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The Stubborn Path of the Novel: Residual Modernism in Joseph O'Neill's *Godwin*

Daniel Dufournaud, University of Macau, Macau, dandufournaud@um.edu.mo

This article joins recent scholarly work that considers postmillennial fiction's indebtedness to canonical modernism. It argues that postmillennial fiction indebted to modernism does not treat modernist themes and styles as resources for innovation in the present so much as it raises questions about the lack of change over time. This formulation finds an illuminating case study in Joseph O'Neill's novel *Godwin* (2024), which continues O'Neill's career-long effort to recontextualize the preoccupations and stylistic signatures of modernism. O'Neill redeploys such modernist tropes as grail quests and the imperialist engagement with racial and ethnic difference to satirical ends, and he adopts a style that echoes modernist fiction in foregrounding the limits and affordances of characterological perspective, in moving among multiple layers of embedded narration, and in the use of scrambled narrative sequence. The article draws on the work of Raymond Williams to frame O'Neill's aesthetic as "residual modernism" that actives literature's powers of critique. It routes its discussion of O'Neill's residual modernism through Zadie Smith's widely read essay "Two Paths for the Novel" (2008). Where Smith sees in O'Neill's 2008 novel, *Netherland*, an effete aesthetic, this article contends that O'Neill's residual modernism affirms literature's powers of critique at a time when prominent voices in the humanities are advocating for postcritical methodologies. Call it the stubborn path of the novel. To label *Godwin* a work of residual modernism is not to accuse O'Neill of hackneyed writing but to argue that the novel is provocative not in spite but because of its familiarity.

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Critics of postmillennial literature have adduced a series of terms that identify what is new about contemporary cultural production, what is new about the material contexts in which such production occurs, and what is new about the modes of interpretation these developments elicit. For Jeffrey Nealon, "post-postmodernism" refers to "a changed cultural and economic situation" that demands "a new theoretical and methodological toolbox for responding to post-postmodern culture" (2012: xii). Nealon tacitly joins such skeptics of conventional critical method as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009), and Rita Felski (2015) in advocating a turn away from critique toward a hermeneutics that endorses literature's power to affirm and guide (2012: 146–170).[1] For Adam Kelly, "new sincerity" describes a strain of contemporary literary fiction that internalizes the poststructuralist rejection of sincerity without altogether abandoning the project of sincerity. Published in the twenty years following the end of the Cold War, these works balance the demands of the market and the lures of formal virtuosity while attempting to settle into a "healthier relationship to the reader and the market" (2024: 10). And finally, for David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "metamodernism" indexes a "logic of innovation through retrospection" running through a series of postmillennial novels that reiterate and recontextualize the stylistic features of canonical modernist fiction (2014: 94). In each case, a cultural precedent (postmodernism, sincerity, modernism) works to contextualize and ground an argument concerning some quality of newness within a market-driven cultural landscape marked by rapid change and planned obsolescence—a cultural landscape, in other words, whose principal characteristic is an appetite for originality.

Although no two forms of originality are the same, my intention in setting the critical treatment of the new against a backdrop of capitalist innovation is to register my discomfort toward what appears to be an alignment between the aims of literary studies and the imperatives of the market—a discomfort, I might add, that has as much to do with the site of literary studies, the neoliberal university that has internalized the principles of the market, as with the work itself. As Sarah Wasserman contends, "novels that confound our sense of newness become critical outliers" (2022: 566). With that point in mind, in this essay I want to pursue a line of inquiry similar to that of James and Seshagiri, for I share with them a focus on the afterlife of modernist fiction. Yet I differ from them in arguing that postmillennial fiction indebted to modernism does not treat innovations of the past as resources for innovation in the present so much as it raises questions about the lack of change over time: what are the social, political,

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[1] No discussion of postcritical approaches to literary studies would be complete without mentioning the impact of Bruno Latour's essay "Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" (2004); see, in particular, Huehls (2016: x), who links "contemporary fiction's pervasive aversion to critique" to its imagining of "new places for new things."

and economic conditions that sustain modernism's appeal in the new millennium and sustain it beyond mere pastiche? If the stylistic repertoire of modernist fiction includes fragmentation, experiments with time and non-linearity, stories told from limited perspectives, and rhetorical devices dramatizing psychological interiority, what do these well-worn features allow postmillennial writers to do that postmodern forms of self-reflexivity do not? To invoke Brian McHale's distinction (2004: 3–25), why do postmillennial authors opt for modernism's epistemological concerns rather than postmodernism's much more recent ontological concerns, and what does this decision reveal about their sense of stalled progress? To answer these questions, critical work would do well to abandon the language of innovation and newness for the language of continuity, residuality, and stubbornness.

This formulation finds an illuminating case study in Joseph O'Neill's most recent novel, *Godwin* (2024), which continues O'Neill's career-long effort to recontextualize the preoccupations and stylistic signatures of canonical modernism. Set in 2015 and split between two narrators—the white, male, over-educated but under-stimulated Mark Wolfe and the Black, female, codeswitching Lakesha Williams—the novel tracks the demise of Lakesha's professional writing cooperative in Pittsburgh while following her colleague Mark as he reconnects with his estranged mother and half-brother to pursue riches in the form of a Beninese soccer phenom, the eponymous Godwin. For O'Neill, soccer's globality and connection to a constellation of greed, profit, and idealism make it a narrative and symbolic matrix for "the thematics of uneven development" that Jed Esty associates with "metropole-colony relations" in his study of the modernist *bildungsroman* (2012: 7). In a postmillennial context, the venality of the soccer industry allows O'Neill to redeploy such modernist tropes as grail quests (e.g. in Eliot, Fitzgerald, and Joyce) and the imperialist engagement with ethno-racial difference (e.g. in Kipling and Conrad) to satirical ends. Indeed, Godwin's name appears to be a portmanteau juxtaposing that which demands humble devotion ("God") and that which fosters regrettable behavior (the desire to "win"). At the same time, O'Neill anchors his satire to a style that echoes modernist fiction in foregrounding the limits and affordances of characterological perspective, in moving among multiple layers of embedded narration, and in the use of scrambled narrative sequence.

