A Conversation with Joseph O’Neill

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Charlton Payne: This journal issue being focused on Turkish-American literature, I thought we might start with your thoughts on the subject. As you explore thoroughly in Blood-Dark Track, the family history focused on your grandfathers, you have an affiliation with Turkey on your mother’s side. Having been born in Cork, spent your childhood in different international locations, and then later in the Netherlands and the U.K., how would you describe your relationship to Turkey?

Joseph O’Neill: My relation to Turkey is, I’ve come realize, primarily a way of relating to my mother. She is a Turkish national of purely Arab origin—both her father and mother were Christian Arabs whose ancestors left Ottoman Syria and ended up in Mersin. These migrants spoke Arabic and French. It’s not until you get to my cousins’ generation that reference is no longer made to les turques as specimens of the other; my cousins are unselfconsciously Turkish, although of course they are conscious of belonging to a minority. So my idea of Turkey flows through and into my mother, who herself has a very powerful but highly specific relation to the country: for several months of the year she lives in Mersin and Finike, where she consorts almost exclusively with family and childhood friends, all of whom belong to the Christian community that is now very much reduced in numbers and cultural distinctness.

Consequently my own perspective, which is bounded by hers, is a very narrow one: I don’t believe that I have set foot in a non-Christian household in Turkey more than a couple of times, and I don’t know much about Istanbul, for example. This is doubly strange when you consider that I have been to Turkey practically every year of my life, and indeed spent some months in a Mersin preschool, speaking Turkish every day, although, bizarrely, I can’t remember that episode and must accept the evidence of photographs that it indeed occurred. I do have powerful visual memories of the Mersin of the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies.

So although I go to Turkey every year, I’m there as a summertime holidaymaker, and a particularly indolent and inattentive one, intent mainly on recreation and family dealings. You could say that I combine the ignorance of the foreigner with the complacency of the local. My experience of being in Turkey is chronically touristic and repetitive, and each summer is a slightly blurred photocopy of the previous summer, and there seems to be no incremental gain of insight into that environment and culture, and certainly my grasp of the Turkish language, very limited to begin with, seems to shrivel every year along with my grasp of
French: to me, French is, as it were, a kind of Turkish. My mother’s first language is French: she went to boarding schools in Lyon and Aleppo, and spoke French at home, and to this day speaks Turkish as a fourth language, after English and Dutch. (My mother worked for many years as a schoolteacher in The Hague.)

CP: As for your relationship to the U.S., you have obviously spent much time there, written about it, and meanwhile, in 2007, even become a U.S. citizen. How would you, then, describe your relationship to the U.S.? And would you regard yourself as in some sense a Turkish-American author?

JO: I feel myself to be a New Yorker; I don’t really feel myself to be an American in any deep way. Although I love traveling in the USA (and Canada), outside New York I am very clearly a visitor in the strict sense—one who is present as a seer rather than as the one who belongs. It has never occurred to me to regard myself as Turkish-American author. Then again, I have the same remoteness from the notion of being an Irish-American author. I’m not sure that these nationalistic identifiers have much bearing on my biographical and artistic situation. That is not to discount their relevance to other writers in situations that differ from mine.

CP: Is there a discernible tradition of or budding Turkish-American writing which, even if you do not necessarily consider yourself a part of it, has nonetheless caught your attention?

JO: It’s certainly the case that someone like Elif Batuman might fall into this category. And only last month I had coffee with a young writer from Mersin, Zeynep Lokmanoglu, who recently completed an MFA at Columbia. I’m hopeful that before long we’ll be treated to fiction that interestingly incorporates both American and Turkish perspectives. No doubt this has already occurred, and I’m simply unaware of it. I have no expertise in this area.

CP: In a 2008 interview with the LA Times you describe Netherland as written within an American literary tradition, namely, as a novel of The American Dreamer. Would you say that it is possible to become an American author by writing within a literary tradition? Or to ask the question another way: Is there something specific to literature and the writer of narrative fiction that enables a type of identification with a nation, culture, or whatever we might want to call such an entity, that cannot be reduced to having been born to certain parents in a particular country?

