



Caryl Phillips has maintained that a ‘migratory condition, and the subsequent sense of displacement, can be a gift to the creative mind’ (A New World Order [2002]).

Examine the extent to which two twenty-first century novelists capitalize on the connection between migration (or displacement) and artistic creativity.

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In Caryl Phillips’ *In the Falling Snow* and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* both protagonists can be seen as migrants, whether moving between countries geographically or psychologically in memories, between their own apartments and their respective family’s homes, or between the past and the present in their reflections and reconfigurations of events. They are lost in a sense of the in-between, experiencing a combination of attachment to and detachment from their surroundings, such as that expressed by Phillips’ repeated phrase ‘of, and not of, this place’.¹ Thus the retrospective protagonists search (willingly or unwillingly, and knowingly or unknowingly) for an identity in the new situation in which they find themselves in order to feel more at home. Although the two novelists are similar in that they use the ‘migratory condition’ as a theme throughout their novels to underpin their characters’ sense of displacement and dislocation, they differ in the way in which they employ the theme in relation to the literal and metaphorical elements of the text. This essay will explore the connection between migration (and displacement) and artistic creativity both in terms of the events that take place and the accompanying formal and rhetorical features that the two novelists employ to convey their characters’ emotional states to the reader.

While Phillips’ protagonist, Keith, is caught between a sense of attachment to and detachment from the world and his sense of self, O’Neill’s protagonist, Hans, experiences estrangement and fascination with his environment and identity. Keith’s emotional state is represented by his difficulty in communicating with his son Laurie. While he feels that he should connect with Laurie, having himself been through things ‘as a black kid growing up in this country’, he is made aware by his son that things are no longer ‘the same now as they were when [he] was [Laurie’s] age’.² The detachment Keith feels from his son is displayed by their behaviour on the London Eye; Laurie ‘turns away from [Keith...] to the east’ and Keith looks ‘to the west’ (162). The way in which ‘[a] camera flashes’ (162) and takes a photograph of them at this point serves to highlight the sense of helplessness he feels in moving on from this point of static conversation. Moreover, Phillips’ use of free indirect discourse, focalizing the image of ‘the sudden bend of the river [that] creates the illusion that Battersea Power Station is floating on the water’ (162) through Keith, unites the reader with Keith’s own experience of feeling afloat in this conversation, unable to connect with his son

¹ Caryl Phillips, ‘A New World Order’ in *London – migrant city*, ed. by Sten Pultz Moslund (Denmark: Narayana Press, 2006), p.24.

² Caryl Phillips, *In the Falling Snow* (London: Vintage, 2010), p.167. Further references from this edition cited in text.

on a concrete level.³ Furthermore, the sense of attachment and detachment is displayed in the way in which the focalization changes between the orientation of Keith and that of a more neutral, detached position. Sentences such as '[t]hey stand together on the bridge and look across at the back of the Palace of Westminster' (165) distance the reader from a particular character's focalization through the external focalization of a distant narrator. This contrasts with the internal focalization of events, when Keith is seen from within by the external focalizer. This takes the form of sentences which use reported thought, such as 'he realises that, on second thoughts, maybe they should just head straight back' (167). The reader is then swiftly aligned with Keith's disorientation to the world as the focalizer coincides with his character's free indirect thought: 'What have [Laurie and his friends] done to 'earn' respect?' (167). The italicised verb '*earn*' furthers the reader's alignment with Keith's thoughts, emphasising Keith's shock and despair with the situation at hand. Thus not only does Phillips underline Keith's sense of attachment to and detachment from the world through the miscommunication with his son, or through the more symbolic elements of their surroundings, but also through the more formal technique of switching between varying degrees of focalization.

Phillips expresses Keith's dislocation and displacement in the world by frequently shifting the reader between temporal states. Jill Clough notes that 'Keith's story is the fulcrum on which past and present balance, uneasily'⁴ and this works both on the level of Keith's reflections and on that of narrative style. When Keith is on the tube, the behaviour of a group of youths brings about his reflection that in the past he would have felt safe amongst black youths but in the present he feels alienated from youths altogether:

Black youths, white youths, mixed race youths, to them all he is just a middle-aged man in a jacket and tie who looks like he doesn't know shit about nothing. (15)