Raymond Williams's distinction between "residual" and "emergent" cultural elements offers the conceptual wherewithal to unpack O'Neill's explicit engagement with modernist style and themes (1977: 121–127). In critical discourse, the residual tends to receive short shrift in favor of the emergent and its association with what Williams calls "structures of feeling" (1977: 128–135). One definition of metamodernism frames

it as a structure of feeling (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). In contrast, what Williams calls "residual" is a cultural element "effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process . . . as an effective element of the present" (1977: 122). Williams goes on to distinguish between the "incorporated" and "actively residual" (123)—by which he means the residual can be used as a tool for hegemony or a weapon against hegemony. He thereby suggests that a residual element remains active only to the extent that it maintains a critical valence.

Setting this association of residuality with critique against the groundswell of scholarly work advocating the abandonment of critique reveals its dialectical value under contemporary historical conditions. Bruce Robbins (2022: 48) has contended that opponents of critique in literary studies, "eager to drape themselves in the shimmering mantle of novelty," advocate for an analytical approach that "fulfills a right-wing agenda" involved in the "defunding of public education." Bringing the new, the anti-critical, and the attack on higher education into the same orbit, Robbins's argument gives us reason to accept the pull of the following piece of conditional logic: if the modernist canon took shape during the English department's rise in the postwar era, if the discipline's subsequent endorsement of various forms of critique maintained modernism's appeal into the final decades of the twentieth century, and if contemporary literary studies is witnessing the rise of postcritical methodologies alongside a broader appetite for the new and the increasing devaluation of the discipline, then perhaps there are few better places to look for the endurance of literature's powers of critique than the postmillennial novel's reanimation of modernist themes and style. "The new is the longing for the new," writes Theodor Adorno, "not the new itself" (1997: 32).[2] To call *Godwin* a work of residual modernism is not to accuse O'Neill of hackneyed writing but to argue that the novel is provocative not in spite of but because of its familiarity. It engenders a critical spirit in readers, forcing us to confront the structural forces that sustain modernism's appeal.[3]

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[2] Ostensibly, Adorno does not belong to a discussion about the crisis of the humanities. His association of critique with "aesthetic autonomy" (1997) is at odds with sociological accounts of critique that treat the university as the institutional site that determines literature's political agency (Guillory 1993; McGurl 2009). Yet Adorno posits a trajectory for autonomous art that begins with heteronomous influence: art achieves autonomy by critiquing the external world that conditions its existence in the first place. Given the intimate association of literary culture and literary studies since the late nineteenth century (see Frank 2022; Collini 1991), it is no stretch to suggest that the declining prestige of literary studies may be one heteronomous impetus among many for postmillennial fiction's residual modernism *qua* critique, not least because so many contemporary novelists have emerged from and/or taught within English and/or creative-writing departments.

[3] My use of Williams deviates from the letter of Williams's discussion of residuality in *Marxism and Literature*. Williams opposes the canonical narrative encircling modernist literature. To propose that the reanimation of canonical modernist style is a form of residuality is, then, to perpetuate the very perspective that Williams critiques. Times have changed,

By way of prosecuting this argument, I weave into my analysis of *Godwin* a discussion of O'Neill's acclaimed third novel, *Netherland* (2008), and Zadie Smith's damning assessment of it in her widely read piece of criticism "Two Paths for the Novel" (2008). Smith's essay has cast a long shadow over O'Neill's career. Yet she enters the territory of a straw-man argument by misrepresenting the novel's treatment of authenticity, presumably in an effort to shore up her laudatory reading of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), a novel whose postmodern style leads it down the optimal path for Smith. Since *Netherland*, O'Neill has shown no willingness to deviate from his impressionistic aesthetic that Smith dubs "lyrical realism." Between *Netherland* and *Godwin*, he also published *The Dog* (2014), a novel that bears thematic and stylistic similarities to the two that preoccupy this essay. Call it the stubborn path of the novel. Smith's negativity notwithstanding, her association of O'Neill's style with aesthetic exhaustion—a familiar form of literary expression that has supposedly run its course and that contemporary novelists ought to abandon—ultimately prompts further examination of the postmillennial novel's residual modernism.

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One way O'Neill grounds his new novel's residual modernism is through a disavowal of postmodernism. Explaining why he "has not fully recovered from a decade spent as an active member of the American intelligentsia, a time of sterility and mediocrity and snark," Mark cites his past self's postmodern attitude toward perception: "The performance of kicking in one's own rotten ideological floorboards was something we called 'reflexivity.' . . . Being smart . . . was less about seeing something for what it was than about critically viewing one's act of seeing, and then critically viewing oneself critically viewing one's originally seeing self, and so on infinitely" (2024a: 117). This did not, in Mark's opinion, make him smarter but prompted him to adopt "an ironic or camp focus on obviously trash TV and comic books and music, and [to] expressing a perverse but real admiration for brazenly rich or crooked or right-wing people, whom we associated with authenticity and transparency" (118).

Allusions to the 2016 election elsewhere in the novel suggest that Donald Trump's imminent accession to the presidency looms as an interpretive key here. Given that Mark's postgraduate fecklessness likely coincided with the airing of the reality program *The Apprentice*, Trump is undoubtedly one of the referents of "trash TV," "brazenly

however; what appeared hegemonic to Williams has become marginal over time. Modernist style exhibits a critical residuality within a disciplinary context of postcritique and an economic period of speed and planned obsolescence. One of modernist style's powers is that it frustrates easy consumption without allowing readers to adopt an attitude of postmodern knowingness.

rich," "crooked," and "right-wing." No milquetoast in expressing his opinions about America's elected officials, O'Neill wants to register the appeal that such a figure would have for the young Mark and for the novel's other characters, such as Lakesha's former mentor, Klaus, who warns her of "[t]errorists, jihadists, criminal gangs . . . disfigur[ing] the gentle streets of Germany" (2024a: 255); and Mark and Lakesha's moneyed co-worker, Edil (an anagram for "idle"), who threatens the future of their writing cooperative by questioning the legitimacy of its democratic conventions.[4] It is not insignificant, then, that the specter of Trump surfaces in the same passage that satirizes postmodern sensibilities: not only the valorization of low culture (trash TV, comic books, and music) but also the "reflexive" self-questioning that suggests ontological interest in selfhood and that fails to yield moral judgment.

