed literature: politically, by denouncing an institutional renunciation;[1] ethically, by making visible subjects generally relegated to the margins of history; aesthetically, by bearing witness to and inventorying contemporary vulnerabilities.

2. As Neal Alexander has aptly demonstrated, McGregor's work is "fundamentally democratic"

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1 In his luminous chapter devoted to the work of Jon McGregor, Daniel Lea evoked his specific brand of commitment in a pithy way: "McGregor's politics are never hectoring, nor are they partisan: he simply lays bare a vision of inequality, moral indifference, and despair" (Lea 226).

(Alexander 721) and characterised by an attention to the ordinary, the invisible and the relegated, which the critic describes as "an attentiveness to the mundane and the profane, the overlooked and the discarded" (Alexander 720). His third novel, *Even the Dogs* (2011), makes the reader dive into the daily lives of squatters, heroin and crack dealers and users in an anonymous English town, immersing them in a world of violence and solidarity. The choral narrative allows us to follow the characters from a collective yet singular perspective, sometimes at ground level, sometimes at shoulder level, providing an immersive, almost experiential knowledge of what it is like to be relegated, to experience precariousness on a daily basis, and to be on a frantic, hallucinatory quest for the next fix. The perspective rarely takes off, except once, to follow the evacuation of a former soldier who has stepped on a mine, aboard a helicopter and then a long medical flight, the aerial journey allowing us to visualise and reconstruct the migration of illicit substances, from the fields of Afghanistan to the car parks of English pubs. In so doing, it traces a chain of responsibilities, but also of failings – particularly those of a State that neglects to take care of those who have defended the homeland and limits itself to managing their distress with the distribution of "meths", as the trapped, haunted consumers call them. Anger rumbles through this novel, without inhibiting a vein of tenderness (Le Gall 175). It is voiced by a multiple, anonymous narrator, made up of the former members of the community who are now deceased and who bear witness to the survivors haunting the story. From this point of view, *Even the Dogs* is a perfect illustration of what Natalya Bekhta considers a we-narrative, which she defines on the basis of three criteria:

> […] there exists a recognizably distinct type of first-person plural narration rooted in collective subjectivity—a we-voice; (2) it is different from we-references in other types of narrative situations and cannot be described as an implicit I plus 'somebody'; and (3) it cannot be reduced to or fully described as 'unnatural' narration. (Bekhta 165)

Even the Dogs' choral narrator produces a truly collective narrative that is the emanation of a community and forms a community with the survivors, beyond ontological barriers, the plural narrator engaging with the protagonists and secondary characters through the means of the we-narrative (Emmott 165-166).

3.   It is this text that could legitimately have attracted my attention in the context of an issue devoted to pronominal variation, except for the fact that it is characterised by a fairly stable pronominal setup, leaving little room for hesitation and slippage and consistently complying with the criteria set out by Bekhta.[2] I have therefore chosen to focus on McGregor's fourth novel,

2 Daniel Lea describes it as a hybrid ("third-person plural point of view"), with no further details (Lea 227). Apart from the fact that the pronoun 'we' necessarily refers to the narrator's presence, third-person plural narration, as

Reservoir 13, winner of the 2017 Costa Prize, which has met with considerable public success, leading the author to publish a companion piece and coquel, the *Reservoir Tapes* (2018). The latter volume is made up of stories that slip into the interstices of the former novel to complement the narrative programme without bringing it to a close. *Reservoir 13* was also set to music by Richard J. Birkin, whose album features melancholic melodies, disturbingly uncanny, following the cycle of seasons and reflecting the immersion into the novel's universe, at once composed of the ordinary and the unexpected.[3] McGregor's fourth novel is set in an anonymous village in the north of England, at the bottom of a relatively isolated valley. It begins like a detective story, with the disappearance of a young tourist who had come to spend the Christmas holidays with her parents in the village. She never returns from a family outing, and her disappearance continues to resonate throughout the novel's thirteen chapters. As is so often the case with McGregor, a horizon of expectation imported from traditional narrative – in this case generic, i.e.: the detective novel – is brought to the fore the better to be short-circuited, as this story is clearly not a detective story. The intrigue fizzles out, and no resolution culminates in a clearly identified coda. The refusal to move forward is also reflected in an innovative structure: each of the thirteen chapters is in fact a description of the actions of the village community, but also of the cycles of nature – fauna and flora included –, and refrains from providing the reader with the substance of a main plot. Readers are thus confronted with a series of micro-plots, all of them secondary, ultimately taking on little or no more importance than the evocations of the natural environment. Critics have naturally turned their attention to the formal characteristics of this narrative, as is the case with Adèle Guyton, who has analysed this work in terms of the dynamics of the short story cycle (Guyton 4-5) and classifies it in the "narratives of community or composite novels" category (Guyton 3).

