

Reading with the Planet: Geocriticism and Mondialism

The “planetary turn” currently under way across the humanities and the world at large means—perhaps in the first place—that the planet is also turning to us to *concern* us all, critics, artists, and laypeople, at once sponsoring and calling for new kinds of world writing and reading, of imagining, figuring, and figuring out the world-as-world. Otherwise put, this concern works both ways: we are concerned, “looked at” by the planet as it is turning to us, but this turn invites ours too. We ourselves have to turn to the planet, *epistemologically*. Because, as Deleuze and Guattary argue in the “Geophilosophy” chapter of their 1991 book *What Is Philosophy?*, the turn of the planet subsumes thought itself, entails an intellectual turn *to* the planet; the reciprocity of planetarization and thought—of thinking on the planet and of thinking *of* the planet as planet, *mundus*, or *monde*—presupposes apposite “concerns,” a certain planetary, geocritical consideration on *our* part. This is as much as saying that, besides the world cast variously identified as multitude (Antonio Negri), Crowd (Alain Badiou), “global soul” (Pico Iyer), cosmopolitan (jet-setting or not, in Bruce Robbins and others), and, if somewhat disconcerting, “nowhere man” (Iyer once again, Alexandar Hemon), the planet affords itself a receptive consciousness—a decoding agency.

In turning to the planetary spectacle of meaning, this geocritical consciousness, I propose, takes in the world homologically, availing itself of a methodology germane to its planetary object, moment, and environment. In that, this methodology—my subject in what follows—is or must become a *geomethodology*. In it, objective and subjective concerns, context and text should dovetail. In my view, its major constitutive steps and tightly interrelated thrusts are three.

The first is principally topological. As such, it latches onto planetarization—the earth’s growing into a culturally-economically loosely integrated ensemble—as a process most visible spatially, as a “spatialization” of the world and of aesthetic routines alike. What I am talking about, essentially, is understanding both the geopolitical developments of our time and the geocritical responses to them as a completion of the spatial turn of the world and the humanities.

The second is, in the main, structural or relational. It homes in on a segment, locus, or facet of one or more artworks to tease out—to “decompress” analytically—their *planetary inscription*, namely, the “here”-“there,” “we”-“they,” “part”-“whole” relatedness structure characteristically folded into them. *This “folding,” this encoding of the planetary in the “fine print” of cultural artifacts is, I submit, a key common denominator of emerging planetary culture.* Otherwise, “planetary cultures” (plural, of course) is far more befitting because there is no one-size-fits-all “telescoping” or compressing mechanism but only compressing codes, which vary a great deal from one cultural site, practice, or agent to another. In decoding or critically decompressing cultures, in showing how “here” is *co-imagined*—pictured inside, alongside, and more broadly “with” there, and vice versa—geomethodology proceeds as a reverse engineering of sorts, activating a *reading-with* or a *with-reading*: it reads these works and their subsequent topo-cultural “partialities” *with* the planetary “whole.”

The third is predominantly ethical. Building on the previous two, it reaches beyond the descriptive by retooling the “with” as a twofold, critical-deontological “for”: geomethodology is not only geared toward tracing symptoms of planetarity “in territory,” in this film or that novel; it also reads *for* the planet, on its behalf. This is where planetary interpretation and planetary stewardship become one and geocriticism plays out as an ethos and thus as a basis, perhaps, for another politics.

This ethos is not a critical construction put, from the outside, on today's culture. Amplifying exponentially across post-Cold War literatures, the "telescoping" of the macro, planetary world into the micro, the local, and the idiomatic "fine print" of culture is intensely thematized in writers of various backgrounds. My example here will be Turkish-Irish-American writer Joseph O'Neill and his 2009 Pen/Faulkner Award-winning book *Netherland*, to my mind, the best 9//11 (and post-9/11) U. S. novel so far. This is a story about America in the world and the world community inside America. What enables this co-inscription of planetarity is an athletic metaphor: the game of cricket. As the Turkish-Irish-American author teaches us through his Dutch protagonist Hans van der Broeck and especially Hans's West Indian friend, Chuck Ramkissoon, cricket is more than a pastime. It is not in the past either. Its time has not passed. Or, if it has, so has the exceptionalist-autonomist temporality in which American communalities have traditionally pictured itself. As a community, Chuck believes, the U. S. still has to pass the geopolitical and cultural-demographic test of the planetary present. Popular with Americans since the early 18th century but gradually elbowed aside by baseball's modern "hegemony," cricket is a concrete, *embodied* modality of presentifying or updating an America that, in the September 11, 2001 aftermath, must reconstellate itself *qua* world community so as to work through the meanings of not only the World Trade Center tragedy but also of the planetarization without which the traumatic event would remain meaningless.