To be sure, Mark's pseudo-intellectual solipsism hardly encapsulates the ontological questions that postmodern fiction can pose. Yet it provides a point of entry into O'Neill's deployment of residual modernism and reads, moreover, like a belated response to the critique that Smith (2008) levies against *Netherland*. Smith (2008) contends, "A breed of lyrical Realism has had the freedom of highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked. For *Netherland*, our receptive pathways are so solidly established that to read this novel is to feel a powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition." The problem is not only O'Neill's hackneyed aesthetics—what Smith calls his novel's "lack of novelty" and "dullness"—but also the readership of contemporary literary fiction. We may note in passing that O'Neill's style is one that readers of Smith might with good reason identify in her own work, and his reading public is one that he shares with Smith. This observation is of some consequence. It orients attention to a cluster of novels and a culture of reading, thereby granting analysis of a single writer's work a measure of inductive import.

According to Smith, lyrical realism excites the highbrow reader's innermost beliefs about the self and about literature's capacity to enact the drama of selfhood wherein no one can be certain of anything apart from their thoughts and feelings. *Netherland* and, by extension, *Godwin* reaffirm the "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" (Smith 2008). For Smith, lyrical realism is not the high Victorian realism of George Eliot, whose omniscient narrators presume to relate solid facts and realities. Rather, she associates O'Neill's aesthetic with Gustave Flaubert. To the extent that Flaubert's emphasis on psychic experience laid the groundwork for

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[4] When prompted to discuss Obama's endorsement of *Netherland*, O'Neill (2014) said, "I'm sure it sold books, which I'll take. But he's now been in office for six years and they're still force-feeding people in Guantánamo Bay. So it's kind of problematic to have that name on your jacket."

subsequent formal innovations, the modernist novel's inflection on realism—namely, its preference for psychic interiority over causal plot mechanisms—mediates Smith's understanding of the genre.[5] It is residual modernism that Smith finds exhausted and exhausting.

Smith's remarks about residual modernism, as well as her lionizing of McCarthy's alternative style, beg to be contextualized within a history of dialectical criticism of the novel, a history that will ultimately shed light on O'Neill's latest novel. Smith's issues with O'Neill's style bear a resemblance to Georg Lukács's critique of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature. For Lukács (1980: 38–39), modernist novelists deploy a descriptive apparatus that luxuriates in superficial detail and thus fails to figure the social and material networks in which life is embedded; where the "goal" of the realist novel "is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society," the modernist novel leaves the "surface of life . . . opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehending": "[W]hat lies on the surface is frozen in any attempt to see it from a higher intellectual vantage point has to be abandoned." In this light, Smith's complaint (2008) that, in lyrical realism, "only one's subjectivity is really authentic" iterates upon Lukács's contention that modernism enshrines an undialectical, conservative subjectivism that reflects the "isolated state of mind of a specific class of intellectuals" (1980: 42).

In contrast, Adorno's critique of conventional realism offers a salutary turn of the dialectical screw: "*If the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the façade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it*" (2019b: 55). Ironically, the language mobilized by Adorno to laud modernist style against realist mimesis serves the same descriptive function as the language used by Lukács to critique modernism ("façade" instead of "surface," "camouflage" instead of "opaque," "reproducing" instead of "frozen"). Smith (2008) triangulates this aesthetic debate in attributing similar language to residual modernism; in *Netherland*, "the world is covered in language." Smith's advocacy for a postmodern style that abandons lyrical realism for "a rigorous attention to the damaged and the partial, the absent and the unspeakable" aligns her with Adorno and Lukács at once. They are all after a literary style that critiques the sources of contemporary life's material and existential conditions. But if the debate between Lukács and Adorno is whether this power of critique stems from an aesthetic virtuosity that discloses social

[5] As Jameson (2015: 181) opines, if Flaubert is to be considered the inventor of unstable irony, as much on the strength of his 'invention' of free indirect discourse as of anything else, then Henry James must be considered its ideologist, and its spokesperson throughout the literary landscape."

totality or social alienation, Smith's insistence on the delusional quality of O'Neill's style tips the rhetorical scale in favour of Lukács's dismissal of modernism, despite her clear preference for postmodernism over realism.

If early-twentieth-century modernism did indeed function as aesthetic critique, the question is whether O'Neill's modernist style is "actively" residual in such a way that his work sustains this oppositional spirit. Adorno's well-known screeds against the culture industry, particularly its capacity to subsume autonomous art, caution us against uncritically embracing any style, no matter how recalcitrant it may seem at first blush. More salient at the moment is Fredric Jameson's assertion that under late-capitalist ideological and material conditions a "caricature[d]" modernism is exactly what the literary marketplace wants, for novels that unfold within the limited sphere of human thoughts and perceptions suggest that "everything is possible" despite contemporary life's oversaturation with capitalist dynamics (2015: 184). Jameson is not wrong; permeating contemporary fiction is a highly subjectivist tendency, which Mark McGurl (2009) attributes to the post-World War II prominence of the creative-writing program and its injunction to "write what you know." Budding and established writers are more likely to have internalized the principles of craft propounded by Henry James than the lessons to be gleaned from either Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) or Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Amid this reality it is difficult to substantiate the claim that literature sustains its powers of critique through a recontextualization of modernist style, particularly one like O'Neill's that does not reproduce the density and challenge of Beckettian, Joycean, and Faulknerian experimentalism.[6]

