Chapter Thirteen

Looking Beneath the Surface

Self and Genre in Joseph O'Neill's Netherland

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In its use of an erudite and troubled first-person narrator; rich, precise, often remarkably beautiful prose; and a demonstrable but never overtly political sense of social awareness and concern, Joseph O'Neill's 2008 novel *Netherland* has all the marks of a certain breed of literary fiction. An instance of what Zadie Smith, in her review of the novel, calls "lyrical realism," *Netherland* is perfectly realized—in fact, in Smith's estimation, too perfectly realized: it is, she writes, "so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis" (2009, 73). As the exemplar of an established literary style, O'Neill's novel offers a worthwhile case study for the function of genre in the contemporary novel. In this essay, I will first demonstrate that *Netherland* is primarily a novel about loneliness and about the philosophical problem of selfhood. I will then show how O'Neill's use of the features of lyrical realism in *Netherland*, including elevated language and a non-chronological sequencing of events, are instances of the conscious deployment of genre to extend and deepen the novel's thematic concerns. I will conclude by examining how the question of genre relates to the larger purpose of fiction, arguing that genres not only provide readers with a familiar foothold—a literary context within which to situate what they are reading—but also make evident the necessary remove between fiction and the physical world.

Netherland is narrated by its protagonist, Hans van den Broek, via an uneven chronology that fluctuates between the immediate and the distant past. Employed by a large bank as an equities analyst, van den Broek moves from London to New York along with his wife Rachel in the fall of 1998. In the aftermath of 9/11, Hans and Rachel become increasingly estranged from

one another, and finally Rachel moves back to London with their young son Jake, effectively ending the marriage. Hans makes biweekly visits to England to visit his son, but his tentative attempts to reconnect with his wife are rebuffed. Living alone in New York, Hans struggles to come to grips with the dissolution of his marriage, spending much of his time in a grieved daze. For reasons he cannot fully explain to himself, he takes to playing cricket, a sport he excelled in as a boy growing up in the Netherlands. Hans's participation in a cricket league leads to his friendship with Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian immigrant and self-styled businessman and cricket aficionado. An ambitious striver—his motto is "Think fantastic"—Chuck shares some of his plans with Hans. The most outsized of these is his goal to build a cricket stadium in New York City and bring professional cricket into the national conversation (or rather, back into it, in Chuck's view). As the novel progresses and Hans finds himself drawn further into Chuck's life and social circle, he begins to see that Chuck's business operations are essentially a front for illegal activities. While Hans is never certain of the extent of Chuck's criminal involvement, he witnesses the aftermath of a vicious beating of an office worker perpetrated by Chuck and another man. By the time Hans decides to return to England in a last-ditch effort to reconnect with his wife and son, he has learned enough about Chuck's dealings to wish to dissociate from him. It is only years later, in a scene that begins the novel and frames Hans's recollections of Chuck and of his time in New York, that Hans learns that Chuck Ramkissoon has been murdered, his body found floating in the Gowanus Canal.

Upon its 2008 publication *Netherland* was met with nearly unanimous acclaim, eliciting numerous comparisons to another New York novel in the lyrical realist tradition—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The literary critic James Wood points to both Fitzgerald and V. S. Naipaul as O'Neill's literary forebears, noting that *Netherland* "has an ideological intricacy, a deep human wisdom, and prose grand enough to dare the comparison" (2008). Garth Risk Hallberg concurs, calling *Netherland* "a Great New York Novel" that "contains some of the most immaculately written English prose of the new century" (2008). Its success notwithstanding, *Netherland* has faced criticism for its treatment of racial and postcolonial issues. In a 2011 issue of *American Literary History*, Caren Irr and Elizabeth Anker both object (in separate articles) to the way the novel seems to offer Chuck Ramkissoon as an exotic object of fascination for the protagonist, who is ultimately able to retreat back to his white upper-middle-class existence without truly negotiating the material and historical realities that attend their relationship. Irr argues that despite Hans's grand vision of the cricket field as a sphere in which justice still seems possible, in *Netherland* "the relatively more manageable sphere of bourgeois family life is finally the only manageable playing field" (Irr 2011, 672). Anker's assessment is still more cutting; she re-

bukes O'Neill for what she calls his "romanticization of the sport of cricket," summarizing *Netherland* as "a predictably colonialist 'moral redemption of the white man' narrative, in which the real terms of postcolonial dispossession are occluded while yet providing a vital backdrop for Hans's edification" (2011, 468–9).