A community driven to the limit by the violently worlding world, the U. S. cannot afford *not* to use its new, liminal position to think through its communal cultural-ethical limits and spatio-political limitations. Cricket, implies Faruk Patel, one of the rumored financial backers of Chuck's New York Cricket Club project, uniquely brings together liminality, Americanness, and understanding, or, less redundantly, simply *brings together*. Chuck's basic idea was to build a

team, a field and its facilities, and socialize with teammates, opponents, fans, and the cricketers' families, in a nutshell, to deploy cricket as a 21st-century ritual of American togetherness. There may be, as Faruk opines, "a limit to what Americans understand," and that "limit" may well be, as he goes on, "cricket" itself. But if that is true, then the game ceases to be trivial. Instead, it takes on a sociocultural and, we shall see, political "consequentiality" beyond the inconsequentially ludic because it opens up the agonal venue where Americans might recontest *practically* the meaning of being in the world. Accordingly, in this space they may not limit themselves to theoretical de- and re-limitations of territory, culture, and identity inside somewhat less rigid boundaries and categories, to mere reconceptualizations of what it means to be in the world; here, they may and in a sense must also "experiment" with worldliness, that is, with being-in-the world as a *community-fostering* modality of being.

Hans and others are aware of the "laboratory experiment" underway. But the laboratory, Chuck maintains, is not limited to the cricket field because the latter's liminal condition necessarily marks and unmarks this terrain as a strict enclosure, *ad quem* limit or terminus. Thus, the field and surrounding grounds set themselves up as an American microcosm. Or, with another metaphor pressed into service by my geomethodological model of reading, the laboratory is also a photo lab—better yet, a socio-photo lab. In it, not only "developers" like Chuck but also Americans at large, players, crowds, and the whole body of *socii* give themselves another chance to learn or relearn how to develop, from the playful negative of the cricket community, a new picture of the U. S. and of the world inside and outside the country.

"The bigger you think, the crappier it looks. . . . So this is going to be my motto—think small," Theo announces in Ian McEwan's 2005 novel *Saturday* as the world's "big things" are encroaching on his private world and concerns. "My motto is, Think fantastic," Chuck lets Hans

know with one of the novel's frequent nods at *The Great Gatsby*. But this is a one-way contradiction because Chuck's plan is not to import, from the outside, worldly "bigness" into cricket-reconstellated American smallness. He just does not envision worldliness as an outside; no optional, flavor-enhancing additive to the American melting pot, the world is neither external nor supplemental to the U. S. His goals are: first, to flesh out the big tightly already packed within the small, the history burrowed inside our seemingly ahistorical contemporaneity, the potential future with which the flat present is thus interleaved, the macro within the micro; and second, to help Americans *visualize* this multilayered structure, picture their home as, with, and of the world and the world as and deep inside it, in brief, turn to the planet by turning meaningfully, self-analytically and ethically, to each other, their country, and its renewed hospitality. As the 9/11 attacks proved to Chuck and others, "Americans cannot really see the world. They think they can, but they can't. I don't need to tell you that. Look at the problems we're having. It's a mess, and it's going to get worse. I say, we want to have something in common with Hindus and Muslims? Chuck Ramkissoon is going to make it happen. With the New York Cricket Club, we could start a whole new chapter in U. S. history. Why not? Why not say so if it's true? Why hold back? I'm going to open our eyes."

To open the American eyes in order to see and "get" the world picture is thus to "fulfill [our] destiny," in other words, to re-become the hospitable community for which cricket can provide a model morally urgent, plausible, and, once again, practical. The only "white man [he] saw on the cricket fields of New York," Hans is surrounded by "teammates" who "variously originated from Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka," with "Hindus, Christians, a Sikh, and four Muslims" drawing together "into a circle for prayer" before the

match. In the finite circle of “we,” a new communality becomes readable at long last. “I’ve heard,” Hans confesses,

that social scientists like to explain such a scene—a patch of America sprinkled with the foreign-born strangely in play—in terms of the immigrant quest for subcommunities.

