

WORLD HISTORY, LITERARY HISTORY: POSTMODERNISM AND AFTER

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ABSTRACT. *World History, Literary History: Postmodernism and After.* The basic question Christian Moraru raises in his contribution is about the direction in which literary history and criticism overall may be going after postmodernism. Moraru’s answer, or guess, is that literary-cultural scholarship, along with the humanities at large, would probably have to adjust to shifts in the world “out there.” As Moraru contends, our profession is already doing its best to catch up epistemologically with an increasingly *strong* planetary ontology, that is, with how the world most known to us—the finite planet—is and presents itself in the twenty-first century. Key here, he argues, is the lexicon and planetary phenomenology of “presentation” or *presencing*, rather, of an overwhelming coming into presence of that which is scattered all around us and we have been exploiting, overusing, polluting, discarding, or disregarding during the Anthropocene. In his essay, the critic attends to this resurgent presence and to what it means for literature and its historical cycles now that one of these—postmodernism—is basically complete. He does so obliquely, through a couple of marginalia to David Foster Wallace’s 1996 meganovel *Infinite Jest*.

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REZUMAT. Istoria lumii, istoria literaturii: Postmodernismul și dincolo de acesta. Principala întrebare pe care Christian Moraru o ridică în contribuția sa se referă la direcția criticii și istoriei literare după postmodernism. Răspunsul (sau intuiția) lui Moraru este aceea că literatura de specialitate din domeniu și disciplinele umanistice în general se vor vedea nevoite să se regleze la schimbările care au loc în lumea materială din afara lor. Așa cum afirmă autorul, profesia noastră face deja tot ce poate să țină pasul cu o ontologie planetară din ce în ce mai puternic marcată, sau, mai bine zis, cu felul în care lumea – planeta ca realitate înconjurătoare finită—ni se înfățișează în secolul al XXI-lea. Vitale, aici, spune el, sunt lexiconul și fenomenologia planetare ale „prezentării” sau *prezentificării*, mai bine zis, ale unei intensificări a prezenței copleșitoare a ceea ce este împrăștiat în jurul nostru și care a fost exploatat, suprauzat, poluat, aruncat și desconsiderat în timpul antropocenului. În articolul său, criticul abordează această prezență recurentă și semnificația sa pentru literatură și ciclurile istorice, acum că unul dintre acestea—postmodernismul—se află la sfârșit. Autorul analizează oblic aceste lucruri prin câteva glose pe marginea megaromanului *Infinite Jest* pe care David Foster Wallace l-a publicat în 1996.

Cuvinte-cheie: *istoriografie literară, critică, postmodernism, post-postmodernism, prezență, epistemologie, ontologie puternică, David Foster Wallace, Infinite Jest, Trumpism, geofobie, antropocen, après-garde*

Where is literary history going after postmodernism? It is probably headed where the world itself is. More to the point, literary-cultural history and our profession generally are doing their best to catch up epistemologically with an increasingly strong planetary ontology, that is, with how the world most known to us—the finite planet—is and presents itself in the twenty-first century. Key here is the lexicon and planetary phenomenology of “presentation” or *presencing*, rather, of an overwhelming coming into presence of that which is scattered all around us and we have been exploiting, overusing, polluting, discarding, or disregarding during the Anthropocene. In what follows, I will attend to this resurgent presence and to what it means for literature and its historical cycles, now that one of these—postmodernism—is basically complete. I will do so obliquely, through a couple of marginalia to David Foster Wallace’s 1996 meganovel *Infinite Jest*.

Why Wallace and why this book? Well, for one thing, *Infinite Jest* is, with Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, published in 1997, perhaps the most important novel to come out in English and possibly in the entire Anglophone world since Thomas Pynchon's 1973 *Gravity's Rainbow*. For another, Wallace's 1,079 pages novel is a major document of the post-Cold War zeitgeist. Specifically, in Wallace's oeuvre, and primarily in this book more than anywhere else, postmodernism reaches a crisis, a turning point. Furthermore, in Wallace, and also more emphatically than in other authors, U. S. or not, the postmodern struggles to shed its skin in hopes of becoming something else, more attuned to the post-Cold War era, something more *direct* and more politically effective (Wallace 1996, 740). This morphing is a broader process taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. Basically, what we are dealing with is a transition, still incomplete, out of the postmodern paradigm as well as out of a certain way of understanding and doing literary and cultural history.