LONELINESS AND AFFECT IN *NETHERLAND*

The criticisms Irr and Anker make of O'Neill and of *Netherland* also appear within the novel's pages. In the present-day of the novel, after Hans and Rachel have reunited in London, she suggests that a fundamental and essentially patronizing inequality obtained in his relationship with Chuck, with whom Hans never seeks true friendship. She identifies a superficiality in Hans's behavior toward Chuck that he also exhibits toward America at large: "'You don't look beneath the surface'" (O'Neill 2008, 166). Rachel's comment, which Hans does not dispute except to wonder to himself whether there is anything *but* surface to Chuck, underscores a crucial theme within *Netherland*, one that has received insufficient attention in discussions of the novel: the limitedness of human knowledge of the external world and of other people. Even those reviews (such as Wood's) that praise *Netherland* tend to fixate on the enigmatic Chuck Ramkissoon and the novel's governing metaphor of cricket, and the various social and political implications of the same. While these aspects of *Netherland* are certainly indispensable to a full understanding of its meaning, to focus on Chuck (the novel's "Gatsby" figure) at the expense of Hans (its "Nick Carraway" figure) is to overlook one of the novel's central fixations, namely, loneliness. Hans's loneliness is what spurs him to take up cricket while in New York, and is therefore the only reason he meets Chuck in the first place. And while cricket offers Hans an important form of community, it is not without its isolating moments, as when he recalls that when he returned to playing cricket after years of abstention in the summer of 2002, he was the only white man to play in New York—or at least the only one he sees (10). Of course, in provoking moments of integration despite racial and religious divides—in one pregame prayer, Hans counts three Hindus, three Christians, a Sikh, and four Muslims with their arms intertwined—cricket functions in the novel to alleviate rather than exacerbate the other's unknowability (11). But Hans's consciousness of his disconnection from everything and everyone around him, initiated by Rachel's departure, is not eradicated by his often tenuous friendship with Chuck, in which he feels, as he himself acknowledges, an indescribable "wretchedness" (31) that does not leave him at any point.

This wretchedness past describing can be glimpsed in Hans's narration of his activities in New York following his separation from his wife. So far

from consoling him, the city and its mass of humanity seems impenetrable and chaotic, taking on "a fearsome, monstrous nature" (24). Hans's response to the dizzying city is to make his own world as small as possible, to reduce his own involvement with the world. To himself, as to anybody who knows him, he seems lost; and the time he now increasingly spends alone at home makes him vulnerable to the kinds of philosophical musings that loneliness breeds. Hans spends much of his time lying on his face on the floor of his apartment, his only consolation, ironically, his sense of communal identification with others throughout New York who he imagines to be engaged in the same activity, similarly prostate on the floors of their own richly illuminated apartments in the New York nightscape.

In many of *Netherland*'s scenes, the reader is apprised both of Hans's loneliness and his powerful longing for affective community. Hans resists mentioning this loneliness explicitly, as though to do so would be to admit a weakness. He comes close on occasion, describing himself as beset by a wish for belonging that runs deeper than the usual search for the a connection with others of his immigrant group, a "less reckonable kind of homesickness" (120) which is not immediately relatable to the disruptions migration produces in one's senses of place and of personal and communal history. In the end, this "homesickness" is a longing not for a particular place, but for a sense of identity that Hans believes he once had and has somehow lost. Only in retrospect, in the novel's present-day time frame, does Hans realize that his sense of identity is entirely bound up in his relationship with his wife and son. In the bleak moment before he decides to move back to England, Hans's surroundings appear to him like a vast, depthless ocean, in which he floats lost but unknowingly close to the surface, within "the reach of a pair of outstretched arms" (219). In Hans's case, these arms turn out to be Rachel's, and the pivotal decision to move back to London is what enables him, by virtue of his proximity to her, to flail back up to the surface. But it is not the type, but the intensity, of a person's relationships with others that *Netherland* holds in estimation. The novel advances the thesis that loneliness and identity function in directly inverse proportion to one another: the less you have of one, the more you have of the other.

Set against the backdrop of a city so potent with affective energy, Hans's desperate need for authentic emotional connection with others comprises an important facet of its kinship with *The Great Gatsby*.[1] Gatsby, all but friendless despite his wealth and lavish parties, may be the central lonely figure of Fitzgerald's novel, but the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, is perhaps equally guarded, and, like Hans in *Netherland*, keeps his hunger for attachment to others submerged. In both novels, the battle against loneliness hints at a deeper struggle: to grasp, to render plain, in a constantly changing world, the vicissitudes of the constantly changing self. The modern city—so rife with humanity yet somehow, on occasion, so seemingly inhuman—is an

important analogue in this respect. In both *Gatsby* and *Netherland*, the idea of New York provides its inhabitants with a means of cathexis, as a repository for what Lauren Berlant has called "cruel optimism." Berlant defines this term as "an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call 'the good life,' which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (2011, 27). In this context, cruel optimism denotes the belief that the modern metropolis offers a space within which the subject, by sharing along with countless others in New York's promissory affect, can attain to a level of self-understanding which is itself a condition for the achievement of the good life—that life which in the time period of Fitzgerald's novel could perhaps still be unironically described as signifying the attainment of the American Dream.[2] For example, Hans is quickly conscious upon his arrival in the city of a sensation that to make a million dollars was as easy as a stroll in New York's streets, a sense brought home by finding himself surrounded by the city's suffusing sense of its own redemptive power (O'Neill 2008, 91–2).

