Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2013
Revisiting the Gilded Age / Littérature et philosophie

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6393
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.6393
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference
Nathalie Cochoy and Olivier Gaudin, "An Interview with Joseph O'Neill", *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2013, Online since 09 July 2014, connection on 05 February 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6393 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.6393

This text was automatically generated on 5 February 2023.

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An Interview with Joseph O'Neill

Nathalie Cochoy and Olivier Gaudin

1 This interview took place in New York in February 2013. We would like to thank Michael Confais for his contribution.

2 Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* was published in 2008. It was awarded the 2009 PEN/ Faulkner Award for Fiction.

Melancholy

Nathalie Cochoy: In *Netherland*, a sense of loss and a reminiscence of the ethereal dreams at the origin of the country seem to coalesce. In this respect, *Netherland* seems to me to be a melancholic novel. As in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a sense of mourning, of disappearance seems essential in the recreation of the beautiful ideals of the nation. However, in *Netherland*, the aesthetic reinvention of the wonderful dreams at the origin of the land is interwoven with some contemporary ethical issues. Indeed the story of Hans van den Broeck's intimate suffering is delicately associated with the evocation of the disorientation of America after the events of 9/11. Memory then seems essential in the reconstruction of the self, or of the nation: Hans's childhood memories are associated with references to the first settlers' arrival on the continent.

How are individual stories and historical events related in your novel? Is memory necessary in times of doubt and disorientation? Is literature a means of remembering? Or recreating a sense of wonder? But maybe these questions are too specific…

Joseph O'Neill: All questions are difficult and easy, depending on how you want to answer them. I suppose first of all, the question puts me in the position of a commentator, which is a complicated position for the author, and an illogical position in many ways, and even if I had theoretical or conceptual ideas regarding melancholy and its role in the novel, I would try to abolish all these ideas by the act of writing… So that when I comment on the novel, about melancholy for example, I wouldn't be really commenting about *Netherland*… I might comment generally, and you can connect this to *Netherland* as you wish. Melancholy in writing… Well, here are some basic thoughts, some starting thoughts: melancholy is a well-known response to human experience and there is no reason why novels should not contain melancholy, or shouldn't investigate melancholy. And in fact we know that they do. All forms of

art are interested in the phenomenon of melancholy, as they are in all human responses to experience. I don't know what melancholy really is... Is it a heightened sense of awareness? Is it just a passing mood? Is it some kind of psychological or chemical phenomenon? I'm not sure...

Here's a basic, descriptive observation about this novel: it's a spasm of memory. The novel is concerned with a man who is at home with his family and is then intruded upon by the past: a phone call comes, with information about somebody who has been discovered dead, the body of Chuck Ramkissoon. From then on, we're in the realm of compulsory recollection, so that what is remembered is not only the deceased but everything that is contiguous to him, which includes the city in which he lived. And those contiguous elements are personally painful to the remembering narrator in different ways, because of his family situation and the difficulty of 9/11 as well. Is it possible to remember anything without melancholy? Honestly remember it? Alternatively, is melancholy a kind of guilty, culpable form of apolitical personalized, narcissistic inspection of the past? I remember one person who said about 9/11: I remember 9/11 very well, I had a total backache that day, thus relating her memory of 9/11 to this personal medical problem. I think that melancholy in *Netherland* is obviously somewhat connected to the disposition of the narrator, which is strongly related to his position, in life. So even if he is remembering something agreeable, there will still be an element of trauma in the act of remembering. And is melancholy primarily related to the past or can one be melancholic about the future as well? I think it can be. I think it's very hard not to be melancholic about future trajectories and where we are all headed.

Netherland, "the years after": still a land, still not a fatherland

Olivier Gaudin: A lot has been written about "the aftermath" and the "sequels" of the 9/11 attacks. Have the 9/11 events influenced Hans's sensorial perception and in what way? How did they affect his ordinary daily awareness?

JON: I'm sure it has influenced his perception. How could it not... Is he aware of its influence? I'm not sure... But it's there. It must be there. It's influenced everybody. I mean, it's a global event, even if watched on television. Hans had a globalized reaction to it. He didn't feel privileged by proximity.

NC: At the end of the novel, the connection between Hans's history and the History of the nation becomes clear. Why is there such a need to return to the origins of the nation, to "superimpose[e] on the landscape regressive images of Netherlanders and Indians"? Again, I'm thinking of *The Great Gatsby*...

