Open City
Reading Signs of Uncertain Times in New York and Brussels

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Introduction

In Teju Cole's acclaimed novel *Open City* (2011), the young protagonist Julius, a psychiatry intern who has moved to the United States from Nigeria, wanders through post-9/11 New York, gauging the complex history of the city and struggling to connect the stories he encounters with his own personal history and identity. On his daily strolls, he meets a range of marginal characters and repressed urban memories – the flotsam and jetsam, it seems, of violent processes, often dictated by economic upheavals. New York appears as a repository of uneasy memories that spatialize the remembrance of a series of forceful dislocations – what the urban sociologist Saskia Sassen (2014) has called, in her most recent book, a logic of expulsions, and one of the most urgent global phenomena currently taking place.

Most of *Open City* is set in New York, and imbued with a keen understanding of how the urban layers are suffused with ethnic and racial trauma. Halfway through the novel the scene switches to Brussels, where Julius spends a few weeks on holiday. In reviews, interviews, and scholarly research (Breger 2015; Genç 2014; PBS 2011), the scenes set in Brussels have been considered as particularly relevant for the way in which they could offer insights into the experience of dislocation, migration, identity and cosmopolitanism against the backdrop of recent ideologically and religiously inspired global violence. Contemporary commentators have pointed to the link between the radicalizing of the characters Farouq and Khalil in the novel, and the attackers of the November 2015 attacks in Paris and the March 2016 attacks in Brussels (see Pitts 2015; Kleinpaste 2015). Teju Cole himself engaged in the debate

about the ideological roots of the Paris and Brussels attacks in media interviews and social media posts, publicly reacting for example, in a widely reported Facebook post responding to a Charlie Hebdo editorial, and effectively accusing Charlie Hebdo, one of the victims of the Paris attacks, of gross bigotry (Facebook 2015a; see also Huckmagazine 2016).

In a number of recent instances, the novel, its literary setting and its characters, then, have become enmeshed in the interpretation of real-life events, in ways that were in part stimulated by the author. Exemplary is a discussion on Teju Cole's Facebook profile in answer to the Paris 2015 attacks, a discussion which drew explicit links between the conditions of some of the disenfranchised and radicalizing youths encountered in the novel and the events in Paris. The discussion starts when Cole links to a blog post by art historian Terry Pitts, who states that "in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks […] I couldn't help but recall a long and prescient section in Teju Cole's novel *Open City*" (Pitts 2015). One commenter to the post, Claudine, immediately disallows this referential relation: "the concerns of the characters he talked to had nothing to do with those of the terrorists in Paris. 'Pas d'amalgame'! ['don't mix things']." Pitts and Cole, in their reactions, agree with Pauline, leaving open, however, the possibility that the novel may present insights into real-world complexities. As Pitts puts it: "The fifty-page section on Brussels in 'Open City' does provide a window into communities like Molenbeek that astute observers like Teju can share with all of us" (Facebook 2015b). The lines between literary fiction and the author's personal opinion concerning the actual events are further blurred when considering an article by Cole in *The New Inquiry*, which presents an argument about Belgium's (or Flanders') historical cosmopolitanism in the context of the current political climate. Referring to Jan van Eyck's fifteenth-century self-portrait with turban, Cole argues that the turban symbolizes a now-lost cosmopolitanism; the very same thought also appears in the mind of the narrator of *Open City* when encountering the radicalizing men in Brussels (Cole 2012; Cole 2011, 106).

The idea of the novel as a "window" into some of the political and societal questions of the early twenty-first century is shared by several recent literary scholars and publicists: Karolina Golimowska (2016, 30), for example, in *The Post-9/11 City in Novels*, argues that *Open City* tries "to explain and imagine how radical Islamic movements come to existence in the context of a Western metropolis", while Adam Kirsch, in a 2016 article for *Foreign Policy*, singles out Teju Cole (on the basis of *Open City*) as one of the novelists who "have provided crucial insights into the political temper of the moment."