It is only after Rachel leaves for England that this patina of possibility reveals itself to be a mirage. Following an unproductive visit to the Department of Motor Vehicles, Hans steps back into the street. Here, for the first time, he finds himself deeply at odds with the America he finds before him. It suddenly seems "under the secret actuation of unjust, indifferent powers," full of hidden foulness beneath a gleaming interior. If the city's freshly cleaned yellow cabs "shone like grapefruits," his senses are now also attuned to the between-space resting between taxi and road, where the ice, dirt, and water of the season offer a sharp contrast to the shiny upper body, and where one "saw a foul mechanical dark" (68). Such observations may tell us more about Hans and his state of mind than about New York City. But they help us to consider the trajectory of Hans's desolation and gradual recovery as influenced, in very different ways, by forms of mass affect as well as by moments of local, individuated affective connection. As a site of undifferentiated affect, New York, in which the achievement of stable selfhood seems eternally deferred, proves challenging for Hans, who struggles in Rachel's absence to locate a stable sense of his own identity, whether in his past, in his acquaintances on the cricket field, or in the city itself (179). It is clear that for Hans, the good life is inaccessible independently of meaningful relationships with others, even against the backdrop of a city of strivers like Chuck, like Gatsby, like himself. All of which is to say that *Netherland*—while it is, as Katherine Snyder asserts, both a 9/11 novel and a postcolonial novel (2013, 462–63, 486)—is also a philosophical meditation on the conundrum of loneliness, and the relation of this and other affective conditions to the mystery of the self. Hans is a man who thinks he knows who he is, until the departure of his wife and son reveal otherwise. Understanding *Netherland* as a story of the explo-

ration of identity helps us to see why it is written in the style I have been calling, after Zadie Smith, "lyrical realism," and more generally, how the genre in which a novel is written relates to its ambitions: to the starting point from which, and to the manner in which, it undertakes to investigate the world and its inhabitants.

THE EVASIVENESS OF SUBJECTIVITY

I broach an analysis of how the theme of *Netherland* interacts with its own form by returning to the most polemical and incendiary of the reviews it received—Zadie Smith's essay "Two Directions for the Novel," which I referred to briefly at the beginning of this article. Smith's essay will serve as my main touchstone throughout what follows, and although (as will become clear) I disagree with many of her conclusions, I trust that my debt to Smith will be clear by the depth of my engagement with her work, which, in its provocativeness and clarity, has greatly helped me to clarify my own ideas. In "Two Directions for the Novel" Smith compares *Netherland* unfavorably with Tom McCarthy's similarly well-regarded but much more avant-garde novel *Remainder*. She argues that *Netherland*, as the literary realist novel par excellence, signifies a dead end in contemporary fiction, and that as writers and readers we would be better served by pursuing the more challenging but more rewarding path forged by *Remainder* and novels like it. The avant-garde novel, Smith claims, because it recognizes that "the world is what it is" and "that that all our relations with it are necessarily inauthentic," portrays our time and its values with greater honesty (2009, 92). In contrast, the lyrical realist novel is still attempting to patch together a hopelessly outworn model of the world and the self, one that declares them to be essentially coherent and knowable. As such, its agenda is not only conservative, it is fundamentally dishonest, unwilling to confront difficult truths regarding the nature of reality.

To her credit, Smith sketches the central themes of *Netherland*—selfhood, loneliness, human connection—with more acuteness than do many of its more admiring reviewers. She recognizes, too, that O'Neill's burnished prose, while it may read as an attempt to shore up the self against its ruins, at least displays a consistent awareness *of* these ruins. Smith intuits that *Netherland* is not simply a blithe paean to the progress of the human self as an assuredly decipherable and governable entity. She senses in *Netherland* a profound awareness of the complexities inherent in subjectivity, and so attributes to its author O'Neill a powerful anxiety, one that produces an urge to render whole through language what may be irretrievably broken. *Netherland*, Smith explains, "sits at an anxiety crossroads"—and she goes on to use the word "anxious" or one of its cognates to describe the book no less than

seven times in the space of her review (74). One might be forgiven for wondering whether Smith is herself somewhat anxious to convince her reader of the novel's anxiousness.

