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**Beyond D.F. Wallace:
Internet-Conscious Literature in the 2010s**

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ABSTRACT

David Foster Wallace saw the progressive cultural hegemony of television as detrimental both socially and artistically for human society, and called for a crucial overcoming of the values and aesthetics of high post-modernism which had failed, having been swallowed, assimilated and nullified by that very televisual world they sought in some way to criticize; most of all, irony, a sort of great invalidator of any criticism. Wallace believed the only solution was a return to a new sincerity – the artist as transparent, frail, weak, human again.

But how has this fared for serious art so far, in the 2010s, in the age of the Internet 2.0? Isn't irony once again one of the Internet's main weapons of cultural hegemony? And hasn't quite a lot of the school of new sincerity in Wallace's wake (Franzen, Smith, Eggers) grown to live almost in a parallel dimension to the issue? Is there, ultimately, a heir of Wallace of sorts, who is problematizing in fiction the way the Internet is changing serious art, and how serious art should actively react?

INTRODUCTION

In the seminal essay *E Unibus Pluram* (1993), David Foster Wallace saw in television the risk of a proper zero-point for art or at least literature; a sort of universal annihilator of anything that had come before. Television gradually achieved unprecedented cultural power, according to Wallace, by masterfully twisting to its own advantage one of the pivotal traits of the high cultural dominant that developed alongside it – postmodernism. That trait was irony (Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram* 159 - 162). Irony had become a common, if not fixed, cornerstone of postmodern art because it got along nicely with aesthetic traits that postmodernism wanted to herald in polemical opposition to older modernism: rejection of one-way interpretations of reality, rejection of elitism, refusal to pursue epistemological questions (because no knowledge that we supposedly have is certain – McHale 6-11). Irony was a great tool indeed to realize these stances. The problem is that, meanwhile, multimedia pop culture started seeing in it something different: a spectacular shield against its own shortcomings. With irony you can get away with anything, because ‘it is never what you mean’; plus as a loan from the high cultural dominant of the time it was fashionable: and viewers, when presented with increasing doses of self-referential irony on the screen, started to justify their (non-)choice with the complacency of the awareness of being part of a smart game, thus becoming even more hooked to it, instead of feeling guilty at the cultural and intellectual passivity they submitted to for “over six hours a day (*E Unibus Pluram* 151-52)”. A domino-effect move, undoubtedly. Even though rightly worried by this – since high postmodernism thought it could absorb from pop culture, but was now being wholly absorbed by it, bones spat out – Wallace sounds almost amused, too, at least every now and then through the essay, as if TV had indeed

played a once-in-a-lifetime trick for which even the villain deserves an applause, something worthy of the Trojan Horse or other Odysseus' gimmicks.

As one might at this point predict, Wallace concluded that for serious art not to be completely, unprecedentedly devoured, the one thing to do was to do away with irony: "the next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels', born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values" (192).

He dutifully tried to apply this diktat to his own fiction, and for a time it seemed that what came to be called New Sincerity could be the new Zeitgeist (some, or many, as we will see, still think it, in one form or the other).

Twenty years later, the problem is – has New Sincerity managed a paradigm shift comparable to the one postmodernism brought into all aspects of culture? Hardly. A very different story is pretty evident – a story in which the Internet 2.0 is the bona-fide cultural successor and all-media dominator to television, a successor through which that appropriation of irony that had already become dominant is more central than ever. Wallace remarked how one of the main keys to television's addictive appeal is the following: "we can see Them; they can't see Us. We can relax, unobserved, as we ogle" (152). Such a narcotic comfort, coupled with the fact that those we watch appear so different from us (they are professionals who have learnt the craft to look 'natural' in front of a glass eye, which in a twisted paradox is actually the most unnatural thing) fostered a vicious circle of loneliness and increasing fear of true relations in a nation of viewers. That was when TV was the new master. Now the Internet 2.0 has given us mainly one important update: we still 'ogle', more than ever, but we are also given a chance, through social networks especially, to live the fantasy of feeling the thrill of the anchorman or the actor by practicing that

totally unnatural spontaneity in front of the glass eye. Twenty years after *E Unibus Pluram*, this is the evident paradigm shift that is pervading all aspects of life – from oglers to ogled, but only when we choose it. Sociology and anthropology aside, which are not the topic here, the important point is that the evolution trend surely does not correspond to a New Sincerity (Shakya and Christakis, n.p.). ‘Ogled, but only when we choose it’ means that television fakery is out of the bag (of television) and finally unleashed onto this side of the screen (Cramer et alii, 739-746). Just look at new popular art (new serious art is much more difficult to define nowadays, and that is exactly what we will deal with later): successful and actually innovative formats such as memes and YouTube vlogs thrive on irony, obviously. Far from being sincere and transparent (presenting the author as weak, human, frail) these forms are either impersonal snippets of comedy where the author, if not invisible, is hidden behind a nickname or a web page (memes), or illusions of spontaneity taken to the next level (vlogs, where the appeal is that the vlogger is talking directly to you, as if conversing with a friend, when there is clearly a glass-eye-conscious character on). We start to wonder – where can serious art fit in this landscape? Shall we still stick to what Wallace proposed in the 1990s?

Serious art strives to avoid shallowness. To do that, it requires time and patience, crucially on the part of the viewer too. While pop art forms have always strived to relieve the consumer of such an effort, many of the newest formats appeared and popularized in the last five-ten years are exponentially exasperating that praxis to an extent that seems entirely unprecedented, and that television could never dream of – they are forms anxiously designed to be consumed in a few minutes at most, often seconds; we cannot afford more because we have three things to do at a time all the time (Watson, n.p.). The possibility of multitasking that goes hand in hand with the overload of information (and not only information, but possibilities of interaction most of all) has led to a collapse in the general attention span of consuming art. This is one of the most

representative cultural changes of our age, and something that Wallace failed to explicitly highlight in *E Unibus Pluram*, simply because it didn't seem as big an issue back then. This might be one more reason for literature to move away from New Sincerity positions if it wants to stay relevant. This does not mean that new literature should 'move away' from sincerity or authenticity in general, but simply that Wallace's vision of New Sincerity is a paradigm that was fresh in the 1990s and (perhaps) 2000s. We are close to the 2020s now: how can literature not realize, or not care, about being so left behind?

Several critics, as we will see in Chapter 3, still believe, as they argued in recent years, that the newest relevant shift of era in serious literature after the demise of postmodernism will be basically a return to realist values, a revival, something still very indebted with New Sincerity. But given what we have said, doesn't that mean living in a parallel dimension? Pretending that what is going on in the world is barely there, a superficial influence at best? Is that eye-shutting the future of literature then? Some underground cult, or the equivalent of radio stations that still play 1940s melodic music? And I repeat – there is not only literature at stake here, but any serious art at large.

My point is simple – Wallace's solution, which entailed that irony as a weapon had been completely hijacked by 'the enemy' and should be to a large extent abandoned to its doom, made sense in the early 1990s. Twenty years later, though, we cannot but state that it has proved ineffective.

One more problem requires our attention. Alternative initiatives, willing to bring back the serious (in the social sphere in general more than in art specifically), the weak and the human as values applicable to contemporary mainstream culture, are present, even though they are hardly the cultural dominant (Silverman, n.p.). However, isn't it notable that basically none of those can

make a move without the Internet – without a Facebook page, without an Instagram page? This is not necessarily another point of criticism (anyone can argue that the Internet also has many positive sides) but it is a crucial technical aspect. In the 1990s Wallace could still carry out his mission outside of television, on printed paper, which was still a different, clear-cut dimension. Television was already an information and communication monster, but print, although on the defensive, was still seen by many as a comparable force, an alternative. What about today? The inevitable conclusion, one that once again was not in the air with Wallace yet, is that serious art should not only reconsider its forms and its means from a physical point of view, but that it might be a good idea, if not inevitable, to act from inside ‘the enemy’ – and who knows that what television did to irony might be done by serious art, disguised but not dead, to the Internet’s holistic fast food, in a future. It is from this hope and these criteria that our research started.

I begin this dissertation by dedicating a chapter to Wallace, to clarify what are the main points informing his poetics that will later be used as a criterion to select the newer, recent authors around whom our focus will revolve. The second chapter will be an assessment and recapitulation of significant recent developments in literary criticism concerning these topics. Finally, the main corpus of the dissertation, focused on the analysis of recent authors, will be divided into three chapters – the first on artistically committed electronic literature or digital art, the second on young Internet-concerned novelists, and the final one on older or slightly older novelists who briefly embraced the digital as a topic.

CHAPTER 1

ASK WHO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE WAS

It is a matter of survival for art to recuperate a relevance for artistic objects that require some of your time - objects that are not carbon-copied in the ubiquitous, hyper-dominant brand of depersonalized Internet irony. The word relevance is key here: relevance is ensuring a nodal position in the contemporary world's web of issues and urgent discussions, along with politics, economics, social changes; relevance is talking to the world and speaking, as much as possible, its language, not resigning from it and being more and more an underground cult. The question, then – who? Who has been seriously trying in literature? Before asking such a question, let us start from the beginning and see what Wallace did, in his time.

Wallace followed *E Unibus Pluram* and its poetics program with *Infinite Jest* three years later, a novel that is often considered its magnum opus and that tries to realize the theoretical program of a new sincerity on an ambitiously large scale: just the daunting size of the book (over a thousand pages) reads like explicit defiance to the era of quick commercials and effortless consumption of information. And indeed in over one thousand pages more than one theme is developed that is linked to our discourse.

First of all there is the sincerity side. Looking back at classics of postmodernism such as *White Noise*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, or *Lost in the Funhouse* we perceive, among other common denominators, that the focus is away from human feelings in their nakedness and intensity. The heavy employment of irony, as well as the author's focus headed on highlighting fragmentation and unpredictability of development, left little space for big emotions, characters tending instead

to be elusive, opaque and passive, seen as little more than pawns when the focus is rather on the incomprehensibility of the chessboard; Oedipa Maas a makeshift detective in a world where signs and logic lead to nothing, Ambrose Small a prison of the funhouse that the world is whose only consolation is trying to become a puppeteer of fantasies himself, and Jack Gladney an obtuse slave of American consumerist rites at their worst – rites which, because of the mystical aura around them (shopping, TV) bespeak some bigger, mysterious, ungraspable power - life and death, the very terror that Jack eventually fails to exorcise. In short, they are all guinea pigs used for testing, when what really matters is the test. Wallace makes a point of shifting the focus back to the guinea pig; and seemingly thinking that a proper shock therapy is necessary to underline the importance of the change, he takes the theme of emotional sincerity from an extreme angle – a lot of *Infinite Jest* is about gruesome substance addiction and decadence scenes, freaky or plain horrific situations of violence if not dehumanization, and personal dramas. A sample quote that is indicative of a tone frequently found throughout the book:

...and then you're in serious trouble, very serious trouble, and you know it, finally, deadly serious trouble, because this Substance you thought was your one true friend, that you gave up all for, gladly, that for so long gave you relief from the pain of the Losses your love of that relief caused, your mother and lover and god and compadre, has finally removed its smily-face mask to reveal centerless eyes and a ravening maw, and canines down to here, it's the Face In The Floor, the grinning root-white face of your worst nightmares, and the face is your own face in the mirror, now, it's you, the Substance has devoured or replaced and become you, and the puke-, drool- and Substance-crusteD T-shirt you've both worn for weeks now gets torn off and you stand there looking and in the root-white chest where your heart (given away to It) should be beating, in its exposed chest's center and centerless eyes is just a lightless hole, more teeth, and a beckoning taloned hand dangling something irresistible, and now you see you've been had, screwed royal, stripped and fucked and tossed to the side like some stuffed toy to lie for all time in the posture

you land in. You see now that It's your enemy and your worst personal nightmare and the trouble It's gotten you into is undeniable and you still can't stop. Doing the Substance now is like attending Black Mass but you still can't stop, even though the Substance no longer gets you high. You are, as they say, Finished. You cannot get drunk and you cannot get sober; you cannot get high and you cannot get straight... (416)

Some dramatic elements are overblown in an intentionally surreal way (and sure enough there is still some irony - see later about this) but it does not touch the drug stories nor the insight into psychological troubles, which are entirely plausible. The 'shock' procedure has the open purpose of awakening a numbed sensitivity and deploys, to an extent, exaggeration and the absurd because they disrupt the well-assured, the supposed obvious, the certainties of the reader. Although in a different context and with different intentions, in his essay *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* critic Jeffrey Severs confirms such an attitude in Wallace: "with Wallace the taken for granted is where we must look; he wants to expose – and often move – the ground beneath our mental feet" (Severs 10).

Also note the attempt at direct identification that Wallace employs on a wide scale by adopting the second person *you*, as in the passage above and many others, which reinforces the idea of a 'shock' poetics, reducing the distance between the horror and the reader even though she/he might perceive that distance as great at first; yet as the horror continually shifts from a mostly graphic level to a more psychological, personal one (i.e. the background of what is going on 'graphically') a connection starts to kick in.

