

## 'In Defense of Lyrical Realism'

James, David

DOI:

[10.1353/dia.2017.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2017.0020)

License:

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

James, D 2018, "In Defense of Lyrical Realism", *Diacritics*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 68-91.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2017.0020>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### **Publisher Rights Statement:**

Final Version of Record to be published in *Diacritics* - <https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/diacritics/>

DOI: 10.1353/dia.2017.0020

(c) Johns Hopkins University Press

### **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## IN DEFENSE OF LYRICAL REALISM

DAVID JAMES

David James is a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, UK. Among his books are *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and edited volumes such as *The Legacies of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and *Modernism and Close Reading* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press). For Columbia University Press, he co-edits the book series Literature Now. His new book, *Discrepant Solace*, will be out in 2019 from Oxford University Press.

Email: [d.james.1@bham.ac.uk](mailto:d.james.1@bham.ac.uk)

Fiction nowadays is beset by the lyrical. That at least is the view of Zadie Smith, who in 2008 published in the *New York Review of Books* what has become arguably one of the most visible (if also schematic) interventions by a novelist about the state of twenty-first-century fiction. Familiar, palatable, resilient—the lyrical has become infectious, Smith observes, its syndrome a matter of serious concern for the very condition of contemporary literature. Much discussed though they are, her appraisals rehearse a well-established formula. By virtue of her title alone, Smith joined a longstanding tradition of prominent writers who issue prognoses for the novel by recourse to the symbolism of diverging paths. This tendency stems back to Iris Murdoch's 1961 essay "Against Dryness," where she offered a polarized vision of postwar narrative condemned to two equally unsatisfactory routes. Following either "journalistic" or "crystalline" trails, the former limits the depth and spectrum of characterization while the latter mode satisfies all too easily what Murdoch called readers' "desire for consolation," through highly wrought language and exquisite design.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his 1969 account of the situation of the novel, David Lodge drew on a comparable metaphor, placing the writer standing "at the crossroads" in

modernism's wake: poised between commitments, this archetypal figure faced a choice between the prospect of increasing formal experimentation and the enduring obligations of social realism.<sup>2</sup> Most recently Mark McGurl has offered his own spin on these split diagnoses, writing for *Public Books* under the heading of "The Novel's Forking Path." Originally, Smith's essay made use of the same noun (before she changed the title from "Two Paths for the Novel" to "Two Directions for the Novel" in her 2009 collection, *Changing My Mind*), and in her case, the two paths refer to Joseph O'Neill's meditation on post-9/11 New York, *Netherland* (2008), and Tom McCarthy's avant-garde debut *Remainder* (originally published in 2005 and released in the US two years later). According to Smith, O'Neill's adjectivally profuse narration consoles his readers: *Netherland* "is perfectly done," she observes, but "in a sense, that's the problem." McCarthy's austere prose, by contrast, challenges and alienates us, thereby pointing to a healthy form of "constructive deconstruction" that guarantees a more vibrant future for the novel than realism could ever do.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it's realism more than anything—especially its comforting familiarity for a novel-reading public—that Smith finds "somewhat dispiriting."<sup>4</sup> Taking to task O'Neill's overtly pathetic and elegantly rendered depictions of the metropolitan sublime, Smith voices broader concerns about the prevalence of what she calls *lyrical realism*, a mode that she herself adopted just a few years earlier in her campus novel and homage to E. M. Forster, *On Beauty* (2005). Without doubt, lyrical realism is a pretty elastic term: among the many candidates for the label, we might include works as diverse as Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), John Banville's *Ancient Light* (2012), Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013), or Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Precisely because of its omnipresence, though, Smith has

come to regard lyrical realism with suspicion since the release of *On Beauty*, identifying in such writing a reliance on lushly evoked impressions and soothing resolutions. That lyrical realism transcribes social and psychic harm with such grace is damaging, suggests Smith, especially when writers deal, as in *Netherland*, with terrorism's collective fallout along with the pernicious ethnic divisions and anxieties it provokes. Hence Smith concludes that while she "has written in this tradition and cautiously hope[s] for its survival," she maintains that "if it's to survive, lyrical realists will have to push a little harder on their subject."<sup>5</sup>

One wonders what pushing harder ought to entail. Smith's primary target seems to be O'Neill's lavish descriptions of first-person contemplation—generated by *Netherland's* protagonist, Hans van den Broek, who by his own admission is "afflicted by the solitary's vulnerability to insights."<sup>6</sup> Smith therefore suggests that "pushing harder" means refusing precisely what Murdoch herself regarded as the equivocal "consolations of form": those structural rectifications, pleasing symbolic patterns, and limpid diction that (supposedly) help literature to mitigate the changing pressures that convulsive, ineffable violence places on representation.<sup>7</sup> As such, Smith emphasizes the ideological perils of lyrical realism more than its formal, affective, or ethical possibilities. As a mode of choice among contemporary novelists, it "has had the freedom of the highway for some time now."<sup>8</sup> All this may seem as ideologically untroubling as it is critically uncontroversial, especially if we don't automatically assume that any one novelistic form is intrinsically more progressive, emotionally penetrating, or politically enabling than another. However, Smith sounds altogether less sanguine about lyrical realism's rampancy: in her verdict, the problem with this breed of fiction is that it perpetuates a myth, the myth of "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth." As

she ratchets up these indictments, it becomes apparent that her real target is not the future of formal innovation per se, but rather audiences placated and sated by the conventions lyrical fiction leaves unchallenged. From this worrying if also generalizing perspective on the literary-cultural present, the hazards of lyrical realism are everywhere apparent; its universal threat lies in its propensity to turn fiction into “the bedtime story that comforts us most.”<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I argue that lyrical realism has something rather more productive to tell us not only about the current historical moment of contemporary fiction, but also about the critical desires that fiction’s synergy with lyric aesthetics brings to light. Smith’s own essay grants a taste of such desires, as her misgivings lodge explicitly in the politics of a style that is leading writers astray. If lyrical realism comforts readers, she implies, it may also be of comfort to the novel-form itself: quelling dissidence, it allows fiction to rest on its laurels. To counter such a standpoint, we need to understand better the stakes of fiction’s enduring intimacy with the lyrical. In this undertaking, Jonathan Culler’s *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) provides a rich vocabulary that equips us to grasp both the formal constitution and critical potentiality of the lyrical as a specific genus of contemporary writing, without reducing it to a symptom of immediate historical determinants. For lyrical strategies in the novel are of course nothing new. Ubiquitous though they can be made to seem in recent fiction, they ultimately “mark a tradition and an evolution,” to borrow Culler’s phrase,<sup>10</sup> extending sonorous and effulgent styles of depiction that one can witness, for instance, in the acoustic cartographies of *The Return of the Native* (1878), where Thomas Hardy lyrically catalogues the wind’s “general ricochet” when unpacking the “linguistic peculiarity of the heath,” or through “the swaying mantle of silence” of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) where, in the elegiac “Time Passes” section, “loveliness and

stillness clasped hands” to furnish one of Virginia Woolf’s most arresting sequences of gossamer resilience.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging this genealogy, my interest here will be in tracing what Culler calls “dimensions of transformation” in contemporary lyrical writing (49), whose significance lies in the way lyrical moments present sites of deliberation for writers and critics alike—narrative sites where style both stages and solicits reflections on fiction’s affective and ethical capacities.