To clarify what I mean, I will extrapolate from the imaginary of presence and presence-derived aesthetic in *Infinite Jest*. The first half of my paper sketches out the basic cultural-historical and theoretical parameters of presence. Explaining how this problematics shapes Wallace's novel, the second is more analytic. It ultimately claims that a whole array of cultural, political, and bodily routines from consumption, waste management, substance abuse, and recovery therefrom to sports, games, public speaking, and moviemaking are keyed in the book not only to ominous, absence- and destruction-prone "recursivity" but also to opening up, inside and against its ever-reiterated cycles, of spaces, moments, or, as Wallace writes, "flashes" of something else, non-repetitive, intensely alive, singularly present, beautiful, and, yes, perhaps, post-postmodern—in brief, what I determine as the *contemporary aesthetic and politics of presence*.² Note too, that what interests me here as far as politics go is chiefly *the geopolitical*. I will pursue, then, Wallace's geopolitical project with reference to what might be called "Trumpism," that is, Wallace's anticipations of Donald J. Trump's war on reality, on things undeniably real, factual, and present, and to postmodernism's delicate self-positioning with respect to such things and to their political—and, again, *geopolitical*—ramifications.

Now, many of the questions reorienting critical debates at the dawn of the twenty-first century are riffs on the Ur-interrogation formulated by Bruno Latour in the title of his influential 2004 article "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." A much-discussed epistemological about-face, Latour's recent scholarship does speak to a growing preoccupation with the ever-vexed "facts," "truth," "reality," "the real thing,"

² For an extensive discussion of "recursivity" in *Infinite Jest*, see Hayles (1999, 675-697).

“authenticity,” and other subthemes of what I would call the *presence paradigm*. Such issues have brought together scores of critics: former Derrideans like Gianni Vattimo and Maurizio Ferraris in Italy, a metaphysician of the post-Alain Badiou era such as Quentin Meillassoux in France, Ian Bogost, Graham Harman, and many other “new materialists” in the United States, and so forth. Presence, then, that which appears to be materially, palpably, and verifiable present, immediate, urgent, and unambiguously *here* in its eloquent proximity and incontrovertible reality, has been focusing a lot of recent work in critical theory, philosophy, and the arts. Most notably, the spectacular proliferation of reflection and of aesthetic practices around this umbrella-term under which “facts,” “truths,” and the like seek shelter represents a response to ontological developments defining our contemporary world and ultimately the contemporary itself after the Cold War. This world is so remarkably and so unambiguously *present* to more and more of us in its sometimes shocking, calamitous manifestations no matter where we are in it that it has acquired “epochalist” relevance, differentiating, that is, our time from earlier epochs. In my 2011 book *Cosmodernism*, I have referred to the post-Berlin Wall years as the “late-global era,” or the “new contemporary.” During these three odd decades, the world has filled with itself its planetary container, as it were, to such an alarming level and threatens to brim over with such a fury that the extensity and intensity of the world’s being, of its *being-here, present*, “in our face”—this overwhelming and imperious omnipresence of the world—has accrued historically definitional, “periodizing” force. To put it otherwise: *how* the world is proves not only ontologically but also historically matchless, or at least distinctive enough. Pushing against our own raids on the environment in the Anthropocene and the ever-thickening of global webs of commerce, data, culture, language, and overall human interface, the world is now “crowding in” on *us*. It abuts on us with a resolve that articulates and elucidates—oftentimes negatively—our *when* by locating our present in cultural time and thus shedding light on the meaning of contemporaneousness. This meaning is therefore inseparable of the “*how*,” of the way the contemporary world feels, looks, and acts.