In the way it addresses urban and global traumatic memories, as well as the possibility of cosmopolitanism in the face of the challenges of the twenty-first century, *Open City* has "managed to hit a nerve in contemporary literary culture" (Vermeulen 2013, 40). But to what extent can we draw on the novel to shed light on current, real-world ideological conflicts? Or, to put it in more provocative terms, is it possible for Khalil, the young Moroccan whom Julius meets in the Brussels municipality Etterbeek, in *Open City*, to speak for the motives of Khalid – one of the actual Brussels bombers, also of Moroccan descent, and staying for a short period in the actual Etterbeek? I am aware, of course, that such questions are essentially provocative (or, from another perspective, perhaps bordering on the naïve). No current literary studies paradigm allows for Khalil to speak for Khalid – and in terms of referential relationship, Etterbeek, Belgium, and Etterbeek in *Open City* are located in effect in different countries (cf. Pike 1981; Westphal 2011). "Pas d'amalgame": let's not mix worlds with different ontological status. And yet the brief reference to how *Open City* has been read in the wake of the Brussels and Paris attacks, as well as the fact that it has widely been read as a 9/11 novel, illustrates the readiness of (some) literary authors to have a say in current social and political affairs, and the keenness of (some) readers and critics to draw on literature to give meaning to real-world events.

This article presents one attempt to come to grips with the complex frames of reference in *Open City* that would seem to point from the textual world to the actual world. I will focus on how experiences of dislocation are framed in the novel as part of its broader narrative strategies. I will first look at how descriptions of dislocation, and people caught up in dislocating processes, are framed in terms of an epistemological reading of the narrator, a search for "signs of the times" which eventually leads back to the narrator himself. I will then move on to consider questions of literary genre, and the way in which the novel exhibits features of the novel of ideas, the Young Man from the Province, and the "roots trip" novel – and what these generic frames may mean for the possibly moralizing conclusions drawn from the novel. I will finally consider the dynamics between aestheticism and ethical imperative, which arguably

constitute a dialogic binary in the novel. This binary is retraced in some of the literature on *Open City*, which is somewhat divided between a reading of the novel as an aesthetic journey (in reviews, in particular, see e.g. von Trotha 2012) or as an intellectual investigation of twenty-first century cosmopolitanism (see e.g. Breger 2015; Gerhmann 2016; Hallemeier 2013) – although there are also readings integrating both perspectives (see e.g. Haley 2015; Vermeulen 2013).

In this article, these issues are considered also for the way in which they chime with broader questions within literary urban studies: the referential relationship between the literary city and its counterpart in the actual factual world, and the aestheticizing tendencies of many of *Open City's* modernist antecedents in city writing. One of the key arguments I make is that the ambiguousness of the narration in the novel makes it unusually problematic to draw moralizing conclusions from the novel. The confusion and loss of moral bearing brought about by violent dislocation does not stem only from the cities' palimpsest memories, but is arguably also found in the narrator's exposition of his personal inquiry. And yet I hope to show that this should not lead to complete referential aporia. This article shares the concern voiced by Hubert Zapf (2016, 245) when he states that "ethics does seem to necessitate [...] a move beyond the self-referential aporias of language towards an involvement of texts in questions of 'life' – even and especially in the depragmatized sphere of aesthetics and literary studies" (see also Zapf 2008).

Before examining descriptions of dislocations in the novel, a few words should be said about the narrator's unreliability and the novel's plot denouement, since the reader who has read the novel in full will be bound to consider everything that happens in the novel from the perspective of the revelations at the end. The narration is filtered exclusively through the voice of the protagonist, Julius, whose perspective is in effect the only one the reader becomes acquainted with. Much of what goes on in other characters' minds consists of speculations and conjectures on the part of Julius, or re-framings of their narratives. The unreliability of the narrator – hinted at throughout – is confirmed towards the end of the novel, when at a party in New York, Julius has a conversation with Moji, an acquaintance of his from his earlier life in Nigeria. She claims that Julius raped her when they were both teenagers living in Lagos. Moji confronts Julius, accusing him of refusing to remember the events (Cole 2011, 243–246; in the following OC). Julius does not