By generating such instances of critical and creative reflection, lyrical realism has certain methodological ramifications for how we value fiction at once for its emotive singularity and its amenability to intellectual extrapolation: simulating irreducibly particular experiences whose takeaway implications can nonetheless be deciphered for a variety of extraliterary purposes. If lyrical realism remains suited to plots that revolve around socially discrete or emotionally localized circumstances that privilege idiosyncratic (and often intricately rendered) perceptions, then to what extent can it register the larger ethical consequences or lasting political import of apparently individuated experiences? Put otherwise, how do we go about identifying such broader ramifications without subjecting this manifestly particularist species of fiction to baldly instrumental readings? I hope to show that critical guides for navigating this conundrum emerge, on closer inspection, from within the formal textures of lyrical realism itself, in ways that sync this kind of fictional practice with recent conversations on method in literary and cultural studies. The alternating scales at which lyrical realism operates invite us to entertain the viability of what Caroline Levine calls a “generalizing impulse,” one that departs from the assumption “that humanists always and only particularize.” With its richly delineated moments of affective intensity, lyrical realism suggests at a diegetic level “that only the detailed and the local can yield ethical, valuable knowledge”; but as a critical category, it

carries an expansiveness that enables a degree of cultural and thematic transposition, allowing it to be strategically “generalized to new contexts,” where lyrical strategies in world fiction can “travel from one political situation to another.”<sup>12</sup> How novels today perform this twofold action with the help of their cross-generic kinship with elements of the lyric—how, that is, they solicit attention to the particularities of affective experience while at the same time demonstrating that contemporary realism exhibits what Levine terms “formal resources with generalizable affordances”<sup>13</sup>—will be my quarry here, as I prize open the carapace of disappointment that Smith planted on lyrical realist writing in the very act of coining a term for it. After playing devil’s advocate with alleged detriments of lyricism’s contemporary epidemic, I consider why the critical valences and emotional complexity of lyrical form might be worth defending.

Before making such a defense, though, I should acknowledge the terminological muddiness of “lyrical realism” itself, especially its slippery translation of a genre into a mode, as *lyric* modulates into the adjectival (and, in Smith’s case, explicitly evaluative) use of the *lyrical*. Smith is hardly alone in reducing *lyrical* to an impressionistic epithet; where she does stand out is in her effort to historicize it as a culprit, positioning lyrical realism at the fountainhead of a virulently unadventurous body of fiction. As such I am compelled to wonder to what extent it’s useful, indeed urgent, to see the constitutive elements of lyrical realism as more than what Culler terms a generic “construction of the moment” in which they historically occur (48), in order to complicate Smith’s insinuation that realism’s contamination by the lyrical is merely indicative of a time when novelists are refusing to raise their experimental game. If the “test of generic categories,” as Culler reminds us, “is how far they help activate aspects of works that make them rich and interesting” (49), then there are positive ways of making sense of this correspondence,

which uncover more affirmative stories of a style that brings otherwise unrelated writers and works into conversation.

Lyrical realism tempts us to say things about genre and mode—the novel's relation to lyric and lyrical features *in* the novel—which might be considered somewhat heretical in light of Culler's warning about the pitfalls of a "novelizing account of the lyric," an account that detracts from what is "most extravagant and most distinctive about" the lyric's formations (3). To be clear, I am conscious of the dangers of "push[ing] the lyric," in Culler's words, "in the direction of the novel by adopting a mimetic model," only then "to compete with narrative on terrain where narrative has obvious advantages" (118). All the same, if Culler suggests that "we need a more capacious notion of lyric to counter modern notions of lyric intelligibility linked to the voice of the subject" (82), then might that capaciousness extend to the prospect of repositioning particular stylistic effects (and their affects) in fiction within lyric coordinates? For instance, could we not consider novels along lyrical lines if an evocative and "distinguishing feature" of their form, in Culler's phrase (following Hegel), "is the centrality of subjectivity coming to consciousness of itself through experience and reflection" (92)? What's more, my response to Culler's compelling book will be less inclined to observe strict generic boundaries than to complement its methodological spirit, spurred as I am by his commitment to poetics over interpretation as a premise for incorporating narrative technique into assessments of fiction's social efficacy. Bringing poetics and genre study to bear on the novel seems especially timely at a juncture when scholars are increasingly attentive to the pitfalls of utilizing contemporary writing as a sounding board for the readymade targets of ideology-critique.<sup>14</sup> That poetics requires us to anatomize style and genre need not spell a withdrawal into some belletristic realm of appreciation; on the contrary, such compositional elements are crucial for



engaging the way fiction today confronts and remodels political arrangements. What Culler himself calls “the seductions of striking phrasing and sonorous form” (348) can, I hope to show, further rather than forestall our recognition of the novel’s potential in this regard. Nonetheless, I also have a hunch that when bringing lyric theory to bear on the politico-aesthetic potentiality of contemporary fiction we are compelled to find opportunities to *synthesize* poetics and interpretation, even if in so doing we also need to grant that the novel has become a privileged optic in literary studies through which to refract methodological propositions, to recuperate neglected affects, and to road test vocabularies for identifying what Peter Middleton calls “the intelligence of literary texts and tracing their constructive influence on research, politics and ethics.”<sup>15</sup> Moving ahead now, I want to return for a time to the ambivalent yet multivalent lyricism of O’Neill’s *Netherland*, before then pursuing its broader consequentiality—including, indeed, its “intelligence”—by looking to the recent work of David Grossman, a writer for whom the stakes of yoking the critical and consolatory work lyrical realism performs couldn’t be higher.

<break>

What then are the generic tendencies of lyrical realism? And why exactly should they be as controversial as Smith claims in her somewhat feisty assessment of *Netherland*? As a testing ground for doubts, let us turn straight to the novel’s climax. Up to this point, O’Neill’s reader has moved in the wake of Hans’s disintegrated marriage. Unable to endure New York City in the shadow of 9/11, his wife has returned to England with their son, Jake. As day-to-day life becomes increasingly amorphous, Hans lapses into meditations on

the sublimity of ordinary sights, atmospheres, and diurnal patterns. Sometimes brooding, sometimes uplifting, these ruminative episodes may be fairly ordinary in essence but are flamboyant in style. Thanks to such vignettes, the *moment* itself as a capsule of phenomenological vitality and impressionistic drama becomes a lynchpin for *Netherland*, stimulating the phonetic range and lexical decorations of its narration. Moments of everyday perception elevate the self-consciousness of the novel's verbal embroidery, so much so that *Netherland* arguably resembles a second-order metafiction about the very procedures of lyrical writing, whose reverberations seem all the more ethically charged when the diegesis is preoccupied by lush reminiscences that merge the personal with the patriotic.