4.   As the title of her outstanding article indicates, she is also interested in what she defines, in the wake of Rosi Braidotti, as a posthuman community where species – humans, animals, but also elements of the plant world – are not only juxtaposed but intertwined, in a vision that emphasises interdependences (which Adèle Guyton describes as "filled with interconnections across species lines" [Guyton 17]). The few articles devoted to this novel highlight its experimental vein (repetitive structure, poetic prose, rejection of hierarchies, inventories of the ordinary [Ganteau 2018; Ganteau 2023, 86-88]) and insist that it is linked to a post-anthropocentric vision (Ganteau 2018; Guyton; Ganteau 2023) that calls on readers to pay attention to the manifestations of such

Brian Richardson points out, is less conducive to the creation of a community (Richardson 200-201).
3   See the pages that Yahya Daldoul devoted to this album as part of his monographic study of McGregor (Daldoul 156).

hyperobjects as climate change and mass extinction – despite the peaceful communality of the novel that follows the rhythm of the seasons and the religious calendar (Ganteau 2023, 87-88). I would like to argue that, despite the fact – or perhaps, paradoxically, on account of the fact – that the novel is not explicitly a we-narrative, the pronoun never cropping up in the narrator's discourse, it performs the usual functions of such narratives by giving visibility and at times audibility to a wide, more-than-human community envisaged in its material dimensions. I will base my demonstration on the analysis of the pronominal usages at work in the novel and will address the poetics of impersonality that it privileges by focusing first on pronouns in character discourse, then moving on to pronominal erasure, before ending on the unwonted prevalence of passive and impersonal forms. My point, overall, will be that such a poetics aims at unveiling the post-anthropocentric, democratic programme at the heart of *Reservoir 13*.

5.   By evoking the aesthetic category of impersonality, what I have in mind in the effacement or "continual surrender of the self" (Eliot 43) that some Modernist writers used both to practice and extoll. Admittedly, Eliot and his contemporaries like Joyce, Woolf or Mansfield, thought in terms of the novelist's impersonality, and the author's effacement, as indicated by Joyce who, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, compared the artist to "the God of creation" who, he considered, should "remain […] within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (Joyce 194-195).[4] In the case of contemporary production, the artist is differently exposed in public space: through interviews, lectures, official sites and social media, among various possibilities. Though the degree of exposure may vary from what used to be the case one century ago, the issue of impersonality remains intrinsically the same: how can all (direct) traces of the author's presence disappear from his/her fiction? This, in turn, can be translated into a grammatical imperative, i.e.: avoiding the use of an I-narrator and the attendant perceptible traces of guidance, recommendation or prescription. The latter model is admittedly one that has fallen into disrepute over the last decades, except in the case of parodies of more traditional, possibly archaic modes of narration, so much so that traces of an authorial 'I' have tended to slip from contemporary production. This is all the truer with McGregor who, from his first novel, has clearly signposted his respect for his Modernist predecessors and whose *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* has been considered as being very much influenced by Modernist novelists like Woolf (Schoene 16, Boileau n.p.). And this applies even more strictly to *Reservoir 13*, I would argue, whose narrator is strictly heterodiegetic and of the fairly discreet type.

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4   For more detail on the issue of impersonality, see Reynier and Ganteau.