react to Moji's revelations, leaving the party without a further word, but also without offering the reader any insights into possible thoughts of guilt he might have. The core thematics of the novel, which deal with dislocation, violence, remembrance, the power of narration, the possibility of aloofness as well as a sense of ethical urgency, are all put into an uneasy perspective by this revelation and the protagonist's casual reaction. Crucially, it returns the focus of the novel to the figure of the protagonist himself, who remains a troubled enigma.

Signs of Economic Dislocations

The protagonist of *Open City* seems constantly attracted to signs of the visible and invisible forces guiding migrations – or of the forces that are violently intervening with natural and man-made relocations. This peculiar attitude is heralded in the opening pages of the novel, when Julius describes his fascination with the bird migrations he watches from the window of his apartment (OC, 3). He muses that the spectacle of these bird movements may have a bearing on his own life, and, echoing the ancient practice of augury, he describes his own attitude to this natural phenomenon as one of "taking auspices" – interpreting the bird signs as omens (OC, 4). It reveals Julius's role as a reader of contemporary urban and natural signs – a characteristic that has led some critics to see Julius as a more contemporary version of the Baudelairean *flâneur* (see Pettersson 2016). Narrating the urban environment in *Open City* is a constant semiotic endeavour, and it is no coincidence that Julius expresses a keen interest in the development of American sign language (see OC, 37).

Julius also moves from probing the city's layered memories of ethnic violence (including ethnic cleansing) to the unearthing of the more contemporary consequences of current economic and climatic disruptions. In the opening chapter, he notes the signs outside the Tower Records store on the corner of Sixty-Sixth Street in New York City, surprised to see that they "announced that the store as well as the company behind it were going out of business" (OC, 16). Not much later, he comes across another example of a national corporation suddenly disappearing from the cityscape: At a local Blockbuster (a video-rental chain) in Harlem he is "startled to see a sign announcing it,

too, was going out of business" (OC, 19). For Julius, these are signs that "the business model had been fatally damaged" (OC, 19). Significantly, Julius proclaims he is largely unaffected by this development:

> It wasn't that I felt sorry for these faceless national corporations; far from it. They had made their profits and their names by destroying smaller, earlier local businesses. But I was touched not only at the passage of these fixtures in my mental landscape, but also at the swiftness and dispassion with which the market swallowed even the most resilient enterprises. Businesses that had seemed unshakable a few years previously had disappeared in the span, seemingly, of a few weeks. (OC, 19.)

It is important to note Julius's first impulse when confronted with the signs of radical change. Although he is able to connect these to larger, and indeed global, phenomena, his first interest is with how they affect his own personal sphere of experience – his "mental landscape." What disturbs him is the fading presence of past structures within his own urban routines – within his solitary walks through Harlem, and his habitual visit to a local record store. In many respects, this attitude feeds into a much larger thematic preoccupation of the novel: coming to terms with the ultimate "absent presence" or "present absence" in the New York cityscape – that of the twin towers (see Salmela & Ameel forthcoming; Wilhite 2016, 6), but it is also emblematic of Julius's aloofness and his preoccupation with his own experiences.

The narrative strategies in *Open City* lead the narrator to extract the hidden meanings from the urban texture, hinting at the possibility that, through Julius, marginalized voices become audible again. Teju Cole has corroborated such a reading of the novel, arguing: "I'm concerned with the story of the *disregarded*, a category that immigrants overlap extensively with – the disregarded in the sense of the ignored, the invisible" (Tepper 2011; original emphasis). As has become clear from Julius's reaction to the residue of economic upheaval in his urban environment, the representation of dislocation in the novel is affected strongly by the protagonist's self-centered attitude. This is also the case in his encounters with people affected by dislocations – a discussion with a shoeshine in New York, and a range of encounters in Brussels will be examined in somewhat more detail.