And reminiscing is indeed what we find Hans doing as the novel moves to its crepuscular close. With his thoughts turned to another "sundown, to New York, to my mother," who visited before he and his wife became estranged, Hans affectionately reconstructs an occasion when they were together "sailing on the Staten Island Ferry on a September day's end,"<sup>16</sup> a memory that overlays the narrative present where his reunited family survey London's skyline from the capital's giant Thames-side Ferris wheel. Personal recollection soon encompasses deliberative reflection as the scene pans out from the ferry crossing, inviting us to contemplate the ethics of retrospectively visualizing a city in ways that counterpoint, even potentially console, its more recent past in the shattering wake of the September 11 attacks:

The forward deck was crowded. There was much smiling, pointing, physical intertwining, kissing. Everybody looked at the Statue of Liberty and at Ellis Island and at the Brooklyn Bridge, but finally, inevitably, everybody looked to Manhattan. The structures clustered at its tip made a warm, familiar crowd, and as their surfaces brightened ever more fiercely with sunlight it was possible to imagine that vertical accumulations of humanity were gathering to greet our arrival. The day was darkening at the margins, but so what? A world was lighting up before us, its uprights putting me in mind, now that I'm adrift,

of new pencils standing at attention in a Caran d’Ache box belonging in the deep of my childhood, in particular the purplish platoon of sticks that emerged by degrees from the reds and, turning bluer and bluer and bluer, faded out; a world concentrated most glamorously of all, it goes almost without saying, 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.<sup>17</sup>

Democratizing the sublime, O’Neill captures wonderment in a quotidian instant, implying that there’s something enriching—if also intrinsically everyday—about the way awe might be collectively observed and shared by people who otherwise wouldn’t acknowledge each other. A mutually consoling moment of solidarity is celebrated for its own sake. And on the face of it, that celebration is answered by style, as the scene’s pictorialism—“rich in sound and syntax,” in Smith’s estimation—diffuses whatever could have been potentially volatile or perturbing about these retrospections into “the form of coherent, lyrical reveries.”<sup>18</sup> For her, this kind of writing indexes a more severe trend that threatens to upset not only the novel’s artistic prosperity but also its political wellbeing. “Everything must be made literary” in novels like *Netherland*, she claims, producing an idiom that readers are likely to find still more appeasing because it feels so familiar.<sup>19</sup> The variety of “adjectival mania” that O’Neill’s prose epitomizes is “still our dominant mode,” she advises, one that licenses its own ornamentation by exploiting lyricism as a dependably attractive strategy, all the while asking its readers to “look kindly upon it.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the trauma that forms its backdrop, *Netherland* provides sensory descriptions of urban life that ultimately “assure us of our beautiful plenitude.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, the novel’s pictorial finesse is mitigating diversion, a questionable nostrum, revealing how “*Netherland* doesn’t

really want to know about misapprehension” or other terrifying facets of material alienation; instead, protests Smith, O’Neill wants to convince us that “things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past.”<sup>22</sup> In this account, recollection’s decorations and the sense of experiential integrity they manufacture serve to divulge the novel’s desire to soothe its reader by deploying lyrical expression as compensation.

At the confluence of poetics and interpretation, another response to this moment seems possible, one that construes an apparent showcase of nostalgia here as more radically unsettled than first impressions of its linguistic opulence would imply. O’Neill’s lyricism coexists with a certain verbal unrest; indeed, it *instantiates* that unrest as the very condition of lyrical description’s potential. Despite everything Hans’s recollections do to appease, their expression doesn’t altogether knit with action. The very tempo and phonemic features of this passage invite a rather different reading. A repeated sibilance that cuts across actions and objects gives the impression of a hushed whisper (*smiling, kissing, clustered, surfaces*), complementing the intimacy implied by all the “physical intertwining.” But it could just as well usher in something more disquieting, as the /s/ sounds proliferate “fiercely” to highlight description’s readiness to put on a lavish appearance, itching to wear alliteration’s glitter. And once we have been alerted to this specious side of description it’s hard to rein in our suspicion; hard not to see as cryptically self-affirming, chauvinistic even, that reassuringly grand image of lofty Manhattan as monumentalizing “accumulations of humanity,” pillars of “promise” that await the arrival of Hans and his fellow nondescript spectators. Furthermore, Hans’s reach for a comforting analogy in Caran d’Ache pencils from his boyhood seems bathetic in relation to the magnitude of the scene he is trying so lyrically to evoke. An awkward gap opens up

between the privacy of this cherished object and the publicly sensed affect of the very spectacle to which it is compared. The success of this visual comparison is then further compromised by the pat construction of “bluer and bluer and bluer”: as repetition forestalls adjectival variation, the novel’s language falters precisely at the moment when Hans wants to re-picture the ordinary as profound, indelible, “amazingly” sublime. The slightly halting clauses that frame his transition into this analogy (“its uprights putting me in mind, now that I’m adrift”) may well match the rhythm of Hans’s meandering observations, punctuated as they are throughout the novel by the digressions of retrospection. But those hesitating phrases also detract from the immediacy of the scene itself, suggesting that there is something artificial about this fidgeting description that cannot quite stay with the scene it evokes. As Hans finds an ungainly correlative in coloring pencils, reminiscence slides into a manufactured conceit, a quaint maneuver fueled by juvenile imagery. What for Smith, then, is “perfectly done”—and what made *Netherland’s* lyrical diction for her all the more questionably consoling—could actually be the opposite: a *struggle* for style’s purchase on its own subject, rather than style’s lyrical consummation, a struggle played out through imperfect comparisons for a “world” that’s supposed to be appearing so “glamorously.”

But maybe—at the risk of cutting partly against the grain of my foregoing case for spotting abrasions between *Netherland’s* penchant for self-possessed vignettes and the destabilizing connotations of its language—that is precisely O’Neill’s point. Style’s relatively predictable elements (relative to the resources that *could* have been employed to embellish this memorable scene) also point to the novel’s ethical and emotional reflexivity. By reaching into childhood for an analogue of awe, Hans seems to be deliberately shunning developed vocabulary, making the scene no more lyrical than his

boyhood self would have perhaps deemed appropriate; no more ornamental than his rather unenterprising diction permits, combining as Hans does, adverbs (*glamorously*, *amazingly*) with adjectives (*brilliant*) that sound as homely as that “warm, familiar crowd” of buildings they are designed to picture. In fact, perhaps we shouldn’t be asking, as Smith urges us to do, “Is this really realism?” but rather: Is this really *lyrical*, at least in that rhapsodic, bewitching sense as an adjective for melodious expression?<sup>23</sup> What happens to the alleged comforts of this artifice if it turns out not to be as elaborately ornamental as it first appears? Do fiction’s compensations survive once we suspect the lyricism at stake is actually contrived, and might that contrivance itself imply that *Netherland* is alert to the ethical flaws of its own aesthetic fallibilities, weaving that alertness into the linguistic warp and woof of rapturous yet restive scenes of recollection?