JO: Yes—I suppose I do think that a certain migration and naturalization is possible in the realm of writing. The obvious examples, here, are writers who work in a foreign language: Nabokov, Beckett, Hemon, etc. But national identification is in any case not exhaustive. If X is identified as an American author, that would not mean X is only American; and of course the question of what ‘American’ might mean, in this context, remains as open as ever.
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CP: In Blood-Dark Track you portray your maternal grandfather, Joseph Dakak, as very much “Levantine” (“He spoke numerous languages, cut a suave figure, ran a hotel, did a bit of opportunistic import-export business, and generally made a living at the intersection of east and west. As a metropolitan, uprooted Syrian, he did not count as a proper Arab [...]” [181]). To understand your grandfather’s story, you write, you needed to understand the “gulf between modern, uniform Turkey and the culturally variegated Levant” (199). Moreover, both Mersin and Jerusalem are identified as “profoundly Ottoman places” (199). Which is not, however, to say that the Ottoman Levant is thereby romanticized or idealized. Like your other grandfather, who was active in the IRA in Cork, Joseph Dakak lived in a place (and time) that was, as you point out, “extraordinarily hateful and hazardous” (336). Where would you see the influence on your writing of this complexly ambivalent heritage with respect to Turkish history and culture?

JO: I suppose that the personal influence you speak of is, in the final analysis, more Ottoman than Turkish. That may sound odd, given that the Ottoman Empire was dissolved almost fifty years before I was born, but as I’ve said, my Turkish grandparents were one hundred percent Ottoman, as is, on reflection, my mother. That’s an anachronistic state of affairs, of course, but anachronism can be artistically useful. The very elusiveness of my and my family’s national identity forced me to deal with certain kinds of complexity and to question the enormously powerful cultural and political categories that seek to reduce one to simplicity, if I can put it that way.

CP: A curious Turkish figure emerges later in Netherland, the “angelic” Mehmet Taspinar. Taspinar wears the costume of an angel, wings and all. He has been dressing this way for two years by the time Hans meets him in the Chelsea Hotel. Before that, he had spent time in a mental asylum in New Hampshire. What is the significance for the narrative of this Turkish figure who, in his “baroque anguish,” defies all the other patterns of meaning presented in the novel?

JO: I wrote this character in part because I didn’t understand his significance—and still don’t. My conception of the writer’s job is that he or she should not, and I guess cannot, really understand what is being written or ‘said.’

CP: Your maternal grandfather, Joseph Dakak, is quite a fascinating figure. Am I wrong to interpret a possible connection between Joseph Dakak’s development, as you phrase it, of a powerful “relationship with his imaginary double” and this fantasist of another sort, the self-imagining angel Taspinar, who is at once transcendent, innocent, sad, but also verging on insanity and finally ephemeral?

JO: That’s a very interesting interpretation. I can only agree that the question of the double—of the imagined, alternative self who seemingly offers an escape from the primary, incarcerating self that does the imagining—seems to detain me more and more.
CP: The relationship of your protagonists (including the autobiographical self of *Blood-Dark Track*) to political geography informs much of your storytelling. This brings us back to the previous question about an experience of place that is not simply reducible to a notion of nationality based on natality. That experience does not seem to entail merely being physically near to or even deracinated from a particular place. For instance, I was struck by how in *Netherland* Hans reflects on a feeling of homesickness among the immigrant cricket players. Their homesickness issues from deeply “individual longings” that are not bound merely to geographical or historical place. Hans even doubts whether his proximity to the terrorist attack on NYC confers on him the status of a victim of attempted murder. What is it that Hans and your other protagonists are trying to come to terms with when it comes to this odd discrepancy between geographically, politically localizable space and the (earnest) play of nearness and distance to such sites that all your protagonists, including of *The Dog*, seem to be trying to make sense of?