In a complex passage early on in the novel, Julius listens to the long story of a bootblack he meets in the netherworld of the city, in "the underground catacombs of Penn Station" (OC, 70). The mention of the underground location of the bootblack can be understood as a reference to the invisibility of this character, of the extent to which he is stowed out of sight of the daylight city, and the terms in which this underground location are couched – "underground catacombs" – are typical also for the aestheticizing and rich intertextual city descriptions in the novel. Although there may be practical reasons for the underground location, where the bootblack is at once close to potential clients and protected from the weather, it also chimes with other references in the novel to a palimpsestic city of the dead, hidden in plain sight, and with high modernist and symbolist readings of the city (T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, amongst others), to which I will return in the final part of this essay. The way in which the bootblack is described, and describes himself, again revolves around the protagonist's endeavours to make sense of signs of the times, and the relevance that such signs may have for revealing larger, over-arching global changes. At the same time, there is also the question of how far signs can be knowable at all – the extent to which they tell us what we think they tell us.

> I haven't always been a bootblack, you know. That is a sign of changing times. I started out as a hairdresser, and that is what I was for long years in this city. You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I knew all the fashions of the day [...] I came here from Haiti, when things got bad there […]. We had to leave because the future was uncertain. (OC, 71–72.)

The Haitian man sees his current profession as a bootblack as "a sign of changing times." Although the reader will first be inclined to think that the man speaks unequivocally of a change for the worse in his working conditions, the picture is more ambiguous, since the reader learns that the man had in earlier times been a *de facto* slave, who had to buy himself free. Life in the service trade in earlier times was no enviable plight, and the man recounts how the Italians and Irish he had met in past times in the city, often "worked in terrible conditions" (OC, 72). The passage is ambiguous also for how it frames the narrative voice of the bootblack. The story is not presented as a direct quotation of his words;

instead, as with most such embedded narratives, it is inserted without quotation marks into Julius's first-person narration. The narration of the Haitian blends in with Julius's narration, without a clear boundary marker, apart from the indention of a new paragraph. Added to the man's argument that "you wouldn't know it to look at me, but …," the story underscores both the powers (as sole narrator) and the limits (as conjecturer of others' stories) of Teju Cole's narrator.

In Brussels

If *Open City* is in part about getting to grips with the "signs of changing time" that point to violent upheavals, and with the semiotic residue they leave in the urban texture, the intermezzo in the Belgian capital in the middle of the novel may seem at first sight somewhat out of place for a post-9/11 New York novel – especially when considering the year of publication in 2011. Surely Brussels in the first decade of the twenty-first century had little to tell of global challenges to come, particularly in comparison with New York? During recent years, however, and especially following the November 2015 Paris attacks (carried out in part by Brussels-based perpetrators) and the March 2016 Brussels attacks, *Open City*'s scenes in Brussels have come to be seen as some of the novel's most prophetic sections. Several critics and readers noted, in their treatment of the novel, the importance Brussels has long had as a hotbed of political violence since at least the first half of the nineteenth-century, and as a potentially pivotal place for gauging how Europe gets to grips with ideologically and religiously inspired global violence, as well as with the challenges of global immigration and integration (see e.g. Kleinpaste 2015).

As has been widely noted, the Brussels scenes also take on programmatic importance for the way in which they provide the novel with its title. During his stay, Julius muses that Brussels was declared an open city at the beginning of the Second World War: "Had Brussels's rulers not opted to declare it an open city and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble" (OC, 97). The reference to Brussels's status in wartime connects the "open city" of the novel's title both with the idea of a cosmopolitan city and that of a city under siege. Especially in light of the