By generating these questions about itself, by announcing the sense in which style animates rather than resolves such problematics, *Netherland* testifies to what Peter Boxall has called realism’s “beautiful disintegrated partiality” more so than exalting lyricism as realism’s contemporary apex.<sup>24</sup> In so doing, the novel also models deliberative reflection, as the very frictions between syntax and diction, between narrative register and narrated perception, invite us to stand back and reexamine, in Levine’s words, “generalizable values and forms.”<sup>25</sup> Alongside these values we might include ambivalent affects, like solace—itsself usually subject to generalization of a more detrimental kind, and to which *Netherland* offers amnesty as an emotional state worth contemplating. Literary solace is typically “condemned,” as the poet Denise Riley has remarked, “as a sentimental search for ‘identification’, and for the coziness of finding one’s own situation mirrored in print.” O’Neill implies that we might “save it from that withering assessment” by broaching “the possibility of a literature of consolation,” in Riley’s words, including “what that could be or

what it might do," *through* the equally contestable lyricism of his style—a possibility volunteered too with blistering poignancy by David Grossman, as we shall soon see.<sup>26</sup>

In its culminating set piece, then, *Netherland* is not—or not only—in my view concerned with defending a redemptive vision of an undamaged city, reaching for the existential succor of superimposing an anterior moment of amazement upon a now-irreparable zone of atrocity. Rather, O'Neill offers an exposition *of* description as such, whereby his writing (via Hans) meditates on a way of seeing—including its limits, its awkward analogies—which may seem precious or overworked, but which is revealing to the reader a process that would otherwise go unnoticed. If O'Neill's writing tries to console, then it also stages an argument with itself, *about* itself, assessing the legitimacy of its own lyrical impulse. And if *Netherland* reclaims—as it does here at the end, with unapologetic intensity—the value of projecting deluxe images of "extraordinary promise," then the novel also remarks on its own idiom. At the very level of construction, through its scrutiny of a moment that seems at once celebrated and thoroughly sized up, *Netherland* debates the quotient of solace that lyrical realism is engineered to promise.

<BREAK>

In this sense, O'Neill's lyrical "moment" seems quite distinct from a merely "abstract concept," in Fredric Jameson's formulation, one that (in modernism's case) conjures within itself a sanctuary for the artistic will, a shrine for experimental techniques where a "new aesthetic can be organized." On Jameson's account, modernist moments could perfect themselves only by being insulated from the messy materiality of the world they lyrically transfigure. Far from "declar[ing] its independence" from "the diachronic texture

of history" in this fashion,<sup>27</sup> O'Neill's moment appears thoroughly imbricated in and formally responsive to the protean impression of social solidarity he affords. For as we have seen, it's an impression that does more to examine than simply to promote the beautification it contains and projects outward upon the city, suggesting that O'Neill's investment in the lyrical is shot through with an ethical agitation about the gesture of his own undertaking in this novel of traumatized commemoration. Admittedly, if his writing is not without a certain level of indulgence, then among the things it encourages readers to indulge are the classic criteria for connecting fiction to the lyric. Drawing on Margaret Atwood's terms, for example, Ian Rae deems that "lyrics generally stress 'formal elegance and verbal felicity' by focusing on 'objects in space' and 'noun-and-adjective accurate description,' while at the same time isolating a particular emotion or cluster of emotions."<sup>28</sup> So far, so recognizable, especially perhaps to *Netherland's* readers. But what sort of emotional occasion might raise the personal and political stakes for the elegance of accurate, particularizing description? What would lyrical moments mean to a novel where sensuous descriptions of experience are tantamount to survival, a novel where rhetorical felicity is not just decoration but a tool of creative resistance?

Taking up these questions, the remainder of my discussion turns to David Grossman's *To the End of the Land*, whose English translation appeared in 2010 when it was praised for taking on "great questions of love, intimacy, war, memory and fear of personal and national annihilation," with epic "ambitions to scrape raw the human heart."<sup>29</sup> The novel follows an Israeli mother, Ora, as she hikes through the Galilee in defiant refusal to wait at home for news of her son, Ofer, who is serving in the military. Ofer had already finished his requisite term in the army, but decided to volunteer again following an "emergency call-up" for a renewed offensive against the Palestinians in the



ongoing Intifada.<sup>30</sup> Gripped by dread, Ora squares up to her imagination's unremitting "capacity for disaster" (72). Surprising even herself, she resorts to magical thinking in the hope of preempting the news she fears, news that would be brought by the military's official "notifiers," who "come even at five in the morning" and "get you sleepy, dazed, defenseless, too weak to throw them down the steps before they can deliver their punchline" (75). Sensing that "every moment she spends at home is dangerous" for them both (79), Ora embarks without a firm route-plan on an all-consuming walk. In its own way, this endeavor is lyric in form: a self-examining, introspective effort to describe one mother's love for her son with a force that (she hopes) will impede war's pitiless prestructuring of events. Though she adheres to "this emergency state that has befallen her" (130), Ora is still taunted not only by intimations of harm but also by misgivings about this seemingly crazy venture; nonetheless, walking becomes her way of coping with "something ominous" enshrouding the thought of Ofer, whenever it "suddenly emerge[s] inside her" (150).

To counterbalance this menace, Ora hopes that the hike will free her son from the destiny-deciding cogs of Israel's military machine, that against the likelihood of grief's terrifying delivery "the parcel will be returned to the sender, the wheel will stop for an instant, and it may even have to reverse a little, a centimeter or two, no more" (95). This precarious promise, this act of preemption, "is the thing that grows brighter by the minute, with needle-sharp flashes of furious cheer" (94). Ora does not go it alone, though; she feels the need to share that "furious cheer." Now separated from her husband, Ilan, she calls on the love of her life, Avram—Ilan's adored friend and, we learn, Ofer's father. Years after she and Ilan raised him as their own, Ofer's paternity remains undisclosed to both her sons. The very act now of describing Ofer to Avram is everything:

"This is why she brought Avram with her. To give a name to all these things, and to tell him the story of Ofer's life, the story of his body and the story of his soul and the story of the things that happened to him" (465). Detailing Ofer so intensively, with such virtuosity, is her consolation: when Ora depicts piece by piece "just a few little things" about Ofer's upbringing, she finds solace in particularizing depictions of his boyhood that allow Avram to "know this person he had brought into the world" (144).

Therein lies the political impulse behind this novel's lyrical realism. In his public lectures, journalism, and critical essays, Grossman has emphasized fiction's opposition to the discourse of retribution, which is fueled by the twinned banality and bellicosity of reactionary nationalism. The bombastic "language of war is narrow and functional," he insists: "Writing is the opposite."<sup>31</sup> Reporting in early 2000 on the Israeli army's occupation of southern Lebanon, he urged withdrawal by noting that "every soldier killed now is an unnecessary victim of military arrogance."<sup>32</sup> Ora too knows this, of course, sensing how that arrogance has always threatened to change her two sons irreparably, even when they are no longer serving. Meanwhile, arrogance also threatens the very "process of accommodation" for Israelis and Palestinians alike, reinforcing what Grossman calls the "armor that all of us in this region have become accustomed to living in."<sup>33</sup> Given that the "language used by the citizens of a conflict to describe their situation becomes flatter and flatter as the conflict goes on," he implies that one task for writers is to expose the "clichés and slogans" for what they are.<sup>34</sup> As a vigorously particularizing medium, the novel is one of contemporary culture's indispensable resources for repairing what Grossman calls the "insult of describing ourselves in coarse language," replete with "stereotypes." And in that respect, "literature can be kind to us: it can slightly allay our sense of insult at the dehumanization that results from living in large, anonymous global

societies."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, lyrical description is itself political for Grossman, because its exacting detail retrieves "the tragedy of the one," as he calls it, "from the statistics of the millions."<sup>36</sup>