Nevertheless, the explicitness of some sequences might tempt one to talk about pulp or exploitation, but two things must be underlined. Firstly, something we have already mentioned *en passant*: Wallace clearly believes in shock therapy to reawaken a numbed out sense of humanity, so the in-your-face, extreme choices of content in the book have a precise political/polemical

agenda behind them: and indeed TV, despite having always thrived on the audiences' morbid curiosity, still today has not yet quite reached the legitimization of such extremes as ordinary entertainment. Wallace's move is thus considerably subversive. Secondly, we must read those scenes in the wider context of the book - drugs and abuse are multi-thematically tied to the general dystopian message. Drugs have become more ubiquitous than ever *because* of the way technology and the ultimate cultural triumph of dull commercial multimedia have numbed humans; so Wallace's agenda works on two levels – simply reawakening humanity, and pinpointing what the cause of the downfall has been. More subtly, drugs (and the abuse and the aberration that go along with it thematically) are not just an obvious correlative to the cheap and inescapable consumption of multimedia, but relate to high art as well. The movie that gives the book its title is rumored to be so ultimate in beauty, in fact *the* ultimate movie, that it is as addictive as the ultimate drug – people get so hooked to it they do nothing but watch it until they die, prompting a subplot of the book in which an organization attempts to locate the movie's master tapes to use it as a terrorist weapon. It is a bittersweet metaphor – any difference between an ambitious work and crass entertainment is pretty much no more relevant at all, since even the former is at best equaled to the kind of entertainment that a drug can provide. All these elements should start to make us realize the continuing relevance of Wallace's discourse, which, however, will need to be transposed from television to the Internet, to grasp and face its many new aspects. But one thing at a time.

Following the theme of 'shock sincerity' described in the previous paragraph, and surely related to it, I believe the theme of incommunicability deserves some lines on its own. Anticipating a stylistic choice that would become systematic in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), in *Infinite Jest* we often have inconsequential dialogues, where each speaker seems to follow his/her own thread, without listening.

- I'm starting to realize it's different from drug rehabilitation programs, the Aa's and the Na's.
- May I ask you what deformities you have?
- The best is when the sun pops out of the snow and everything looks so white. (642)

In other cases, one voice is missing, replaced by dots (637-38). This choice seems to denounce a rupture in the capacity to communicate, a loss of attention and interest; and although nothing allows us to automatically relate this to the usual villain – technology etc. – Wallace does not suggest many other pretenders to the title. Complementary, almost specular, to this significant rupture in some dialogic exchanges, is the use of endnotes. In *Infinite Jest* we have over three hundred endnotes which alone occupy roughly a hundred pages at the end of the book; some of them are ordinary notes adding one or two lines of more explanatory references, but others are entire chapters, like notes 24 and 110, which have been for some reason expunged from the text and recuperated at the end as if they were less important, or just for the sake of playfulness and making fun of the reader. Some notes, in an over-zeal of verbosity whose intent cannot be reduced to comic effect only, feature multiple subnotes on their own. Considering Wallace's macrotext this curious use of notes must have another very specific meta-communicative purpose. To counterbalance the characters' communication which is disrupted, difficult, often insincere, incomplete, problematic, the author offers a sort of overabundance of completeness in the paratext; as the completeness is obtainable only after facing fragmentation, non-linearity of narrative, and over one thousand pages of content, there is a clearly didactic purpose of educating readers to patience and research. Needless to mention, anti-televisual values.

A third element worth a mention is the use of science. Not the science behind the ubiquitous consumer technology, but science conceived mostly as an abstract, pure discipline. In this sense Wallace seems to see science as a correlative of literature or art, equally and problematically divided between pure and independent on one side and commercialized on the other. This

explains Wallace's detailed references to mathematics (602) and chemistry (endnotes 384-87, 368), not to mention grammar and etymology (endnote 280), throughout the book. This obsessive emphasis on precision, rationality, and pompousness much for its own sake is an intentional, polemical watershed: art or science need not be functional (to create a consumer product, to be 'liked'); they can exist, indeed, for their own sake.

So far we have enumerated elements that Wallace problematizes and thematic-stylistic solutions he proposes for a re-legitimization of serious literature in the 1990s. This is a fundamental premise because it represents a useful blueprint of what we might need to find today. However, let us remember that Wallace certainly does not cut all ties. Much of the novel is still purely post-modern: Wallace surely helped get over a waning postmodernism and influence a new era, but let us remember he had nothing against (high) postmodernism, he only had something against its televisual appropriation. The fragmentation, non-linearity, and unpredictability of the narrative direction, the continuous references to pop culture even though fictional, the pastiche (the movie dialogues, the news, the letter) are all prominent; not to mention the focus on technology itself, actually. Irony is also certainly employed. This might seem like a contradiction, and indeed it can be read as a slip, a conceptual weakness of the novel, falling short of its intent. Another interpretation is possible, however. Wallace wants to ease his contemporary reader's path into content they are supposedly not used to, and to do so he chooses to compromise – irony is, in his vision, the one culturally familiar element to the audience that can serve this purpose, facilitating to an extent (not a huge extent, actually) the approach to the book and its most controversial themes. It would thus be a means to an end, still deemed necessary and only gradually disposed of. Whether Wallace, even in his later work, did manage to 'get rid' of irony as his originary intent seemed to be remains a question for the critics. Nonetheless, this is a reminder of the necessity of

compromising whenever innovativeness steps into the scene to create something new, and that is one more thing that, again, we should expect today from new Internet-conscious serious art.

CHAPTER 2

LOOKING BACK OR NOT

Internet-conscious serious art, then, will be the main focus of this dissertation. It may sound a little pompous and to some, perhaps, ludicrous. Indeed not everybody in the contemporary literary world seems to be up for such an idea. And yet, what alternatives are being brought up? Are we looking for solutions in general, and to which extent do we care? Where should we start from?

This will be a chapter of questions. The most trodden one, which has troubled critics for many years now, still seems to concern what the successor to postmodernism is, the new supposed cultural king (because postmodernism is surely dead and has been for a while – or isn't it? – Kirby 5-6); but I believe keeping such a perspective makes us simply risk missing the point. Indeed, many critics seem, firstly, to be looking at the cultural landscape still as if 'culture' were a strict synonym of 'academia', thus in this sense seeing absolutely *nothing* after postmodernism; and secondly, to believe that that successor has inevitably to have something to do with postmodernism – a child of it, or a rival, or a relative, or a polemical opposite, but something postmodern-related it must be. We will see to which, often convergent, conclusions this widespread approach has led to. What all, or almost all, the critics have in common is at least one thing, however – the obsessive hope in believing that literature will still be relevant. It is not the first time that 'relevance' appears here as a key word, and once again it is not by chance. The problem is that the anthropological (because we absolutely need to use this adjective) passage from television to Web 2.0 as newest cultural matrix has drastically narrowed the margins for relevance outside of it. Not just the head, but the whole body is possessed; nothing thrives outside its precincts. The fact that the Internet

has become such a universal swallower may have something to do with the word relevance having become, indeed, a fashionable theoretical mantra for some lately. 'Relevance' is not the same as 'importance' – it is a more nervous term, one that bespeaks crisis. 'Stay relevant' as a necessary condition not to succumb; all the rest, the irrelevant – and it is always easier to be irrelevant than its opposite – evokes a wasteland of nothing, a grey forgotten blur. It feels like the house is burning down and we are forced to pick the one or two items to save; all the rest is doomed. This emphasis on relevance is something that can be related to what anthropologists and sociologists such as Augé and Lipovetsky have argued about the supposed new cultural dominant at the turn of the millennium: supermodernity or hypermodernity – the cult of speed, globalization, consumerism (see more about this later). In such a fast world the place for relevance is obvious - expunge richness and deeper layers from life and from all forms of text; leave only what is urgently necessary. But necessary to what? If we talk about objective relevance, it might be economic relevance; but there is another side to it. Isn't social relevance (still tightly tied to economic relevance) whatever you make believe is relevant? More hype than substance, an illusion you create? Basically a poetics of conditioning - once objective truth is seen as pointless and insubstantial compared to social relevance, what matters might as well be convincing others that you are right as if it were just a game. Is that what we have ahead of us? Note that "prophet" Wallace had already foreseen such an eventuality:

We're all – especially those of us who are educated and have read a lot and have watched TV critically – in a very self-conscious and sort of worldly and sophisticated time, but also a time when we seem terribly afraid of other people's reactions to us and very desperate to control how people interpret us. Everyone is extremely conscious of manipulating how they come off in the media; they want to structure what they say so that the reader or audience will interpret it in the way that is most favorable to them. What's interesting to me is that this isn't all that new. This was the project

of the Sophists in Athens, and this is what Socrates and Plato thought was so completely evil. The Sophists had this idea: Forget this idea of what's true or not – what you want to do is rhetoric; you want to be able to persuade the audience and have the audience think you're smart and cool. And Socrates and Plato, basically their whole idea is, "Bullshit. There is such a thing as truth, and it's not all just how to say what you say so that you get a good job or get laid, or whatever it is people think they want.

(100-word n.p.)

Curiously, the ongoing debate about the supposed successor to postmodernism seems to a large extent to be divided between these two very camps, or at least something similar – Sophistic supporters of a "new" poetics of Internet-conscious sense of relevance versus irrelevance, and Socratic supporters of an old-fashioned (?) truth-ism – authenticity opposed to relevance. The Sophists do not actually talk about relevance; they talk about persuasion and rhetoric, which is what I referred above as a sort of poetics of conditioning. Yet the much more modern concept of economic (and consequently) social Relevance, raised to new heights by neoliberalism and globalization, seems to me a natural offspring of such an approach: what is relevant is what sells, exactly as the sophists focused on 'selling' their points through rhetoric. New critics and authors might thus want to look more and more at the 'relevance' dominant in today's culture as a starting point to describe and interpret contemporaneity, as well as find fuel not to let literature's engine die. Some are trying to do just that; but let us look first at the former school of thought.

Back in 1990 John Barth, in the essay "The Novel in the Next Century", had expressed a much more negative opinion about the future of the novel compared to "The Literature of Replenishment", his previous essay appeared ten years earlier; it was clear that, while "The Literature of Replenishment" still reflected a moment of late bloom for the kind of postmodern narrative Barth refers to, something ominous had instead started to happen in those ten following

years: “all kinds of viral shit festering out there... dissident comics, wiggled out zines, electronic journals, quicktime hypermedia CD-ROMs..., the Internet...”(Barth 459). Back then, when the Internet was only – comically – one of the many new funny items on the block among “wiggled out zines” and “CD-ROMs”, an artist like Barth could hardly have had anything other than a conservative reaction. “Print” fiction and the newer electronic forms have, according to Barth, simply nothing to do with each other, and the fact that the growing popularity of the latter is clearly threatening to the first does not change anything: as Jeremy Green writes, referring to the 1990 essay as well as to Barth’s later novel *Coming Soon!!!* (2001) which implements the same issue, “the novel must, Barth implies, embrace its irrelevance if it is to retain its essential connection to tradition”(63). It is implied that the link to tradition and the consequent critical authority one acquires from studying tradition are completely lost in the new e-fiction; thus it is a stark either-or to which Barth has a stark answer – serious narrative must, heroically, choose the former and forsake all “claims to influence, engagement, and consensus”.

What is more curious is that as late as fifteen or twenty years later, many critics still seem to think the same. Robert Rebein, for example, in *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism* (2001) avoids almost entirely to concentrate on anything electronic, or even technology-related, as if it belonged to another dimension: whatever was happening ‘after’ postmodernism in literature apparently had nothing to do with technology. Yet 2001 is not 1965, and not even 1990, when Barth was already writing a lot about that. Rebein concentrates instead on what he sees as the emergence of a “new realism” (18-21), which is basically a contemporary realist approach to fiction which has however “absorbed postmodernism’s more lasting contributions”, that is, at least some self-consciousness “about language and the limits of mimesis”. How does this quite middle-of-the-road definition translate into actual authors and books? Rebein suggests a number of different sub-genres that have supposedly distinguished

themselves for this stylistic bridging: skimming postmodernism's repertoire of 'experiments' in order to "take what has been proven useful and put it to work where and how they may" (whatever this means) but in an overall realist setting, because realism, he complacently says, is back and thriving because it has proven itself "far more adaptable". He then discusses at length some of these emerging undercurrents, such as dirty realism (which deals with sensitive subjects such as violence, solitude, and drugs; the work of Denis Johnson and William Vollmann in particular) and a brand of region-centered, geographic realism revolving around the concept of home, which Rebein describes in the chapter *Return of the Native*; attempts at post-Raymond Carver minimalism; and others. But no electronic literature at all; the word seems to be banned.

Other authors agree with this line, that is, what has happened and is still happening is basically just a return of realism all over again. (Rebein even suggested that a "continuing tradition" in American fiction is in full-fledged bloom again after having been brought to a "halt" by postmodernism and partially minimalism too, as if postmodernism had been, to a large extent, an unpleasant incident – Rebein 165.) Some have grouped around a new key word, or lens through which to read the newest paradigm shift: Reconstruction. Such critics include Imtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk. Once again the consensus seems to be: no more postmodern fragmentation. In fact Funk, in his very recent and aptly titled *The Literature of Reconstruction* (2015) introduces the term as an explicit response to Derrida's concept of deconstruction; a "new common ground of signification" as opposed to postmodernism's ontological pan-dubitation; an "attitude of confidence in the power of sign systems to actually convey experience (5-7)" as opposed to skepticism and suspicion, and so on. Funk originally insists on the concept of Authenticity believing it can have a decisive "contemporary appeal" in the post-postmodern age and can act as a tool to move beyond postmodern fragmentation and become a new center of gravity: being by definition the problematizing of "the dialectic of real experience and its aesthetic representation",

authenticity also, according to Funk, “lays claim to a direct and immediate link to a realm beyond symbolic representation”. Rooted in “a deliberate embrace of paradox and ambiguity”, thriving in “ontological oscillation and epistemological confusion”, authenticity thus entails “a challenge to confront this confusion, to reconstruct the paradox as it were”.