Yet there is a difference between a pseudo-Cartesian sensibility that phantasmatically denies materiality and a residual modernism that registers the brokenness of the world by retreating into human consciousness. What is implicit in Jameson's critique of neomodernism—namely, that contemporary fiction ceases to be critical when it circumvents the need to identify the ontological forces constraining human life—is more explicit in Adorno's aesthetic theory. Adorno (2019a: 223) contends that the "individualistic work" of modernist literature is ultimately "anti-individualistic": "The great avant-garde works of art [i.e. modernist literature] cut through this illusion of subjectivity both by throwing the frailty of the individual into relief and by grasping the totality in the individual, who is a moment in the totality and yet can know nothing about it." To cite Peter Uwe Hohendahl's gloss of Adornian aesthetics (2013:

[6] That said, recent critically acclaimed novels have iterated upon the styles of Joyce, Beckett, and Faulkner: respectively, Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019), Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018), and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017).

16), foregrounding the "frailty of the individual" allows the literary work to provide a "strong interpretation of the world." Modernism's obsession with the thoughts and perceptions of individuals does not, in other words, celebrate interiority. Within a society where alienation is more common than genuine solidarity—alienation not only from one's labour power but also from other people—modernist style has the capacity to defamiliarize the hallowed values of individualism that obscure the reality of social atomism.

If the fracturing of social life provided early-twentieth-century modernists a reason to aestheticise the alienated individual's consciousness, the same holds true in O'Neill's time. In *Godwin*, the breakdown of Lakesha's writing cooperative would not strike readers as a canny representation of social malaise if there were not a spate of headlines about union busting, about growing wealth disparity, and about a crisis of loneliness. Lakesha explains that her and her co-leaders' responsibilities increased as her co-op grew in size, though this did not translate into a higher managerial salary: "[O]ur compensation stayed flat at around twenty thousand dollars p.a. . . . We were ready to accept part-time pay for a full-time job, out of idealism. Idealism, if it's real, means extra work" (2024a: 4). *Godwin* is cruel to its idealistic characters, as O'Neill shares with his modernist forebears a suspicion of idealism. Tellingly, such hopefulness is associated here with a profit-sharing operation minimally hierarchized only in order to soften the burdens that freelance writers would otherwise feel. The trajectory of Lakesha's business suggests that the prospect of working together and finding common ground are exceedingly thin for O'Neill.

Such overt cynicism about collectivism grants O'Neill's residual modernism a dialectical power to critique the forces of alienation in contemporary life. He routes his novel's preoccupation with social fragmentation and psychic interiority through an impressionistic aesthetic that implicitly links perception to broader forces. Within *Godwin* perceptual habits are symptoms of either the capitalist structures that perpetuate global inequality or the social paradigms that sustain racial strife in America. To remain with O'Neill's treatment of workplace culture, the novel exhibits a suspicion of perceptual clarity through Lakesha's accounts of discrimination and through the controversy that besets her at work during the early stages of the co-op's dissolution. Although she rarely discusses her positionality, she frequently intimates her awareness of racist microaggressions. "I needed a lot of references to get my career going," she says, "because I wasn't the kind of person folks had in mind when they looked for a medical writer (2024a: 125). Later, while defending herself against false accusations of professional malfeasance, she is told by the colleagues investigating her that "the problem is one of . . . *perception*" (248) and "optics" (249).

As he shuttles between Mark's meditations on the act of seeing and Lakesha's struggles to transcend how she is seen, O'Neill establishes a thematic and characterological dichotomy through which he channels his skepticism toward unbiased perception. Having arrived in England in order to reconnect with his half-brother, Mark explains, "Not that long ago, I would have been deeply interested in my whereabouts . . . [and] would have come prepared . . . for the great task of seeing. Not anymore. The great task is precisely that of not seeing—of refusing the whole rotten spectacle" (2024a: 32). Mark's subsequent fascination with the grainy video footage of Godwin playing soccer lends weight to this cynical statement against perceptual openness, for it is merely as a capital asset that he and his family take an interest in the phenom. Mark knows that he is "in possession of an actionable world-exclusive video of an athlete with potential career earnings in the hundreds of millions. His representatives would make millions" (97). Although Mark has justificatory means at his disposal to avoid self-reproach, explaining that "this kid, Godwin, needs the help of an honest person like me" (98), his fantasy of entrepreneurial success indicates that he has weak, if any, altruistic reasons for "solv[ing] the Godwin puzzle" (88). By foregrounding the conjunction of avaricious perceptual conventions and ennobling delusions, O'Neill invites scrutiny of Mark's perceptual habits.

Such habits carry over into Mark's conversations with Lakesha that she narrates. To Mark's insensitive question—"Is it true, what they say about Milwaukee? That it's the worst city in the United States to grow up in as an African American?"—Lakesha thinks,

> He was very curious. It fascinated people—the poverty of North Side Milwaukee. They want to hear stories about the ghetto, about everybody gangbanging and going to jail, about nobody graduated from college, about lead in the drinking water, about babies dying of malnutrition, about the possibility of renewal through urban farming. I decided a long time ago that it's not my job to have that conversation. (2024a: 135)

Where Mark's narration would likely couch his interest in the language of solicitude, Lakesha's impressionistic account of their conversation undermines this delusional self-righteousness. She links his "curious" questioning to a series of exchanges in which "people," presumably non-racialized people, exhibit "fascinat[ion]" with Black abjection. Her shift from the singular to the plural suggests that she has had to answer questions like Mark's a lot, that Mark's curiosity is not the expression of a uniquely caring and inquisitive individual but rather evidence of the very racial inequity that he seems to abhor. From Lakesha's point of view, Mark participates in a sociological reductionism that views Black life as nothing more than the effect of deplorable circumstances. Such late-modernist writers as James Baldwin (2012) and Ralph Ellison (1995) made this perspective on Black life the subject of essays and sought to refute

it in their own work. And just as Ellison and Baldwin adopted limited points of view in their fiction, so too does O'Neill. Through the narrowness of Lakesha's and Mark's respective points of view O'Neill highlights racial friction and cautions viewers against a myopic view of racial inequality that denies its victims rich inner lives.