events unfolding after the Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 attacks, when armed forces patrolled the streets and military vehicles were stationed at schools and stations, this frame of reference somewhat uncannily envisions the city in threatening military terms. It also resonates with the reading of the novel as a quintessential 9/11 novel, which pictures a global city under siege (see e.g O'Gorman 2015; Wilhite 2016). The way in which the narrator characterizes his experiences in the Belgian capital through the use of military language is, in fact, initiated in the opening pages of the Brussels chapter, where Julius reflects on how "the mild winter weather and the old stones lay a melancholy siege on the city" (OC, 92). The wording draws on the age-old pathetic fallacy in city literature, pioneered famously by Baudelaire in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), in which the environment is read as an expression of the narrator's innermost sentiments – aestheticizing, in personal terms, urban space. It also foregrounds the city as a site of a (personal and global) battle front. "Open city" becomes, then, associated with a far from a reassuring concept from military history: Declaring a city "open" only asserts its vulnerability, and Brussels is never described in the novel as devoid of traumatic (war) memories.

As in the chapters on New York City, the narrative moves from reflections on the built environment to an engagement, through a number of chance encounters, with dislocated people in these sites. In Brussels, Julius meets two young Moroccan men, Farouq and Farouq's friend Khalil, with whom he engages in long, rambling conversations. Farouq manages an internet and telephone shop – a dislocated man catering to the dislocated. He is an autodidact, studying to be a translator, and fascinated by a question that also seems to be on the mind of Julius: whether it is possible for people from different backgrounds to "live together but still keep their own values intact" (OC, 112). For several critics, these conversations between Julius and Farouq constitute "the centerpiece of the novel" (Mahajan 2011).

The protagonist's engagement – or rather, his lack of engagement – with the often politically sensitive issues at stake in these dialogues can be contextualized with reference to the generic features of the novel. In the conversations with Farouq and Khalil, *Open City* comes close to being a novel of ideas, a literary genre in which different (somewhat caricatured) characters engage in a philosophical discussion of competing ideas – or a novel "in which conversation, intellectual discussion and

debate predominate, and in which plot, narratives, emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization are deliberately limited" (Cuddon 1999, 602). Cole has confirmed that *Open City* is "an ideas-driven book" (PBS 2011). For most of the novel, the narrator merely presents a range of stories, characters and ideas, rather than his own reflections on events, even when solicited: "He [Farouq] paused, and laughed, assessing my reaction to what he had been saying. I gave no indication of my thoughts. I only nodded, signalling that I was listening." (OC, 115.) There are moments, especially in Chapter 8 of the novel, one of the last Brussels chapters, when Julius seems to be not unsympathetic to the plight of Farouq's story as a victim of racism and new kinds of orientalism. But Julius's engagement returns swiftly and somewhat unexpectedly to ethical aporia. He proves unable to attribute meaning, unable to embrace one of the sides of the political polarization, and ultimately also unable to continue the conversation:

> But it suddenly occurred to me that, even if he had been alone, I wouldn't have wanted to talk. He, too, was in the grip of rage and rhetoric. I saw that, attractive though his side of the political spectrum was. A cancerous violence had eaten into every political idea, had taken over the ideas themselves, and for so many, all that mattered was the willingness to do something. Action led to action, free of any moorings, and the way to be someone [...] was to be enraged. It seemed as if the only way this lure of violence could be avoided was by having no causes, by being magnificently isolated from all loyalties. But was that not an ethical lapse graver than rage itself? (OC, 107.)

In this passage, the narrator expresses the feeling that all political ideas had become infected by a "cancerous violence"; that even an "attractive […] side of the political spectrum" is ultimately suspect. Julius's aloofness from the political opinions of other characters that he recounts is here given a basis: the only way out was "by having no causes." And yet it could also be said that this course – evidently chosen by the narrator – actually constitutes a more severe "ethical lapse" than taking sides on the political spectrum. In the subsequent Brussels chapter in the novel, this paradoxical position is not resolved, but rather framed in new terms, adding a reflection on writing itself to this ethical consideration.