An initial, if still insufficient, reply to this charge would be that in its unhurried pacing, its narrative digressions, and especially its finely honed, often strikingly gorgeous prose (as when Hans looks down from a skyscraper window at the "roving black blooms of four-dollar umbrellas," or watches his son wade into the "harmless fire" of a pile of autumn leaves, or meditates on the "garbage of light that rest[s] in a low silver heap over Midtown"), *Netherland* is assured, confident, anything but anxious (O'Neill 2008, 62, 104, 19). To characterize it as being so is to paint a severe distinction between the novel's self-presentation and its deeper, veiled concerns. This is the sort of distinction that would inevitably render *Netherland* a flawed piece of fiction. But are O'Neill's motives really as panicked as his writing is polished? Does he really intend to save or maintain an outmoded conception of the self? While it is important to maintain a separation between O'Neill and his protagonist, it is worth noting that Hans, who narrates the novel, is under no illusions about the imprecision of his understanding of selfhood. Early in the novel he recounts his dutiful visit to a psychiatrist, prodded by Rachel's encouragement, in whose optimism about the possibility of acquiring self-knowledge through an attentive living of every single day Hans cannot share (38).

During the pivotal scene in which Rachel announces that she plans to leave him and to take their son with her, Hans offers the reader a brief but revealing self-diagnosis. He recognizes in himself an "enfeebling fatalism" that leads him to conclude that life was but a series of random events unaffected by individual agency, to a despair about the possibility of love, of enjoyment, of being able to really say anything or prevent the utter dissolution of everything (30). Throughout the novel, in keeping with this self-assessment, Hans is revealed to be a relatively passive character, something of a spectator within his own life, never fully committed to his own potential for agency, more likely to contemplate a thing than to act on it. (Importantly, in all these respects Hans is the diametric opposite of Chuck Ramkissoon.) And these qualities, so far from manifesting in Hans once his wife has left him, constitute the very reasons for their separation. This is not to say, of course, that her departure does not exacerbate them. The series of misfortunes that besets Hans during his time in New York gives him further cause to ponder how little room fate may leave for agency, especially in regard to matters of the heart; convinced that he must have taken a wrong step somewhere, he wonders to himself if there is a chance to discover this false step in retrospect, or whether life, like a pathless forest, makes such backtracking impossible (139).

Netherland is, in short, the narrative of a subject endeavouring with little success to establish what it means to be one. However elegant their phrasing often is, Hans's reflections on being and knowing do not intimate that O'Neill is anxiously trying to retain some sense of human subjectivity as explicable and constant—the idea of the self as "a bottomless pool," to use Smith's phrase (2009, 75). Rather, they express O'Neill's incipient doubt that such knowledge could ever be possible. The question the novel explores is how to adjust to a social reality in which the notion of the self's wholeness and consistency has been exposed as a fiction. In a world of impenetrable surfaces, semi-anonymous faces, and inexplicable directional shifts, even Hans's own reflection offers him no moment of reassuring recognition. Glimpsing an image of himself reflected in the window during a brief fling with a barely remembered acquaintance, he finds himself torn by a new sense of unhappiness caused by finding himself no longer able to recognize his own mirrored reflection as a "true likeness" (O'Neill 2008, 115).

If Hans's physical appearance provides no foothold for self-understanding, neither do his emotions, which by his estimation are too volatile to be used as a resource for the cultivation of a stable sense of identity. As he embarks on what he mistakenly hopes will be a long-lasting, restorative relationship with another woman, Hans's happiness is cut short by "a kind of vertigo" caused by the "very completeness of my gladness, which was erasing, along with my wretchedness, everything attached to the wretchedness, which was everything of importance to the person I understood myself to be" (114). Discovering no link between the transience of affect and the basis of identity, Hans comes to reject the possibility "that one's feelings could give shape to one's life" (125). His maladjustment to sudden bachelorhood, his distrust of his own appearance and feeling, and his very personality all conspire to render Hans disconsolate regarding his ability to solve the mystery of personhood. In general, then, the tone of the novel is one not of anxiousness, but of rueful disappointment; Hans seems constantly to wish that his being or his surroundings were otherwise, but to accept out of necessity the ephemerality of what he sees and feels.

NETHERLAND'S TEMPORAL DYNAMICS

Thus far, I have shown that *Netherland* is neither anxiously clinging to nor naïvely upholding a conventional understanding of selfhood. I now want to turn to the question of the novel's form, specifically its status as a lyrical realist novel. I will argue that in two important ways, the genre and style of *Netherland* furthers the narrative themes of loneliness and subjectivity I have outlined above. First, by narrating his novel using a digressive and shifting temporal framework, O'Neill situates *Netherland* as an intertext in a signifi-

cant literary tradition. Second, he constructs a mimetic portrait of what selfhood, apprised in language, actually feels like.