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Impressionism, perhaps the signal feature of modernist prose, is the most powerful aesthetic link between *Godwin* and *Netherland*. Yet its powers of critique receive no consideration in Smith's reading of the latter novel. It is thus worth revisiting the impressionistic passage near the end of *Netherland* that Smith finds exasperating. After saving his marriage, wealthy stock analyst Hans experiences a Proustian flashback while riding the London Eye Ferris wheel with his wife and son. The memory is of a moment he spent with his mother in New York City before 9/11, and the image is an impressionistic rendering of the Twin Towers:

> [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. (2009: 255)

In Smith's view (2008), O'Neill fails "to let the towers be what they were: towers. But they were covered in literary language when they fell, and they continue to be here."

That is an unconvincing reading on which to base a critique of residual modernism. The significance of the Proustian flashback can be grasped only when considered alongside Hans's relationship with the novel's Gatsby-like figure, Chuck Ramkissoon. In Chuck's humble beginnings, his boundless aspirations, his illicit entrepreneurial pursuits, and his ultimate death, O'Neill dramatizes global inequality on a microcosmic scale. Hans's impersonal relationship with Chuck transports readers back to canonical modernism, evoking the "indiscernible barbed wire" that inhibits class mobility in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1950 [1926]: 141). Set against this narrative and intertextual flashback, Hans's "quest for vision," to quote O'Neill himself (2011:15), ends with a return to his flawed perceptual conventions, similar to how Nick Carraway's experiences send him back to the safe, reactionary precincts of his patrician upbringing

in the Midwest. Hans's impressionistic abstraction ("lilac acres," "a brilliant yellow mess") from the objective materiality of the towers is unseemly. It functions as a dubious epistemology ("Factual assertion can be made") and crass religiosity ("people risen in light") bespeaking his failure to become a critic of his lifeworld.

Transposing into a post-9/11 context modernist impressionism, O'Neill does not affirm that "only one's subjectivity is authentic" (Smith 2008) but rather highlights that any belief in the authenticity of subjective experience is a symptom of the social alienation wrought by contemporary capitalism, of which the Twin Towers were once a powerful symbol. The scene evokes Hannah Arendt's account of thinking. For Arendt, thinking enables critical reevaluation of one's convictions and conduct, and its "only essential precondition" is "withdrawal from the world of appearances" (1977: 78). The problem with Hans's impressionism, in other words, lies in his failure to move from the realm of the senses to the realm of the intellect, where an understanding of privilege and positionality can shape the meaning gleaned from sensorial data. Yet Hans's failure is not the novel's failure. In "Extorted Reconciliation" (2019a: 225), Adorno reproaches Lukács for this mistake: "Even the assertion that the world is unknowable, which Lukács never tires of faulting in authors like [T.S.] Eliot or Joyce, can become a moment of knowledge, knowledge of the gulf between the overwhelming and unassimilatable [sic] world of objects, on the one hand, and experience, which glances helplessly off that world, on the other." Similarly, O'Neill's impressionistic style in *Netherland* prompts readers to critique the uncritical attitude that Smith sees him endorsing.[7]

In *Godwin*, O'Neill' use of impressionism is much more capacious. Sometimes, as in the example of Mark's flawed perceptions, the aim is satirical, serving the same end as it does in *Netherland*; in other moments, particularly during Lakesha's narration, it frames relativistic experience as a powerful form of understanding. Consider, for example, two instances in which the signifier "impression" appears in the novel. While in France on his mission to help his half-brother, Mark is "happy to walk" and, like Hans, slips into a Proustian flashback: "With sour amusement I recall a certain professor's enthusiasm, in my student days, for the flâneur: the aimless, invariably male urban ambler who is alert to things . . . undetectable by others, the stiffs who hurry purposefully to their for-profit appointments. It made a great impression on our class" (67). Mark's mention of his "student days" indicates that he is skeptical of the flâneur, a figure made famous in the history of modernism by Walter Benjamin (2007: 155–200). But it is precisely the capacity to detect the "undetectable" that O'Neill associates

[7] To be sure, scholarly work on O'Neill's novel is split. For readings that share Smith's critical orientation to the novel, see Keeble (2024: 67–89), Pease (2019), Robbins (2011); and for laudatory appraisals, see Rothberg (2009), Wasserman (2014), James (2012).

with impressionism in an exchange between Mark and Lakesha later in the novel. As Mark recounts his exploits abroad, Lakesha thinks, “My impression was that Wolfe was choosing his words carefully, out of a delicate concern for my feelings. Maybe he thought that Africa or Africans would be something I’d feel sensitive about” (2024a: 156). There is no ground here for adjudicating the truth value of Lakesha’s impression. She is the narrator, after all; her sensorial, affective experience outweighs objectivity. Her immobility obscures the fact that her interpretation of Mark’s monologue evokes the affordances of the flâneur’s ironic detachment. The principal difference is that the cause of social alienation has assumed new dimensions: like Mark and Lakesha’s earlier interaction, racial friction looms over this scene. O’Neill need not link Lakesha’s feelings to an antiracist political movement such as Black Lives Matter to generate the sense that racial inequity is a social force informing Lakesha’s patterns of thought and interpretation of external phenomena.