What is often glossed over in discussions of the Brussels episode in *Open City* is that it is part of the novel's generic outlook as a novel of ideas to avoid psychological engagement, and to focus on the presentation of opposing political visions. Julius's exposition makes room for two different narratives concerning the complexities of the situation of identity, migration and cosmopolitanism in the Belgian capital, while fundamentally remaining aloof of the actual debates. The perspective of the two Moroccan men is complemented not by that of Julius, but by that of a Belgian woman Julius meets on the plane to Brussels, Dr. Maillotte. Dr. Maillotte, too, is, like Julius, Farouq, and Khalil, a migrant. Having lived through the Second World War as young girl, she has moved to the United States, where she is still living. The Brussels section as a whole is framed by the two parts of her story: The first person Julius speaks to on his journey to Brussels is Dr. Maillotte, and she is also the last person he meets before leaving. Yet in most of the existing literature on *Open City*, Maillotte's contribution is ignored (see e.g. Golimowska 2016).

Dr. Maillotte, who has her own story to tell about dislocations – one suggestion, in the novel, is that she might have had difficulties pursuing a career in Belgium because of her atheism – has little patience with the rage of the young Moroccan men:

> Look, I know this type, she said, these young men who go around as if the world is an offense to them. It is dangerous. For people to feel that they alone have suffered, it is very dangerous. Our society has made itself open for such people, but when they come in, all you hear is complaints. Why would you want to move somewhere only to prove how different you are? And why would a society like that want to welcome you? […] There's a reason, she said, I had to leave Belgium and try to make my life in another country. I don't complain and, to be honest, I really have little patience for people who do. (OC, 143.)

The use of the term "open" in the passage is revealing, especially in relation to the programmatic metaphorization of the "open city" concept in the Brussels scenes. The passage seems to question to what extent it is possible to have an "open city" – a city or a society that maintains openness to people who, on the basis of Khalil's and Farouq's words, want to "keep their own values intact" (OC, 112), express an apologetic

stance towards Al-Qaeda (OC, 121) and the desire to complement the Enlightenment with the teaching of Islam (OC, 126–127), all combined with "rage and rhetoric" and the intimidating "willingness to do something" (OC, 107). Julius notes with an undertone of disapproval that Dr. Maillotte dismisses the story he tells (OC, 144), but there is no effort on the narrator's part to create a synthesis of these different opinions that the migrants – one who had to leave Belgium, the other one who has moved there – have concerning displacement, otherness and the possibility of cosmopolitanism.

It would, therefore, go too far to read *Open City* as "a return to more 'positive', in part universalist, in part culturalist paradigms of collective identification," as Claudia Breger (2015, 107) – amongst others – has suggested. I agree, then, with Pieter Vermeulen (2013, 41, 42), who argues that, although "*Open City* can easily be read as a magisterial display of literature's enabling role in fostering cosmopolitan feeling and understanding," the novel, in fact, "interrogates rather than celebrates such a literary cosmopolitanism." This is the case not only for how, in the novel, different ideas and arguments are narrated and embedded – the way, for example, in which the narratives of Khalil and Farouq are enclosed within the much more sceptical views of Dr. Maillotte, and the way in which the tensions between these views remain ultimately unresolved.

The novel's interrogation of cosmopolitanism is also bound up with how its aesthetics blur any imaginary window into global dislocations and their repercussions. Breger (2015, 106) claims that the novel affirms "the significance of aesthetics also for political readings of literature." But in the novel, aesthetics seem to get constantly in the way of political and ethical questions, or, rather, get in the way of taking over an imaginary moral high or low ground. This is foregrounded and problematized specifically in the passage immediately subsequent to Julius's final conversation with Dr. Mailotte. The protagonist's aloofness *vis-à-vis* the questions he faces is immediately put into perspective by his subsequent musings in front of the statue of Camille Claudel. Julius considers the criticism that befell the author for his support for the collaboration during the Second World War, and W.H. Auden's kinder stance towards Claudel, that "time will pardon Paul Claudel, pardons him for writing well" (OC, 144). Julius is not entirely convinced, and wonders "if indeed it was that simple, if time was so free with memory, so generous with

pardons, that writing well could come to stand in the place of an ethical life" (OC, 144–145). Following so closely upon Julius's unwillingness to get involved in the questions posed both by Dr. Maillotte and by Farouq, and his elaborate aestheticizing of the encounters he has had in Brussels, the statement takes on a programmatic quality – especially when seen in retrospect, with the novel's denouement in mind.