His reflections on the youths' ill manners spark a flashback which in turn sparks another so that the shifting in narrative time and space disorients the reader from the present situation. The narrative shifts from the present tense with Keith on the 'Hammersmith and City train' (14) to the past in which he is a boy being brought up with good manners by his stepmother Brenda. This reflection then prompts another, that of his and his wife Annabelle's own upbringing of their son and the troubles of racial bullying, which in turn incites the memory of Laurie's first encounter with Annabelle's father. Even within this external analepsis,⁵ there is another, longer analepsis of Annabelle's relationship with her family regarding Keith as her choice of partner. The time then shifts forward to the occasion when Annabelle's father meets Laurie again, and finally to the present in which Keith is on the tube (the narrative digressions span in total fifteen pages). Such complex transformations of narrative temporal order not only transport the reader temporally but also spatially, exhibiting Keith's sense of displacement and disorientation. This fragmentary style is, as Phillips notes in *A New World Order*, part of the Caribbean 'yoking together of man and nature, of past and present',⁶ connecting his artistic creativity to the Caribbean's influence.

³ See Alan Palmer on the link between 'the internal consciousnesses of characters and their external social and physical context', *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp.48-9.

⁴ 'Caryl Phillips' In the Falling Snow', *Friction Magazine*, (Newcastle: NCLA, 2010) <<http://www.frictionmagazine.co.uk/2010/03/19/caryl-phillips%E2%80%99-in-the-falling-snow-2009/>> [accessed 2 January 2011] (para.3 of 10).

⁵ See Michael J Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp.50-3

⁶ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p.130.

There are many events in *Netherland* which evoke the binary sense of fascination and alienation that Hans experiences in New York. Dislocated from his home with his family following the 9/11 attacks, his physical and internal displacement is represented in the formal style that O'Neill employs to describe Hans looking out from their hotel apartment window onto New York City. Whilst O'Neill chooses words that create a feeling of illness – 'pallor', 'garbage', 'coarse' and 'mad' representing Hans' feelings of disorientation and almost nausea at the unfamiliarity of his environment – he also uses transitory words and phrases that suggest awe and praise such as 'remarkable', 'glowed', 'refined into a radiant atmosphere', 'silver' and 'twilight'.⁷ Furthermore, O'Neill's detailed description of the numerous different sources of light in the town contrast to the 'deserted office buildings', evoking both the energy and inertia Hans feels when looking out onto the city at night. Such contradictory employment of lexis represents Hans' confusion with his environment, its haze or 'fuzz' ultimately enveloping him in a state of 'paralysis' (17). This suggestion that one's environment affects one's identity and emotional state is furthered when Hans is left alone following his wife's and child's move back to London. He is physically separated from his family and psychologically separated from himself: 'On my own it were as if I was hospitalised at the Chelsea Hotel' (29). The more detached Hans is from a familiar environment and his sense of home, the more disengaged he becomes from his own sense of identity. He describes how '[I]f itself had become disembodied' now that '[his] family, the spine of [his] days had crumbled' (28). The reference to losing attachment to his own physical body in relation to his separation from his family represents how he simultaneously loses his sense of attachment to the physical world, becoming afloat in a kind of suspended animation, 'lost in invertebrate time' (28). Even when he experiences a 'remarkable development' in an awakening of his senses during his sexual relations with Danielle, he simultaneously becomes 'conscious of a kind of vertigo' (110) and detachment from events, realising the 'sadness produced when the mirroring world no longer offers a surface in which one may recognise one's true likeness' (111).

While O'Neill is praised by countless critics for his 'gorgeous, ruminative prose'⁸ that depicts a nostalgia for nineteenth century realism, Phillips is prone to criticism for prose that is 'largely undistinguished' and a narrative that is 'frequently banal'⁹; this contrast in narrative style depicts the different way in which each novelist presents the migratory condition. The disjointed and at times awkwardly written prose¹⁰ reflects Phillips' experimentation with what he calls the Caribbean's 'restlessness of form'.¹¹ The very banality of language and narrative serves to display what Keith himself notes as a 'banal' (46) period of his life. Phillips creates a sense of displacement through Keith's inability to find the words to express himself. He continually struggles to produce 'tangible evidence that he has [...] actually written something' (66) for his proposed book, and often adopts clichéd language when arguing with his wife, such as asking her '[h]as the cat got your tongue?' to which she replies, '[w]hat kind of phrase is that?'. Keith even withholds actualising his thoughts from the world altogether; Yvette notes how he '[doesn't] say much' (9) and following his father's death, he lies to Annabelle that there is 'no reason' (324) for his return from the hospital. Keith's sense of banality is further highlighted when the reader reaches

⁷ Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), p.17. Further references from this edition cited in text.