On one side, then, this presence is an objective reality “out there”—the world itself. This world is present in the twenty-first century with an ontological vengeance. Thus, it delivers a set of undeniable facts, a presence—ecological and otherwise—that trumps, as Latourians would quip, any environmental, economic, interpretive, rhetorical, or aesthetic handling and representation of its reality and of reality generally in a form that *would take anything away* from the blunt presentness of this materially, intellectually, and ethically uncircumventable actuality. On the other side, the side of that *form* itself, of the world’s treatment in art, philosophy, and “theory” broadly, one must consider three interrelated aspects.

The first is that the dominant aesthetic and ideological paradigm of the past half-century, postmodernism, arose by dint of sophisticated discourse “games” played with this reality and its representation history, whether we talk about jocular-ironic, differential-intertextual-quotational renditions in the Jacques Derrida-Umberto Eco-John Barth line, various “constructionisms,” “relativisms,” and “fictionalisms” in cultural theory and literary practice, or other aesthetic approaches striving to “deconstruct” *what is* and thereby reveal it as ideology, simulacrum, rhetorical effect, trace, infinite semiosis, meaning deferral, lack, absence, and so on.

The second is this: whether postmodernism, poststructuralism of various stripes, and a vast segment of cultural and identity studies may or may not be reducible to this epistemological police sketch, their arguably “weak,” “constructionist” ontology does not seem best suited to capture the stronger and stronger ontology of presence brought forward by the contemporary world sometimes in the catastrophically salient mode of one major economic, natural, or political disaster after another following the fall of the Berlin Wall. I would dismiss here again, as I have done in the past, the notion of an ahistorical and antirealist postmodernism. But, and this is the third thing worth mentioning in this context, even if this ontology were appositely “strong,” it would still not have made up for the overall weakening, since the end of the Cold War, of postmodernism and of the rest of the language games-based cultural model.

Accelerating this retreat and compounding contextually the predicament of the postmodern in the third millennium are the electoral revival of populism and the rise of TV reality as well as news media as “show,” “production,” and ultimately *unreality*. The consequences for the actually existing world are well known: in *Infinite Jest* and the real U. S. alike, the President—an entertainer (a singer) and a con artist on so many levels—has hummed his way into the highest office, and “experialism”—rather than “imperialism”—has been variously implemented via a slew of Brexits. Undergirding populist rhetoric throughout the Euroatlantic zone over the last decade or so, the ebb of “reality,” of what counts as “real” in culture, has often been blamed on the “pomo-poco-poststruct complex” and on the “deconstruction” of various grand narratives—Marxist teleology, the talking cure, archaic notions of class, gender, sexuality, etc.—an operation said complex and the larger critical culture of suspicion surrounding it are deemed to have carried out or sponsored.

At any rate, in his preface to the English translation of Ferraris’s *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Harman concurs with Ferraris, who thinks that “postmodern relativism has reached its logical outcome in right-wing populism” (Ferraris 2014, x). Postmodernism’s “complicity” with assorted rhetors moonlighting as Holocaust deniers, neoliberal free marketers, Brexitarians, Trumpists, Berlusconians,

i tutti quanti is such a stretch that I will not bother to refute it here. That said, the second point made earlier stands: the presence set forth by a struggling, polluted, overly exploited, overpopulated, and evermore interconnected world calls for an apposite aesthetic of presence, an aesthetic that, by and large, is bound to go against the grain of the postmodern aesthetic of indirectness, allusiveness, multiple encoding, and self-reflexivity. In asserting itself, that presence expresses an immediacy. This immediacy, this being-thereness declines, generally speaking, to operate as sign, representation, or material stand-in for something else underneath it; nor does this presence is “reenchanting” in its main thrust, for it does not call on “us” to “transcend” it, to comment on it, perhaps ironically, to reach beyond it, whether toward a perpetually retreating signified or in the opposite but otherwise cognate direction of a “culturally situated” interpreter, a subject needed to make sense of what exactly is rendered present in this presence. Instead, deconstruction, at one end, cultural analysis, at the other, and postmodernism as a modality of aesthetic practice all around do just this: they transcend presence again and again, substituting its “being there”—de-presencing or absencing it—in its very reading as palimpsest, intertext, linguistic ploy, and other similar constructions dependent one way or the other on the reader, viewer, the human witness, and, more broadly, the human.