After a lengthy theoretical introduction and development concerning the concept of authenticity, Funk goes on to study some recent novels (Eggers, Egan, Barnes, Fforde) that supposedly constitute practical examples of his theory as they highlight the issue of authenticity in order to push the reader to ‘reconstruct’ a truth. Unlike Rebein, Funk does dedicate at least one section (“thesis five”) to the issue of technological novelties as a challenge/influence for literature; but it is an indirect and tangential discourse, although interesting and in keeping with our focus – Funk essentially intends to review how the new forms of communication renegotiate the concept of authenticity on which he focalizes (and which entails the renegotiation of identity, for example). It might be a relevant starting point but Funk is clearly interested in landing elsewhere, and the new-media section only occupies a small handful of pages out of 224. Overall, Funk’s stressing of Reconstruction and Authenticity as new catalysts is a relatively original vision, but in the end, it basically converges in the general, current critical trend of ‘let’s bring back realism, which is now called *new realism* because it has a layer of leftover post-modern spray paint on it’; and once again literature and new technologies seem to have to remain conceptually very separate.

Irmtraud Huber echoes Funk as she talks about the supposed successor of postmodernism as some kind of reconstruction in *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (18). With a difference – she questions the inevitability of “the widely asserted return to realism” (7) and makes a counterexample proposing a new emerging school of relatively accessible, ‘fantastic’ literature (Danielewski, Safran, Chabon, Mitchell). Could this be the literary dominant of the future? The point is that, beyond her singling out a literary niche, Huber actually agrees with the

general frame of new realism or at least with the interest in “a return to the “real””, though “not necessarily” to realism (216-17). This distinction in particular supposedly justifies her focus on fantastic elements while remaining embedded in that neorealist theoretical framework – and the contemporary fantastic simply comes to be, in her vision, a good example or embodiment of a (partially) post-modern animal tamed back into less troubled realist waters (51). She says for instance, about Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, that due to its ambiguity and multiplicity of interpretations (open, contradictory) the fantastic/unrealistic element seems here used in a way essentially postmodern, but the difference is that we are having a “fantastic beyond subversion, a fantastic that is no longer driven solely by the need to deconstruct but by a desire for reconstruction”, inevitably. Postmodernism, in what remains its main lesson, taught us “that our reality is largely fictive”, but what has come, or is coming, next is that “this makes us responsible for the fictions our reality is composed of and that we should still learn to value them” (74). Towards the end of the book, Huber summarizes a sort of mini-manifesto of Reconstruction, including the return to the real, the acknowledged inevitable influence of postmodernism (using similar “aesthetic strategies” to different ends), communication seen as more possible than postmodernism did and the possibilities of fiction in the future regarded with careful optimism. These are familiar points by now, perhaps even too much. Bottom line: “while unrepresentability is acknowledged, reconstruction does not stop at its invocation but searches for ways to accept and go beyond it... if modernism was ‘either/or’, postmodernism was ‘both/and’, reconstruction is ‘in spite of’ (223).” Surely ‘in spite of’ growing irrelevance, too. It does sound a little desperate, but we will see.

So far as the new realist camp goes. Let us move to the other which, honestly, interests us more. Some critics have actually tried to construct the contemporary evolutionary threads in society, anthropology, technology and communication forms to come up with an aesthetic that be possibly

applicable to literature. The mandatory assumption is that literature should really look around, instead of harking back; because, let's face it – those who advocate essentially a return to realism are not finding much to come *after* postmodernism. Yet regardless of whether postmodernism is really dead or not, there is plenty that is coming after, and we should see it. So much, in fact, that it is hard to proceed in some order.

Critics who are refusing to accept that the new cultural dominant is just a revival of something past include: Alan Kirby, Raoul Eshelman, Timotheus Vermeulen with Robin van den Akker, and Gilles Lipovetsky. Everyone has tried to come up with a suitable name to describe the supposed, but still ungraspable 'new thing', regardless of cacophony: digimodernism, hypermodernity or supermodernity, performatism, metamodernism, remodernism... what immediately meets the eye, in opposition to the new realists, is the almost universal continuation of the '-modernism' stem. Most of these critics cohesively believe that the 'modern' is far from over and that we are witnessing, in one way or the other, a continuation of it, though in an incarnation that is remolding itself quickly so that it is still hard to discern a clear image. Lipovetsky, for example, argues that his own hypermodernity is still modernity, only 'deregulated and globalized' (Rudrum and Starvis 158); and Kirby underlines how, despite it being, in a sense, a wholly new cultural dominant, his 'digimodernism' also appears "socially and politically as the logical effect of postmodernism, suggesting a modulated continuity more than a rupture", and "insofar as it exists, "digimodernity" is, then, another stage within modernity, a shift from one phase of its history into another" (Kirby 2-3).

The only programmatic proposal that openly disagrees with this vision of continuity is (as is evident in the name too) Raoul Eshelman's 'performatism'. Performatism seems, however, a vague and, more often than not, ambiguous affair. The etymology Eshelman reveals is actually interesting: it's not about 'performance' but about 'per forma' (Latin), that is, doing things

“through form” (Eshelman n.p.). What does this mean? That “narrative works of art are using formal means to create fictional conditions for experiencing love, beauty, transcendence and similar positive states of social interaction”. Moving across Eshelman’s manifesto hoping to find something more beyond this new-age-leaning vagueness, we realize that Eshelman’s interest in those “positive states of social interaction” springs out mainly as a strong antithetical reaction to postmodernism. The result is an embrace of intentional polar opposites of postmodernism’s most famous traits: a performatist vademecum talks about “chok[ing] off irony” and “a return to history... return to authoriality... transition from metaphysical pessimism to metaphysical optimism” (Kirby, 40-41). We still need more to understand what really distinguishes a performatist text, and especially what ‘per forma’ means. Given these premises, Eshelman tries to make a concrete example with (again!) *The Life of Pi*. Performatism’s basic goal seems to be to force us to “‘believe’ using literary (...) devices”; since performatism, unlike fragmentary and dark postmodernism, is about positivity, “we can only act in a positive way if we believe in something” (“something unified”, he specifies later; not that it clarifies much), and performatism forces us to do just that. This “coercion works through form”, and here comes the example from *The Life of Pi*: in the novel we have a supposedly ambiguous/unreliable narrator, yet “the story is set up in such a way that you wind up wanting to believe his long, untrue beautiful story instead of the short, ugly, true one he also tells”. This is clearer. The idea, however, seems to me a bit like artificially fooling us into believing only one side of a story out of two to spite postmodernism’s openness and indeterminacy. I will admit it sounds a little contrived to me. Alan Kirby of all people seems to agree, believing especially that Eshelman’s vision is vitiated by his spurious assumption of theoretical postmodernism’s “former cultural-monopoly”; this leads him to fill his manifesto with plenty of anti-postmodernism points but, looking at things in a wider perspective, this could apply

to many texts – hence performatism’s vagueness: “the characteristics he gives of a performatist text sound like vast quantities of texts” (Kirby 42).

Gilles Lipovetsky’s concept of hypermodernity (also echoed elsewhere, in similar terms, as supermodernity; see later) is instead mainly a sociological and historical definition – Lipovetsky is a sociologist and not focused on fiction (there’s no such thing as hypermodernism); yet what interests us here is that from the traits of a sociological cultural dominant stylistic and aesthetic hints for art may totally be discerned – as an additional step. Summarizing very briefly, Lipovetsky defines the age of hypermodernity as “characterized by movement, fluidity and flexibility” (Lipovetsky 11), as well as by newfound anguish and fear about the future. The real symbol of it is hyperconsumption, “or the nature of a society flooded by the ethos and practices of consumerism”. Hypermodernity also entails, most interestingly, a vicious circle: consumerism in its aesthetic fulfillment (the supermarket aisles, Ikea, crowded Christmas markets, ultra-crowded malls, and so on) bespeaks and dictates freedom, luxury, flexibility, and convenience to the maximum, whereas keeping the very hyperconsumption machine turning implies curtailing that freedom into harder and harder working patterns – lower pays, longer hours etc. (Rudrum and Starvis 153).

Lipovetsky’s hypermodernity echoes Marc Augé’s supermodernity, a concept he had already brought forth in 1995; it reads, equally, as a possible overcoming of postmodernism, even though Augé had called it “the face of a coin whose reverse represents postmodernity” (Augé 40). Augé’s book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* is, just like Lipovetsky’s, neither a literary study nor a specifically cultural one, and not even a technological/scientific one; in its observation of the overwhelming changes of the contemporary world, it intends to be anthropological. Yet once again indirect hints at directions that literature might take to read and interpret the world are present, and it is especially impressive how, more than twenty years ago,

Augé remarked the rise of cultural traits that are perfectly applicable to the current situation, having only become more pervasive and ubiquitous. He talks, famously, about the concept of non-places (places that cannot “be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity”, i.e. mostly public places such as a train station or a subway, or an elevator, or a motorway) as crucial to explain what supermodernity does; in the anonymity and a-historicity it creates, supermodernity also leads us to experience non-places as “turning back on the self, a simultaneous distancing from the spectator and the spectacle” (92) which makes us feel “relieved”, because we experience “the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing” (103); also, last but not least, “[the] anthropological place is formed by individual identities; non-place creates the shared identity” (101). Augé wrote with entirely different things from the Internet in mind, so it is all the more striking how much this still applies, as we have simply moved much further in that direction: isn’t Web 2.0 an entire, almost independently functional dimension where we have gotten rid of anthropological places, just like the exact reverse of the pre-modern world where non-places were supposedly non-existent yet?

Non-place, shared identity, a-historicity, “excess” (29) as the Zeitgeist: these are all still very relevant concepts literature might want to heed if it wants to describe contemporaneity (of course some are shared with postmodernism, but some are not).

The critic who has proven himself most obsessed with relating the technological/social changes of the last few years to the heritage of postmodernism, voicing the question of where a survival for art might reside, is perhaps Alan Kirby with his *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (2009). The concept of digimodernism had already been sketched by Kirby in a previous essay, *The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond*, under the name of pseudomodernism; what he was trying to describe was the undoubtable, although not so clearly definable yet, emergence of a new dominant entirely different from postmodernism,

although traces of a *fil rouge* should be detectable. One first line of evolution that Kirby detects is the following: modernism gave supreme importance to the author; postmodernism tried to renegotiate it, the authorial figure still being central but now often “pretend[ing] to abolish him or herself” or exposing the scam, the hoax of his/her authoriality; finally, the stage we have reached now is reducing much further the weight of the author, turning an unprecedented amount of attention on the recipient instead. In fact, the recipient often becomes “a partial or whole author” (*DoPaB*, n.p.); by definition, pseudo-modernist cultural products cannot and do not exist “unless the individual intervene physically on them”, and this works for any Internet content, most contemporary television formats which feature audience participation or vote such as quizzes or *Big Brother*, and videogames.

This entirely new characteristic of the text allowed for by technology suggests that texts are being born of an entirely new nature, which Kirby still struggles to define, but surely it all does not simply revolve around the word ‘interactivity’. Such a simplistic definition is conceptually wrong in many ways, he argues, to describe the situation “because there is no exchange: instead the viewer or listener enters – writes a segment of the programme – then departs, returning to a passive role”, even though, Kirby later admits, the word might be partially useful to capture “the historical rupture with the textual past” and digimodernism’s distinctive “flow of exchanges in time” (61). What is sure is that this yet-confused quality of seemingly random multi-authoriality, this active and at times simultaneous partaking of previously silent and passive watchers (*Dig* 59-60), immediately entails another characteristic – the brevity of life, or constant re-morphing, of the text. Wikipedia pages (one of the examples of digimodernist text that Kirby emphasizes the most) can be modified at any second; TV shows that imply audience participation cannot be repeated twice, not even in part; text messages, social network posts and photos and e-mails are forgotten at breakneck speed, being superseded by fresher ones on a daily basis: “a culture based on these

things can have no memory – certainly not the burdensome sense of a preceding cultural inheritance which informed modernism and post-modernism” (*DoPaB*, n.p.). This seems to be one of the most defining elements of digimodernism, further remarked elsewhere: “Internet sweeps (...) are intrinsically amnesiac – the brain cannot reconstruct them in the absence of a logical overarching shape, so finds it difficult to remember them” (*Dig* 64). It is a symptom of what he calls digimodernism’s ‘antisequentiality’ (a sequence of web hyperlinks is never dominated by a cohesive logical arc) and ‘ultraconsecutiveness’ (a logical relation exists only between two immediately consecutive, adjacent hyperlinks; any further than that it easily gets lost). An example, randomly generated by exploring Wikipedia might be:

David Foster Wallace → “The Pale King” → Peoria, Illinois → 2010 census.