⁸ Andrew Anthony, 'Perfect Delivery', *Observer*, (2008)

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/07/celebrity>> [accessed 2 January 2011] (para.24 of 44).

⁹ Peter Parker, 'In the Falling Snow by Carly Phillips', *Sunday Times*, (2009),

<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article6373471.ece> [accessed online 3 January 2011] (para.1 of 7).

¹⁰ Parker highlights the phrase, 'He sets the microwave timer for three minutes, which guarantees that the soup will be extremely hot' (143) (para.7 of 7).

¹¹ *Selected Essays*, p.130.

Earl's monologue. Critics such as Parker have noted that the narrative picks up pace and fluidity of style in Keith's father's monologue¹² and this could be due to the general shift from the 'mimetic' narrative method ascribed to Keith and the 'diegetic' narration ascribed to Earl.¹³ The general focalization of the novel is Keith and this limits the reader to "everything that happen[s]" only as it is revealed to Keith, and thus the reader gains a largely scenic presentation of events.¹⁴ Earl's monologues, however, are relayed in the narrative mode of diegesis, in which the present Earl is the external focalizer of his younger self and is therefore able to condense, summarize and reflect upon his experiences to give them meaning. Instead of recounting how one might 'pop the plastic lid off a carton of vegetable soup and tip the contents into a deep blue bowl' (143), Earl's story relates only the experiences that are important to his story of migration. Thus Keith's sense of boredom and inertia, reflected in his 'banal' narrative, is in contrast to his father's decisiveness and action, highlighted in his ability to actively shape his story's narrative. Consequently there is the suggestion that Earl's breaking of his 'silence', which had meant that Keith had 'never been able to properly explain himself to anybody' (285), may also finally encourage Keith to find the means of expressing himself.

Zadie Smith argues that O'Neill's lyrical realism, a style which has dominated 'for some time [...the reader's] receptive pathways', offers the reader a 'powerful, somewhat dispiriting sense of recognition'.¹⁵ She goes on to say that O'Neill writes almost too 'perfectly' and that this foregrounds the anxiety about its nostalgic style lacking novelty.¹⁶ The reader can observe this anxiety reflected in the character Hans, who initially finds the SVP's nostalgia irritating and Chuck's dreams of setting up a cricket stadium in New York grandiose. He echoes the reader's thoughts of Chuck's clichéd language and adoption of the motto 'Think fantastic' (77) when he checks to see if Chuck is 'joking' and remarks that he 'didn't think people had mottoes any more' (72). It becomes clear throughout the novel however that Hans is gradually taken in by the idea of embracing a nostalgia for symbols and mottoes in the hope of finding his identity in an alien environment. Cricket becomes his nostalgic refuge (Hans having played it as a child in the Netherlands) and in this sense also becomes the overriding metaphor for the novel's sense of displacement. Anthony explains how 'Hans' attempt to grasp common bonds amid his emotional desolation is resonant of the wider search for community and identity that marked the anxious aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center'.¹⁷ The nostalgic refuge Hans finds in playing cricket is therefore paralleled with the reader's indulgence in the nostalgic narrative style of lyrical realism, the style that one has 'been taught to value in fiction'.¹⁸

Indeed cricket provides Hans with a refuge of familiarity within an 'unfamiliar' (66) environment. The chance discovery of 'CHUCK CRICKET INC' (66) is like a beacon of hope, a reminder that Hans has cricket to rely on for a 'thread' (47) of his truthful identity. Cricket offers him not only 'a home away from home' (42) but also a way to become a colonial of America and to see something familiar in a new light. In the early stages of Hans' involvement in New York cricket he contrasts the immigrants' abilities to 'modify their battering without spiritual upheaval' with his 'limits' to 'self-transformation' (46). Once Hans has begun to accept the American way of aiming towards those 'higher peaks' (173) he learns to 'hit the ball in the air like an American cricketer [...] without injury to [his] sense of self' (170). Chuck's dream however, rather than to become a colonial, is to colonize a part of

¹² Parker, (para.7 of 7).

¹³ See Toolan, p.126.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p.71.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 'Perfect Delivery', (para.8 of 44).

¹⁸ *Changing My Mind*, p.71.