Because the world is so present, so in-your-face no matter where you are, there is no way out, no way to opt out of its embrace, to step out if its hyperpresence. In fact, looking obsessively for an outside, for a safely separated-off “out there” and for its others on whom to dump our own parochial anxieties, insecurities, and impurities, real and imaginary, makes for anachronistic and patently unethical behavior in this world. All the same, such an outside, hole, or Wallace-like “Concavity” in the world continuum provides the pivotal *topos* of a rhetoric that, in the Trump administration and in *Infinite Jest*, in the Gentle White House alike, serves as a vehicle for a conspicuously nationalist-populist anti-globalization overreaction.³ In effect, this is precisely what Wallace’s “experialism” represents: a *neoimperialist* backlash against a world whose ontological condition and unprecedented presence qua world, as a single *worlded* world, in a quasi-Heideggerian sense, force us all to be and collaborate with another to tackle problems whose scope is of necessity planetary and whose solutions, accordingly, cannot be solely national, let alone nationalist, isolationist, and otherwise self-centered.

Following from the inevitable co-presence of people, peoples, and animate and inanimate entities in the overly present contemporary world, “interdependence” is another undeniable fact—a logic of planetarity, as I define

³ On populism in *Infinite Jest*, also see Doyle (2018, 259-270).

it in *Cosmodernism* and in its sequel, my 2015 book *Reading for the Planet*. And yet the antiphrastic rhetoric of unreality has retooled interdependence into its de facto opposite. James Orin Incandenza, a moviemaker among other things, is a central figure in *Infinite Jest*, and his earlier—let’s say, “postmodern”—cinematic poetics often took up in the novel the “parodic device of mixing real and fake news-summary cartridges” to the point where real and fake would swap places and official parlance flips interdependence over and deploys it to push a brazenly autarchic agenda (Wallace 1996, 391). Interdependence is now, of course, celebrated during Interdependence Day nationally, one might say O.N.A.N. istically (O.N.A.N. is the acronym for the post-U. S. organization of North American nations). As such, interdependence is “our” primary, supremely advertised *national* value. Thus, with an eerily prescient anti-ironic irony, interdependence in Wallace signifies its contrary. This happens according to a twisted, geopolitically narcissistic imaginary. In this imaginary, being with the world becomes, illogically enough, license to *hollow it out* by purporting to opt out of its interconnectedness either by shamelessly engaging in what O.N.A.N.’s Secretary of State himself calls “ecological gerrymandering” (Wallace 1996, 403) or by the “dissolution of NATO” (Gentle’s phrase), which, as Canadian Prime Minister hastens to add, implies that the EU countries would have to “pay for their own defendings henceforth” (Wallace 1996, 385).

Such Trumpian moments abound in Mario Incandenza’s “untitled” film. This is a filmed puppet-show, actually, “which really started out just as a kids’ adaptation of *The ONANtiad*, a four-piece of tendentiously anticonfluent political parody long since dismissed as minor Incandenza by his late father’s archivists” (Wallace 1996, 380-381). Granted, both Himself (James Orin Incandenza) and Mario are particular to the real- and fake-news bricolage and, more broadly, to the disjointed poetics of “anticonfluentism.”⁴ But Wallace makes it clear that the son presses into service such a *modus operandi* with a nod at the *auteur*’s work so as to *enhance* intercinematically—counterintuitive as it may seem—the post-parodic (post-postmodern?) distance between the “original” (quotation marks de rigueur, of course) and the “openly jejune version” (Wallace 1996, 385). This interval, we shall see momentarily, is not only external to Himself’s work but, as Joelle van Dyne notices, also internal to it and, I would argue, to postmodernism broadly as well. Notably, post-postmodern artists such as late Incandenza, Mario, and their less-then-fictional counterparts, Wallace included, would steadily widen this discontinuity or gap in postmodernism itself to make room for another aesthetic. On this account, Wallace is a true “late” or twilight postmodern.