Containing only two chapter breaks, *Netherland* is written in the form of a long, circuitous flashback. Hans is often prompted by an image or phrase to jump forward or backward in time, from New York to London and back, or even all the way back to his childhood in Holland. As Garth Risk Hallberg describes it, O'Neill "knows better than to present his hero as a unitary psyche; one of his chief effects is the subtle altering and re-altering of perception that attend the passage of time" (2011). That is, O'Neill's narrative approach emphasizes the distance that can obtain between the narrator and what he describes—the sometimes stark contrast between the world as it is and the world as Hans sees it. Even so, for Smith the weaving timeline of *Netherland* is more literary than lifelike, especially in concert with its finely honed language. "*Netherland*," she writes,

> wants to offer us the authentic story of a self. But is this really what having a self feels like? Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they not sometimes want its opposite? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of this world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really realism? (2009, 82)

Smith's questions are not without merit. The trope of the flashback is deployed in *Netherland* almost to the point of overuse, and there are moments when the temporal shifts strike the reader as perhaps too abrupt, even clunky: "As he talked, my thoughts went from the ice on the Hudson, which struck me as a kind of filth, to the pure canal ice of The Hague." Sentences of this type occur with regularity in the novel, sometimes too nakedly serving the purpose of shifting Hans's narrative to a different time and place (O'Neill 2008, 75–76). But the technique has value first of all in the homage it pays to other writers who have employed similar methods, thereby attaching to *Netherland* an allusive richness it would otherwise lack. The most famous example of these, of course, is the *madeleine* in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. But O'Neill's flashbacks also hearken back to the chief intertext of *Netherland*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which, while more conventionally chronological in structure than O'Neill's novel, also uses as a conceit the finished novel as compendium of the memories of its narrator. Such literary forebears help to insure *Netherland* somewhat against criticisms of its narrative framework, since to criticize it is also, by implication, to criticize the many other writers who have used a similar approach.

More presciently, though, O'Neill's formal strategy renders *Netherland* the pieced-together workings of a single mind (that of Hans van den Broek) rather than a purportedly objective account of a life. If *Netherland* is able to

present the reader with what Smith calls "the authentic story of a self," it is successful not because the self in question is fully known, or exhaustively rendered, or finally restored, but because it is told from within rather than from without, so that instead of seeing New York or London or Chuck or Rachel, the reader is always seeing *Hans* seeing these places and people. In the same way, the sudden leaps in *Netherland* from one month or year to another are an attempt to represent life through the lens of a particular subjectivity—replete with discontinuities, reversions to the past, moments of regret or hope, and so forth. As physical beings, we exist incrementally, from moment to moment. But as mental beings, we exist in memory and anticipation, nearly always thinking back or forward from the precipice of the immediate present. As an inquiry into selfhood and into the connections that accrue between individuals, *Netherland* reflects this aspect of existence, patterned by what O'Neill describes in an interview as the "consciou[s] embrace of randomness" (Reilly and O'Neill 2011). That is, it must necessarily follow the digressive and patternless track of its protagonist's mind to the various recesses of the past, through which we all come to understand ourselves as individuals.

Of course, an understanding of past experiences can conjure up only a provisional picture of the self. Hans distrusts the platitude that we come to an understanding of ourselves by accumulating and reflecting on different experiences, in part because this implies that self-transformation is a straightforward, even inevitable process. One small but effective symptom of Hans's resistance to such an idea occurs on the cricket field, in his refusal to bat in the American style, which involves hitting the ball high into the air. Instead, he clings to the batting habits he learned while growing up in the Netherlands. To make the change from one style to the other, he feels, would require "spiritual upheaval," and after all, "self-transformation has its limits" (O'Neill 2008, 49). These refusals are compounded by Hans's recognition in himself of a habit of "self-estrangement," a sense of his own discontinuity with past selves (ibid.). (Although Hans eventually does overcome his aversion to American batting, it brings about no great epiphany, cricket perhaps always having been more incidental to his identity than even he realized. In fact, the deep feelings stirred in Hans by the game of cricket seem to have more to do with his mother, who attended his matches in his early childhood, than with the sport itself—an aspect of his character that returns us, not coincidentally, to the argument that interpersonal relationships constitute the crucial component in the formation of personhood.)

Throughout *Netherland* Hans depicts himself as perched uneasily between past and future. If the novel itself comprises Hans's account of his past, his vocation as an equities analyst, which requires him to predict the successes of various stocks, allows O'Neill to provide a sketch of his attitude toward the future. Hans is insistent that his success at his job, which has

earned him a solid reputation indeed, owes to his cautious, detail-oriented nature and is not transferable into the ability to predict the future of any other aspect of culture (26). Asked by his colleagues to hypothesize about the impact of the Iraq War on the global economy, Hans has no answers to give them, relating his own inability to offer an opinion with a larger reaffirmation in the unknowability of the future as such (100). Nor does looking back resolve these conundrums, even if *Netherland* itself is an exercise in looking back. The aggregations of personal and national histories leave Hans more bewildered than enlightened. When Chuck takes Hans to a Brooklyn graveyard where New York's first Dutch settlers were buried, reminding him of the originary connection between New York and Holland, Hans is flummoxed, without a sense of what a proper emotional response might be even as he feels the "obligation of remembrance" (154) that the cemetery imposes.