Discussing the recontextualization of modernist impressionism in contemporary literary fiction, Jesse Matz (2016: 251) observes that “what seems to be a false or belated impressionism is its extension into postmodernity and beyond.” While this “postmodern impressionism . . . reasserts a modernist aesthetic,” “maintains a commitment to what is achieved by the impression’s fraught form of perceptual emergence,” and indicates “a kind of comeback” as well as “a return to the aesthetic,” it also “represents a new development in literary history” by allying modernist aesthetics with “postmodern skepticism” (252). In this view, impressionism is properly residual only when it affirms the salutary effects of aesthetic experience, and it is new only when it resonates within a critical register. Such an account of impressionistic style resonates with Michaela Bronstein’s formulation of “transhistorical” modernism. For Bronstein (2018: 1–26), the style associated with canonical modernist literature anticipates readers in different times and places; this stylistic orientation to the future appeals not through a critique of the real world—which is limited to the novel’s context of production and initial moment of dissemination—but through its affirmation of timeless values. Just as Matz underscores the affirmative powers of impressionism, so Bronstein contends that modernist innovation, a much broader stylistic register, “represents the process of organization freed from any particular organizational content” (144). In moments of chaos and disorder, style exercises an organizational imperative that consoles.

Yet Matz partly builds his case by turning to John Carlos Rowe’s work on Henry James (249). Rowe identifies a homology between Jamesian impressionism and Derridean and de Manian deconstruction (1984: 189–217). In his study of literary impressionism, Michael Fried supplements Rowe’s argument by adopting a deconstructive approach to

the subject matter (2018). If this style appears to elicit a certain interpretation, a strong argument could be made that it possesses a kind of deterministic agency that blurs the line between readerly and textual sensibility. Far from choosing between aesthetic affirmation and criticality, modernist style, particularly literary impressionism, occasions their entanglement. A neat distinction between the two appears to overlook the extent to which this contradiction can be generative in the epoch of canonical modernism and, as the examples from *Netherland* and *Godwin* suggest, in the postmillennial period of residual modernism. In his laudatory essay on Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot (1975: 177) contends that "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" prompted Joyce's innovative "way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance" to his content. In other words, Joycean style reacts against contemporaneous social and political currents no less than it provides order and direction. To ground this point in the debates permeating contemporary literary studies, particularly what David Kurnick (2020) calls "our method melodramas," modernism's inherent criticality is one of the premises on which Rita Felski builds her case for postcritical method. Felski (2015: 42) writes that "much of what has counted as theory in recent decades riffs off, revises, and extends the classic themes of literary and artistic modernism."

In this light, there appears to be a great deal of dialectical value in Smith's understanding of aesthetic exhaustion—value that can prompt further examination only if we remove the negative valence from the equation. O'Neill's use of literary impressionism in *Netherland* and *Godwin* encourages deeper investigation of the socioeconomic determinants of perception. To "let the towers be what they were" (*Netherland*) and to leave relativistic experience unexamined (*Godwin*) are to suggest that one's positionality does not affect what they perceive and misperceive. In both cases, instead of a new aesthetic providing a dialectical check on the old—like modernism did for realism in Adorno's account—an old aesthetic reaffirms literature's critical powers in a postmillennial period where capital subsumes everything new and makes it profitable. As a concept, residual modernism does not deny that postmillennial writers leverage literature's critical powers to slightly different ends than those of their modernist predecessors. Nor does it posit that nothing has changed since the era of high modernism. Yet the stylistic similarities and thematic overlaps direct attention to a transhistorical constellation of concerns stemming from capitalist overreach, institutional failure, and social fragmentation.

It thus bears highlighting O'Neill's frequently avowed admiration for the work of Joseph Conrad (see O'Neill 2011; 2024b). The "task" of fiction, writes Conrad, "is, before all, to make you *see*" (2017b: 261). His novels' capacity to make the addressee of this

remark see, however, is often the function of their characters' failure to see. In *The Secret Agent* (2009 [1907]), Conrad begins with Mr. Verloc, whose "approving eye," fastened on a scene "glorified" by a "peculiarly London sun," betrays his antiradical political commitments (9), and concludes with the ghastly, bomb-equipped Professor "averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind" (227). The tension between seeing and unseeing is, as Bronstein (2018: 126) puts it, a "juxtaposition that locks all parties into a pointless, absurd struggle." This tension is no less a part of O'Neill's skepticism than Conrad's, and it is similarly oriented toward "the damaged and the partial, the absent and the unspeakable"—the qualities of literary fiction that Smith extols. In the following section, I explore how this indebtedness to Conrad shapes *Godwin*.

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At times, O'Neill's strategy of distinguishing his characters' impressionistic perspectives from his novel's critical aims leads *Godwin* to the brink of moral obviousness. O'Neill has Mark explain, "To my eyes, every woman of my supposed kind, which is to say an American white descended from American whites, suffered from a fatal transparency" (94). Even though his wife, Sushila, "was American-born, . . . she emerged from an alluring global gloom" as the daughter of Sri Lankan immigrants: "There was something brave and important about them" (2024a: 94). This comment recalls Lakesha's experiences with racism. For an essentializing logic underwrites Mark's putatively progressive attitudes toward racial and ethnic difference. Although Mark's comparison between white women and his Sri Lankan wife, between "fatal transparency" and "global gloom," is fatuous enough, O'Neill leaves no doubt about the passage's humorous intentions. He takes the famous word uttered by Conrad's Kurtz near the end of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and reinscribes it within Mark's assessment of romantic life with a woman of his "kind: "It filled me, I can say without exaggeration, with horror" (94). Where Kurtz's ambiguous repetition of that final world "can be either an ethical judgement against himself . . . or a summing up of the 'truth' about life that destroys the whole basis of ethical judgement" (Graham 1996: 213)—either existential despair or anti-imperialist critique—Mark's use of the word grasps for nothing more symbolic than bourgeois doldrums.