Such is the purposeful impulse behind *To the End of the Land's* lyrical evocations of place, both intimate and environmental. Grossman "insisted in this book to describe with nuances everything"—from the flora and topography of the Galilee to the everyday commotions and delights of parenthood—in order to "regain the language the situation has confiscated from me."<sup>37</sup> As the conduit for this descriptive mission, Ora sets out to recount "the smallest details about Ofer," those "little effects, the many acts and deeds and efforts that we do in order to accumulate one human being in this world," because her feeling is that "by telling these facts she in a way builds a wall around him," one that will "envelop" Ofer and "protect him."<sup>38</sup> Yet if lyrically reconstructed memories comfort Ora, they also emblemize *through* their expressive plenitude the poverty of a social reality shaped by conflict's unpredictability. Descriptions of Ofer remain her defense, even as they remind her (and us) of what Grossman calls fate's "cruellest arbitrariness," throwing into relief that capricious destiny that Ora dreads and so strenuously aims to defer.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically this concession—that description periodically conjures in prospect the very cruelty it strives to redress—coincides with the consolation Ora obtains by reclaiming her son in words from the military's chauvinism. Ora gradually introduces Ofer's life thus far to the father he has never met, the father whose self-exclusion from their lives she laments. Regret about Avram's absence can only be compensated by her redescribing the most singular moments he missed, as the "lasso of distant memory floats over and tightens softly around her throat," compelling her to delineate "Ofer's swollen little fist right after he was born" (98):

From the moment he was born she drew strength from him. And now she saw his tiny fist—*fistaloo*, Avram would have said had he been with her in the delivery room; even now she finds it hard to accept that he wasn't there with her and Ofer; how could he not have been there with them?—with the deep crease around the wrist, and the bold red of the tiny hand itself, which until moments ago had been an internal organ and still looked like it. The hand slowly opened and revealed to Ora for the first time its conch-like, enigmatic palm—What have you brought me, my child, from the deep, dark universe?—with the thicket of lines drawn all over it, covered with a white, fatty layer of webbing, with its translucent pomegranate-seed fingernails, and its fingers that closed up again and gripped her finger tightly. (98–99)

Paratactic yet composed (in Jessica Cohen's translation), the syntax unfurls with a measured tempo of the sort that befits the affection Ora projects from a distance, an affection that is no less acute for all the years that have passed. This patiently particularizing account of one "tiny hand" reproduces in its steady momentum—in its unhurried, studied accretion of "lines," "webbing," and "fingernails"—the pace with which that "enigmatic palm" itself had "slowly opened," its features "revealed" in a way that only perpetuated its mystery, consolidating the hand's aura of indescribability. The whole sequence momentarily suspends the narrative: it intrudes between ongoing events to allow the "moment he was born" to exist for its own exquisite sake. That this luminous memory is shadowed by the eulogy that it could still become plaintively alters the tone of what might otherwise have been just a tender recollection.

At the same time, though, the moment's lyrical intensity defies that portent by virtue of its interruptive pressure on the ensuing plot, adjourning the onrush of events. We might assume, in distinguishing poetry generically from fiction, that "the moment is to the lyric what sequence is to the story";<sup>40</sup> but here Grossman gives expression to a moment that parries the demands of sequential narration, as description structurally intervenes to postpone dread, cutting across the diegetic motion of the novel's

perambulatory main story. From personal, treasured flashback, then, comes lyrical realism's tangibly political implication. Thanks to its intrusion upon the narrative (imposing an interval in the awful inevitability of the fate Ora feels Ofer is hurtling toward at times) and by virtue of the particularism of its diction (as her account of that hand's physical irreplaceability defies the arrogance of militaristic uniformity), description affirms the talismanic assertion that Ora asks Avram, her temporary amanuensis, to write in her notebook: "One person, who is so easy to destroy" (454).

This formidable task of lyrical (re)description is by no means straightforwardly consoling, however much it rescues language from nationalism's dulling monotony. For detail trades in a moving discrepancy: to exhibit, as this novel so eloquently does, "language's natural richness and its ability to touch on the finest nuances of existence can be truly hurtful," warns Grossman, "in a state of conflict," precisely because such richly expressive nuances "constantly remind us of the exuberant reality that we have lost, of its complexities and subtleties."<sup>41</sup> Ora learns to embrace this discrepancy, knowing as she recounts Ofer's childhood that while descriptions may protect him (in her imagination at least) their evocative richness can also be elegiac, anticipating the loss of what they passionately describe. If she gains some reprieve from dread in devoting these lovingly animated sequences to her son, then the aid they offer also coincides with apprehension—haunted as her lyrical notations are by their proximity to the threnody she hopes they will never become.

Creeping doubts start to overshadow the magical thinking that drives Ora's belief in her hike as resistance. Toward the novel's climax, she loses faith in the conceit of walking as protection, wondering if "maybe we got it all wrong, from the beginning" (575). In the final series of events, those doubts enter and temper language: lyrical descriptions give

way to clipped dialogue, leaving us with all but the carapace of that depictive lushness we witnessed in Ora's memory of Ofer's birth.<sup>42</sup> When the narrative momentarily assumes Avram's point of view, the novel's lyrical element subsides more or less entirely, and in the coming pages I want to pursue the larger ramifications of this modulation. Ora has made a rash decision to pick up recorded messages, including those left on Avram's apartment phone. All is well, for now: Ofer called to say he's "okay, the bad guys not so okay" (561); yet she also conceals, at first, the fact that she dialed into Avram's answering machine as well, retrieving there a message from his girlfriend, Neta, who suspected she might be pregnant but has called to confirm a "false alarm" (572). Initially hiding this from Avram and unable "to say how good it would be for him to have a child and what a wonderful father he would be" (572), Ora falls into a sort of manic silence, hostilely sprinting ahead and then cold-shouldering him when they meet two hiking boys, whom she welcomes with exaggerated camaraderie. Thrown off balance by her inflated affection and hyperactive chatter with these strangers, Avram in his bewilderment "dwindles as he watches her, all bustling chumminess, as clumsy as an elbow in a rib, her conduct, foreign and grating, until it occurs to him that she is doing this to spite him" (567). They resume the walk, but he struggles to keep pace with Ora's ferocious urgency. Bemused then panicked by her continuing silence, he senses "that they were running to reach Ofer in time, the way you dash to rescue someone from the ruins of a building: every second counts" (569). Grossman does periodically shade into Ora's perspective, but even then he doesn't quite disclose the source of her growing "disquiet" (569), or her sudden coldness toward Avram. Instead, the reader is kept at a certain distance. Strangely enough, the effect of this remove occurs structurally at the very point in this

novel where we might expect culminating intimacy or revelation as we shadow this couple's faltering defiance of dread.

A prolonged moment of concealment, then, temporarily displaces the sort of lyrical realist moment to which this novel has been committed. Grossman denies his reader—through the alienated perspective Avram assumes, through our alignment with his abrupt isolation from an intractable Ora—any explanation of what she so keenly withholds. Momentarily, too, the responsibility for magical thinking, for sustaining the protective work such thinking carries out, has been handed over to Avram, as he observes that “it’s not good that she’s quiet,” realizing indeed that “now is when we have to talk about [Ofer], when she has to talk about him” (569). After she finally does speak, the momentary relief of relaying the message from Neta gives way to further consternation. She snaps at Avram irritably, “snorting into her hands” (573), hounded by prophetic visions of “people standing on either side of the street that leads to her house”—some of whom, having “already gone into the yard,” ominously “wait for her silently, eyes lowered” (573). Growing doubts once again leak into the whole enterprise of magical thinking, and all they can do is vow to each other to “remember Ofer, his life, his *whole* life” whose familial story she has exhaustively particularized (576).