Evidently, neither the past nor the future can offer Hans what he seems to long for: a safe haven, that proverbial vantage point from which the import and substance of one's existence might be accurately judged. The inchoate longing to do so is figured in *Netherland* by the character of Eliza, Chuck Ramkissoon's mistress, who is a compositor of photo albums by trade, as Chuck tells us (73). Hans gives her a cardboard box full to overflowing with pictures of his son Jake. Noting his incapacity to organize these scattered photographs into something concrete, Hans admits to envying those able to do so, seeing in them a "faith" in a future in which these mementos will enable them to "repossess" their lives (129). It is not a faith he shares. In fact, when Eliza returns the finished product to him, Hans is unnerved by the way history seems to flatten individuality into a vacant progression of images, in which the rapid sequence of images of himself in winter and summer seems to continuously eradicate selves. Hans wonders: "Is this really the only possible pagination of a life?" (235). This question is never explicitly answered, but the novel's tentative conclusion is that neither the city and its web of affect, nor the tangible physical self, nor one's own emotional cadences, nor the past or future, offer any foothold from which to embark on a journey toward the fully attained self.

BETWEEN MIND AND WORLD: THE ROLE OF GENRE

The novel's final pages bear out the continuing indeterminacy of Hans's self-knowledge. As he reunites with his family for a trip up the London Eye (a giant Ferris Wheel along the Thames), he and Rachel share, via an exchange of glances, in the "self-evident and prefabricated symbolism" that such a sightseeing venture provides, namely, the reassurance to those enjoying the panoramic view have achieved a vantage point from which new horizons might be viewed and even the old vistas below be seen from a new perspec-

tive (254). Hans luxuriates in the sentiment of meaning and closure this moment provides him even as he acknowledges its patent artificiality. He recognizes that the pleasure we attach to viewing the landscape from a great height owes not simply to its vastness or splendor, but to our instinctive desire to fit the grandeur of what we see into the narratives of our own lives. One thinks here of Immanuel Kant's understanding of the sublime as something located in the mind rather than in the world. For Kant, the feeling of sublimity arises in us when we discover "in our own mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability." The role of nature in producing the sublime, Kant writes, is that it "raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature" (2000, 145). For Kant, the sublime only becomes so in the context of human perception; and Hans, in his wry estimation of the view from atop the London Eye as a contrived milestone, uses a similar principle to reach a somewhat different conclusion.

O'Neill is gesturing here to an essential and indissoluble barrier between mind and world, between the perceiver and the perceived. In *Netherland*, it is the fact that this barrier cannot be surmounted—even when the object of perception is the self—that produces so much of the isolation and confusion Hans feels. This obstacle to knowledge, which is a condition of being human, also allows us to explain the seeming dissonance between the measured beauty of the writing in *Netherland* and the tentativeness and doubt that saturates its great themes. For Zadie Smith, the style in which *Netherland* is written is problematic because it so exactly exemplifies a tradition of lyrical realism we are already too conditioned to appreciate. More daunting still is her charge that the elegance of O'Neill's writing is meant to function as a redemptive salve, a papering over with pretty language of the fragmented and chaotic condition of reality. "In *Netherland*," she writes, "only one's own subjectivity is really authentic, and only the personal offers this possibility of transcendence, this 'translation into another world.' Which is why personal things are so relentlessly aestheticised: this is how their importance is signified, and their depth. The world is covered in language" (2009, 79). This tendency to obscure the thing itself in favor of the language used to describe it is, for Smith, the great shortcoming of the lyrical realist novel. The opposition between this conservative literary tradition and the avant-garde movement heralded by Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* can be summed up, in this reading, as "the fundamental division between those who want to extinguish matter and elevate it to form . . . and those who want to let matter *matter*" (91, original emphasis). To let matter *matter*, one supposes, would be to document the world itself—or, to return to the example I discussed above, the bit of it viewed from the London Eye—rather than evading it via ironical well-wrought sentences that return us, again and again, to the protagonist's own mind.

But what if *Netherland* invites us to consider, through the lyricism of its writing, that the mind is just what we can never escape? Here we might refer again to Kant, who famously demonstrated the impossibility of seeing the *Ding an sich*, the thing-in-itself. However hard we stare at the world, we are always seeing—along with whatever else—the limits of our own perception.[3] And in the history of the novel, this fact is brought home to us by the presence (and, in recent years, the resurgence) of genre fiction. I think here of recognizably "literary" genres such as lyrical realism, but also of such genres as popular romance, science fiction, detective fiction, and fantasy.