An Aestheticizing "Roots Trip"

In order to gauge the extent to which the Brussels' chapters are informed by self-centered aestheticizing strategies, rather than by an interest in the plight of others' lives, Julius's reasons for being in the Belgian capital warrant a closer look. Ostensibly, the trip is made for the purpose of getting in touch with his German grandmother, with whom he has lost contact. But when asked for his reasons to travel to Brussels, Julius is reluctant to reveal them (OC, 93). When Khalil questions him about it, Julius only gives "a version of the truth" (OC, 117), and he invents a name and background for himself when in conversation with a Czech woman he meets in the Belgian capital. Even more conspicuously, he fails to even try to contact his grandmother.

One possible interpretation of these various versions of Julius's intentions in travelling to Brussels is that the existence of a German *oma* is entirely invented. This might stretch the evidence given to the reader, but it would be in tune with the characteristics of one particular literary genre with which the novel has affinities: *Open City* reads at times like an early twenty-first century version of the Young Man from the Province novel (see Ameel 2010; Chanda 1981; Trilling 1948). One of the crucial features of the Young Man from the Province – apart from his provincial background and his unusual sensitivity – is his exceptional, though hidden lineage, which sets him apart from his peers. The Young Man is in essence a kind of foundling, and in the nineteenth-century novel the aristocratic background which partly explains his unusual behavior and aesthetic predispositions tends to be shrouded in secrecy and is sometimes entirely invented by the character. This secretive, highborn background frames the Young Man in his constant performance of (tragic, over-stretched) self-fashioning, carried out in the hope of social and/or artistic advancement. In the light of Julius's unreliability as a

narrator and his constant endeavors to self-consciously construct an identity, the insistence on his lost German grandmother, for whom he fails to search in Brussels, and the occasional use of German words are behaviors that seem "suspiciously pretentious" (Genç 2014), appearing to be first and foremost acts of self-fashioning.

Even if we presume that Julius's *oma* is real, and that he has the intention to find her, it becomes gradually clear that the insertion of the Brussels scenes in the novel is motivated by other interests than those dictated by family ties. This dawns on Julius, himself, who, halfway through the Brussels episode, "began to wonder if Brussels hadn't somehow drawn me to itself for reasons more opaque than I suspected, that the paths I mindlessly followed through the city followed a logic irrelevant to my family history" (OC, 115–116).

The trip to Brussels is ostensibly constructed as a "roots trip" (Antz 2012), a journey to an imaginary or real homeland. (A prototypical example of such "roots trip" literature is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* [2004].) But the reader is only superficially led to believe that Julius is looking for his actual, genetic ancestors. Rather, this is a journey back to the literary and artistic antecedents of the narrator's aestheticizing tendencies. The text is rich with references to W.G. Sebald's Belgium (in *Austerlitz* [2001]), Joseph Conrad's Brussels (in *Heart of Darkness* [1900]), and the movies of Kieslowski, amongst many others. The Brussels episode ends, revealingly, with a long reference to James Joyce's "The Dead" (OC, 146). The rain falling over Brussels and over northern Europe may have the power to connect Julius's plight with that of global predicaments – but within the novel's structure it is, first of all, a way to link it to the aestheticizing narration pioneered by Joyce. In its "concern with interurban echoes" (Irr 2014, 55), the novel foregrounds this essentially modernist impulse – the idea that "one city leads to another in the distinctive aesthetic voyage into the metamorphosis of form" (Bradbury 1976/ 1986, 101) – to the extent that this aestheticizing concern overshadows, I would argue, what these literary cities might tell us about their counterparts in the real world.