How true this is: we’re all far away from Tipperary, and clubbing together mitigates this unfair fact. But surely everyone can also testify to another, less reckonable kind of homesickness, one having to do with unsettlements that cannot be located in spaces of geography or history, and accordingly it’s my belief that the communal, contractual phenomenon of New York cricket is underwritten, there *where the print is finest*, by the same agglomeration of unspeakable individual longings that underwrites cricket played anywhere—longings concerned with horizons and potentials sighted or hallucinated and in any event lost long ago, tantalisms that touch on the undoing of losses too private and reprehensible to be acknowledged to oneself, let alone to others. I cannot be the first to wonder if what we see, when we see men in white take to a cricket field, is men imagining *an environment of justice*. [italics added]

The passage draws the fine distinction between immigrant “subcommunities” and communities that could be called planetary or in which planetarization—the world telescoped into a particular location, the earth as place—can be “experienced” and witnessed locally, socially, and also experienced with, observed as if under microscope. Typical of earlier, postcolonial diasporas, the former group type, the subcommunities, cohere around ethnos, more specifically, around effectively or imaginarily separate and competing *ēthne*. Here, “competition” tends to be disjunctive and topoculturally exclusionary, further prying the competing bodies apart and spacing them out literally or figuratively across intervals of territory, affect, faith, belonging, and

cultural practice. What matters is ethnos-as-*gamesmanship*. The communal game is played on a field athletically and socially finite, limited as to what the players might do and mean together.

Gathering around one, trans-ethnical ethos—the ethos of cricket—the latter category is cross- or supra-communal, integrative. In its finitude of time, space, skill, and membership, an infinite, because infinitely definable, communal game awaits. Its ludus is multiply ethical, in fact: it relies on cricket's civic behavior injunction and play-by-the-rules principle; it works as a language conveying “others,” playfully, quasi-ineffable emotional states (“tantalisms”) that, by the same movement, can be either sublated or “mined” for bonding purposes; and, since it is, at least potentially, “infinitely” inclusive of winners and losers, hosts and guests, Americans and “foreigners,” main actors and family extras alike, it is also, if not already just, then a template for unlimited justice. At premium in this playfully open zone is ethics-as-*sportsmanship*; the contest here is not primarily a faceoff but a face-to-face preamble. While the small relational community of cricket, the micro, is not and cannot substitute itself to the macro, infinite world, this world’s face is legible in Chuck’s contractual vision, where the contract’s “print is finest”—where in making sense of the cricket club “picture,” one makes sense of the planet.

This instance and instant of reading are, as Deleuze and Guattari would call them, aesthetic in that they ultimately “create[s] the finite,” the little situation, the tiniest “Russian doll” of human life, or the infinitesimal that in turn “redisCOVERS,” “restores,” and shows off the “infinite.” Neither the infinite nor the infinitesimal is anterior/posterior or superior/inferior to the other. “The town,” the philosophers also stress in their 1991 book *What Is Philosophy?*, “does not come after the house, nor does the cosmos after the territory. The universe does not come after the figure, and the figure is an aptitude of the universe.” They are telescoped inside each other and available to our geomethodological microscopy. The figure figures a universe because

there is a universe to be figured and figured out, and the universe itself is a figure, a representation and a face of many faces, all alongside one another and oftentimes all in one or in one place. Let us be mindful of this, because it sums up geomethodology's basic tenet, from which the decompressing technology of reading follows. It is the kind of distancing-cum-de-distancing technology Levinas endorses in his essay "Heidegger, Gagarin, and Us," against Heidegger's apprehensions about the fast-growing human capabilities of "measuring and executing, for the purpose of gaining mastery over that which is as a whole." What Levinas admires in the astronaut's "feat" is a completely different technology. This technology *spatializes* ethically. It "redistricts" place planet-wide to help both the comfortably placed and the displaced to relate and come together. Less "dangerous than the spirits [*génies*] of the *Place*" that, throughout history, have placed to include, shelter, and nourish, but also to exclude, control, and enslave by "splitting . . . humanity into native and strangers," this is a distancing technology liable to renew the earth as a common home. "[W]hat counts most of all, Levinas says, is that [Gagarin] left the *Place*," the Earth as Place. For, Levinas stresses, the cosmonaut rose "beyond any horizon" but only to open up new horizons and understandings, within which the planet's mystery, its many facets, faces, and relations are all necessarily entangled.