JON: Hans is Dutch for a reason. Once he is Dutch, then there are consequences of him being Dutch. Nick Carraway is not Dutch. So he just briefly mentions the Dutch right at the very end. But Hans van den Broek is the original colonial eye revisiting New York. So it's almost compulsory. When I came to New York I saw all these names—you know, Van Wyck Highway, Brooklyn, Bronx, it's all Dutch... I felt very struck by the Dutch and by the traces of Dutch and of colonial times. There's no reason that Hans wouldn't be. So that for him that kind of superimposition of the past on the present isn't just an extension of the author's thematic preoccupations but in the first instance an extension of the protagonist's natural inclination and world view. And I

suppose his whole friendship with Chuck is so unusual as to wake him up. Some friendships have a soporific effect, other friendships have to do with differentness and a potential adventure of awakening. As do travel and transplantation. It may be that his historical sensitivity is awakened by the act of travel and the act of friendship.

OG: In spite of all its allusions to "the attack," *Netherland* does not appear to me primarily as a "post 9/11" novel. Its characters are not hit by personal loss or mourning, but rather by more distant blast waves, indirect and diffuse. As its title suggests, the novel depicts a unique place, a world city that has always been a home to everyone *because it's a true home to no one*. Rather than staging this peculiarity through thematic descriptions, it seems to insist on the porosity of the boundaries separating people's lives.

Would you agree with this and was this shift of narrative focus deliberate in your writing of *Netherland*?

JON: The novel has to acknowledge the elephant in the room. And I think that the elephant in the room is the fact that New York City is possibly the most morally, ethically and economically successful city in the history of human beings. I really believe that. If you look at the history of urban human aggregation, you're just not going to find very many cities about which you can say, this is a city where any outcome is more or less relatively possible, compared to other cities. You take all the immigrants here—forty per cent of people in the city born abroad... There is, in addition to the unavoidable feeling of alienation, a sense among many of us of belonging. I think that's not an atypical experience of immigrants here: for better or worse, for richer or for poorer, they feel like *New Yorkers*.

Of course, there is a lot of division in the city, and cultural, economic, and social separation and inequality. But I think there is a shared subjective status about coming and being here. I think what it offers, *de facto*, is economic opportunities and a relationship of identity with the city (as opposed to the United States). In other words, if you come to New York from Bangladesh and one day later you're run down by a truck, the headline will be "New Yorker run down by truck." It's not going to be, "Guy from Bangladesh run down by truck." In some ways, the culture is extremely and diversely receptive. It will confer the identity of New York on you very quickly. Once you've had this identity, it's very hard to shed it. It's a very powerful identity. People who've lived in New York always feel like New Yorkers, or yearn for the feeling of being a New Yorker.

Is the city a home? I find the word 'home' very difficult. I don't know what it means. I understand the term primarily as a phenomenon relating to children or the infirm: where I lived with my parents—the house—that was home. And I have a home now: the apartment where I live as a parent, with my children; and if I find myself in a hospital, I'll want to go "home." But is a city a home? I'm less sure about that...

OG: Has this influenced your writing?

JON: My personal biography is one of moving around. Maybe I don't understand the word home because I've never really had one. I've always been a foreigner. For me, New York is a solution to a kind of personal quest for somewhere to belong. The liberating thing, from my point of view, is that the place that I write about in *Netherland* is a vaguely cosmopolitan, stateless, postnational sort of place. I always found it difficult before I came to New York to situate my fiction. I wrote two novels: one was in London, but I didn't know what to do with it—I'd never lived in England,

growing up, and I didn't have an English back story, and I didn't have an Irish one, even though I'm Irish by nationality. My second novel was situated in a kind of make-believe country, a kind of Ireland but not really. So when I came to New York, I could be very specific, so that was very liberating. It's a kind of nationality for me, being a New Yorker.

Cricket as a language

NC: Cricket appears to me to be a sort of language in your novel. It seems to emblematize a new writing of the land (the lines of the wild field have to be defined) and to recall the manner in which the English language had to reinvent itself in order to name a new territory and "well nigh express the inexpressible" (Whitman). In America, cricket is played by men of various nationalities: it seems to reveal the manner in which the American language is constantly renewing itself in order to incorporate a wide variety of accents, vernaculars and cultural references. Quite significantly, it is when he succeeds in changing his way of hitting the ball that Hans truly feels "American." As Chuck Ramkissoon asserts, cricket is a lesson in tolerance ("Put on white to feel black"). And indeed, Hans progressively learns how to see the "invisible men" who live in the outskirts of the city.

Could we then say that cricket, in *Netherland*, is a means of communication that reveals and revives the democratic ideals of the nation?