After only four passages no logical arc is retraceable – which accounts, in part, for digimodernist ‘action’ tending to be not only quickly forgotten but rapidly emptied, insignificant in meaning, and shallow as an experience. Let us think not only of the Internet but, for instance, of the SMS – it is ultimately the frequency of action and overload of information (and perhaps, as many note, the flicker of the screen too – see Kirby, 68-69) that lead to the endemic brevity of fruition that leads to the shallowness that leads, in turn, to something else – unprecedented linguistic degradation in writing. The SMS is “the lowest form of recorded communication ever known (...) out go subclauses, irony, paragraphs, punctuation, suspense, all linguistic effects and devices; this is a utilitarian, mechanical verbal form” (*Dig* 69-70).

This decline in literacy is presented as a natural consequence of everything described above (“the subintellectual barbarism of its age”, 233) but more interestingly, and on a side note, it fosters a return of the grand narrative that postmodernism had killed. In a world where subtlety and depth, which require time and patience, seem to have lost a lot of their value, people are prey to quick,

cheap, catchy solutions; namely, fundamentalist religion, the “superstitions of New Ageism” (233) and, most of all, consumerism (234-40). This return of the grand narrative is perfectly logical and in keeping with some of the characteristics of digimodernism, yet, it should be noted, surprisingly jarring and in contradiction with others, such as the supposed interactivity and multi-authoriality.

All these traits sound like a quite accurate painting of what we are living in. Of course, other than trace the history and antecedents of digimodernism, Kirby also poses the question of how literature and art are supposed to survive and find their place in such an environment – an environment that highlights and even fetishizes qualities so opposite to the ones traditionally thought of as requisites to appreciate serious art. Is there room to negotiate? Can artists manipulate this scenario, sneak their work in instead of being left out? Of course that would mean compromise.

To this Kirby has no answers and even avoids trying. First of all, it is too early – digimodernism has just begun (remarkably, he writes in 2009 but, although innumerable tiny things have changed by 2018, the paradigm seems to me well-embedded and still essentially the same). Secondly, it seems first necessary to deliberate about what exactly we should think about digimodernism, and if there is some positivity in it, how to handle it (“what are we to make of digimodernism? Is it to be celebrated, excoriated, accepted, resisted?” *Dig* 264). Some recurring aesthetic coordinates that characterize a digimodernist product, or at least some of them, are actually traceable (220): Kirby talks about infantilism (focus on simplification, children stories, pre-democratic, ancestral values, fantasy, and subcultural artistic worlds such as comics, cartoons, and fairy tales), mythology (a tendency that Kirby sees as an immediate logical consequence of infantilism), earnestness (as opposed to postmodernism) and endlessness (the cult of sequels, episodes, series, and in general the aesthetic of constant change, rehash, edit, update). He associates them to some tentatively digimodernist novels such as *Harry Potter* and *Dark Materials*, but to his own admission their

scope is very limited, too much so to depict a cohesive new literary paradigm of some potential significance. We are equally at a loss when trying to pinpoint what the ubiquitous technological innovations that strictly regard the book-object (Amazon, Google Books, the e-book, etc.) will bring to the table in terms of possibilities of artistic evolution and survival, besides the obvious consequences in economics, distribution, and fruition. Will it be, in artistic terms, a negligible influence? Meanwhile, an even wider issue - of the survival of the 'text' not only as form but as concept - is perhaps even more urgent. If digimodernism is, as Kirby dares suspect, "the condition of after-the-text" (223) where everything is fluid, "indistinguishable from the textless flux of life", how can it not represent a fatal blow for literature?

Ultimately one thing is certain, and it is inevitably an elitist ("God forbid", Kirby himself comments on the word) remark. If literature most of all needs the survival of the object-text to survive in its turn, then "the survival of the object-text depends on the continued valorization of competence, skillfulness, and know-how, because these are, *ipso facto*, excluding forces: they delimit, isolate, close" (224).

CHAPTER 3

BECOMING THE NEW: SERIOUS ELECTRO LITERATURE?

Kirby is surely right when concluding that preserving competence will be the key to save the object-text (but we might expand this and substitute 'object-text' with 'literature'). Most interesting is then the condition of some electronic artists who are trying both to preserve, or evolve, that competence, but making it work in tandem with a wholly new set of technical competences obviously related to the digital world (programming, etc.) This chapter will focus on some of these artists who, consciously or not, are 'fighting the enemy from within'.

Works that have been dubbed as 'electronic literature' have been around for decades now. Some were curious formal experiments whose assets proved to be entirely technical and are thus now totally dated, others are more broadly interesting, or managed to remain so for a while. But the point here is not only doing something worthy, is doing something intentionally, programmatically 'serious' in the literary sense – aware of how the secular or millennial heritage of humanism is at risk as technology is changing our lifestyles, and how we must provoke and connect and bond and create to most of all preserve that human heritage. It is not just about cold, technical, even though appreciable, experimentation. But let us start from the beginning.

'Hypertext' means, in general, any text displayed on a computer screen with which the user can in some way interact – typically moving between different chunks of text by clicking on hyperlinks that connect more pages with one another ("hyper-' is used in the mathematical sense of extension and generality (as in 'hyperspace', 'hypercube') rather than the medical sense of 'excessive' ('hyperactivity')). (...) 'hyper-' refers to structure and not size" (Theodor H. Nelson,

n.p.). It is still the same basic system around which the Internet revolves today, although not everybody might know that the World Wide Web is only one of many hypertext systems that used to exist and were then superseded. Considering that 'hypertext' became a buzzword (in academic circles) in the 1960s when computers started hitting their stride, fiction needed a significant amount of time to face the possibilities of this new medium, as primitive as it was as yet.

In *American Literature in Transition: 2000 – 2010* (2017) Brian Kim Stefans retraces some of the contributors to the development of significant electronic literature, starting from the early '90s (ALT 193-196). Michael Joyce with *Afternoon: a story* (1990) and Shelley Jackson with *Patchwork Girl* (1995) are among the earliest to operate a serious, committed embracement of what was then called 'hypertext fiction' (a variant of it was also called 'interactive fiction', less a narrative than a puzzle for the reader to solve). Both of these used Storyspace, a pre-Internet platform that essentially only allowed to move from link to link, but the rise of the Internet 2.0 led instead to the creation of texts that were at the same time "poetic, visual, and interactive" (193). This newer generation, taking advantage of the early stages of the Internet as multimedia, started to distinguish itself in the early 2000s, with the likes of Josh On and William Poundstone pushing the boundaries of what nevertheless remained an intellectual, secluded, avant-garde-ish form of art, still widely unnoticed. Most of these are meta-works which, in a sense, study themselves and try to explore technically what the unprecedented combination of written text, image, sound *and* audience intervention can do for us; they are inherently experimental, playful although overtly ambitious at the same time, as the elation that comes with treading new ground inevitably endows them with some sense of importance. Poundstone's *Project for Tachitoscope* (2005), for example, is introduced as making the reader "highly conscious of how texts and images are read together and how a reader's attention is parceled out in time-based media" (Poundstone n.p.); and Poundstone defines his own work as "the first to use subliminal effects in a work of electronic

literature". *They Rule* (2004) by Josh On, a political activist, picks a completely different slant but is still ultimately a meta-reflection on the new possibilities of the Internet's multimedia and communicative powers. The work provides a sort of interactive map of the relationships between boards and CEOs of the most powerful companies in the USA, giving out their names and connections. The medium is thus used quite strictly as a political weapon, to first inform and then prompt reflection as well as, importantly, sharing – it allows users to "save a map of connections complete with annotations and email links to others" (On n.p.).

Such diverse tentative efforts left open the question of a general definition, something that may unambiguously distinguish electronic literature from, say, electronic art in general: when is it literature? It is not a question to underestimate as we must not forget that several print writers have also taken a cue from the innovative possibilities of the medium to produce print works that are electronic-inspired or even spiritually, we might say, electronic-based, starting from the Oulipo group and especially their co-founder Raymond Queneau to poets like Haryette Mullen, Christian Bön, and Mark Z. Danielewski – a school of print writers who sought to innovate the form by introducing interactivity, formal constraints and oddities that are explicitly inspired by the tentacular, ungraspable multi-directionality of the Internet, not to mention by the technical concept of the algorithm, which is "ageless", never gets "exhausted" and thus gives the idea of unending repetition, recombination, and regeneration (*American Literature in Transition* 199).

Yet "many of the digital and print-based works [seen so far] can be described as one-off" (199). Who, instead, has taken the electronic as a mission? Seeing electronic literature as a substantial and resourceful quarry to carry out art? And more than that – taking an extreme position and seeing the electronic medium as the only way to keep making great art relevant?

Jason Nelson, mentioned, although briefly, by Kim Stefans (*ALT* 200-202) struck me as one of the most interesting contemporary figures in this sense, with a definite touch of Wallace in him. Nelson, a teacher of Cyberstudies, digital art, and digital creative writing at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia, started to make a name for himself in the mid- to late 2000s with digital art of disparate types; his most popular creations, however, mostly use the skeleton of the videogame as their basic form. Nelson's ultimate focus, however, is language - and semiotics (Stuart n.p.): language in a pure sense (that is, poetry) but also language intended broadly, just as 'text' at large can be any communicative/sensorial content – the language of sound, the language of images etc. Thus on a superficial level, Nelson throws together sound, computer-generated landscapes, hand-drawn images, random text and poetry to see first how different forms in the same environment interact with each other, and secondly, how they interact with the user, given the amount of action and freedom he is allowed to have. Which is nothing different from what a lot of electronic art is about, except that Nelson in his best works moves beyond the cold, mostly technical experiment and manages to make his odd jams of sensorial stimuli into something cohesively communicative, and say something about contemporary man.

Game, game, game and again game (2008), one of his first works to achieve some recognition, is still only embryonal in its attempt to blend technical experiment and message. The 2D videogame environment is an excuse for trying to involve the reader actively in the fruition of poetry, images, movement, and random combinations of the three. The game structure itself is trivial, levels generally taking just a few seconds to complete; what matters is the pastiche of the different forms and the (still very limited) power of the reader/player to interact with it. Since videogames per se are not very much our focus, it is crucial to point out that Nelson is most of all, at heart, a poet. A poet in the sense that (although one might argue about this) his ultimate, deepest aim, besides the superficial technical accomplishment of blending noise, drawings and word in an

overall message, is to make the player appreciate language for its own sake. He seems striving, beyond whatever has to do with the digital medium, to carry on a poetic tradition, to find some new place for poetry lest it dies, to make it visible again by refreshing its form and use. Nelson is surely still post-modern in many ways, his verses relying on stream of consciousness and unafraid of nonsense, bespeaking a neurotic urban alienation that tries to match the parodic, delirious pseudo-futurism of the game's drawings:

An erratic life shouldered by innate ability and leaping guesses, all directions in dizzy, pointing. The occasional beauty sparks a cloaked routine... (*Nothing you have done deserves such praise*, n.p.)

With a language of heat exchange and narrative matter convergence, the aliens' efforts to take human form and 'speak' were perceived as feverish babbling gangster... (*Evidence of everything exploding*, n.p.)

Poetry chunks in the game pop up here and there, spawned by the player's movements; most of the poems are 'open' poems, full of deleted lines and optional words, fragments of a wider puzzle of convoluted, obscure meaning that we hope to reconstruct through the levels, while at the same time the triviality of the game as 'procedure' allows us to focus all our attention on the imagery and language that overloads the screen. Graphically, the game (produced using a simple Adobe Flash platform software) is primitive, childish, made of vaguely futuristic, messed-up sketches between the abstract and the surreal. The music (repetitive, ear-piercing drones of electro-industrial minimalism which might have been entirely produced on a basic synthesizer) is also an effective component in the general cacophony which seems precisely aimed at training our concentration in a difficult environment, satirizing the bombardment of stimuli congenial to the contemporary digital world.

Subsequent works see a progressive focalization on social content and issues of communication and contemporaneity. *I made this. You play this. We are enemies* (2009), basically a retread of *Game* employing the same formula and style, is more socio-political, with (yet vague) hints at consumerism throughout (each level is dedicated to a corporate giant or multimedia firm) whereas *Game* was more simply about the 'ludic', random interaction of texts. *Scrape Scraperteeth* (2012), which "explores the societal obsession with real estate investment" displays more "politically charged" (in the author's own words) poetry set to alienating urban cityscapes hand-drawn in the background. Although these follow-up art works are less full-fledged follow-ups than spin-offs of the original *Game*, recycling the same formula (rudimentary replica of classic 2D game mechanics, with lifting platforms, jumps to avoid pits and enemies that kill you) they nevertheless show a gradual progress in Nelson's awareness of his means and communicative intent. The blizzard of verbal messages coming in disparate shapes (arrows, whirlwinds, convoluted schemes appearing on displays-within-the-display, chunks of poetry) are an irreconcilable mess that we would at least try to make some sense of if we weren't distracted by multiple other elements (images and sounds, equally and intentionally invasive, abrasive and cacophonous). Yet even without these additional distractions the amount of textual content to decode is overwhelming, in both quantity and headache-inducing disjointedness.