JO: Again, I’ll cheerfully refuse an exegetical role here. I’ll simply affirm that you touch on a huge and complicated issue: the moral and political consequences of human proximity, and how the most recent phase of modernity is changing our understanding of proximity. It used to be the case, of course, that proximity was a physically and technologically limited phenomenon; but as the potential for human mobility, intellectual as well as physical, is suddenly almost infinite, we are left in a dizzyingly undetermined space in which we can no longer limit our sense of the world to our country or region or culture; and this of course affects our sense of identity, which is to say, our sense of who we might be like, and thus who we should first and foremost care for and about. *The Dog*, in particular, is animated by this new kind of vertigo.

That all sounds very abstract. Let me give a terribly concrete, and coincidentally Turkish, example: today’s *Guardian* leads with a story about the body of a refugee Syrian boy washed ashore near Bodrum. There is a photo of the little body lying face down in the surf. The image is indescribably shocking: and consequently, and in accordance with the newspaper’s intentions, the reader is moved to a place of close proximity with these desperate migrants and their plight. But images of this kind could be published daily in the newspaper. There is no end to the number of children around the world who are dying and suffering, and there is no end to technology’s capacity to publicize their situation. How, then, are we to go forward? How are we, the readers, to allocate our finite emotional and financial resources? Where does it all end? Some new thinking is required here. The huge risk, of course, is that our sympathetic faculty will become overwhelmed and will shut down and that, perversely, we will begin to demonize those who make a claim on our consciences. We already see this kind of thing happening in the domestic politics of Europe and the United States.

CP: It’s no coincidence that hotels, which the French anthropologist Marc Augé includes among the transient “non-places” of supermodernity, figure so prominently in your stories: the Chelsea Hotel, of course, but also your family’s Toros
Hotel in Mersin, or the vanished Modern Hotel in Jerusalem. How do such “non-places” facilitate narrative?

JO: The non-places you list might also include the serviced apartment that the narrator of *The Dog* occupies on his arrival in Dubai—a place where all traces of his presence are daily removed by the cleaning staff. And I suppose that some would say that Dubai itself is a kind of non-place. I myself would not say this—although I might assent to a suggestion that the emirate is an alter-place, in that many of the usual attributes of a national space either are absent or are present in a radically different form. There is a character in *The Dog* who suggests that secret mission of Dubai is to make itself indistinguishable from its airport, and he may have a point. These supermodern places, as you call them, resonate with me, for all sorts of reasons. They seem to be where the action is.

CP: In *Blood-Dark Track* the narrative principle of rescripting applies not only to the events you describe and the actions you narrate of the participants in them, but also to the locations in which these things take place. It applies not so much for the transient spaces of hotels as for the historical sites that have been erected, demolished, refashioned, and in certain ways overwritten—“re-scripted”—by the narratives by which their inhabitants make sense of their worlds. This seems to be especially true of Mersin and Adana. Or are they no more exceptional than the many other places you have written about?

JO: Most, maybe even all, societies are agitated by a continuous process of rescripting, as you say, but of course the agitation is particularly extreme in contemporary Turkey. I wouldn’t be the first person to point out that the Kemalist national rescription is itself undergoing a dramatic revision by the current government, with all kinds of interesting and alarming consequences. I’m not really up to speed with what has been going on in Mersin in last ten years, but it seems to be developing a sense of itself as a liberal hotspot, and this liberalism comes from an increased awareness of the city’s origins as a cosmopolitan, outward-looking, business-oriented place. Perhaps I’m dreaming.

CP: Before and after the publication of *Blood-Dark Track*, this biography/family history, you write novels, which are told by unique, compelling narrative voices. The factuality that biographical writing thrives on would seem, in contrast, to restrict the narrative voice’s freedom to fictionalize. Was the choice of a genre so heavily invested in “truth” a way to balance the narrator’s confrontation with the “cold and profound sea of misconceptions” in which your family’s personal narratives were steeped and which consequently let the memory or knowledge about the greater political events of the time (e.g., the Armenian genocide) sink into oblivion? And if so, do you think this was a good choice?

JO: In writing *Blood-Dark Track* I felt empowered by the so-called facts, and by the challenge of constructing something coherent out of them—a family history, which is to say a micro-history whose construction would shed light on the macro-
historical edifices that national narratives offer. This sense of empowerment was rooted in the knowledge that I was not modifying the record, as it were, but adding to it.

Works Cited