⁴ One of *Infinite Jest*’s tongue-in-cheek coinages, “anticonfluentism” is concisely but comprehensively defined by Bell and Dowling (2005, 221).

At once coterminous and discrete, commensal and adversarial with respect to the postmodern corpus off which it fed in the first place, this is an aesthetic of presence that needs to be grasped along neoformalist lines, as suggested earlier. In other words, its domain encompasses traditionally conceived form such as that of a James Incandenza “anticonfluent” movie or the post-ironic, post-self-conscious, post-fragmented form Joelle gets a glimpse of in the same film, but also the material form of the world, as mentioned earlier. This “geoformation,” scheme, or subsystem is literally and characteristically one of interdependence—or, one might say, “confluent”—in the contemporary era, and neither Trumpism nor Croonerism can do anything about. If not in so many words and despite the hyperbolic evidence the novel adduces to the contrary, the author does recognize this world reality, which surely warrants dwelling at length on “global Wallace.”⁵ But, much like DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and other U. S. postmoderns so consequential to his craft and worldview, this global Wallace asserts himself, in *Infinite Jest* and elsewhere, through a commentary on American thematics and reflexes. This is why critics like Lee Konstantinou ultimately concede that there is no contradiction in Wallace between the American and worldly thrusts and, what is more, that these vectors necessarily merge in a rebuttal of U. S. parochialism and isolationism, reflexes that do not define the “national character” but do flare up periodically to show the world an ugly American face (Konstantinou 2013, 83-84). Alongside what Wallace designates, apropos of Mario’s nonplused E. T. A. Canadian audience, as the “American penchant for absolution via irony”—which Wallace consistently diagnoses as a self-complacency symptom—jingoism, protectionism, experialism, and other neopopulist symptoms are facets of the same *habitus* and therefore targets of the same critique (Wallace 1996, 385).

Cultural, political, and geopolitical, this *habitus* is also, and perhaps more than anything else, aesthetic. In fact, Gentle’s Clean United States Party’s platform “has been totally up-front about seeing American renewal as an essentially aesthetic affair” (Wallace 1996, 383). I propose we take the Party at its word. Lethally magnified in the “Entertainment” the A.F.R. sadomasochistic terrorists are searching for, this aesthetic is endogenous, ingrown, self-repetitive and otherwise O.N.A.N.istically self-gratifying, and mal-formed—indeed, “bad form” in more ways than one. Deliberately endorsed by Gentle and Trump, it pertains to a certain aspect, “gestalt,” or configuration of the country and of the world, a figure—again, a *schema*—whose contour is, in this case, an effect of populist rhetoric’s scheming figuration of the United States as well as of the country’s place in the bigger world. Making America great again or, more modestly, “renewing America,” as Gentle says, notoriously entails “swamp

⁵ See Thompson (2017, 5).

draining” or, in the same pseudoenvironmental lingo smacking of fascist fantasies of national purity and mandated decontamination, “cleaning up”—perchance sterilizing—the country and its culture. These forms or, better yet, the form they all have in common is supposed to be antiseptic internally and externally. They are expected to keep the world at bay and thus geopolitically discrete, cut off from and thereby quarantining other presumably contagious forms, and acting as a de-formation of this world, variously eroding and dirtying it, emptying it out, voiding it of various contents, instruments, and international agreements of word togetherness under the overarching cloak of the insane sanitization rhetoric. *Because* this geophobic rhetoric reigns supreme—and because, once more, it all comes down, inside and outside fiction, to a rhetoric of form, of a putatively beautiful, wholesome, untainted, germ-free form—Gentle is right to claim that his program is aesthetic. By the same token though, this program finds itself in the crosshairs of Wallace’s own critique, which, for the same reason, operates aesthetically—hence the political affordances of the aesthetic of presence. For, much like Gentle’s historically recognizable aestheticizing of politics and, I might add, of geopolitics as well overflows the time-honored jurisdiction of art criticism, Wallace’s “confluent” counter-aesthetic of presence covers, in response, a whole set of trans-aesthetic practices from movie directing, tennis, and other games to make-believe and geopolitical affairs, as I have already insisted.