Nothing you have done deserves such praise (2013) is perhaps his best interactive work, where he most cohesively (almost) approaches an idiosyncratic form instead of simply juxtaposing different stanzas, sounds and images in one mishmash. Nelson describes the game as satire, tackling contemporary disquietudes, need for acceptance and obsession with success in a rather quirky way by polemically offering the player "absurdly dramatic rewards for inconsequential actions and accomplishments... between those over-blown victories will be long stretches of boredom, of nothing but moving and crickets and the sound of threatening storms" (Stuart n.p). The graphics

have improved and the design is more original, a minimalistic cartoonish world of bright and sick colors on a huge white background; the player controls a kind of astronaut moving slowly (or slower than usual) through a disquieting, strangely silent 2D landscape that is a cross between an outer-space post-apocalyptic scenery and a sci-fi human body (red globules? Platelets? Bacteria?). Everything, including the sound and the verbal text most of all, is remarkably more restrained, well-balanced and less schizophrenic than in the previous games; against the intentional, constant stimulus overload that dominated those, here we often have the opposite – a lot of void. Beyond the satirization of mass-consumption videogames, which is here more explicit than before, the work faces a wider, subtler issue in how videogames only reflect problems brought along by the digital revolution that are much more generalized: the tendency to hyper-simplification, narcissism, and loss of patience and concentration that lead to the obsession with ‘praise’. Videogames, which when most profitable are brutal, active and not reflective, quite simple, immediately satisfying and player-glorifying, are one of the most evident incarnations of this mentality, whether cause or symptom of it is ever hard to say. Thus, for the first time Nelson is not only using the game as a great excuse for post-modern pastiche (actually renovating the procedure) but he is tackling the spirit of his times through a satire that is less vague and more precisely aimed. The game is clearer in its intentions to be a meta-game, a parody of a game; Nelson is more focused than before in what exactly he wants to communicate and his art gains in intensity. Some sequences are memorable, harrowing and arresting, such as when, at the slogan of “Your victorious movements win a sea of dismembered applause”, a sea of severed dark limbs, sinisterly oscillating like seaweeds, obstructs the entire landscape, growing at a point even disturbingly larger, as we pass by, for what seems like eternity, in uneasy, poignant silence.

In another level, “a slow walk across your organs’ healthy flora”, the player is perversely forced to walk at an exasperating slow speed, in another instance of satirization of pop videogames’ frantic

and ultra-smooth pace, while otherwise trivial symbols (we touch television antennas and they turn into luxuriant flowers) acquire a new poignancy as it is *us* who trigger the transformation; in traditional literature it would not have been anything more than a trite image, but here it feels fresh in some way, as if the involvement of the recipient gave new communicative meaning to everything: it becomes another strangely memorable moment in its simplicity, the slow pace of walking that we are forced to pushing us almost perversely to observe ‘pointless’ details in the background and scenery that would otherwise surely escape our attention, to rediscover eyesight not as a tool but as an asset for its own sake. A possible parallel with Wallace is here, I believe, evident – as Wallace tried to make us rediscover transparent emotionality and moral value for their own sake in the age of television, now Nelson has to take a step back and make us rediscover things that are even more basic, as the ‘enemy’ has become much more all-engulfing – thought, eyesight, hearing, sensorial stimuli for their own sake, as an inner experience that should disregard any agenda and especially disregard ‘praise’.

The for-its-own-sake poetic is especially powerful in the finales of some of the games such as *Game, game, game and again game*, where Nelson stages a parody of a victory (your prize for completing the game or a level is a short, pointless and nonsense video) exposing the meaninglessness and triviality of the obsessive drive to ‘win’ that informs much videogame culture. This gimmick is made pervasive in *Evidence of Everything Exploding* (2009), perhaps the pinnacle of Nelson’s most schizophrenic side. *Evidence of Everything Exploding* is at the same time more of a game (more challenging to go through, whereas most of the others are parodically trivial to complete) and more academically ‘serious’ – level after level “various historical and contemporary texts” (*Evidence of Everything Exploding* n.p.), as Nelson himself explains, assorted with no discernible criterion and ranging from Joyce to a letter by Bill Gates to an excerpt from the *Dictionarium Britannicum* appear gigantically in the background. At first the game seems mainly an

excuse to expose the player to a lot of texts, mostly now almost-obsolete written forms such as the letter, the encyclopedia entry, the printed newspaper article, with an obvious didactic purpose: reminding the 'gamer' that such things existed. The lack of any coherent connection between all this text (paratext to the game?) and the game itself results in the player hardly noticing the former, though. Midway through the game the suspicion grows that either Nelson had no clear idea of what he wanted this time, or he rather ended up simply unleashing post-modern confusion, as suggested by the stark contrast between the seriousness of the texts shown and the idiotic, nonsensical after-level video intermissions (disguised as 'important evidence'). In short, some works are more successful than others, although all have huge communicative potential and relative originality of language.

Nelson is decidedly postmodern, but a postmodern updated for the era of mass-consumption videogames. There is a significant technical setback: the programming is, for various obvious reasons, light years behind the pop videogame world of our time, so even though the sketched, elementary nature of the graphics does have its own charm, it only lets one guess what possibilities a much more advanced graphic engine could allow for in the same context.

The general artistic value of Nelson's work – a work which appears in a form that is not standardized in any way yet and is only beginning to be academically accepted - might still now seem, not surprisingly, mixed or arguable. His creations have not attracted univocal reactions. Illya Szilak of *The Huffington Post* rightly remarked how Nelson's main asset is using "language as an adjunct technology, a means to create an additional play space", instead of "plac[ing] poetry in opposition to technology" (Szilak n.p.); but the result is simply "as alienating as modern art can get", opines *The Wall Street Journal* (Giles n.p.); not to mention the risk involved in blending two forms, poetry and videogames, that have such incompatible and unrelated historical backgrounds.

It is something simply bound to have its share of detractors in both camps, poets claiming it is not “truly literary” and game makers dismissing it as “easy-to-play artsy wankerism” (Jansson n.p.).

Truth is, most of his work, also given the pace at which all Internet-related things evolve, cannot help giving the idea of something half-baked, tentative, and that might be much wider in scope. He has the talent to produce a much more significant, committed and engaged work to develop more broadly and deeply the relevant issues he has managed to face, but never too consistently, so far. Perhaps his best is still ahead, even though, according to his website, he has not produced a new work of electronic literature since 2015.

Alan Bigelow is another digital author mentioned by Kim Stefans in *American Literature in Transition* as one of the most significant of the last few years, who arguably embodies a stylistically different take on the same issue and on the same purpose of Nelson – give artistic credibility to the digital and attempt to ferry poetry and fiction onto a credible, cohesive digital dimension. As we will see, he ends up sharing most of the same limits, too.

Unlike Nelson, whose ‘schizophrenic’ approach is at odds with the patience required for narrative, Bigelow is more of a narrator than a poet. This means that the digital-visual component, in comparison, has to be toned down as the written text requires more space, more iterations, more continuity, and more concentration on the reader’s part. In fact, just as Nelson’s use of it is brash, in-your-face and magniloquent, Bigelow’s is minimalistic and sober. It is part of the story, a useful side dish, but essentially it is the story that matters, a story that just happens to be enriched by some images and sounds. *The Fall* (2015) exemplifies this use of the digital as simple coloring – it is a short story about a very boring, unexceptional person reminiscent of Musil’s *Man Without Qualities* updated for contemporary paranoia, whose absurd life (he has won the Most Boring Person in the World Award multiple times) is described in deadpan comical tones. He finally

decides to change, with a comical plot twist leading to a happy ending. The simple story is well-written and might recall the work of accessible but accomplished post-postmodern authors such as Jennifer Egan or George Saunders. It is linear; the reader is not given any choice except move forward and move backwards, just like turning the pages of a book, the only difference being that every webpage features images to go with the words, only one line or two of text, and occasionally sound. On the other hand it attempts to be something more than an illustrated book – some images are cinematographically in a first-person perspective, helping identification, while others portray signs that are symbolically important to the story. The overall concoction is much more accessible but much less daring and original than Nelson.

Bigelow's minimalism as opposed to Nelson's hardcore approach is more efficient and also more evocative, more original, and less linear in little ideas like *The Quick Brown Fox* (2011). The work is, admittedly as the subtitle reveals, a pangram (a sentence built using, at least once, every letter of a given alphabet). On a white background, the sentence "the quick brown fox jumps over a lazy dog" appears, in grey letters; by moving the cursor upon a letter, we realize that each of them corresponds to a fragment of some story, in the form of one sentence that begins with the selected letter. Once touched, the letter spawns the sentence but also a different background image – a moving image, a loop. Background images range from a meadow shaken by the wind and other natural elements (water, fire) to evocative, disquieting close-ups of lonely humanity: the sad eyes of a still woman, a pale hand spreading as if looking for help, people trapped in repetitive, routine, nonsensical gestures; on top of it, a new-age harmonic organ drone sustains an atmosphere in between the contemplative and the suspenseful. The sentences generated by moving the cursor on top of a letter of the initial sentence seem like chunks of a disintegrated narrative, vague allusions:

A pair of earrings by the bed add to her suspicion (letter A)

Roses wave gently in the breeze (letter R)

Out of sight, mr. Cully mows the lawn (letter O)

Slowly, we discern frames of a loose but clearer narrative linking the isolated sentences: a woman, suspecting betrayal from her husband, depressed and tormented, meditates on whether to leave. At least so far, what she does in the end is not clear, regardless of the order in which we proceed – we might touch the sequence of letters in linear order, from left to right, and thus unfold the loose narrative the way the author intended for us to do it (or rather, the way the pangram sentence has it – Bigelow simply found it, did not ‘create’ it), but we may also proceed randomly, evoking even looser, vaguer images that frame the same ‘shadow’ of a story. The whole (the music, the looping psychedelic images, the sparse short sentences) is delicately evocative; but once we have touched all the 33 letters of the original sentence, they rearrange in alphabetical order and reduce to 24, the same sentences remaining associated to the same letters. We thus have a chance at a new ‘suggested’ order of reading, and find out that this way, the story has a much more linear and intelligible development. In a way, it is only a little mathematical game applied to a trivial story, yet it interestingly walks a tight rope trying to have the digital (inventiveness in the interactivity department, blending literature with sound and image) and the story (quality of narrative content) on the same level, having to restrain both in the process. The result, although presented as very humble, is much more significant than the sum of its parts in this respect.

Although very different, Bigelow shares with Nelson the same mission and many of the limits: dated or very limited quality of digital programming on the one hand, and narrow scope of the works on the other – there is potentially a lot of depth in them, but what still ultimately prevails is the sense of little more than an amusing novelty. The problem might tentatively, and predictably,

be attributed to the digital medium, perhaps constitutionally inadequate at valorizing works of art beyond the level of superficial fruition.

Other digital artists, perhaps very much conscious of this problem, have attempted more programmatically serious, complex and highbrow works. One example of this less accessible approach might be – and it will be the last before we close the chapter of electronic literature – J.R. Carpenter. As we will see, once again the results, keeping in mind what we are looking for – art that bridges the gap between making serious literature and making it relevant, visible and contemporaneity-conscious – can be considered mixed.

J.R. Carpenter is active in many forms – poetry, short fiction, essays – but is perhaps best known for her electronic literature works, which she has been producing since 1993 and which have been awarded various international prizes. (Carpenter, “Digital” Literature” and “Biography”, n.p.). They are numerous, but one that might be considered typical of many traits of her style and poetics is *Etheric Ocean* (2014). As the author claims, *Etheric Ocean* is an experimental, atmospheric/mood piece “born of the difficulty of communicating through the medium of deep dense dark ocean” (“Etheric Ocean: Sources”, n.p.). A physical difficulty of communication which rapidly becomes, through a sea (indeed) of suggestions and hints, metaphorical, bespeaking more abstract and contemporary communicative dysfunctions. The reader can see in it whatever they want in the end – as mainly a ‘mood’ composition, it is open to all kinds of interpretation, with only the oceanic theme setting a definite tone in color (black, dark blue, dark green) and literary influences as well, with countless, camouflaged echoes of classics of adventure literature.