At this point, the novel's perspective seems to back away. Once more we, like Avram, are somewhat shut out. Without sustained access to Ora's interiority, readers can't take for granted that their immersion in or direct sympathetic attachment to her thoughts will continue uninhibited. In fact, by the end Grossman steers us away from that kind of instant, effortless absorption. Just as “all she gives [Avram] is the shell of her face” (576), so we are granted the shell of the novel's hitherto abundant lyricism, as Grossman swaps sumptuous free indirect discourse for impersonal third-person

commentary and clipped dialogue. Shorn of interweaving descriptions, terse exchanges between Avram and Ora raise questions again about their project of preemptive magical thinking—"Maybe we were wrong" (575)—a project that has finally come to rest in a state of austere irresolution. Subsequently, the affective impact of this closing episode no longer relies entirely on our stirring proximity to Ora's inner perceptions: of herself, of what awaits her and Avram on their return, of Ofer's fate, of the whole venture she now so disconsolately calls to account. The competing textures of these final lines match the tension Grossman posits between the rejuvenating force of her familial descriptions and the stark reality of their situation, between the verbal world that she's created to shelter Ofer's "*whole* life" and the military action that could still extinguish him. Delicately intruding on the scene, evocative sounds and scents are discordantly juxtaposed with the posture of Avram and Ora, conjoined as they are in a freeze-frame of unknowing and beset by unalleviated dread:

They sit for a long time, hidden away in the small crater. Holding each other like refugees from a storm. The sounds slowly return. The hum of a bee, the thin chirp of a bird, the voices of workers building a house somewhere in the valley.

Then Ora detaches her body from his and lies down on her side on the rock ledge. She pulls her knees into her stomach and rests her cheek on her open palm. Her eyes are open yet she sees nothing. Avram sits beside her, his fingers hovering over her body, barely touching. A light breeze fills the air with the scents of *za'atar* and poterium and a sweet whiff of honeysuckle. Beneath her body are the cool stone and the whole mountain, enormous and solid and infinite. She thinks: How thin is the crust of Earth. (576)

Abrupt, denotative sentences initially reinforce a sense of detachment from these mute and motionless figures with whom we have spent so much intimate time across the novel, in harrowing and life-affirming episodes alike. By telescoping back, by suspending his previously lyrical focalization of inner reflection, Grossman reciprocates linguistically a



sense of affective disengagement that seems curious at this climactic moment. Eschewing free indirect style, he asks us instead to engage the scene's impact in a visual rather than vicarious respect. In place of fervent empathy as a gateway to heart-rending sorrow, it seems as though we are invited to observe—if not to extrapolate and socially allegorize—the outward structure of human vulnerability, so as to notice in the tableau these “refugees” form the “legacy of pain and conflict” for both Palestinian and Israeli cultures, one that is, in Colm Tóibín’s phrase, “written into the gnarled and beautiful landscape through which Ora and Avram walk”—written here onto their bodies stilled and silenced on the “cool stone.”<sup>43</sup>

All of a sudden, we are presented with a display of lyrical realism at its leanest—lyrical realism, in a sense, without patent lyricism. Consolation seems all the more inconceivable now that style has receded. Nonetheless, the formal construction of Grossman’s tableau makes solace thinkable against the odds, as I want to argue now in drawing to a close. An enduring function of tableaux, as David J. Denby observes in the context of sentimental texts, is to “hold up for contemplation an intensified and heightened vision,” and thereby “to suspend temporal progression so that the set of forces with which the narrative has brought together in a particular moment may be allowed to discharge their full affective power.”<sup>44</sup> Tableaux isolate, probe, and augment the epistemic substance and gravity of such affecting moments, just as lyric poetry can do through epideictic renditions of emotion. Grossman’s closing picture of gnawing irresolution certainly combines intensification and suspension in this manner, an irresolution that may in essence complement what Culler calls “the unpredictability of lyric’s efficacy” (348). But the scene also channels the political connotations of affective inflections in ways that counter its otherwise appalling inconclusiveness. Grossman

achieves this by situating the reader as an implied observer—an abruptly distanced one, as we have noted—while reconstructing the goal of sentimental tableaux to issue an “affirmation and celebration of the possibility of a common, communicable human experience.”<sup>45</sup> This is not a wide-eyed appeal for the mutual recognition or benevolence between nations in ceaseless conflict, but a solemn warning against what Grossman sees as the most ubiquitous form of fellow feeling in the Middle East: despair.

As such, the tableau is suspenseful not just because of what it leaves untold about Ofer’s fate but because of what it implies about dejection’s ubiquity in the region. Doubling as an intercultural forecast, the tableau petitions readers to watch from their relative remove how two isolated characters, in whose histories of trauma and love the reader has hitherto been so involved, have metonymically come to exhibit a “state of mind . . . with no horizon,” in Grossman’s 2014 analysis, one that’s trapped, “dully comatose,” in “a self-induced numbness.” In this condition, despair prevails as a normative symptom for Israelis “living in a self-satisfied democracy, with pretensions to liberalism and humanism, that occupies and humiliates and crushes other people for decades on end.” The “paralysis” of “this pessimistic worldview,” as Grossman would later describe it, besets Avram and Ora, a paralysis that is reproduced formally as the tableau halts the novel and yearns in that moment of standstill to communicate the “fateful” side effects of despair that Israelis and Palestinians have been compelled to share.<sup>46</sup>

This yearning, however forlorn, yields the discrepant consolation of *To the End of the Land*’s closing moment. By devoting more descriptive space to external, environmental observations than to the simulation of internal sensations, Grossman collocates the creamy lexicon of “sweet” flora with the bleak image of detached bodies held in suspense on a “rock ledge.” It’s not that ecology here simply compensates for

dread; if surroundings envelop Ora and Avram, embalm them even, they still edge toward the verge of enervation. Rather, when “sounds” mingle with then overtake the “storm,” there are glimmers of quotidian calm, glimmers that Ora and Avaram are not in a position to detect for themselves but in which readers might discern the seismic “hope” Grossman elsewhere defines as “the healing power of the everyday.” To be sure, the tableau serves to bring into stark definition the emotional extremity his characters have now reached, appearing even starker when set against an indifferent environment where builders and bees carry on regardless. At the same time, those noises from ordinary life whisper as they eventually return some lyrical hint of “existential security.” And that, for Grossman, is the consolatory if forever vulnerable upshot of common hope—the hope that families from two peoples might one day feel secure enough to build home lives and “raise children without abject fear, without the humiliation of occupation or the dread of terrorism.”<sup>47</sup>