Wallace’s reader may remember that, in Mario’s film, Gentle replies to the Canadian Prime Minister’s kneejerk references to the “smaller world” with his own, irony-tinged clichés such as “We’re interdependent. We’re cheek to jowl,” but only as a “segue” to an “entr’acte, with *continent* squeezed in for *world* in ‘It’s a Small World After All,’ which enjambment doesn’t do the rhythm section of doo-wopping cabinet girls a bit of good, but does usher in the start of a whole new era” (Wallace 1996, 386). Gent(i)le aesthetics signals the onset of a novel continental order, but this order’s interdependent syntax—North America’s own enjambment—is another bad form. Not only is it an experialist deformation of the continent, but it also contravenes to the bigger, actually existing planetary geoformation, eating as it does into the world presence through a plethora of maneuvers allegorizing or effectively setting off withdrawal, decoupling, depleting, carving out, lack or lacking, absence and various “absencing” rites leading to it, and so on. Most significantly, all of these are fundamentally *recurrent* in nature, variously enacting obsessive-compulsive reiterations that inform—better yet, deform—private and public, individual and collective, material and fantasmatic, productive and consumptive, lucrative and leisurely, literally minded and literary American life. Whether we talk about waste management, drug addiction and AA-type of recovery programs, sports, language, postmodern literature, film stuck in their cerebral “meta,” self-

mirroring mode, or the repeat epitome—the Entertainment itself—the defining metabolisms of American bodies and body politic are recursive and terminally so. For they are poised to use us up as *we* use and overuse them in the arch-modality of drug abuse. In that, they move, and move us, deathward, like DeLillo's plots or, closer to *Infinite Jest* and to the matter at hand, like in what DeLillo also describes, in his 1997 essay "The Power of History," as the addictive, nauseating, depersonalizing, and "de-presencing" drive of cable networks' "serial replays" of a botched bank heist caught on camera. "[I]f you view the tape often enough," writes DeLillo, "it tends to transform you, to make you a passive variation of the armed robber in his warped act of consumption. It is another set of images for you to want and need and get sick of and need nonetheless, and it separates you from the reality that beats ever more softly in the diminishing world outside the tape" (DeLillo 1997).

If, in retrospect, postmodernism's neo-avant-garde ambition has been to expose the cultural-ideological fabric of reality so as to disabuse us of any naively realist delusions, Mario's, Himself's, and ultimately Wallace's own *après-garde* art *overdoes the postmodern*, overdoses on the disabuse and thus repeats paroxistically postmodern self-conscious repetitiveness to expose its onto-aesthetic shortcomings and possibly reconnect us with reality and ultimately with ourselves, problematic and intricate as reality and people are bound to forever remain.⁶ Tightly and multifarously integrated, the symbolically paronymous Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House make up in effect for the same site of Wallace's highly complex, truly contemporary post-post-modern aesthetic. This is a place where, for human subjects, their bodies, and the world's body alike, the biomental apparatuses of reproductive behavior are rewired so as to enable, as anticipated earlier, alternate instances and styles of productive life and meaningful, more "sober," outward-projected, worldly relationships with others and reality. Bent on retrieving the world and human reality threatened by a jadedly ironic rhetoric of absence and disengagement in which postmodern critique "confluences" with the Gentile-Trumpist geopolitics of chauvinist reentrenchment, the aesthetic in question is, to reiterate, one of presence. Parasitically on the postmodern, this aesthetic opens its host up to the world by reconditioning postmodernism's innate intertextuality and overall relatedness as reality-, human life-, environment-, and planet-oriented nexus.