The entire composition is on one web page developed both vertically and horizontally, but especially the latter; the reader has to proceed and eventually reach the end by scrolling from the left to the right. Amidst black silences and sequences of dots, different, disjointed pieces of text

and images juxtapose, often appearing simultaneously (vertically distributed) or in ambiguous order, on top of the page or at bottom, so we never know in which order to proceed; to make matters even more alienating – in correlation with the difficulty in communication and comprehension that the vast mass of waters embodies – some lines amidst the chunks of text change constantly (some of the chunks seem to be arranged like poems, but the entire form here is very fluid). Typically, two or three lines at a time disappear cyclically and are replaced by a different line each, all the while we are trying to read the whole fragment. This often makes a traditional, linear reading impossible (and attempts at it frustrating): we have to develop a new, tentative, slower way of reading, stopping on each ‘revolving’ line until we have read all the alternate possibilities of it and memorized them; and only then proceed. These revolving lines, actually, often offer trivial variations of the same concept or rather interchangeable alternatives, but we still don’t reach any cohesive conclusion regarding narrative content and direction – the only message is silence, confusion, getting lost, attempts at communicating and failure. While some of the fragments read as poetic and abstract, many seem like quotations or reformulations of historical ship voyage diaries, where obscure allusions to mysterious sounds of unknown origin and islands that should be there but that cannot be found perfectly echo our own disorientation. There is no way out of the bottom of the ocean. Reaching the rightmost end of the multidimensional page leads us only to the ultimate disruption of language, of any hope to communicate – madness, perhaps, or a point of no return anyway:

Shores between in receiving and sending between in signals between in messages between in
hours off the during record the off themselves between themselves amongst about spoke ship this
board on were who those what is about wonder I what know you

(from *Etheric Ocean*)

Closing off the chapter, we might now wonder: is such a take on the theme of communication in keeping with Wallace's 'progressive' approach to it? Communication is central in *Etheric Ocean* (we might argue that all digital art is about communication by definition – transplanting the heritage of ancient, historical forms on such a new medium is automatically a communicative challenge). But Carpenter is so in a way that seems more post-modern than Wallace-ian: no solution is proposed, the author instead thriving on the fragmentary and on the pastiche of forms, sometimes giving the idea of caring more about the medium than the message (perhaps an inevitable, if temporary, impression before a work that is more linguistically complex, in terms of content, than Bigelow and Nelson).

If, among these few examples that we have managed to consider, we wanted to find a 'heir' to Wallace in this field (restoring emotion, values, seriousness, and problematizing communication in a constructive way, all through uncompromising literary 'shock treatment') the worthiest candidate seems to me to be Nelson, with especially *Nothing you have done deserves such praise* striking me as the most emotionally hard-hitting work, while at the same time witty and relatively accessible. But if some new 'order' is getting born, the ultimate impression is that we are still in a pretty embryonal phase. The future years, with the inevitable, further technological developments we already can or cannot expect, will surely have more surprises in store.

CHAPTER 4

PROBLEMATIZING THE NEW: SOME INTERNET-RELATED LITERATURE BY YOUNG NEW AUTHORS

A very different challenge is the one that some authors (not many yet, to tell the truth) are dealing with in trying to face the Internet openly and directly, but from without, not from within like the electronic artists we have just described. Namely, we looked for novelists, seeking to find strong or interesting stances concerning the 'enemy' but expressed through a traditional literary form. We have chosen three books.

Once again, the question is not just to talk about all things digital, but to see how these recent authors relate to a Wallacian approach: is their work comparable in intentions, tone and message, or did the transition from television make the task much harder? This is a question that we will focus on as a bottom line to the analyses of the authors we have chosen; but for the sake of clarity, and in order not to get lost in a field that might be too vast and drift us off topic, we will mostly articulate the following paragraphs trying to assess, for each author, two factors. The first will be how they go about the problem concerning the gap between literary language - the language of the novel - and the necessity to renovate, responding in some way or another to 'the language of the Internet', provided that such a thing exists. The second will be what opinion of the Internet is presented. This second point, we should specify, takes into account the possibility, more than once brought forth already, that formulating a complete critical rejection of the Internet phenomenon without being hypocritical has become much harder than it used to be with television.

It is perhaps right that this part of our analysis should begin with Joshua Cohen, as the young American author has received straight comparisons with Wallace (Sarvas n.p. and Fowle n.p.) for his ambitious and multi-thematic novel *A Book of Numbers* (2015). The book follows the stories of two eponymous characters, both called Joshua Cohen like the author. One is a Silicon Valley magnate and founder of a ubiquitous search engine modeled on Google and named Tetraton; he is reaching the end of his life, being sick with cancer, and he is thinking of publishing his memoirs. The other is a failed writer who is commissioned to ghostwrite those memoirs. Focalization alternates between the two characters; one section of the book, the one in the middle, is composed of a series of work-in-progress interview transcripts where we hear the voice of the magnate (although filtered, possibly, through the one of the writer who is taking notes on those transcripts, which are supposed to be reworked into a book). In this section we go through the memories, adventures and misadventures which are entailed in starting up and developing an ambitious, innovative company; in the remaining two sections of the novel – the opening one and the closing one - focalization is on the writer instead, and on his romantic, existential and professional troubles. Overall, the book is impressively diverse thematically and spawns reflection on a variety of urgent and relevant topics.

There is actually not much of a linear, consecutive, eventful plot; sure, things happen to Joshua the writer and things happen to Joshua the magnate (named 'Principal') but the actions themselves are often not fundamental or irreplaceable in terms of what the novel ultimately has to say. This is really a novel about language; that is where most of its ambition lies.

Part of this ambition also relates to implementing the Internet within the folds of the language of the novel, or at least addressing it; and this is the point that most interests us. Not by chance have many referred to *A Book of Numbers* as an 'Internet novel' (Sturgeon n.p.), and even a 'great Internet novel' (Chayka n.p.).

Yet that might be reductive. Actually, in terms of lexicon, Cohen works on two fronts. On the one hand – the first and last section, featuring the voice of Joshua the writer – we have sprawling, almost schizophrenically detailed vocabulary, encompassing a variety of topics – history, art (50-55), literature, movies (62), politics (120), mathematics (33). There are serious ambitions to display an encyclopedic lexicon here, and this is one of the main similarities with Wallace. This alternates (see, for example, pp. 94-96) with a pretty direct, almost unfiltered assimilation of the typical Internet user language (Urls, abbreviations, e-mails, computer lingo):

I sat, Tetbook and Tetote on my lap, at a Gospel Go 2.0. Clicked the Union Jack / Stars & Stripes, which loaded up the Staatsbibliothek homepage in English. Agreed to abide by the Terms of Service... my IP was what it was... (473).

The comparison of this kind of language with many philosophical, conventionally 'literary', academia-conscious passages also found in the book might be remarkable:

It's like with the Korans I've been reading, it's like with any other paradisaically dictated book. There's enough of everything for everyone, there's never any call to hoard or grub. When you're wandering the desert, you get to decide what your manna will taste like. Then you eat it, and whatever it tastes like it is (154).

The two distinct choices of lexicon create a contrast in tone, that ends up being one of the main characteristics of Cohen's writing, but they also weirdly converge: yielding to the ubiquitous language of the Internet user on one hand and resisting it by showing off an old-fashioned gusto for encyclopedic, inaccessible vocabulary, on the other, sometimes end up being similar in tone, as they both bespeak a paranoia, or the protagonist's neurotic alienation. As programmatically opposed as they seem to be, they often merge seamlessly in the language.

This, more than the plot, might be the most interesting thing about the book – and indeed *A Book of Numbers*, for all the numeric emphasis of the title (which is a pretty obvious technological reference, although the Biblical one should not be completely ignored either) is really about words more than actions, sentences more than events, a precious study on language more than a ‘narrative’ novel. Indeed, the specific linguistic choices as well as the creativity in the vocabulary concatenations and juxtapositions in themselves spawn, much more than the actual story, the novel’s most intriguing questions: how much of Internet-user (pseudo)language can we take? (The novel literally puts us to the test on this). How can an anti-Internet language relate to it? Can it still make sense and survive? What happens when we juxtapose the two? And beyond that, as we have already mentioned – can they merge with interesting results?

Cohen at times manages something remarkable in this respect, such as the following passage: a reflection where the apparent focus is existential, but typically ‘digital’ words such as ‘search’, ‘consume’, ‘order’ are employed to achieve the effect. The same paragraph is reiterated three consecutive times, with progressive corrections to make it more synthetic; this, as many other similar quirky moves on Cohen’s part, intend to firmly depict the author as a digital and not manual writer, while also staging a parody of existential reflections, hinting at a typical feature of the digital era – the obsession with aphorisms, as cheap existential tips. So while the paragraph is seriously existential in content, it is parodic in form:

The time and/or distance required for luxuries to become staples, for wants to become needs, for consumption to consume us. London’s just around the corner, a floor up or down, Paris can be ordered, ensuite, round the clock. Our access is bewildering, not just beyond imagination, but becoming imagination, and so bewildering twice over. We can only search the found, find the searched, and charge it to our room.

The time and/or distance required for luxuries to become staples, for wants to become needs, consumption to consume. London's just around the corner, Paris can be ordered, ensuite, round the clock. Our access is bewildering, not just beyond imagination, but becoming imagination, bewildering twice over. We can only search the found, find the searched, and charge it to our room.

(...)

The time/distance required for luxuries to become staples, wants to become needs. London's just around the corner, Paris can be ordered. Our access is bewildering. We can only search the found, find the searched, and charge it to our room. (127-128)

Another passage appearing shortly afterwards again manages this remarkable balance of linguistic tones, in an original way: religion (the sacred, the ancient, the timeless, the anti-digital by definition) becomes something that can be 'technologically experienced'; that is, supposedly, discussed in technological terms:

(...) of all the miracles of all the religions, Buddhism's are the only ones that make sense to me, because they're the only ones I've at least technologically experienced – seeing over long distances, hearing over long distances, passing unimpeded through walls, doubling, tripling, and quadrupling the self, and especially levitation – going up, staying up for a bit, coming down. (132-133)

It is in passages like this that most of Cohen's merit and peculiarity as a novelist lies.

Not always does he deliver. In fact, Cohen's language, although admittedly ambitious, might still be argued to be over-the-top. More often than not the result of his efforts is a cluster of thick, pretentious neologisms, such as:

I waited for my hooch behind a pornstached chillionaire and his two biogrammer friends, by which I mean his coworkers at #Summerize, according to their shirts and shorts and hats (80).

I had no wasta, and only this chance. Though even if I'd manage to baksheesh the campjockeys at resort IT (146).

A few lines above we were talking of how attempting to blend anti-digital and digital language might be Cohen's greatest merit. Granted, it works when the results are artistically appreciable. At times, they feel not only terrible (intentionally anti-aesthetic?) but, what is worse, pointless and truly cold – alternating techno-mathematical jargon and big Greek-Latin words, going nowhere:

Each bacterium's DNA containing the equivalent of approx. 1 million bytes of information. Meaning the average remote control button has the data capacity of approx. 100,000 terabytes.

According to Principal: streptococcus, staphylococcus, meningococcus, coliform.

Aerobic, anaerobic. Microbes. (95).

The excess of disparate topics and thematics mentioned might be a setback, at least at first read. Sudden and seemingly disconnected religious references are another idiosyncrasy of Cohen's that might, indeed, remind us of something by Wallace:

Let this meeting be as cryptic – as representative/nonrepresentative – as the Arameans, a people that never had a land of their own but still managed to leave behind their language – the only thing they left behind, their language. Aramaic. *Ha lachma anya*. This is the bread of affliction. *Eli Eli lama shavaktani?* Father, Father, why didn't Christ quote the Psalms in Hebrew – was he that inept, or does excruciation always call for the vernacular? (40)

Yet these disparate thematic excursions and insertions feel more fragmentary and magmatic and ultimately, quite often, heavy and inconclusive.

The large central section of the book, as already said, moves the focus away from Joshua's private life and towards the Principal's, being made of hurried, still unrevised transcripts of his numerous interviews. Obviously, Cohen tries to change tone here. The erudition and idiosyncratic neologisms that characterize Joshua the writer are mostly gone (or the author tries to do so): the Principal's voice is more practical, factual, and the only lingo being explored here is, mostly, the technological one; so Cohen's intention is to contrast an outsider's, casual user's vision of the digital, with the one of an insider, a creator. The main linguistic consequence is that while the beginning and the end section of the book thrive on the struggle between embracing the digital and resisting it, this central section is more of a full immersion into the digital – and it is the heart of the book. This, seemingly, is the aim; once again it is more disputable how proficiently Cohen achieves this in practice. Sometimes there are oscillations of focus and voice: existential reflections appear that seem to be more in keeping with Cohen the author or Cohen the character than with the very different and distant, cold and practical tech guru and businessman:

It was like a dream. Or hallucination. As like when the comp digirecorder shuts off when its condenser mic does not detect our speaking voice for 1, 2, 3, 4 seconds and so the recording will become nothing but an artificially compressed memory omitting the time in which life is lived, the times of blankness between the redlit sesshs just lost and irretrievable. That is how we perceive that existence today, as like a vast unrecorded emptiness. We were not sleeping and not awake.

(225)

It is still one of the best pages in the book, by the way, another great example of Cohen's managing an aesthetic marriage of the digital and the existential. But this central section is undoubtedly the most difficult to swallow, to an extent intentionally anti-aesthetic as an unrevised collection of interview transcripts might be, but also showing Cohen uncertain, as anticipated, when facing the issue of what voice to give to Principal. To be sure to distinguish him from Joshua

the character, he resorts to some easy tricks such as associating to him silly idiosyncratic expressions such as 'as like' and 'stupey'.

As partially anticipated, *A Book of Numbers* turns metafictional in its central section. Here Cohen presents the interview transcripts as an open quarry, with parenthetical notes, scribbles, redacted lines, truncated sentences; but at times, these devices come to seem like a convenient way to keep up our attention and maintain a 'human' feel against the shortcomings of the very prose – the boredom, mostly. Of course, once again, the boredom effect is not only inevitable (we are hearing the story of the evolution of a business enterprise in detail) but aesthetically intentional, so it does depend on the reader's point of view.

So far about Cohen's efforts in relating literary language with digital/Internet language. The next question to raise is what opinion of the Internet emerges from the novel.