America. He wants to reinvent cricket, an unfamiliar sport to Americans, as America's 'first modern team sport' (98), based on America's history of colonization by the Dutch. Chuck's chosen name for the cricket stadium is also important in relation to the migratory condition. 'Bald Eagle Field' represents the simultaneous aim to embrace America and to pay 'homage to the eagles and other birds [...] to the hundreds of migrant species travelling through here on the Atlantic flyway' (79). Chuck describes the eagle as representative of the migratory condition, 'living as it does in the boundless void of the sky' (72), free and unattached to anything. Furthermore, when Hans sees the once barren, deserted plain now 'a bright green field', it is as if Chuck has colonized his own piece of the 'strange' (79) land of America, creating a space in which migrants and immigrants can feel a sense of home and belonging in the 'void' of America.

Indeed, O'Neill's ending embraces the idea of nostalgia with a traditional, unambiguous and uplifting sense of closure, zooming out from the characters to a panoramic view of the novel as a whole. One of the major themes of the novel is the contrast between the Londoners' tendency to 'shrink the significance of [one's] attainments and [one's] doom' and 'New York selfhood's hill [that] always seems to lie ahead and to promise a glimpse of further, higher peaks' (172, 173). Hans chooses the latter; when he returns to the field on GoogleEarth and finds that the field has become 'brown' with 'no trace of a batting square' (244) he continues to look towards life's horizons with hope and creativity, represented by the way in which he 'flee[s] upward into the atmosphere' and away from the 'low' vision (244). Thus it is fitting that the end of the novel should focus on both London and New York from a larger and wider perspective. In the London Eye, Hans insists that his wife 'accept her place above it all' when they are at its peak, suppressing her 'urge to go down' (246). He notes that there is 'a self evident and prefabricated symbolism' attached to the 'slow climb to the zenith' and yet, contrary to how he would have previously reverted to a grounded view – for example, when he knocked Chuck 'off his pedestal' (205) – he shows a determination to see things in terms of where they have 'made it thus far, to a point where they can see horizons previously unseen and the old earth [...] newly' (246). As the novel ends on a pan of the New York skyline, the lyrical style embodied in such phrases as 'a world concentrated most glamorously of all [...] in the lilac acres of two amazingly high towers going up above all others' (247), there is the invitation for the reader also to join Hans in the sense of hope and wonder once experienced by the Dutch colonists on their arrival in America.

In contrast, Phillips' ending lacks a sense of closure and moral authority. As Keith makes his way to see Annabelle and Laurie, the 'silence' following the sound of traffic envelopes him and he feels 'exposed', 'vulnerable' and '[s]mall' (327), yet the meaning behind such feelings is disguised from the reader. They could illustrate Keith's continued feelings of dislocation from his surroundings or his sense of vacancy after his realisation of his father's sacrifices in life compared to his midlife crisis – '[s]o that's it then?' (327). As he wakes up in his wife's (and once his own) bed, 'he feels like a stranger in his own bedroom' (328). The sense of attachment and detachment still envelopes Keith in a 'claustrophobic' (328) manner, and the way in which he refers to his own family as 'these people' (330) shows that Keith still feels alienated from what was once familiar. The repetition of the phrase 'he will tell her' that he no longer belongs in the house however is ambiguous, for he waits in bed until she 'comes back upstairs' (330) and the novel ends on the sound of her footsteps. Thus the reader is left with a lack of closure, unknowing whether Keith does in fact 'tell her' or whether he succumbs to his wife's directions; yet this very lack of clear direction from the author, the lack of a clear authorial and moral voice in the novel as a whole, gives the overriding impression that being unclear about one's identity is acceptable. Phillips' lack of moral disclosure represents the influence of Caribbean literature's 'unwillingness to collapse

into easy narrative closure'.¹⁹ In an age in which increasing migration incites increasingly complex identities, it is no longer essential to fully understand one's identity; thus the complex ending of *In the Falling Snow* represents the idea that identity is also complex and migratory. Just as the reader is left to determine his or her own sense of ending to the novel, Phillips leaves the novel on the idea that 'a self-determining history is still there to be created'.²⁰

In conclusion, both novels testify that a migratory condition and subsequent sense of displacement inspires artistic creativity, not only in the development of the plot and content, but also at the level of character, style and tone of the novels. While O'Neill uses the migratory condition as more of a hopeful outlook on the world, Phillips withholds a clear sense of judgment through the novel's lack of authorial voice in order to mark how identities, becoming increasingly complex, are also often unclear. This is, as Phillips stresses in his *New World Order*, the future for people, a hybrid identity, one in which a sense of being in-between different identities is perfectly acceptable – it is up to the individual to determine his or her own history. O'Neill also presents the migratory state positively, re-envisioning the world with a nostalgic preference and this is predominantly symbolised by cricket, the overriding metaphor of the novel.

¹⁹ *Selected Essays*, p.130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.132.

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