6.   Of course, in some passages, a sense of amusement and irony does emerge, as when, for instance, in the first chapter, while the community is still reeling from the girl's disappearance, the issue of the yearly spring dance is raised: "The annual Spring Dance was almost cancelled, but when Irene suggested holding it in aid of a missing-children's charity it became difficult for anyone to object. Sally Fletcher offered to help organise it, once Irene had looked pointedly at her for long enough" (McGregor 2017, 12). Such attentive observations of the community members in their most mundane relationships may give the impression that the narrator is mildly poking fun at some larger-than-life characters and at a form of hypocrisy. But the narrator's voice remains effaced, as if he were indeed "behind or beyond or above his handiwork" (Joyce 194). Still, the sense of objectivity is shattered by the end of the second sentence and the presence of "enough", which lets an obvious assessment of the situation transpire and comments on the overexplicit nature of Irene's gaze. By this stage in the novel, the reader may well have realised that the narrative's project is to provide the portrait of a community by juxtaposing brushstroke by tiny brushstroke, snippet by snippet of conversation. The sense of impersonality is precisely achieved through the technique that consists in putting side by side such vignettes, the narrator's voice and interventions being kept to a bare minimum as they find little room in McGregor's creation of what often reads like an experimental type of narrative parataxis. Such a minimalist syntax is evocative of the technique of collage, the effect being of magnifying the characters' voices. This implies that, when such an adverb as 'enough' intervenes at the end of a sentence, attribution to the narrator or to an observer in the community, or to the community as a whole (including the direct witnesses of the event and the beneficiaries of the reported scene) becomes a moot point. In other terms, even when a strong subjective effect is attributable to the narrator, it is immediately euphemised by the narrative's ambiguity and the impossibility to pin down the origin of the enunciation.

7.   Such a subtractive poetics, in which McGregor's practice of impersonality finds its roots, makes up for the prevalence of character discourse, in a wide palette of forms. One of the characteristics of this novel is that its pages appear as narrative blocks, without any indentation signalling the presence of dialogues. This is due to a specific choice that is part and parcel of McGregor's signature, i.e.: the consistent refusal, novel after novel, to use canonical direct discourse. Instead, he practises a hybrid form in which the limits between direct discourse, free indirect discourse and even free direct discourse are erased. One emblematic passage is to be found in chapter 3, when James, a teenager who spent some time with the missing girl, belatedly confesses to it, in an agonising conversation with his parents:

> The four of you swam together in the river? his mother asked. And you told the police none of this? We were scared, James said. It didn't seem important. We didn't want them asking more questions. So you all decided not to say anything, his father said. James nodded. It was, like, a pretty intense time, he said. There was all that talk. Of course there was talk, his father said. Why didn't you tell us everything? What were you thinking? He was raising his voice, and James was pulling back. (McGregor 68)

8.   In such passages, the narrator's voice appears to be commingled with the characters', strictly juxtaposed with them on the page, without any typographical marker separating the two enunciation levels, as if the text were refusing any type of hierarchy. This democratic poetics relying on a levelling, itself based on the double effects of juxtaposition and subtraction, favours the emergence of a polyphonic effect, in which not only all characters' voices are equal, but in which they vie for equality with the narrator's minimal interventions. From this point of view, and even if *Reservoir 13* is not dependent on an explicit we-narrative produced by an intrinsically choral we-narrator, as is the case with *Even the Dogs*, I would argue that the effect achieved in the more recent novel is that of collecting and mediating the voice of a community. Said differently, behind, or above, or beside what can be technically called a third-person (singular and plural) narrative voiced by a third-person narrator, hauntingly and piercingly emanates a 'we' that is the voice of the community. This is achieved through a minimum level of narratorial mediation, all the more so as the discreet narrator seems to be both without and within this community. Such a situation radicalises the effect of 'proper' we-narratives produced by we-narrators that "cannot be identified with or reduced to an 'I' speaking on behalf of such a group" (Bekhta 165), and this all the more so as no trace of a narratorial 'I' is to be found on any single page. Without resorting to a 'we', *Reservoir 13* makes a "collective subject" (Bekhta 171) emerge, whose voice is plural and who testifies to the existence of a community, even while it creates it. Behind the third-person, radically impersonal narrative hides a collective *in potentia*, waiting to be activated through enunciation. To follow Marielle Macé's description, it helps define the community not so much through external boundaries, "through an inside and an outside, but through the density of the links that compose it" (Macé 472; translation mine) and that tie it all together.