If the reader has come to associate preemption throughout *To the End of the Land* with Ora’s effort to withstand what she dreads, on the final page Grossman levers the stress off forestallment with a clarion call to “resist the gravitational pull of despair,” a resistance that Ora and Avram, for their part, seem scarcely capable of in the end.<sup>48</sup> In fact, what makes the novel all the more haunting is the way their crippling trepidation is offset against the persistence and thus also the promise of everyday life, whose fragile, consolatory intimation of existence beyond fear remains obscure to the couple who actually need it—on the brink, as they are, of becoming emblematic of the hopelessness Grossman sees as endemic to the Middle East. Such is the poignant (yet politically urgent) hermeneutic twist this novel finally provides, as it sacrifices the particular, inconsolable individuals with whom the reader has become so involved, precisely in order for us to

recognize at a more generalizable level how despair is a common condition that condemns “anyone who still hopes.”<sup>49</sup> Throughout *To the End of the Land* Ora is able “to find refuge and meaning,” in Grossman’s terms, in the language of lyrical description. In this final instance he tempers that language to articulate a different sort of solace, one that manifests in a paradoxically detached register the very means of giving “words to the mute,” to those denounced as dreamers. If this register also enunciates a warning, it ultimately does so “to bring about *tikkun*—‘repair’”—warding off the “luxury of despair.”<sup>50</sup>

The personal repercussions of lyrical realism’s debatable solace could not have been more extreme for Grossman: “Writing a precise sentence, imagining, fusing life into characters and situations, I felt I was building my home again. It was a way of fighting against the gravity of grief.”<sup>51</sup> Most of *To the End of the Land* was finished in draft when in August 2006 Grossman joined fellow writers Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua to urge their government to accept a ceasefire with Hezbollah. A halt to the Israeli offensive arrived too late for Grossman’s twenty-year-old son, Uri, who was killed in the closing moments of the Second Lebanon War by a rocket strike on his tank. Just as Ora in her “continuous resolve” believes that she “has to keep moving, has to be constantly in motion,” in order to safeguard Ofer (130), so Grossman sensed “at the time” of completing the novel that he had “the feeling—or rather, a wish—that the book I was writing would protect [Uri].”<sup>52</sup> He recalls holding on to “this magical thinking,” while recognizing it for what it was: “I do not believe that words can really protect a life,” he admits, “when you’re in the heart of war.” And yet the thought-experiment endured, for he saw that it was his “duty to accompany [Uri] through writing.” After the tragedy Grossman returned to the manuscript, convinced that by going back to the task of finishing the novel he was recreating a “home in this chaos.” On the frontline of anguish, writing afforded “the slight

satisfaction of doing the right thing,” of “choosing life again.”<sup>53</sup> If much of the plot was already in place, “what changed, above all”—he notes in a devastating postscript—“was the echo of the reality in which the final draft was written.”<sup>54</sup> It seems inconceivable now to read *To the End of the Land* without hearing this echo for ourselves, without the book’s emotional voltage being continually raised by the searing pathos of that postscript. The novel was Grossman’s unexpected apprenticeship in bereavement, for it turned out to be the lyrical elegy it never wished to become, grieving the loss its author never wanted to anticipate, the loss Grossman once hoped his writing process might somehow hold at bay.

<break>

For the very different writers encompassed by this discussion, I have tried to grasp the payoffs of attending to how “the materiality of lyric language,” in Culler’s words, “makes itself felt as something other than signs of a character or plot” (119). Lyrical realism is particularly helpful in enabling us to grasp the formal and ethical implications of such linguistic operations, despite Grossman’s and O’Neill’s varied artistic priorities, the distinct literary-cultural traditions from which their fictions draw, and the contingent nature of those ontological and sociopolitical circumstances they engage. Distinctions are as notable as affinities, of course: in O’Neill’s case, the moral vectors of narrative style only really become legible if we’re willing to allow that his meditation on post-9/11 New York is tactically aware of its own lyricism; in Grossman’s narrative, by contrast, the precariousness of individual life is foregrounded by lyrical descriptions whose political affordances are made apparent by how purposefully the novel distinguishes its own particularism from the banal aggressions of governmental discourse. Internal variations

within a category as capacious as lyrical realism are themselves instructive, inasmuch as comparisons between otherwise unrelated writers typify the rewards of lyrical realism's productive generalizability. That the term can be extrapolated like this doesn't excuse us from close reading, of course, as my own commitment to the poetics of fiction will hopefully have demonstrated. Scaling up need not mean scaling back. Construing the results of this style as offering more than a pleasing glaze means closely examining its formal and affective work as "an event," in Culler's phrase, as opposed to solely a "representation of an event" (35). Understood thus, lyrical realism may conceivably be fathomed as a historical-aesthetic event in its own right for the contemporary novel. This seems all the more consequential if we also entertain lyrical realism not only as a mode of writing but also as a mode of critical attention. For if, as its practitioners in this essay reveal, lyrical realism is more than a shallow counteragent for material or psychological exigencies, then in turn it compels readers to parse granular components of style for the provocations they yield as a way of appreciating how novels provide, in Levine's terms, "a thought experiment in creating models for life."<sup>55</sup> When we enter the political and affective worlds of lyrical realist writing, microanalysis facilitates rather than impedes our sense of what this modelling makes possible.

While allowing us to get a better handle on lyrical realism's aesthetic constitution and historical peculiarity, O'Neill and Grossman also enable us to recognize the opportunities it affords for thinking fiction's criticality. Together they show that "reading literary texts," as Christopher Nealon suggests, "for marks of how they imagine themselves as literary . . . is not only self-referential, but referential of literature's shifting position in the history of 'social effort.'"<sup>56</sup> As such the experiences their novels so gracefully convey—whether by virtue of style's exuberance or its strategic diminution—

don't simply service their plots, but also activate our participation as readers in what Culler calls "the lyric's varied imagining of the world . . . with all the elegance it can muster" (352), even if they also confirm that elegance alone is hardly enough to compensate the social privations they bring so arrestingly to light. The fact remains, though, that lyrical strategies often get a bad rap in conversations about the fortunes of contemporary writing. Qualms arise from suppositions about a register of fiction that in practice is far from compositionally homogenous and whose avenues of interpretation are numerous. Accusations of artistic self-reassurance can hover around lyrical writing, exposing a mode that has survived largely because it is so dependable. Mark McGurl sails close to this suspicion in his essay on the "Novel's Forking Path" that I mentioned at the start. For writers today, a "temptation to lapse back into the lyrical is constant," he asserts: "And why wouldn't it be? To the extent that 'lyrical' simply means a beautiful voicing of individual perception, adding that kind of value to the raw matter of the world will probably always seem a good bet for writing something worth reading."<sup>57</sup> In the end, McGurl is too shrewd to upbraid contemporary fiction for making the most of lyric resources. And yet there is a lingering insinuation here that "the lyrical" insures readerly gratification. From this perspective, it becomes a safe option that writers might find hard to resist, just as Murdoch once suggested that the closer postwar fiction comes to the "crystalline" physique of the lyric the more it indulges "our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation"—an ongoing "temptation" for writers and readers alike, in her view, endangering "our sense of reality as a rich receding background."<sup>58</sup>

Lyrical realism, I have argued, is by no means inimical to the urgent representational demands that loom large from that background. O'Neill's dazzling though deliberative commemorations of irrevocable skylines along with Grossman's painstaking

yet precarious portraits of irreplaceable children stage lyricism's solace as a generative quandary for literary expression: when style becomes a controversial counterpoint for loss, an antagonist of despair, their works distil those dilemmas the contemporary novel faces as an engine of redress, dilemmas that are also among its conditions of possibility. Far from succumbing to linguistic panache purely for distinction's sake, such texts examine the implications of conferring value upon the "raw matter of the world" without suggesting that we can tolerate distresses in felicitous language that cannot be weathered in real life. By these lights, lyrical realism has no truck with mere bedtime stories. Instead, it triggers assessments of fiction's capacity for tackling tough material without transmuting it into something more bearable, for scrutinizing the solace that lyricism secretes while refusing to guarantee the reader's comfort. A nimble double act like that suggests consolation and critique might well have a rapport after all.