To further elucidate this, it will be helpful to think more generally about the rise of the novel as an historical phenomenon. Critics as different as Mikhail Bakhtin and Northrop Frye see the novel's beginnings as a reaction to the general *resistance* to mimesis in the literary forms preceding them. For Bakhtin, the novel's revolutionary contribution to the literary arts is produced by its "heteroglossic" language—that is, its inclusion of numerous competing voices and perspectives within a single text. Existing in contrast to these dialogical works are the novels Bakhtin calls "Sophistic"—highly stylized and purely monologic works from which the novel as we know it today evolved by attempting more accurate, complex representations of reality, in this case, by attending to the multiplicity of viewpoints that invariably comprise any social event (1981, 372). Frye characterizes the movement in different terms, but along the same lines: the novel, he writes, begins as "a realistic displacement of romance," its relation to which is typically parodic (1976, 38). Frye cites Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Austen's *Northanger Abbey* as primary examples of this movement: such cases exemplify how the early novel moves away from the broad caricatures of romance and closer to observable reality. They tend to do so by featuring protagonists whose chief difficulty is the failure to distinguish between the make-believe and the real, between formula and fact.

One way to diagnose the increasing popularity of genre fiction among contemporary novelists, then, is to see it as a movement in the opposite direction: away from facticity and back toward convention. Indeed, Frye himself defined this movement, which he regards as the most recent development in literary history, as that from low irony back toward myth, so that in the modern novel "the dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear" (1957, 42). This puts the case in the most extreme terms, of course: there are no rituals or gods in *Netherland*, but there is a sense of established convention, not only in the novel's invocation of its eminent literary forebears but in its deployment of language. Lyrical realism, in this sense, functions as a way of recognizing that the world is necessarily filtered through human perception, and that communication is filtered through language. The luminous writing of *Netherland* is not a way for O'Neill to attempt to depict "authentic" subjectivity; he is well aware that language is

only another surface in a world of surfaces. Rather, well-written language, by drawing attention to itself and by poeticizing the things it describes, serves to remind the reader that the screen between self and world, the gap between perceiver and perceived, is reproduced in language.

In her critique of O'Neill's overtly poetic writing for what she sees as its obfuscation of the truth of things, Smith hones in on a passage at the very end of the novel: Hans's recollection of a September day with his mother on the Staten Island Ferry. Hans describes looking across the water at the city and seeing

> a world concentrated most glamorously of all . . . in the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers going up above all others, on one of which, as the boat drew us nearer, the sun began to make a brilliant yellow mess. To speculate about the meaning of such a moment would be a stained, suspect business; but there is, I think, no need to speculate. Factual assertions can be made. I can state that I wasn't the only person on that ferry who'd seen a pink watery sunset in his time, and I can state that I wasn't the only one of us to make out and accept an extraordinary promise in what we saw—the tall approaching cape, a people risen in light. You only had to look at our faces. (O'Neill 2008, 255–56)

Smith argues that this description suffers from a needless and insidious determination to turn things into symbols, events into experiences. "There was the chance," she writes, "to let the towers be what they were: towers. But they were covered in literary language when they fell, and they continue to be here" (2009, 83). No doubt it is easy to mishandle a scene so weighted by the terrible history that was to follow it. Hans himself recognizes as much, limiting himself to what he calls "factual assertions." At the same time, it is worth observing that there never *was* the chance to simply let the towers be towers—at least, not in the human imagination. From the moment they were built, they were always symbols as well as structures, and became even more so when they fell. To pretend otherwise on the page may be more, and not less, disingenuous than to evoke them using "literary language." One is hard-pressed to find a more powerful example than the twin towers of the way human perception does not simply allow things to be things; and lyrical realism, in drawing our attention to the subjectivity of perception and the complex instability of language, is a genre that by its very form alerts us to this truth.

This is not true only of lyrical realism, however. Within the realm of fiction, the very concept of genre is—in practice if not in theory—about the impossibility of seeing the thing-in-itself. For what else is a genre but the partial supplanting of the novelist's attentiveness to the things in the world by patterns and formulas that readers have come to desire and prize? Genres impose onto the novel a set of conventions that gradually solidify into defini-

tions. Hence a given genre becomes a site of the familiar, the expected, and the comfortable—not because its characteristics reflect the world, but because they reflect the mind. Genre concedes the actual in favor of the mythological. In this sense, genres and their appeal reinforce Kant's recognition that the thing-in-itself is not available to us. In so doing, they allow fiction to serve not only as an exploration of the external world, but as an investigation of the human self.