This aesthetic is twice confluentalist. On one side, it can be isolationist neither on the individual nor at the social, national—let alone international—level. On the other, it sets out to analogously join the human subject and reality back together by making both more real, more present in and of themselves and

⁶ On the *après-garde*, a Wallace coinage, which has been in use in European and U. S. art and literary criticism, see *Infinite Jest* (1996, 64, 788, 947, etc.).

to each other, by restoring their ontological dignity. On both, subtly dovetailing accounts, the Eschaton game plays a key role (Wallace 1996, 321-342). First, the game shows that the world map is nothing like Gentle's worldview. Interdependence of world communities, countries, and territories does exist, and, be it beneficial or, as it comes across in the game, destructive, it is nevertheless real and must be managed. Second, and apropos of "territory," the world as real place and this place's representation are discrepant, asymmetric ontologies. This is another wink, if not a jab, at postmodernism, its Borgesian inheritance, and realistic deficiencies. At the same time, the "ontological confusion" that has players target each other not as players but *as real people* and prompts Michael Pemulis's irate peroration on the map-territory antinomy has at least the merit of dramatizing the no less real, mutual inscription of the local and the world (Wallace 1996, 333-334). As the ludic principle breaks down and the game comes to a grinding halt, the two orders mesh more and more, with the macro world telescoped into the micro world of repurposed tennis courts and, vice versa, the courts *qua* game board, the E. T. A., and the United States with them, woven into the world texture. This happens, though, as the players assert their presence by ending the contest, exiting its pretend world, and becoming or re-becoming real rather than automata set in motion by impersonal rules whose application is monitored by a computer software. And third, the doomsday game and its conspicuously repetitive pantomime constitute the make-believe hinge on which two *realia*—two undeniably palpable facts of life—coarticulate, confluence. One is tennis, for there would be no ballistic exchanges without tennis balls and the ability of lobbing them with pro accuracy. The other is geopolitics. Ideally, they should be both "confluent" and, as such, mutually isomorphic, and the reader will remember that the "Show" actors and actresses are globe-trotters, world citizens, in a sense. But, needless to say, world Armageddon's mutual assured destruction is anything but confluent, the kind of interdependence we want. Equally recursive in its endlessly repetitive drills, tennis too risks remaining non-confluent unless Schtitt's theory of athletic self-transcendence pans out. Schtitt's name makes one think of a number of things, including the repetitive "t"s in it, but let me just point up, for now, the overarching yet complex logic of repetition enforced at E.T.A. intra- and extra-curricularly with an authoritarianism smacking of popular representations of Nazi "analism" and terrorist obstinacy (E.T.A. also alludes to ETA, the Basque separatist organization).

As far as tennis goes, it is noteworthy that the Academy produces top-performing players capable of hitting, à la Stan Smith, the same shot mechanically, uniformly, passionlessly, and unflappably, almost *disappearing* in the flawless and flawlessly repeated mechanics of the stroke (Wallace 1996, 110). But if they

disappear on this “plateau,” if they give themselves to “repetition. First last always,” as Jim Troeltsch also lectures them, this is not to absence themselves but to resurface wholly present and fully themselves, to *recover* their presence, much like Wallace himself rehashes postmodernism with a vengeance, “ODs” on it, to recover on a higher, less ironic plateau of performance (Wallace 1996, 118).

This is not postmodernism anymore; it is hyper- or post-postmodernism. But neither in tennis nor in literature does this recovery obtain in the accumulative temporality of rehearsal of the same technique. Honing form into perfection “until you can do it without thinking about it” (Wallace 1996, 118) and thinking “about it” has stopped or, more likely, has confluenced with—etymologically, has flown with and into—the body to become corporeal, body in action, “muscle memory,” “it,” doing all this, I say, is the steppingstone for the quantum leap of self-presence and tennis-court self-realization; similarly, discarding the “meta,” “cerebral” “postmodern” posturing and even the “post-postmodern” affectation, which are identified *expressis verbis* in *Infinite Jest*, clears the deck for another confluentialist literary performance and resets the clock of contemporary aesthetics (Wallace 1996, 141-142).