Cohen surely has a complex view on the matter that hardly surfaces explicitly; and once more it is very difficult to establish a direct parallelism with Wallace, whose characters were much more directly anti-televisual – be they resistant or surrendering, pure (such as Mario) or corrupt, it is clear that modern times are a disease to their humanity. Cohen is perhaps a little less Marxist, so to speak, and more fatalistic: the Internet reign is the newest face of change, a change that perhaps disrupts more than it creates, but where Wallace observes the fight for survival against alienation with more bleakness and pessimism, Cohen is a little more nonchalant and curious; not necessarily does anything very good come from the Internet, but at least the 'fight' does at times spark creativity and spawn stories of humanity, such as the humanity that is slowly revealed to be existing, even though hidden, in the cold, powerful mogul that is Principal – whose decline and end, by the way, highlights the vulnerability, the non-exceptionality of the spreaders and creators

of the 'digital disease'. This is something that once again is conspicuously absent in Wallace, where the televisual powers are much more invisible and invincible, Big Brother-like. In fact, sometimes Cohen's view of the Internet (while still mostly bleak throughout the novel) almost even verges on the playful and ironic:

...today I was writing an email to my cousin and his wife in Israel (Kfar Chabad) to wish them a mazel tov on their first child, a boy. But then I was stopped by a sinful thought!! Obviously when I type anything that invokes the Hebrew for "G-d", I use the traditional euphemism familiar from the way everyone knows to pronounce the Name whenever they're not distinctly praying: "HaShem", which means, of course, "the Name". Like for a good luck on a new business venture email I might type: "May HaShem bless you and keep you", or for a get well soon email: "Blessed is HaShem, the source of healing"... but now that all of our communications are online, I can't help but wonder about rabbis like yourself who have to type out the Name of G-d, the true and perfect four letter mystical unpronounceable Name He calls Himself, for religious purposes such as instruction.

According to Jewish law... the Name of G-d must never be destroyed. Any paper or other writing surface that contains the Name must be buried like a person is buried, and discarded. But what about on the computer? Can we erase or trash? Or do we have to bury our machines too? And what about servers or online like in the cloud? (421-22)

Once again Cohen shows an obsession with religion and significantly tries to explore how it can relate to the digital (Cohen is Jewish, yet not only Judaism but also Islamism is thematically important in the book and problematized in relation to contemporary digital values or anti-values).

Ultimately, however, one passage of the book towards the end may be the one to come across as most central in revealing Cohen's vision of the relationship between authorship/writing/narrative and the digital. It is a reflection on the perceived difference between typing and handwriting:

Computers keep total records, but not of effort, and the pages inked out by their printers leave none. Screens preserve no blemishes or failures. Screens preserve nothing human. (...) But a page – only a page can register the sorrows of the crossings, bad word choice gone bad, the gradual dulling of pencil lead, which is graphite. (...) A notebook is the only place you can write about shit like this and not give a shit, like this. (548-549)

If this is to be taken as the ultimate assessment of the digital it is pretty bleak and not very original either – yet it is Cohen the character that is speaking here first and foremost, and we must remember that Cohen the author presents him in a particularly disheveled and disillusioned state towards the end of the book (namely, he has just heard of the death of his agent, Aaron). Also, Joshua is hardly presented as a reliable narrator – self-pitying, porn-addicted, heavy on black humor, stream of consciousness and thematic drift, he may not exactly be an anti-hero but he is close. The monologue reported above should thus be taken with a grain of salt, being only arguably presented as truth and more surely as the plaintive mumblings of an unsatisfied writer.

But there are misleading clues even beyond a suggested narrator unreliability – notice, for instance, how the last sentence in the quotation above decidedly sheds uncertainty in the assessment of paper writing, somewhat at odds with everything that came before, which seemed univocally a scathing judgement of digital writing. Is it really positive to be able to “write about shit like this and not give a shit”? May digital writing have actual advantages in this sense, forcing one to a better sense of order, synthesis and purpose, because of the much greater emphasis inevitably put on the result (as the ‘process’ disappears)?

An ambivalent view of the Internet it remains, therefore, even though predominantly negative but never so much as in Wallace; which would confirm once more that the Internet is more inescapable. But is there more to it? Judging by some interviews where similar issues were tackled, Cohen seems very little interested in waging a war against the digital, subscribing instead

to a mildly optimistic, fatalistic vision in which literature will survive anyway: “I think if German literature could survive the ‘40s, and Russian literature could survive Sovietism, American literature can survive Google” (National Public Radio, n.p.). Notably, in the same interview he also dismisses the idea that there is such a thing as a ‘language of the Internet’, which I do not believe matches well with a Wallacian view either: “the birth of the search engine, it’s nothing new, it’s essentially embedded in our literature, it’s how ideas relate, how the mind makes connections. (...) Really, I think there is no language of the Internet”. This seems to me a relative downplaying of the role of the Internet as a power that be, because what has the power to make its voice really stand out can always be argued to have its own language, and Wallace surely believed that television did have its own language, broadly speaking. Despite dedicating almost 600 pages to the issue in its various facets and with deep insight, Cohen appears ultimately more dismissive and fatalistic.

A much more politically charged, combative figure that has also stood out in the last very few years, dealing with some of the same themes (namely, the context being that of the new Silicon Valley magnates and the massive influence of their financial choices) is Jarett Kobek. But for all the similarities in the thematic premises to their work, Kobek’s approach could not be more distant.

I Hate the Internet (2016) is the story of a middle-aged, ‘kind of famous’ woman, Adeline, who commits the only ‘unforgivable sin of the 21st Century’ – forgetting she is being recorded during a speech. The video being uploaded and going viral, fostering all sorts of ‘digital-retard’ reactions but mostly insults from haters, leads us to reflect on the anthropological issues springing out of such societal and technological changes in a way that was absent in Cohen: Cohen seemed much more interested in the individual’s relationship with the life-changing technology (the intellectual individual, in fact: both Joshua the writer and the Principal can be considered or are rendered as such) than with the societal, broad-scale effects of the Internet. Kobek makes instead an effort to move from the specific to the general: Adeline’s story intertwines with similar ones that further

detail the picture, such as Ellen's, whose life is ruined after sex pictures she had foolishly yielded to take part in with her then-boyfriend resurface to haunt her years later. All happens in a general atmosphere that Kobek's sneering, sardonic tone throughout depicts as of madness and stupidity, everybody having fallen prey of irrationality, passivity and idiocy under the comfortable new yoke of the new powers that be (the social network technocrats); everybody except the protagonists, appearing as lost, unlikely islands of humanity, little lights amidst the thick fog.

Kobek's is also a much more clearly political book. He does not restrain himself to denouncing the usual, run-of-the-mill negative effects of technology on the user, something we have arguably heard enough about – he attempts to give a picture of how life has changed, socially, humanly, economically, and in urbanistic terms, in and around San Francisco since the Silicon Valley technological boom of the last 10-15 years. In this respect the book, despite being thrice as short, is almost as thematically rich as Cohen's: we deal with the comic book industry and some of its history, with science fiction (we will especially come back to this point later), with cinema, with American politics, and with, perhaps most importantly, the social/urbanistic phenomenon of gentrification, in which a previously middle-class, financially accessible neighborhood starts seeing rent prices rise and becomes inhospitable to former residents due to the moving in of much more affluent people.

This is what happens, to the author's heartfelt dismay, in San Francisco, as the proudly held 'bohemian' Bay Area culture – a haven for misfits, minorities, hippies, alternative people and humble people is being swept away by the new techno-ultra-rich.

As the book makes clear, Kobek's and Cohen's languages are massively different. Not by chance did both the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Metro* define the book as 'quotable' (Kobek III-IV). What they refer to is Kobek's characteristically short, simple, easy, quipping and ironic sentences,

giving scathing and sneering opinions on anything in a way that tries to be aphoristic and catchy. If Cohen's attempt to absorb some of the Internet language results in a jaggedness, a blizzard of information that gives the idea of the surfer being lost, adrift in the inextricable haze of the net (an effect somehow augmented by Cohen's literary, magniloquent, encyclopedic language), Kobek considers the very opposite route - the route of the Internet oversimplifying and diminishing language, and embraces it to an extent. Not only does this present itself as a 'retard-proof' novel or even a 'retard-addressed' novel, it is straight out a "bad novel": not sparing anyone including himself from the bleak picture, the author warns, in a harsh, acid judgement typical of Kobek's style:

this bad novel, which is a morality lesson about the Internet, was written on a computer. You are suffering the moral outrage of a political writer who has profited from the spoils of slavery [as computers, Kobek reports, are "built by slaves in China"] (25).

This nihilism, which pervades the book and actually tries quite clumsily to make up for the author's actual incoherence or lack of moral integrity, might sometimes go over the top. But it is made up for by Kobek's effectively quirky sense of structure and development. A typical example might be the following:

The furor died on a Friday. Like Jesus Christ, it was reborn on a Sunday.

Jesus Christ was a social radical from the Roman province of Galilee... he preached the radical ideas of total love and total forgiveness.

J. Karacehennem was fixated on the idea that Jesus Christ was a White Magus initiated into a system of sexual magick by Apollonius of Tyana.

Apollonius of Tyana was another mystic. Like Karacehennem's family, Apollonius of Tyana was from the land mass now known as Turkey. No one really knows much about Apollonius of Tyana. (115)

A certain cultural reference is made in what seems a totally random and perfunctory way, just for comedic or metaphorical effect; then Kobek deviates from the narration to give his ever sardonic insight about that reference, until we figure out it was not random, but had a discernible relation with the general discourse. Topical drifts and jumps abound, but everything is gradually revealed to be on topic in some way.

The deadpan comical tones, the countless cultural and para-cultural references and the characters' surreal behaviour sometimes remind me of Thomas Pynchon more than Wallace; and indeed, even though at least every now and then the tone might be traced back to something Wallacian, those who are willing to compare the two will have to address something else – Kobek apparently hates Wallace. At a point, Adeline 'tweets':

Isn't it strange that @BretEastonEllis, an out gay man, is somehow a villain while everyone worships David Foster Wallace, a sexist jock? (206)

But it is *Infinite Jest* in particular that – ironically, considering the premises of our dissertation – gets most of the hate. Adeline remembers how trying to read *Infinite Jest* made her “sick” (112), and further on the author even imagines an anti-app which would simply “make people’s iPhones unusable (...) [it] would read the text of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* until the iPhone owner committed suicide over sheer pretension and boredom” (179). Just like with all the other things Kobek vents his anger on, this Wallace hatred seems no joke. Kobek does not see him as a kindred spirit or ideological ally, as we do; rather, he is just another enemy, partly because of supposed traits (sexism) that Kobek is ferociously vocal against, and partly because he, evidently, sees Wallace just as an author of what he contemptuously and sardonically defines ‘good novels’ – Academia-conscious works that do nothing in relation to the significant issues of the contemporary world. This complication makes matters more interesting – because we remain

convinced that Kobek has stood out as one of the most notable new torchbearers of that critical vision of television (evolved now to confront its successor, the Internet) that really began with Wallace.

Clearly, Kobek is not a fan of the large, openly ambitious book (even though his polemically short-sentence, quick-fire novel is just as ambitious in intentions). This is important because it signals a significant difference between the two authors, one that might be read as another incoherence on Kobek's part: for all of his sported hatred of Internet phenomena (he is by all means much more venomous than Cohen) Kobek seems unequivocally favorable to absorbing some traits of its language, or of the side-effects of it. The ultra-simple sentences, the overall short length, the 'retard-proof' linearity and explanations all indicate an attempt to reach the common Google-using man by adapting in many ways to his level. And while Cohen had limited himself to implementing the form of the e-mail, Kobek goes further by implementing tweets and even the 'listicle', a very recent Internet form (basically a webzine article that only consists of a list, for the sake of the shortest of all attention spans). The most exaggerated instances of this process of assimilation might be read as ironic, of course: but I believe the effort in general, and its purpose, is serious – Kobek really strives to reach the, so to speak, 'post-reader').

Just as the language is, at least superficially, simpler than Cohen's, Kobek's general view of the Internet in general is clearer, totally unambiguous: "the Internet was the disease" (149). The arguments brought forth to support such a judgement are explicit and quite articulate, nothing to do with the typical fodder (alienation from the 'real world', damage to the attention span, etc.). Instead the 'disease' is diagnosed with precise reasons that intertwine the financial and the social, best exemplified perhaps by Kobek's opinion of the 'cosplay' phenomenon. Namely:

...comic-book conventions were excuses for people to dress up like the intellectual property of major corporations... in the liminal zone of the comic-book convention, trapped within the magick [sic] circle of 'cosplay', it will be impossible to determine whether this 45-year-old man has any conception that he is not, in actuality, the intellectual property of a major corporation... [these people who spend their leisure time tweeting and creating intellectual property for Twitter] had transformed their bodies into walking advertisements for entities in which they had no economic stake. (196)

It is the financial 'deception' that finds fertile humus in the functional illiteracy, real-life ineptitude and hampered judgement produced by the Net that most worries Kobek. Naïve people were always financially deceived by the more powerful, but now the illusion to create 'free' content to 'express your freedom' and your personality while you are actually not only working and advertising for free to the profit of two or three immense, all-swallowing companies, but also creating original content that is entirely detained by them, is a novelty combination of our era.