JON: Well, Chuck would say so. Hans isn't that political, he is quite conservative, obviously. But cricket is definitely a language. All sports are languages, and football especially is global language. Sport is becoming one of the most unifying cultural phenomena, and cricket is a very powerful language too. What is the content of the language? According to Hans, it's a kind of value system. The background of all of this is of course that it's a colonial sport. Cricket has its history as a distinct, playful jurisdiction within the colonized whole country. Players were taught the rules of the game, and how to organize themselves on a field, and how to submit to rules for a whole day and at the end of the day say thank you and then leave and then disperse in an orderly way. So it's about the orderly accumulation and dispersal and tranquillization of the players, about 'civilizing' them. Civilization is about rules, and respecting the rules, and the reciprocity of respecting the rules; all sports have that element, and cricket in particular has that possibility, that potential. I mean it's changing now of course, cricket is now in the hands of the Indians and South Asians who are running the sport now and have a somewhat different idea of the game that's much more competitive, much more explosive, whereas the old colonial version can last over five days and tacitly celebrated the rigors of work and domination. Yet it's still in some ways is a violent game—a ball is coming at you at a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour, and you've to learn how to play the ball that comes at you—and so it is a sport that contains some violence, and is about containing that violence.

OG: But is the cricket field a space that erases differences? That for the moment of the cricket game, makes everybody the same?

JON: It's certainly a new space. It's a space which is devoid, as much as it can be, of certain of the meanings of the spaces around the playing field. I think that Hans says something about that, something about an environment of justice. You have other things going on outside the field, but you come to the field—I felt this very strongly when I played here—it's a respite. A different hierarchy is inaugurated, a different personal status... The players are not pressurized by the need to make money, they

are not pressurized by their families, they are not pressurized by any of the stuff which characterizes the difficulties and pleasures of the rest of their lives. And the players, whatever their backgrounds, have that in common.

Margins

NC: As a shady dreamer, Chuck Ramkissoon appears as an initiator. He significantly encourages Hans to explore the margins of the city—the suburban areas of Staten Island, Flatbush, Yonkers… Hans's perception of these intermediary zones from a car or from a train thus contributes to a revelation of the unexpected beauty of the trite, the trivial, or even the sordid.

Why are these areas where the urban meets the wild so important in your novel?

JON: I don't know… I'm asking myself… The population, the demographics are always changing in the suburban and urban areas, the cultures are always changing. Even the ecology is less settled. I'm not sure that I can or should explain why the book gravitates towards this ecological dimension. In fact it's dangerous to try to explain what you're doing, because you can't really explain. The raison d'être of the fictional text is, partially, to resist the cult of explanation.

That said, one of the very basic things that I can talk about, in relation to the novel, is the quest for vision, which I think pretty much every novel engages with, and *Netherland* is no exception. You see that explicitly in the book's last paragraph. It's such a complicated quest, and it's a quest that none of us on earth can avoid. Hans sees things, he notices things. He is a natural noticer of Manhattan, but when he is in the outer boroughs, he needs to tour about; he's a tourist. He can't really see for himself and Chuck is the person who is his informer. Is Chuck a reliable intermediary? I've no idea. And because of Hans' socio-political status, he is quite a visual seer. I associate his sort of politically conservative, strongly visual perspective with nihilism, with a kind of aestheticizing of the world, so that it's just beautiful, or interesting to look at. That's a sort of nihilistic viewpoint, in opposition to progressive, humanist ideals, which implicate visual seeing with the inspection of questions of politics and justice and economics…

NC: When browsing through the novel this morning, I noticed a difference of perception… When Hans is in Manhattan, he focuses on details—the minute or the immense: the colors of a dove, the colossal laughing billboards, the hailstones hopping like dice on the asphalt, the small golden trees at the corner, the taxis in the rain like grapefruit—whereas when he is in the outskirts of the city, his vision is roaming and registering movement…

JON: Hans is nostalgic. He is remembering New York, so he is automatically nostalgic about it, and homesick for it, so he remembers and takes pleasure in everything, really. And I suppose you're right, there is always the question of the velocity of the observer. I mean often he is looking out of a window, he is static, he is looking down, and then he is smoking, and then he's traveling in a car, he has a sort of anthropological interest in the outskirts, which he doesn't really have in Manhattan. As you say, he catalogues things in the outskirts. He goes from place to place—Chuck moves him along. He thinks he's going around innocently, but that's not possible obviously. And he watches Chuck, and afterwards understands that he was looking at him run his illegal gambling game, and so the innocence of his perspective is retrospectively undermined. Yet he does not really go into the question of responsibility…