This evocation of Conrad, skirting seriousness, does not suggest that O'Neill's redeployment of modernist skepticism serves a critical purpose. Yet O'Neill's engagement with Conradian themes and style gathers critical force as the repetitions accumulate. Much like Conrad, O'Neill exhibits an anxiety toward objectivity and opts to couch much of the story of *Godwin* in layers of narratorial mediation. In this novel, knowledge is rarely gained from first-hand experience but repeatedly filtered—filtered by embedded narrators, gossip, Google Earth, and grainy video footage. For instance,

Lakesha shares details about Mark that enable a fuller biographical sketch. It is through her narration that readers learn about Mark's physical altercation with a security guard and, later, about his death. More significantly, a long chapter midway through the novel reflects the embedded narration, impressionistic style, and narratorial biases running through Conrad's work.

After Mark initially abandons his search for Godwin, Jean-Luc Lefebvre, the talent scout whom he originally deputized to help locate the soccer star, arrives unexpectedly at Mark's house in Pittsburgh, and his recitation of his journey through Benin recalls Marlow's tale of his journey through the Congo. O'Neill's Conradian strategy of mediation becomes especially palpable as Mark relates the story that Lefebvre relates to him:

> For as long as he'd visited Africa, there had been stories of . . . unrest, of killings, of massacres. He had ignored them. There had always been violence in these lands of sand and rock, it never stopped, it was part of the immemorial history of such places, and no purpose of Lefebvre's was served by concerning himself with these matters, which did not affect him. Or did they? Of late he'd been hearing bad rumors . . . of new threats arriving from beyond the edge of the civilized world. (2024a: 202)

If the layers of mediation here deprive Lefebvre's impressionistic account of firm epistemological ground, the account itself accentuates his perceptual flaws. To link violence to "immemorial history" is to dehistoricize Africa, particularly the violence of colonial and imperialist regimes. And to suggest that Africa is a "place beyond the edge of the civilized world" is to naturalize global inequality and tacitly condone Lefebvre's exploitative reasons for traveling to Benin.

Mark's frequent interjections compound Lefebvre's flawed epistemology. When Lefebvre reveals that he encountered Mark's estranged mother and half-brother in Benin, rhetorical abstractions begin to dominate Mark's narration. Learning that his mother has also begun to treat Godwin as a grail, Mark admits, "From then on, Lefebvre is an auditory presence[.] . . . I am inside a cloud of shock" (2024a: 217). He then confesses, "Maybe it's dehydration, or the dreaminess of near-sleep, maybe its's the uncanny boatlike dark, but factuality is coming unfastened. I am being carried away" on an "imperceptible current" (229). O'Neill's aesthetic of psychological interiority creates tension between form and content, pulling readers inside his characters' minds at a moment when the story itself widens its scope to highlight neoimperialist forms of exploitation and the social impasses they create.

The scene of Lefebvre sharing his exploits in Benin, then, reveals more about him and Mark than about Benin—an irony that calls to mind Marlow's tale of his journey

into the Congo. Indeed, O'Neill's impressionistic style, the layers of narratorial mediation, the content of Lefebvre's account, and Mark's preoccupation with the "faint incessant murmur . . . made by a river" (228) all work to evoke *Heart of Darkness*. Perhaps more than any other modernist novelist, Conrad deployed the limitations of characterological perspective, as well as the formal structure of a story within a story, to underscore's truth's relativity. While recounting his trip down the river to retrieve Kurtz, Marlow (in)famously eliminates history and culture in one impressionistic swoop: "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse" (2017: 36). The irony, of course, is that Marlow's incomprehension is itself a form of comprehension, and the only account of the "heart of darkness" that his listeners are likely to receive. The similarities between the two works are unmistakable. Where Lefebvre sees "immemorial history," Marlow sees "the night of first ages." Where Lefebvre considers "threats arriving from beyond the edge of the civilized world," Marlow conjures the image of "sane men . . . in a madhouse." A charitable reading of this connection between O'Neill and Conrad is that, in both works, perception is not innocent but encodes feelings of superiority, hinders epistemological humility and ethical openness, and thus exposes each storyteller to reproach.

Conrad is a unique figure in the history of modernism for the intensity of the criticism his work has received, particularly *Heart of Darkness*. In *The Political Unconscious* (2002: 218), Jameson reads impressionistic passages in Conrad, like the one cited above, as part of a broader "*aestheticizing strategy*" that "seeks to recode or rewrite the world and its own data in terms of perception as a semi-autonomous activity." Conrad's impressionism, in other words, occludes history, particularly the rise of the European bourgeoisie. Although Jameson makes clear that he has no interest in political or moral condemnation, this historicist reading evokes Chinua Achebe's impassioned claim that "Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" (2017: 313). In language that anticipates Jameson's analysis, Achebe goes on to list the ways in which Conrad reduces Africa to a mere extension of the European mind, a nightmare from which Europeans need only to awaken: "Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (314).

But even though *Heart of Darkness* is reproachable on political grounds for what it fails to include, its formal arrangement and impressionistic style give it no stable ideological position from which to naturalize or affirm imperialist hierarchies. This observation characterises Edward Said's analysis of the text. On the one hand, Said (1994: 24) echoes Jameson in making a historicist claim that imperialism conditioned

Conrad's impressionistic aesthetic and that Conrad's positionality prevented him from envisioning an anti-imperialist and indigenous reality in the Congo. On the other, Said tempers his critique with praise for Conrad's "formal devices" that clear ground for a "second, less imperialistic possibility" (28). Through embedded narration Conrad reveals the mediated, partial nature of Marlow's narratorial authority and thus its tenuous claim on truth. And through an impressionistic aesthetic that underscores Marlow's failure to exert control over his African surroundings, Conrad reveals the anxiety of mastery at the heart of Marlow's narration and by extension European imperialism. These formal and stylistic devices enable readers to "sense the potential of a reality that seemed inaccessible to imperialism" (29).[8]

O'Neill's use of Conradian formal devices engenders a similar sense in *Godwin*. Lefebvre's tale includes his encounter with Janice, the wife of an American anesthesiologist combining work abroad with leisure in Benin. She mentions that she brought Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) but has yet to read it, even though