Blind and robotic reprise, repetition of the same, cancelling the world out inside the small cycle of sameness—all this can kill you as an addict, tennis player, movie director, writer, citizen, and polity. But, as Troeltch stresses, the sequential time of repetition can also accrue under certain circumstances in which “mindless,” unassuming, non-posturing drilling seems to be key, another temporality to it. This temporality is kairotic, eventful, propitious, and genuinely contemporary. It is an other to merely repetitive chronology, a productive *newness* in the heart of reproductive *nowness*, a surplus similar to the *differential* quality Gilles Deleuze theorizes by drawing from Søren Kierkegaard (Deleuze 2017). This time is also a space: the space or spaces, moments, and flashes that lift the curse of recursiveness—of drug use, of monotonous baseline rallies, of ever-reiterated “meta” gimmicks in postmodernism, of same old, same old *Simpsons* rip-offs—to make room for presence. This space-making, this topo-poesis is an aesthetic protocol. In tennis, Wallace himself describes it in painstaking detail as a “[Roger] Federer moment,” one of magic and genius, of ecstasies and aesthetics, of sheer beauty different from anything occurring during drills (Wallace 2016, 119). In this moment, Federer is fully present, in “flesh” and in a different dimension running through his body thanks of a temporality surging during, and disrupting, the time of that forehand or backhand “consistency” intensely rehearsed in practice.

In the same instant, Federer also produces something *different*. He does not repeat anything anymore. Nor does he *think* about it—which “thinking,” in Wallace’s tennis and literary worlds, is *overthinking* and represses “feeling,” acting “naturally, innovatively, and therefore ends up reproducing the intensely

rehearsed, the cliché, thus “absencing” the thinker in the act of repetition. Overcoming this de-presencing and affectless effect of rationalization is exactly what James Incandenza’s father teaches his son by urging him to achieve “[t]otal physicality. No revving head. Complete presence” like the spinning body of a tennis ball coming at you, a situation that makes us so much part of the world, so “environmental”—“[f]urniture of the world,” says Incandenza Sr., that “our absence” becomes inconceivable (Wallace 1996, 160, 168). A somewhat less scarier figure than Himself’s parent, Schtitt professes the same, post-Cartesian tennis philosophy. Its key point is to fuse body and mind by suturing the inhibiting mechanical-cerebral divide in the moment of the tennis stroke, but also to translate into worldly behavior, into a non-adversarial recognition of the opponent, of the other, because, declares Schtitt, the “second[-order] world” of sportsmanship is a training for and a laboratory of first-order world “citizenship” (Wallace 1996, 459). So does Hal, Wallace’s alter ego, who “seems now almost to hit the corners without thinking about it,” for he *is* in the moment now or in its spatial equivalent, the Zone (Wallace 1996, 260). So does Don Gately by not letting his “head” overrationalize,” by also “living completely In The Moment in what the AA calls *The Present*,” the time of presence, not in the re-instantiated past of an addiction that simply adds one past instance to another to defer the redemptive new time of different behavior, of the new as a qualitatively distinct now. So does Himself in the endlessly and sterilely self-reduplicating *The Medusa v. the Odalisque* movie. The film turns out no less lethal than the self-mirrorings caused by A. R. F. terrorists on itself self-repeating New New England’s highways. And yet the movie nests, Joelle tells us, “little flashes of something more than cold hip technical abstraction the sensuous presence of the thing an emotional thrust an unironic, almost *moral* thesis” as the referenced Bernini “statue’s stasis *presented* the theoretical subject as the emotional effect—self-forgetting as the Grail *presented* the self-forgetting of alcohol as inferior to religion/art” and attuned to Schtitt’s “mediated transcendence of the self” (Wallace 1996, 742). And so does Wallace himself throughout *Infinite Jest*, which re-presents postmodernism as the template and dawn of a new art.

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