Mobility

OG: On different scales, mobility succeeds in creating a subtle unity in the novel. Moving around the metropolitan area as one moves around the globe, Hans mostly meets immigrants, thus enjoying an elusive sort of social mobility. Immigration, an all-time trademark of New York, does not only have an economic and political meaning; it involves creating habits of perception, ways of talking, patterns of behavior in public. But Hans, an immigrant himself, is no anthropologist; interestingly—and maybe unrealistically—his moving viewpoint remains unprejudiced as he comes across all kinds of people. Driven out of his solitude by his friend Chuck and the practice of cricket, but also by meeting people, he manages to escape the "natural" social circle of his colleagues. The faces, the bodies and the words of the strangers he meets retain his attention.

How is this mobility through society *connected* with Hans's concrete wanderings through the vast urban space of the metropolitan area?

JON: There is a sort of *flâneur* element to him... I personally think that the whole *flâneur* element can be overcooked these days. I think it's an open question, whether or not the *flâneur* is a kind of superior investigator. I don't think it's a given, as literary tradition has it, that if you really want to see something different, and think differently, you just become a *flâneur*. It reminds me of those ads for Apple computers —"Think Different." The idea that you get in the car, you look around, you drive or you walk around, and you escape the consumeristic agendas of shopping and working and you just set forth as this independent kind of seer, at liberty from the self's monetization by modern life... I think nowadays, that's a bit utopian and naïve... The question remains, how independent of society and ideology can we be, how innocent can we be? Even when Hans is hanging out with Chuck, he's either working on the new cricket field or serving as a kind of accomplice in Chuck's enigmatic errands and business transactions. So there is a not fully stated, not fully acknowledged commercial purpose to whatever it is they are doing.

Is Hans mobile through society? He's relatively unprejudiced I suppose, but that's not uncommon anymore... He's definitely received by a lot of readers as being unusually unterritorial, unconfined in his movements, even though all movement ends in confinement, you can't escape it—you're confined in the cricket field, you're confined in the house, and mobility in a car means being confined by traffic regulations and traffic, the movement of others. Mobility, in this sense, is just confinement plus velocity.

OG: As the very structure of the novel shows, Hans eventually stops drifting and comes back "home" (though London is not situated in the Netherlands) to his family, while Chuck's dreams end up below the surface. Does it suggest that constant mobility, however enriching, is not sustainable?

JON: I question the idea of a homecoming. At the very last moment of the book, Hans is on the London Eye, and he is promised the vision of something by his son: "Look, look, look." He has to look quickly, otherwise the vision will be lost... And is lost, inevitably. The wheel keeps turning, keeps moving... So there's no such thing as a kind of homecoming and the static viewpoint associated with being at home. It goes on...

Walking

NC: Walking in the city is a means of expression and experience in *Netherland*. It allows the narrator to reveal his most intimate, ineffable suffering, but also to rediscover the wonders of the ordinary: "[I'd] walk and walk until I reached a state of fancifulness, of indeterminately hopeful receptiveness, which seemed to me an end in itself and as good as it got."

Is walking in the city a means of losing and finding oneself at the same time? Of rediscovering the transitory and the trite?

JON: One of the things about New York is that it is a pedestrian city. People here do walk a lot. It's strange, you wouldn't think so, because on the face of it, from a distance, it's a megalopolis, with tall buildings. But it is a great walking city. I'm not a walker, I hate moving around physically unless I have to, but even I find myself walking all the time. So there is a sense of an inevitable pedestrian drama. It's not like London, which is difficult to walk, it's twisted, you never really have a clear sense of how far away things are...

NC: What about the link between walking and remembering for example?

JON: Well, walking is a rhythmic activity. Everything rhythmic is profound. Music, sports. Everything rhythmic has something ineffably significant about it. Walking is potentially a kind of physical music, a proto-dance... I suppose it's possible to fanatisize about the purity of movement on foot. We're back in the land of the *flâneur*. It's escapism as well. It's indeterminate, fanciful, there's some dreaming, there's no obligation to remember, to pay attention, to move carefully, to not injure others, it promises a kind of ethical freedom. Walking has that dimension of liberation I suppose. But so does sitting on a bench, or on the grass, watching strangers walking by or watching them playing with a frisbee. And walking is, 99% of the time, connected to a destination or telos. So I'm not sure if it's an activity that can be comfortably associated with a discrete variety of consciousness.