> she understood the title, because, seemingly, there was no human-made thing in Benin that wasn't dangerous or defective and falling to pieces. . . . She had developed, she said, a strange, almost indescribable aversion to the blurriness and vagueness of the boundaries between roads and walkways, . . . how everything was made of dirt the color meat. (2024a: 221)

Even vague familiarity with Achebe's anticolonial novel will make Janice's "understanding" of the title sound absurd. *Things Fall Apart* is likely the only work of African literature she (and perhaps readers themselves) can name. Accordingly, the formal choreography of the scene exacerbates the shortsightedness of her touristic gaze, implicitly challenging her observations. Unlike Lakesha's minimally mediated impressions that draw attention to racial tension, Janice's impressionistic assertion of "blurriness and vagueness" is itself rendered epistemologically blurry and vague through Lefebvre's and then Mark's narration. By foregrounding the partiality of her account, O'Neill forces readers to confront how offshoots of Orientalist discourse continue to circulate amongst Westerners and to *mediate* their understanding of African nations and Africa as a continent.

Few readers familiar with Conrad would get to the end of Lefebvre's account of his trip to Benin without noting the similarity to *Heart of Darkness*, from the layers of narratorial mediation to the dubious epistemology that encircles Lefebvre in a space

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[8] See also Watt (1979: 160–161) for a similar reading that notes Conrad's failure to humanise Africans as well as his critique of imperialism.

of moral condemnation. If, as Said intimates, an alteritous "reality" was difficult for Conrad's early readers to "sense," contemporary historical conditions make it much more palpable for readers today and accentuate the critical power of O'Neill's residual modernism. That is, the intertextuality linking *Godwin* and *Heart of Darkness* prompts both a recognition of ongoing injustice and a consideration of how neoimperialist structures perpetuate the perceptual habits and attitudes of superiority that readers have long identified in Marlow. The scene implicates Lefebvre and Mark (and Janice) in a perceptual regime that is symptomatic of contemporary global inequality even though it flourished under the historical conditions of Conrad's time. At the same time, this formal arrangement allows readers to register the partiality of Lefebvre's perceptions. As Lefebvre himself recognises, "power . . . corrupts not only oneself, but all those who deal with one. Every interaction becomes a calculation, becomes a lie, becomes a manipulation" (2024a: 187). Such self-awareness may not cause him to abandon his discriminatory ideas, but it invites readers to examine their own corruptibility. Indeed, to the extent that it functions as an incitement to consider how perceptual experience is associated with broader forces, O'Neill's Conradian style elicits moral judgment of the structural and social determinants of alienation and inequity.

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Although literary history's preoccupation with periodization rewards efforts to define what is new about aesthetic production, it also raises questions about continuity and indebtedness. If historical conditions shape the styles and themes of novelistic art, it does not follow that novelists can register these conditions only by innovating and by abandoning an older aesthetic. A great deal of postmillennial writing continues to wrestle with the legacy of modernism, and the basis for this engagement is literature's powers of critique. Despite modernist novelists adopting questionable political stances in their own times, modernism has bequeathed to later generations an aesthetic whose principal affordance is to foreground the problems of the world and of the people in it. Like he does in *Netherland*, O'Neill leverages residual modernism in *Godwin* to satirize privileged characters who lack self-awareness and to show how global and domestic structures perpetuate social alienation and inequality. By recontextualizing Conradian formal devices, O'Neill connects his characters' subjective perception to these structural and social problems. Residual modernism is not, however, tantamount to unremitting cynicism. Critique is not a zero-sum game. It would not exist without an idea of how things could be better—without, in other words, a hopeful attachment to the world. By way of conclusion, I want to attend to the novel's final pages, which balance a modernist distrust of tidy resolutions with O'Neill's recognition of the need to champion Lakesha's perspective.

Lefebvre's tale ends not with him finding a husk of a man like Conrad's Kurtz but in an encounter with Mark's half-brother, Geoff, and avaricious mother, Faye, who has begun to follow her sons in treating Godwin as a kind of grail. Faye and Lefebvre become business partners, with Faye applying to adopt Godwin and Lefebvre traveling to Pittsburgh to recruit Mark for the family business. As Lefebvre tells Mark, "Godwin is not only a client. He is your brother" (2024a: 244). If Faye's adoption of Godwin undercuts the love of family with the vulgarity of business, a grim form of poetic justice comes in the fatal plane crash that claims the lives of Mark, his mother, and his half-brother. This doubt about idealistic pursuits also punctuates Lakesha's story. At first blush, the novel suggests that she can enjoy an optimistic future only by embracing motherhood, an unlikely and arguably conservative conclusion for the professionally obsessed Lakesha. However, after she becomes Godwin's legal guardian in an improbable twist, the final paragraph has Lakesha driving to her new job "working for the Hilary for America campaign" (277). The novel highlights the smallness of its most hopeful character by framing Trump's election as a tragedy in the offing. There is no improbable happy ending in O'Neill's fictional universe.

But in the final chapter, O'Neill extends the rhetorical abstractions mediating Mark's narration to Lakesha's perceptual experience. For much of the novel, Lakesha's short chapters seem to hold secondary importance in comparison to Mark's relatively long sections. Where Mark's narration is laden with Conradian echoes, Lakesha's is written in stodgy prose, containing plain imagery and few metaphors. But when asked whether she is interested in adopting Godwin, Lakesha cannot maintain her stilted communication and slides into a putatively authentic register: "I felt myself going through a strange neurological storm. . . . I felt an intensification of reality so strong that I had a touch of vertigo" (2024a: 271). Where the Lakesha of the opening pages would not have described her anxiety as a "strange neurological storm" or her raised blood pressure as an "intensification of reality," the Lakesha of the final chapter has taken up the aesthetic mantle left by Mark. She is neither Mark nor Marlow, but she sounds *like* them. This is O'Neill's way of making space for, and of suggesting that the future ought to belong to, someone like Lakesha, for she is the only character who does not see Godwin as a financial investment.

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