9.   As already stated, *Reservoir 13* is *not* a we-narrative, even if it embraces some of its values and effects. Indeed, according to Guyton, its most recurrent pronoun is 'they', which technically makes it a they-narrative (Guyton 12). This also implies that, to a lesser degree, it is a he- and a she-narrative, as is emphatically apparent in one of the novel's most experimental innovations. In fact, in McGregor's poetic prose, attention to details and a form of inventory of the ordinary are

foremost. Such an orientation buttresses the repetitive impression that is performed by the circularity of the thirteen chapters and the absence of a main plot or narrative arc. This impression is bolstered up by the consistent return of refrains that produce an effect not unlike narrative rhymes. Such recurrent snatches harp on what is originally presented as the main theme of the novel, and which in fact proves to be a red herring, i.e.: the missing girl. The following extract is to be found at the very end of chapter 10:

> It was a decade now the girl had been missing, and although little talked about she was still in people's thoughts. Her name was Rebecca, or Becky, or Bex. She'd been wearing a white hooded top with a navy-blue body-warmer. She would be twenty-three years old by now. She had been seen in the beech wood, climbing a tree. She had been seen at the railway station. She had been seen by the side of the road. She had been looked for, everywhere. She could have arranged to meet somebody, and been driven safely away. She could have fallen down a hole. She could have been hurt by her parents in some terrible mistake. She could have gone away because she'd chosen to, or because she had no choice. People still wanted to know. (McGregor 2017, 260)

In this refrain, the third-person pronoun is solicited in a relentless anaphora. The device is instrumental in providing a haunting effect, the missing girl being everywhere and permanently on people's minds, since she is nowhere to be found. It is equally instrumental in evoking the state of collective trauma that has seized hold of the human community, as the violent event of the past is both remembered and *repeated* in the present, a compulsion performed by the re-enacting power of the structural rhymes acting on the readers' own memories. Such a textual stammering puts centre stage the missing girl and failed protagonist but, paradoxically, the anaphora insists on her lack of agency. As indicated by the framing sentences, the 'she' reflects here the agonising, relentless activity of a 'they' – the community's –, made up of a myriad singular consciousnesses aggregating around the central impossibility that carved and keeps carving a major cesura right at the heart of the human history of the valley. In contrast with some descriptions of they-narratives indicating a distance between the narrator and the objects of the narrative (Alber 134), I would argue that the unrelenting anaphora insists on the relational economy at the heart of the novel. Through this hyperbolic repetition, which may seem to scratch, punctually, the ideal of impersonality – the narrator's poetic powers are fleetingly flaunted as s/he is flexing his/her verbal muscles –, the narrator paradoxically effaces him-/herself by giving access to the cravings of individual members of the community making up its open, plural integrity. This is where I punctually disagree with Guyton's contention – in an otherwise totally convincing article – that McGregor's narrative "offers up a community, posthuman or otherwise, as something virtual and conceptual rather than

something experienced by its component parts" (Guyton 13). My impression is that the many threads that compose the "rich tapestry of everyday life" (Guyton 2) provide a concrete presentation that is more often than not incarnated or vibrant, thereby taking part in the material realism that characterises the novel's presentation of a more than human community.

10.   At stake in *Reservoir 13* is precisely the nature of a wider community than the one traditionally investigated by the novel. This has been underlined by most commentators, including Guyton who has pored over the "interconnections across species lines" (Guyton 7) with which the narrative is rife. Indeed, it is characterised by the multiplication of vignettes that implicitly illustrate the interdependences between the human world and the natural environment, be it animal or vegetable. It deploys a vibrant evocation of all that is alive in the valley, observing ecosystems and instances of biodiversity at ground-level, and once again privileging a poetics of juxtaposition and subtraction. This is nowhere more apparent as in the repetition of striking non sequiturs throwing together snatches of ground-level observations:

> At the edge of the beech wood and in the walls along the road the foxgloves were tall, and the bees crept in and out of the bright thimbled flowers. On a fence-post by the road a buzzard waited. The cricket team went over to Cardwell and although rain took out most of the day there were enough overs left for Cardwell to win. The bilberries came out on the heath beyond the Stone Sisters, and on the second Sunday in August a group went up from the village to pick them. The fruits grew sparsely and there was a need to keep moving and stooping across the ground. It felt less like a harvest than a search. The grouse shooting started. (McGregor 2018, 45)