Surfaces

OG: Though Hans' first-person narration stands in the foreground, I am tempted to say that it often (and most subtly) plays the part of a vehicle for the progression of the novel, almost in a literal sense. Indeed through the eyes of the drifting narrator, the reader watches a number of surfaces where projections of actions, past and present, occur. Thus, throughout *Netherland*, the perceived environment seems dominated by *superficial* phenomena, both concrete (water, ice and snow, mirrors, cricket grounds, screens, streets and sidewalks...) and social (make-up and costumes, ephemeral relationships between neighbors at the hotel, Chuck's performances, and even Hans' personal troubles and reminiscences). Strikingly, the *flattened* spaces and characters of the city don't quite seem to offer a source of meaning, but are nonetheless more than a mere background to the "lost" narrator.

Would you agree with the idea that the novel's physical and social environment actually becomes a sort of screening surface for the narration?

JON: I think Hans says something like that himself. I personally don't agree or disagree. Doesn't Hans at a certain point say something about his inability to find a mirror? Doesn't he question the adequacy of the self-images offered by the mirroring world? Part of the quest for vision is this idea of a quest to find that surface which will in some ways reflect something back to him about himself in his situation, a quest which is somehow related to his disorientation, either as a cause or effect.

It's again a question of what you see, and what you say. Hans tries to be accurate. He's trying to see, and he's trying to avoid, he does avoid, although not all the time, the error of interpretation. Obviously, he's existentially at a loss.

OG: Rather than creating a distressing experience of loss, doesn't urban drifting (driving or walking) through Greater New York, appear to you as a means of liberation and emancipation?

JON: Yes, to Hans, this is politically liberating. He's not really a citizen, which of course is a state of responsibility, he is a denizen. There's also the paradox of the geographic particularity of his observations, which is often characteristic of a person who is lost... To be lost is to be forced into a zone of attentiveness.

Exile and home

NC: If the "attack" of 9/11 is delicately screened by memories of the "corporeal obscurity" of a night or of the "concreteness" of a snowstorm, the twin towers nevertheless shimmer like a dream at the end of *Netherland*. Veiled by a metaphor reflexively associating the skyline with a box of rainbow-colored pencils, this memory is immediately and anamorphically redirected towards the interwoven memories of Hans's mother's gazing at her son, on the ferry, in New York, and of Hans's gazing at his own son, on the Eye, in London. As in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," we thus notice a reorientation of vision from a discovery of the unknown to a rediscovery of the known.

Is exile necessary in order to return home (although you cannot define this word...)? Is nostalgia a means of recovering one's faith in the future?

JON: *Caran d'Ache* is such a French and such a European and childish thing. You see how they arrange the colors in the boxes, so that they have that harmony and progression and order. I don't know how the idea came to me, but obviously it's a childhood memory.

NC: And you don't write with a pencil, you draw with it...

JON: Absolutely. You color with it. The twin towers are highly reflective in that scene. Light is shining off them. So it's all about the exterior, not about the interior. We don't know what is going on inside the twin towers. And it's a dream, he talks about with "as if"... Again he has a very personal relationship to those towers. People seem to think the end is a happy ending. I think it's a highly provisional ending.

NC: The act of looking seems to be more important than the object of vision...

JON: And also where to look. He seems to have gotten some sort of clue from his mother. That what to look for it isn't over there, it's right here. You can walk in New York as long as you like, but there's a certain looking that isn't available. It's ironic, because New York offers, in addition to the horizontal perspective, the perspectives of looking down at the streets from tall buildings, and of course the drama of looking up at skyscrapers, which point upward, beyond the human. And there's also the question of being seen. Hans plays cricket in order to be watched. Chuck watches him play cricket, and his mother used to watch him play the game. It's about being seen and being witnessed. And in a way there's this whole question of the witness and the bystander. What did he witness? Was he a witness of 9/11, or was he watching TV, or both? And it's about mutual witnessing.

NC: I remember your commentary on the word "aftermath" at the beginning of the novel (the consequences of an event, or the act of mowing the grass for the second time). Do you often wonder about the origins of words?

JON: Always, yes. The more basic the word, the more interested I am in the etymology and word-history. I try to teach my students this. What does "visitor" mean, what is the Latin root of "visitor"? Vision. Someone who goes to see. You start there... I'm not quite as fetishistic about word-origins as certain philosophers are... They seem to think that there is some mysterious, kind of cabbalistic truth in language, some secret code. I'm probably misrepresenting their interest in etymology, but I try to look into every word I use.

NC: Are you writing a new book?

JON: Yes, I do have a new book and I'm hoping to finish it this year. It's set in Dubai...

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AUTHORS

NATHALIE COCHOY

Université Toulouse-Le Mirail

OLIVIER GAUDIN

Université de Poitiers