---

<sup>1</sup> Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 31.

<sup>2</sup> Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads."

<sup>3</sup> Smith, "Two Directions for the Novel," 71, 93.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>6</sup> O'Neill, *Netherland*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 31.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, "Two Directions for the Novel," 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 49; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>11</sup> Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, 105; Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 176–77.

<sup>12</sup> Levine, "Model Thinking," 633, 635, 639.



---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 649.

<sup>14</sup> See Dominic Head's introduction to *The State of the Novel* and Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, chap. 4. Derek Attridge warns that "if we spend our time as teachers showing how literature exemplifies and reinforces ideology we're not treating it as literature but simply as one among many types of discourse." Even in cases where a text "can be seen to undermine the ideology it apparently endorses," Attridge argues that in interpreting it as such readers "still risk reducing its field of operation to the restricted realm of existing ideological structures" (*The Work of Literature*, 112–13). Similarly, Jarad Zimbler concludes his astute study of J. M. Coetzee's poetics by suggesting that if postcolonial criticism is to "survive its own faddishness, it will need to address its failure to treat literary works as literary works, rather than cultural texts" pressed solely into the service of evincing the devastating effects of imperialism (*J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style*, 202).

<sup>15</sup> Middleton, "Epistemological Respect," 1182. Lytle Shaw opens his review essay on recent contributions to lyric theory by noting how "renewed interest in the lyric seems recently to have dislodged narrative fiction, ever so slightly, from its several-decade status as an a priori object of inquiry among literary scholars" ("Framing the Lyric," 403).

<sup>16</sup> O'Neill, *Netherland*, 247.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, "Two Directions for the Novel," 80–81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 80–81.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 81.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Boxall, *The Value of the Novel*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Levine, "Model Thinking," 643.

<sup>26</sup> Riley, *Time Lived, without Its Flow*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Rae, *From Cohen to Carson*, 10, quoting Atwood's Introduction to *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, xxxiii.

<sup>29</sup> Grant, Review of *To the End of the Land*.

<sup>30</sup> Grossman, *To the End of the Land*, 79; hereafter cited parenthetically.

<sup>31</sup> Grossman, "'I Cannot Afford the Luxury of Despair,'" interview by Rachel Cooke.

<sup>32</sup> Grossman, "Leave Lebanon Now," in *Death as a Way of Life*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Grossman, "Beware, Opportunity Ahead," in *Death as a Way of Life*, 46.

<sup>34</sup> Grossman, "Writing in the Dark," in *Writing in the Dark*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> Grossman, "Individual Language and Mass Language," in *Writing in the Dark*, 83–84.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>37</sup> Grossman, "'Israel Is a Lofty Idea, and It's Worth Fighting For,'" interview by Jonathan Freedland.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Grossman, "Writing in the Dark," 67.

<sup>40</sup> Cameron, *Lyric Time*, 204; quoted in Rae, *From Cohen to Carson*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Grossman, "Writing in the Dark," 61.

<sup>42</sup> I would like to thank Grossman's longstanding translator, Jessica Cohen, for reading substantial portions of my work on *To the End of the Land*, and for conversations about the novel's style in Hebrew that encouraged me to close read it in English.

- 
- <sup>43</sup> Tóibín, "Losing Battles," review of *To the End of the Land*.
- <sup>44</sup> Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France*, 75, 76.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.
- <sup>46</sup> Grossman, "On Hope and Despair in the Middle East."
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>50</sup> Grossman, "Individual Language and Mass Language," 85; "Writing in the Dark," 62–63; Grossman, interview with Freedland.
- <sup>51</sup> Grossman, interview with Freedland.
- <sup>52</sup> Grossman, afterword to *To the End of the Land*, 577.
- <sup>53</sup> Grossman, interview with Freedland.
- <sup>54</sup> Grossman, afterword to *To the End of the Land*, 577.
- <sup>55</sup> Levine, "Model Thinking," 649.
- <sup>56</sup> Nealon, "Reading on the Left," 44.
- <sup>57</sup> McGurl, "The Novel's Forking Path."
- <sup>58</sup> Murdoch, "Against Dryness," 31.

## Works Cited

Attridge, Derek. *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Atwood, Margaret, ed. *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*. Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Boxall, Peter. *The Value of the Novel*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Cameron, Sharon. *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Culler, Jonathan. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Denby, David J. *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760–1820*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Grant, Linda. Review of *To the End of the Land*, by David Grossman, *The Independent*, August 27, 2010. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/to-the-end-of-the-land-by-david-grossman-trans-jessica-cohen-2063011.html>

Grossman, David. *Death as a Way of Life: Dispatches from Jerusalem*. Translated by Haim Watzman; ed. Efrat Lev. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.

—. "I Can't Afford the Luxury of Despair." Interview by Rachel Cooke, *The Observer*, August 29, 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/29/david-grossman-israel-hezbollah-interview>.

- . "Israel Is a Lofty Idea, and It's Worth Fighting For." Interview by Jonathan Freedland, *The Guardian*, September 8, 2010 (audio).  
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2010/sep/08/david-grossman-israel-lofty-idea-worth-fighting-for>.
- . "On Hope and Despair in the Middle East." Translated by Anne Hartstein Pace. *Haaretz*, July 8, 2014. <http://www.haaretz.com/on-hope-and-despair-1.5253853>.
- . *To the End of the Land*. Translated by Jessica Cohen. London: Jonathan Cape, 2010.
- . *Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics*. Translated by Jessica Cohen. London: Bloomsbury, 2008.
- Hardy, Thomas. *The Return of the Native*. 1878. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Head, Dominic. *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- Jameson, Fredric. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002.
- Levine, Caroline. "Model Thinking: Generalization, Political Form, and the Common Good." *New Literary History* 48, no. 4 (2017): 633–53.
- Lodge, David. "The Novelist at the Crossroads." In *The Novelist at the Crossroads, and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, 3–34. London: Routledge, 1971.
- McGurl, Mark. "The Novel's Forking Path." *Public Books*, April 1, 2015.  
<http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/the-novels-forking-path>.
- Middleton, Peter. "Epistemological Respect." *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1181–82.
- Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch." 1961. In *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury, 23–31. London: Fontana, 1977.

Nealon, Christopher. "Reading on the Left." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 22–50.

O'Neill, Joseph. *Netherland*. London: Fourth Estate, 2008.

Rae, Ian. *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.

Riley, Denise. *Time Lived, without Its Flow*. London: Capsule Editions, 2012.

Shaw, Lytle. "Framing the Lyric." *American Literary History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 403–13.

Smith, Zadie. "Two Directions for the Novel." In *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, 71–96. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009.

Tóibín, Colm. "Losing Battles." Review of *To the End of the Land*, by David Grossman. *New York Times*, September 23, 2010.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/books/review/Toibin-t.html>.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Zimbler, Jarad. *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.