In this emblematic passage, the human element is not given more prominence than the other items of the natural environment. Interestingly, the juxtaposition and shift from one object of attention to the other does not favour the use of pronouns referring to previously mentioned nouns. Indeed, the only personal pronoun, here, appears in the object form as "them". Similarly, the segment "The bilberries", at the beginning of the fourth sentence, is paraphrased by "The fruits", at the beginning of the following one, whereas "They" would have been the obvious option. Such juxtapositions and non sequiturs, which by definition do not favour pronominal reference, seem to be accompanied by a tendency to introduce restatement through paraphrase. The effect is that the absence of pronouns seems to be flaunted, which creates the same type of poetical asperity as the one mentioned when analysing the insistent anaphora above – only, through a reverse, subtractive technique. The impression is that of an impersonality that extends from the narrator to the members of the diegesis – or at least what is left of it, since, in such passages, no story is allowed to build up, the text privileging an inventory-like type of description meant to provide an experiential knowledge of the

valley's living texture.

11.   Once again, I would argue that, in this they-narrative, the expression of a 'we' crops up. In fact, the largely realistic protocol that informs the novel excludes any resort to prosopopoeia, so that the nonhuman dwellers of the valley cannot be endowed with a voice of their own. Generating the sense of a 'we' therefore has to be done indirectly, through a permanent and immersive attention to vibrant micro-events of the non-speaking world, which approximates to the expression of a collective made up of singularities, all this with minimal narratorial intervention. Such a situation appears to me to be close to that described by Marco Caracciolo when he evokes the power of we-narratives "to engage with *nonhuman* assemblages" (Caracciolo 2020, 87; original italics), as this is precisely the novel's main formal innovation and ethical proposition. This is a possibility that Caracciolo seems to have anticipated when he specifies that "nonhuman assemblages can play a central role in stories that do *not* consistently deploy the we-form" (Caracciolo 2020, 95; original italics), to which I would like to add that this can extend to narratives, like *Reservoir 13*, which do not deploy the we-form *at all*. As indicated by Caracciolo in another article, there follows from this that such instances of posthuman narration destabilise our expectations of what a narrative of fiction is. By "such instances of posthuman narration", I mean a text like this one, characterised by an impersonal narrator who tends to give equal prominence to the human and the nonhuman, and to gnaw at the novelistic convention consisting in painting a human foreground against a nonhuman background, which has formed the structural and existential basis of the novel for at least three centuries. Here, the human and the nonhuman are seen to belong to a same continuum of living matter. Indeed, such an experimental narrative as *Reservoir 13* "is particularly effective at moving beyond an anthropocentric framework, because rejecting conventional narrative templates is a way of rejecting the anthropocentric assumptions that are bound up with such templates" (Caracciolo 2018, 306). In the critic's terms, the interdependence between human and nonhuman "destabilizes the conceptual categories of narratology, a discipline that presupposes clear-cut distinctions between, for instance, human characters and inanimate spaces, or intentionality and natural processes" (Caracciolo 2018, 312).[5] The fact that the pronominal conventions are also thrown into disarray destabilises not only narratological but also grammatical categories. The use of a third-

5   This idea, notoriously put forward by Bruno Latour, is present in many contemporary commentaries on the Anthropocene and the end of anthropocentrism associated with the posthuman turn, as indicated in the first of Dipesh Chakrabarty's theses: "Anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell out the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history." (Chakrabarty 201). It is also rehearsed in literary criticism on contemporary literature, as a recent study on the Twenty-First-Century anglophone novel reminds us: "nonhuman narration offers a generative estrangement of literary forms *and of* anthropocentric life" (Lieberman, Rahn, and Burger 33; original italics).

person narrative of the highly impersonal type to evoke indirectly the sense of a 'we' refers back to the value of the first-person plural pronoun that, according to Macé following in Émile Benveniste's wake, is "an I + a non-I" (Macé 473; translation mine). In other terms, this 'we' narration that assumes the form of a third-person one partakes of a radical process of impersonalisation in that it opens the 'I' to the 'non-I' to create an ethical community made up of interdependent singularities, which voices one of the novel's most remarkable political proposals.