In sum, even if the narrator shows interest in the repercussions of dislocations and trauma in the urban space, and if occasionally he considers himself in terms of ethics, congratulating himself (certainly with some self-irony) at the end of the novel on the fact that he has, in his life, "hewed close to the good" (OC, 243), aesthetic preoccupations

trump moral ones. Even if Julius considers that "having no causes" may constitute an "ethical lapse graver than rage itself" (OC, 107), this is exactly what he is guilty of. The combination of aestheticizing tendencies and ethical aloofness entail that the narrator refuses to attribute responsibility, guilt, or moral accountability to characters around him, or indeed to himself. This is most explicit in the turning point of the novel, when, confronted with Moji's accusations, Julius's inner voice comes up with nothing more than a banal anecdote involving Nietzsche, Camus and Scaevola – a sixth century BC Roman hero (OC, 246) – which contributes little to the reader's view of Julius's sense of moral responsibility, and starkly foregrounds his tendency to read the events he encounters in terms of intertextual references. Tellingly, Julius cares to look up the story to verify the anecdote (OC, 246), but has no interest in revisiting the diverging and potentially troubling versions of his own past.

Conclusion

Open City, so preoccupied with reading signs of its times, essentially draws attention back to Julius himself, and to his efforts to locate himself within a world permeated by violent transformations and dislocations. Rather than being about the absence of the Twin Towers, or the economical, ethnic or other dislocations encountered in the cityspace, the novel presents Julius himself as an absence. The protagonist appears not only as a dislocated character, but a deterritorialized sign, an enigma to himself, who is constantly struggling to re-locate. This is presented in the opening pages as a process of walking – when Julius argues that "New York City worked itself into my life at walking pace" (OC, 3) – but it is essentially an aesthetic, intellectual, and poetic endeavor. Julius's efforts at understanding the palimpsestic cityscapes in the novel are not directed outward to a referential reality, but are primarily framed in highly aestheticizing terms. In this project, there is little room for emotionally engaging with, or passing judgement on, the people or processes Julius encounters. *Open City* tells of expulsions and dislocations, but it is also an exercise in memory dislocation – both within the urban landscape and within the mind of the narrator – and one of the suggestions made in the novel is that his aestheticizing efforts may actually be complicit in

veiling painful memories, rather than helpful in retracing and bringing to life the past. Especially in view of the end of the novel, Julius's musings and his intertextual associating seem to become ways of blocking his engagement with real life.

If one would want to read the novel itself as a sign of its own times, its most pressing meaning lies perhaps not in how it describes political, economic, and ethnic dislocations, but in the way it projects the protagonist's moral aloofness towards these. This is how Adam Kirsch (2016) reads the novel – not as an example of a novelist shirking his responsibility in writing about politics and history, but, on the contrary, as "producing a faithful record" of "individual powerlessness". Keith Wilhite (2016, 6) sees Julius's moral reserve (both in relation to people around him as well as when confronted with his own past) as an allegory of "American refusal to account for its troubling foreign policy and record of global imperialism" in the wake of 9/11. I would suggest that the way in which the novel thematizes the protagonist's "ethical lapse" can be read as a sign of times in which (moral) responsibility is increasingly experienced as evasive (see Sassen 2014, 78–79), and in which questions of good and bad (in politics, the environment, or historical trauma) would seem to elicit a mute sense of hopelessness. Seen from this perspective, if the novel is to be read in terms of how it points towards the context from which it is written, it should be read in terms of how the protagonist isolates himself from all possible loyalties that could move him to action. The masterly ability Julius displays in narrating complex displacements within a delicately wrought historical and intellectual framework does not, eventually, bring him any closer to positioning himself either on a broader political stage or to coming to terms with the events, past and present, of his personal life. And it could be argued that the novel's urgency lies in this paradox: its, and its protagonist's, very resistance to being read as a moral *exemplum*.[1]

Notes

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