These reflections bring us ever closer to the question lurking behind them: what is it exactly that the writer of fiction should try to do? David James broaches this question in his analysis of O'Neill's above-quoted passage describing the twin towers. He notes that despite Hans's resistance to speculation in his narration of the scene, "the very process of telling us about it ignites the kind of metaphysical analysis that he wants to avoid." This is the case, James argues, simply because (as I have also been suggesting) language colors perception as perception colors objects. O'Neill, he writes,

> knows too that in redescribing the ordinary he cannot prevent description itself from idealizing the impact of quotidian events so as to make them more luminously life-affirming and prophetic than they actually are. Yet this degree of augmentation, of embellishing idealization, need not be synonymous with wishful and ethically irresponsible romanticization. (2012, 868–69)

James goes on to argue that, while writers should be attentive to this process and its effects, it should not be shunned, even in cases where the veneer of description in literary language ultimately takes the form of a consolation. "For why," he asks, "should we be wary of fiction's ongoing power to console, whether it's to do with the instances of reparation that a writer chooses or with the comfort that stories of quotidian wonder afford an individual reader?" (871). Smith's essay provides one answer: as critics, we distrust fiction that consoles (as, indeed, so much genre fiction does) because we suspect an inherent opposition between consolation and reality, between what we wish to find in the world and what we actually do find in it. And I think it is fair to say, along with Smith, that the chief obligation of the novelist is not consolation, but accuracy of representation.

How does this mandate fit with the understanding of genre outlined above? It may help to think of the successful work of fiction as an exploration of the unknown moored in the framework of the known. To veer too far toward the unknown is to risk alienating and confusing the reader; to stay too fully within the realm of the known is to underestimate and infantilize the reader. If we think of genre as an element of the known—a familiar scaffolding that offers the reader a point of entry—then the challenge for writers who choose to work within the confines of genre is to remain attentive to how the form in which they choose to write conditions what they write about, and

may do so by enacting another barrier (in addition to language and subjectivity) between the reader and the chaotic unpredictability of the world.

Of course, a writer conscious of the limitations enforced by the genre they write in can turn these limitations to his or her advantage. This is the tactic O'Neill employs to remarkable effect in *Netherland*. To embark on its exploration of the unknown (the indefinability and fleetingness of selfhood), *Netherland* situates itself in the known (the memories, fears, and desires of single protagonist, a conventional self). Indeed, the novel's structure invites an analogy between the familiarity of the lyrical realist novel as an established genre and the familiarity we all have with the traditional notion of the self. But O'Neill works within this structure precisely in order to trouble its tidiness. Aware of the situatedness of perception and the power of language not only to represent but to misrepresent, *Netherland* links these challenges to its themes. It thereby moves into the territory of the unfamiliar, reminding the reader that the conventions we use to organize novels echo the conventions we use to narrate our lives. In this way, O'Neill means not so much to console as to provoke. His use of lyrical realism provides readers an entry point into his novel, but the novel enacts an aesthetic and philosophical investigation of the very tradition it partakes in.

As should be clear from my emphasis on the important place of risk and self-questioning in fiction, rather than mere stasis or consolation, I agree with Smith's affirmation of the avant-garde as one path that the contemporary novel does well to explore. However, I see no basis for the rejection of any other path, or for the creation of an opposition between avant-garde novels and genre fiction. The success or failure of novels should be assessed not on the basis of the form in which they are written but on how effectively they put that form to use. As I have argued, genre fiction may be better suited to exploring the vicissitudes of the self, while other styles may offer strategies for documenting the world. In every case, the writer's task is to move from the known into the unknown, wherever he or she chooses to begin on that continuum, and to resist effacing all the difficulties this process implies.

The Russian critic Victor Shklovsky famously insisted that defamiliarization is the goal of all art: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged." The danger of clinging to tradition or to the strictures of genre is implied in Shklovsky's further elucidation that "the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (1998, 18). But these words also hint at both the tenuousness of assumed knowledge and the locality of perception. We do not fashion language into art in the vain hope that by doing so we may attain a complete sense of our relation to the world. And it is because the essence of this

relation may be something near to mystery that our efforts, if never quite sufficient to that mystery, are acquitted, just as they are constantly renewed.

NOTES

1. In a recent article, Katherine Snyder details the similarities between *Netherland* and *The Great Gatsby* at some length; see Snyder 2013.

2. In an interview, O'Neill rejects the notion that the measure of self-created success attributable to the "American Dream" can now be considered unique to America, assuming it ever could have been: "We're living in a globalized world, and as a consequence, the American dream narrative which is commonly attributed to *Gatsby* simply doesn't work as a current premise. The notion that America is a privileged place, that obtaining American citizenship provides a unique opportunity which cannot be duplicated anywhere else on the planet, is no longer applicable—if it ever was applicable." See Reilly and O'Neill 2011, 13.

3. As Katherine Snyder reminds us in her analysis of the novel, its very title hints at this theme: "'Nether' is a kind of indexical, a gesture of reference: what is 'nether' is what lies under or beneath or behind something else. *One could argue that reference is, by definition and necessity, always located 'nether'*" (2013, 480, my emphasis).

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