12.   To build up on the preceding analysis of the novel's poetic of impersonality, I think it necessary to turn to another of its most haunting characteristics, i.e.: its tautological use of the passive and impersonal forms of the "there was/were" type. Regularly, across the narrative, there emerge passages in which such stylistic turns concentrate, as shown in these emblematic lines:

> The sound of gunshots cracked down from the woods in pairs. There were more sightings of the missing girl's father, although some of them turned out to be false. It was known that he no longer wore the charcoal-grey anorak, and there was anyway no shortage of preoccupied men striding solitary through the hills. But there were enough sightings to give the impression of a man who couldn't keep away. There was talk that he and the girl's mother had divorced, and around that time the sightings increased. On the shore of the reservoir; around the edge of the quarry; down at the river by the packhorse bridge. Almost always seen from a distance, moving away. At the allotment the pumpkins fattened slowly, lifted from the damp soil on squares of glass, striped in the low autumn light. (McGregor 2018, 77)

The association of the passive ("It was known") with four "there was/were" occurrences introduces an awkward impression, as if some information were withheld. This has a titillating effect on the reader, in a novel that originally starts as a narrative of detection. Besides, the juxtaposition of such cryptic turns of phrase may paradoxically generate the fleeting sense of a presence behind the scenes, as if the narrator, by multiplying the references to self-effacement (the absence of any pronoun cancelling any sense of a speaker's direct reference to the object of his/her discourse), drew attention to his/her erasing gesture, hence to him-/herself. Such an impression is reinforced by the presence of a litotes ("there was no shortage of") that sends ironic ripples through the sentence and therefore refers to the action and presence of a speaker, in metaleptic fashion – the presence being intuited from the effect of the utterance. Interestingly, such passages may be said to affect the impersonal poetics that are such a prime characteristic of this narrative, as if too much impersonality could kill impersonality, or as if a single passage could bear only a certain degree of concentration. Still, what such lines evoke are voices, or possibly a voice, as the actions refer to thought processes ("It was known") and speech acts ("There was talk").

13.   At such moments, clearly, the logic of impersonality culminates. The passive and "there was/were" forms are symptoms of a situation in which the narrator's pronominal erasure goes along with the effacement of a single original voice. Such indications as "there was talk", basically signal that a speech content is being referred to, without being associated to any single speaker. In other terms, the reader is presented with what could be called a double dis-origination, as both narrator and characters as not explicitly given the authority or the responsibility for the speech content that seems to emanate from a community. I would argue that in all such passages, the reader is once again confronted with what looks and sounds like a we-narration without the traditional pronominal markers of such a form. One step beyond, it seems as if the characteristic of we narratives expressing the collective presence of an 'I' + a 'non-I' were buttressed by the radical impersonality of such passages: by impersonalising him-/herself in hyperbolical fashion, the narrator spectrally emerges as an 'I' that does not say its name and becomes equal with all the other voices in the community, in a democratic impulse that "creates a holistic supraindividual level" (Bekhta 165). The impersonal narrator, whose subjectivity haunts the narrative, acts as a vehicle for the community's expression, so much so that the novel manages to call forth what is generally considered the prerogative of we-narratives: a "plural and truly collective storytelling voice" (Bekhta 178). From this point of view, I agree with Guyton that "the village in *Reservoir 13* at no point *declares* itself as a 'we'" (Guyton 11; italics added), and I hasten to add that through the means of its grammar of impersonality, the narrative calls forth and performs a haunting 'we' effect that is the signature of a collective voice, one to which the impersonalised narrator does not belong *and* belongs at the same time, on account of his/her spectral presence. Admittedly, it is not as explicitly spectral as the choral, we-narrative of dead witnesses in *Even the Dogs*, but it seems to have achieved a high enough degree of self-effacement so as to be nowhere and everywhere at the same time, including within the boundaries of the community, both human and nonhuman.

