

In a 2008 essay, British novelist Zadie Smith famously laments the crisis of the novel in our times, citing on the one hand the dominance of “lyrical Realism” and on the other the marginalization of the “avant-garde” vein. While she places her own work in the lyrical Realist tradition, Smith contends that if it is to survive, “lyrical Realists will have to push a little harder on their subject.”

Smith’s diagnosis of the novelistic genre is rendered alongside her review of two well-received English novels published in the late 2000s: *Netherland*, by Joseph O’Neill, and *Remainder*, by Tom McCarthy. For her, O’Neill is the contemporary champion of lyrical Realism, a model that by most accounts can be traced back to the likes of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; whereas McCarthy’s novel belongs with the avant-garde and has come along to dismantle the complacency of the genre.

The following is an excerpt from Smith’s essay centered on her evaluation of *Netherland*. Read it, and write an expository essay in which you analyze and respond to Smith’s argument: What is it in O’Neill’s novel—and lyrical Realism, for that matter—that concerns her? Judging from her interrogation of O’Neill’s novel, what may be considered a more commendable alternative for the contemporary novel? Is Smith implying that ours is an unusual world and that novelists today need to write differently than their predecessors to better come to grips with it? If you don’t find her thesis compelling, how, then, do you conceive of the task of novelistic writing at this historical juncture?

Don’t worry if you are unfamiliar with the novel under discussion or the thinkers cited. Your job is to engage with Smith’s claims and see whether/how her essay may provoke your assessment of the status quo of the novel.

*NOTE: Produce a coherent and well-structured essay. The way you summarize, paraphrase, quote Smith’s text or quote Smith quoting other people will also be taken into account.*

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“Two Paths for the Novel” by Zadie Smith, *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 20, 2008

From two recent novels, a story emerges about the future for the Anglophone novel. . . .

*Netherland* is nominally the tale of Hans van den Broek, a Dutch stock analyst, transplanted from London to downtown New York with his wife and young son. When the towers fall, the family relocates to the Chelsea Hotel; soon after, a trial separation occurs. Wife and son depart once more for London, leaving Hans stranded in a world turned immaterial, phantasmagoric: “Life itself had become disembodied. My family, the spine of my days, had crumbled. I was lost in invertebrate time.” . . .

. . . *Netherland* is only superficially about September 11 or immigrants . . . . It certainly is about anxiety, but its worries are formal and revolve obsessively around the question of authenticity. *Netherland* sits at an anxiety crossroads where a community in recent crisis—the Anglo-American liberal middle class—meets a literary form in long-term crisis, the nineteenth-century lyrical Realism of Balzac and Flaubert.

Critiques of this form by now amount to a long tradition in and of themselves. Beginning with what Alain Robbe-Grillet called “the destitution of the old myths of ‘depth,’” they blossomed out into a phenomenology skeptical of Realism’s metaphysical tendencies, demanding, with Husserl, that we eschew the transcendental, the metaphorical, and go “back to the things themselves!”; they peaked in that radical deconstructive doubt which questions the capacity of language itself to describe the world with accuracy. They all of them note the (often unexamined) credos upon which Realism is built: the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self. . . .

*Netherland*, unlike much lyrical Realism, has some consciousness of these arguments, and so it is an anxious novel, unusually so. It is absolutely a post-catastrophe novel but the catastrophe isn’t terror, it’s Realism. In its opening pages, we get the first hint of this. Hans, packing up his London office in preparation to move to New York, finds himself buttonholed by a senior vice-president “who reminisced for several minutes about his loft on Wooster Street and his outings to the

'original' Dean & DeLuca [*note*: a chic eatery/grocery store]." Hans finds this nostalgia irritating: "Principally he was pitiable—like one of those Petersburgians of yesteryear whose duties have washed him up on the wrong side of the Urals."

But then:

It turns out he was right, in a way. Now that I, too, have left that city, I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you're the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course.

None of this means that I wish I were back there now; and naturally I'd like to believe that my own retrospection is in some way more important than the old S.V.P.'s, which, when I was exposed to it, seemed to amount to not much more than a cheap longing. But there's no such thing as a cheap longing, I'm tempted to conclude these days, not even if you're sobbing over a cracked fingernail. Who knows what happened to that fellow over there? Who knows what lay behind his story about shopping for balsamic vinegar? He made it sound like an elixir, the poor bastard.

This paragraph is structured like a recognized cliché (i.e., *We had come, as they say, to the end of the road*). It places before us what it fears might be a tired effect: in this case, the nostalgia-fused narrative of one man's retrospection (which is to form the basis of this novel). It recognizes that effect's inauthenticity, its lack of novelty, even its possible dullness—and it employs the effect anyway. By stating its fears *Netherland* intends to neutralize them. It's a novel that wants you to know that it knows you know it knows. Hans invites us to sneer lightly at those who are "prone to general observations" but only as a prelude to just such an observation, presented in language frankly genteel and faintly archaic ("so one is told and forlornly hopes"). Is it cheap longing? It can't be because—and this is the founding, consoling myth of lyrical Realism—the self is a bottomless pool. What you can't find in the heavens (anymore), you'll find in the soul. . . .

*Netherland* recognizes the tenuous nature of a self, that "fine white thread running, through years and years," and Hans flirts with the possibility that language may not precisely describe the world ("I was assaulted by the notion, arriving in the form of a terrifying stroke of consciousness, that substance—everything of so called concreteness—was indistinct from its unnameable opposite"), but in the end *Netherland* wants always to comfort us, to assure us of our beautiful plenitude. At a certain point in his *Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek passes quickly and dismissively over exactly this personal fullness we hold so dear in the literary arts . . . , directing our attention instead to those cinematic masters of the antisublime (Hitchcock, Tarkovsky, David Lynch) who look into the eyes of the Other and see no self at all, only an unknowable absence, an abyss. *Netherland* flirts with that idea, too. Not knowing what to do with photographs of his young son, Hans gives them to Chuck's [*note*: someone Hans meets at a cricket club] girlfriend, Eliza, who organizes photo albums for a living:

"People want a story," she said. "They like a story."

I was thinking of the miserable apprehension we have of even those existences that matter most to us. To witness a life, even in love—even with a camera—was to witness a monstrous crime without noticing the particulars required for justice.

"A story," I said suddenly. "Yes. That's what I need."

I wasn't kidding.

An interesting thought is trying to reach us here, but the ghost of the literary burns it away, leaving only its remainder: a nicely constructed sentence, rich in sound and syntax, signifying (almost) nothing. *Netherland* doesn't really want to know about misapprehension. It 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 the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really Realism? . . .