14.   In fact, the above passage ends on a transition toward evocations of the natural world, focusing on the ripening pumpkins, thereby following the non sequitur logic analysed previously. This movement also applies to the other highly impersonalised passages, which are generally framed by snapshots of the nonhuman inhabitants of the valley. Indeed, through the choice of strict juxtaposition and subtraction analysed in the first part, *Reservoir 13* flings together verbal and non-verbal events coming from both the human and nonhuman spheres, making all species collaborate in the novel's vibrant tapestry of valley life. What allows for its tight weaving is the rejection of the most obvious traces of anthropocentrism apparent in a set of conventions usually governing

fictional narrative. As already indicated, the refusal to display a hierarchy of characters allows for a more homogeneous fusion of the human and non-human actions. Similarly, the explicit rejection of any strong sense of plot to be replaced by an unwonted circularity that revels in repetition draws the limits of the human interest even while it suggests and performs the mesh of interdependences with which it becomes attuned to the nonhuman. The impersonal poetics at work throughout and saturating some passages partake of an anti-anthropocentric programme that is inscribed in the novel's thematic repertoire and grammar. From this point of view, I would claim that *Reservoir 13* belongs to this type of texts that expose and destabilise the deeply-ingrained, anthropocentric orientation of the novel as form. In Caracciolo's terms, "narrative in general may be biased towards human (and human-scale) affairs, but particular narratives may deploy strategies that work against the grain of this bias" (Caracciolo 2018, 305). This is precisely what McGregor's text does in its own idiosyncratic, innovative fashion. Its radical use of impersonality is one of the pillars on which this strategy rests, as I have tried to demonstrate, in so far as the structural and thematic "surrender of the self" makes up for a democratic concert of voices. It leaves room for the dis-originated voice of the human community, itself made up of singular voices cohering into a supra-individual rumour, opening itself to the unvocal but vibrant presence of the non-human lives that are part and parcel of the valley's community. What the novel achieves through this means approximates to what Dominic O'Key considers a "non-human narration" (O'Key 76) geared on to sharing an experiential knowledge of how "human collectives seep into and are pervaded by nonhuman collectives" (Caracciolo 2020, 88), so as to promote an extended, cross-species, open collective.

15.   *Reservoir 13* marks a fundamental step in McGregor's programme consisting in destabilising the most unwavering pillars of conventional narrative. This is made possible through an impersonal poetics relying on a specific use of character discourse, the disappearance of pronouns in inter-species non sequiturs, and passages saturated with the presence of passive and impersonal forms of the "there was/were" type. This poetics prolongs a series of structural choices like the abolition of the foregrounding of the human against a nonhuman background, a preference for repetition and circularity, the elimination of the plot as a characteristic of what Monika Fludernik defines as "natural narrative", which rejects the conventional teleological orientation "situat[ing] the narrative dynamics in the tension between the initial situation and the final outcome" (Fludernik 15).[6] Such poetic choices help create a new type of textual mesh in which the human and nonhuman are mixed in a post-anthropocentric, anti-speciesist narrative assemblage that both reflects and performs the

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6   On this point, see also Caracciolo 2020, 93.

interdependences and entanglements that characterise life in the valley. The result is a hybrid text that refuses explicit we-narration – in which the human element would still be too obvious – to promote radically impersonal narration working though effacement and juxtaposition and providing a collective, doubly impersonal effect that edges towards a form of spectral, nonhuman narration.

16.   The experimental vein in *Reservoir 13* is McGregor's answer to the preoccupations of the time and it contains the gist of his ethical and artistic response to the contemporary consciousness of our entry into the Anthropocene. By honing out his impersonal poetics, he contributes to the elaboration of a new form of realism, meant to take more faithfully into account the preoccupations of our present times and of the new frames of perception and intelligibility that mediate our apprehension of it, even while helping re-fashion them. It provides the beginning of a response to Nancy Armstrong's invitation to "develop an analytic vocabulary comparable in precision to *narration, plot, point of view, setting,* and *character* (Armstrong 10; original italics) by innovatively contributing to a practice of fiction that calls for new categories like "indirect we-narration", "crypto we-narration", "saturated impersonality", "double impersonality", or "quasi-natural narration", possibly, among others. What emerges from this dual consideration of human and nonhuman scales is a sense that "the individual recedes from the scene" (Tomasula n.p.) so as to let a mesh of interdependences emerge. With *Reservoir 13*, McGregor contributes his mite to the elaboration of a new mimetic idiom, adapted to the contemporary novel. It takes the form of a material realism whose responsibility it is to present the vibrant assemblage and intermeshing of the sundry categories of the living world. And powerfully draw our attention to it.

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