Thus, another topic is introduced that is perhaps the most important of the book – what a person should do with their own creative content nowadays. At least three of the main characters in the book are artists: Adeline, Baby and J. Karacehennem all have to struggle with a world that more than ever waters down and dumbs down the idea of artist, due to the democratization and huge banalization of it that the web promotes. Adeline has to endure systematic industry sexism that even forced her for a while to adopt a male pseudonym, J. Karacehennem would like to write committedly about politics and terrorism but no one takes him seriously, with his father (comically, a traditionalist Muslim) pushing him to just put "some sex" in it (173); and finally, Baby has resigned to write commercially viable, conventional science fiction novels and renounce all further literary ambition. (Science fiction in particular is argued by Kobek to have been a huge influence on Silicon Valley tycoons, whose ambitious visions of the future and annexed crazy

expenses are supposedly, for lack of different and deeper intellectual stimuli, an offspring of those childish readings their generation grew up with). This aspect - much stressed by Kobek - is, notably, not only much less present in Cohen (who deals in some way with the chores of a struggling writer, but more generically and without tracing any relation with the Net as a direct cause of that struggle), but also absent in Wallace. Television alone could not yet have such a strong and direct influence on the world of a writer, or in the perception of their artistry. We have, therefore, another key difference between the two epochs, with Kobek being here the one who is more focused on tackling the new issue.

At least one more thing is significant enough to be underlined, and we partially anticipated it – Kobek skillfully connects the issue of technology to others that are equally very contemporary: sexism, but especially racism. Once again the book does not limit itself to the usual, generic accusation of racism as something ubiquitous and to be reckoned with; it goes further, making a connection between the societal consequences of the Silicon Valley's rising power and the discrimination of African-Americans and other minorities as something obviously embedded in the birth of America. At a pivotal passage of the book he seems to make the point that racism is so much behind the culture of the Silicon Valley nouveau-riche and their empires that the uncontrollable, all-affecting consequences of their actions are spreading to everybody a condition that is equivalent to that of suffering racism:

The idea of privacy was rooted in the concept of individualism. As such, it was impossible to have privacy when the systems of control refused to see you as an individual. Nowhere was this more true than in the lives of African-Americans... there is no privacy in the slave quarters... there is no such thing as privacy when every person on the street suspects you of anything.

Watching the media coverage of [Edward] Snowden's revelations, it was hard not to feel like the world had been transformed. It had become a place where the greatest concern was whether or not mass-produced cellphones were turning White people into Black ones. (202)

Although this may seem like going a little too far, connecting the issue to the political is a fundamental link, and it is done here in an obviously more explicit and determinate way that both in Cohen and Wallace. In Cohen the theme of race (or at least of differing cultures and religions) is quite present, but the connection that Kobek attempts is not. Wallace did develop a thematic connection between technology and the issue of nationality (not really race, however): technological developments had led to ecological and moral disaster, which in turn led to political turmoil and social upheaval (the threat of the nationalist terrorists). But the strength with which Kobek underlines the connection he sees between racism, individual freedom and the technocrats' rule completely sets him apart.

Jarrett Kobek and Joshua Cohen are two hugely different authors. For the purpose of our dissertation, we set out to try and compare them – which might work, but only in the tackling of certain issues, which most of the times the two face from very different perspectives and with very different degrees of intensity. In a nutshell, we might opine that while Cohen is mostly interested in experimenting with language (his being an 'Internet novelist' is a linguistic task mainly) and exploring the intellectual individual dealing with the daily influence of the Internet, Kobek expands the issue from the individual to the general, the historical, the anthropological. Curiously, though, Kobek paradoxically dresses his effort in a short, Internet-man-friendly format, while Cohen, who is less openly critical and fierce, is actually much more Internet-defiant in form (a long, complex book).

To complete the picture, we will now delve quite briefly into a third ‘Internet novelist’, as she has been called too (Barekat n.p.) – someone who tackles once again the same issue, and once again from a completely different slant. Natasha Stagg is a young editor based in New York City; *Surveys* (2016) is so far her only novel, and it was born almost by accident – she had to write a lot about celebrities as a magazine editor and, having always “been interested in it [the idea of celebrity]”, she started collecting ideas for a book that would “explore the idea of people becoming famous (Heuser, n.p.)”, the story coming together from many autobiographical elements as well. Notice, on an introductory side note, that even if Stagg’s book deals more explicitly and shamelessly with the theme of Internet celebrity, Kobek’s and Cohen’s did, too. Adeline was famous, and other characters in *I Hate the Internet* were published authors; as for *A Book of Numbers*, Principal was famous whereas Joshua the writer obviously strived to be, as every author does, although it was never admitted. Apparently, it is impossible to talk about Internet 2.0, even in literary terms, without talking about celebrity. Yet Stagg is the only author of the three not to treat it as a side effect or as a secondary topic behind much more pressing issues, but instead as the epicenter of everything.

Similarly to Kobek, but in a more natural and not didactic way, Stagg lucidly tries to delineate the causes of a problem; a remarkable difference is that here the Internet itself is not seen as the only one. In fact, technology seems to appear as merely an outlet, even though ubiquitous, and one that turns bad only because of outer reasons that lead to abusing it. Or at least, the Internet is not portrayed as the only evil, but only as an amplifying cause along with independent ones: the economic crash of the late 2000s (increasing youth depression due to the difficulty in finding jobs and career disillusionment) and the bankruptcy of moral values.

All causes of what, in the end? Of the millennial being lost.

Indeed, crucially, *Surveys* is the only book of the three that tries to tackle the topic from the perspective of millennials, who are arguably the most obvious protagonists. Millennials (people in their twenties now, post-adolescents or eternal adolescents) are, crucially, no intellectuals. While both Cohen and Kobek, when describing the individual's relationship with the digital, select the relatively self-conscious and ambitious artist as subject, Stagg makes sure to keep intellectual characters away from the book. Not only is the main demographic reference that of digital natives, but older characters, who are frequently and crucially described (the mother and father of the protagonist, the drunken uncle, an old stalker) are all anti-intellectual, middle-class or working-class people depicted as dated losers, clueless victims of a faster world whose newest developments they still do not quite understand; they seem intrinsically alien to it, or forcibly excluded. The generational gap between them and the young protagonist's generation is traced as absolutely unbridgeable.

Colleen, the aforementioned young protagonist, works at a mall in Tucson, Arizona. Her college degree seems to have amounted to nothing, and she works a miserable and dead-end job collecting and eliciting surveys from customers at the mall. The monotonousness of her days and the lack of prospects gradually lead her spiraling down a loop of social network addiction, pornography addiction, more and more encounters of casual sex, and alcoholism. Using social network obviously leads her to dream about online popularity as a way out of her grey life, and one day the unlikely dream comes true (in circumstances that are more or less intentionally kept vague) as she digitally comes across a famous man and they become partners. After an initial period of elation and naïve ecstasy, the side effects of it will start to come down relatively hard, yet after a bittersweet phase of resettlement, Colleen will not learn from her mistakes. The plot is that of a conventional coming-of-age or anti-coming-of-age story, but not many other books have

yet, with such crude lucidity, set it efficaciously into the new world order of social network obsession and fakery.

Let us now move on to our two main criterions: the language, and the way the Internet as a phenomenon is portrayed.

The first aspect might this time seem less interesting, at least at first sight. Stagg's writing style is quite linear and oscillates between that of a coming-of-age protagonist that tries to be well-spoken and insightful about describing and analyzing her troubles, and a much more (intentionally?) naïve millennial tone, bespeaking banality and deploying consciously silly young slang words, with adjectives such as "fashion victim-y" and "mediciney" (Barekat). The following examples might be explicatory, respectively, of these two stylistic poles:

Everything in the physical and spiritual world is interconnected in many more ways than we have the capacity of knowing. So, there are trends that attach to every living being, but also they attach scenarios and occurrences or habits, everything you've done or seen or thought. And these threads are too much for our minds to handle, so they mostly remain invisible, but correcting this invisibility with Internet frameworks can fake a better understanding of it (12).

Guy after guy after guy, and then one was this guy, this semi-famous person, who I'd seen a million times... he was more complicated than just a guy, being a guy, alone in a room. I met him online, it doesn't matter how, and we began to merge our following. Describing it would be pointless, and anyway, you can look it up. It was interaction, and people love to see that (65).

I believe it is arguable whether Stagg attempts to seriously tackle the problem of how to relate Internet language to the novel, but some critics seem to strongly believe it, and they might have a point: still Houman Barekat on the *LA Review of Books* writes that "Stagg deploys a flat, colorless

register in order to bring out the mechanical monotony of the process in which Colleen is engaged [the daily activities of an Internet celebrity, supposedly]." (n.p.). On the other hand, interestingly, it does make sense that an Internet book written from the perspective of a millennial might be more casual and less self-conscious in the use of 'contemporary' language; Internet references and related common lingo pop up here and there, perfectly and effortlessly integrated in the description of Colleen's days, whereas Kobek and Cohen, even though surely not at all that much older than Stagg, make a conscious and thus more strained effort in that direction, because they look at the phenomenon with a more openly critical stance (not to mention from a wider, more detached distance). Stagg, being much closer in spirit if not in age to the digital native, does not need that. It is not only, as one might argue, a matter of focalization, even though Stagg does focalize on a younger character; as we have partially anticipated, and as will better emerge later on, Stagg's ultimate opinion and message on the Internet is much more open and less negative than not only Kobek's, but Cohen's, too. Provided that such a message is intentional, it suggests a greater closeness and familiarity to the web, allowing for a different perspective.

Needless to say, Stagg is probably the less Wallacian of the three. Not only is there no truly explicit and strong criticism towards the Internet, but the whole topic is faced from the inside, by a digital native or almost-native who is quite at ease within it. And yet paradoxically, out of the three *Surveys* is probably the book that, for many people, will succeed as the best and most shocking deterrent from digital life, much more than Cohen's alienating complexity and even Kobek's programmatic panning. The way this generation is described comes across as incredibly bleak, and the protagonist, narrating in first person, is particularly merciless about herself: having completed college without much enthusiasm but with decent hopes, all she can obtain is a boring and humiliating job; but of course this is not only a generation of professional disappointment and uncertainties, not only a generation that is having a hard time figuring out their lives amidst fast

societal change; it is most of all a generation grown incapable of coping with even the slightest difficulties as they were dealt with by their parents. Colleen resorts to alcoholism and casual sex out of boredom; in an identical situation, the previous generation would have been busy saving money and trying to start a family. It might be over-idealizing, but it is a difference that is decidedly hinted at in the book, especially in the sequences that involve Colleen's parents, or Bill the old stalker – in short, the older generation, for whom the key word is 'resigned'. In this sense, Stagg paints a disquieting and poignant picture by suggesting that for Colleen's generation, the only way out of that resignation, of that cage (the old American motif of the escape, rebellion, individualism, freedom) is now through a screen. Colleen cannot conceive anything else; only that one-directional drug paradise of being lifted off smoggy anonymity. As for the rest, all cities are the same. There is no more West, no frontier to escape to.

This leads us to a tentative answer to the second question. A passage, first of all, might be enlightening, perhaps the best in the book:

What if we had to live in a way that TV had never described?

Lucinda's only piece of extensive writing online was a seven-page essay on the future of fame. - In the future, no one will want to be famous, in the way that no one now wants to be exploited. We will all aspire to be less and less known as we grow up. As things currently stand, no one can resist a little fame here and there. - She was working on a book. I was sure it would be bad, but that she was working on it, not constantly publishing it, was the type of thing that kept me up at night.

People work on things for years. People work on one thing, every day, without an audience. (109)

Lucinda is another girl who becomes a sudden Internet star like Colleen, embodying the stereotypical source of envy: Lucinda is more beautiful, more well-spoken, younger, everything. As the book progresses, she is delineated not only as Colleen's doppelganger but also as her mirror-

like image, perhaps Colleen's dream equivalent, what she cannot ever be, and her reverse in many ways: unlike Colleen, Lucinda seems to be finding a way out from what at this point is evidently a sickness – she is writing a book (which equals tradition, stability, anti-digital) and learning to disparage completely the concept of Internet fame, tracing a moral bottom line according to which this Zeitgeist obsession is, hopefully, ephemeral, and it will be gone. But it is interesting that this unlikely (and up to that point even unexpected) heart-warming wisdom only comes from the periphery of the book: Lucinda is never met, she only exists as a hologram online as Colleen obsessively follows her profiles; she is distant, her wisdom never becoming a guide but always being regarded with suspicion, incomprehension; even to the intended reader, who is supposed (perhaps?) to be smarter and know better than Colleen, Lucinda hardly becomes a voice to look up to and trust, as the possibility is always alive of her being fake, inconsistent, nonexistent – and yet for what she represents, as a shadow of a better self, she keeps Colleen awake. Morbidly, we much more tend to empathize with Colleen, so humane and inhumane at the same time, but at least carnal and embodied. The ambiguity of the book well mirrors the general millennial incapability or unwillingness to take a strong and conscious position about the Internet. Overall, we might say that the assessment of the digital phenomenon is, once again, decidedly more negative; but at the same time, as I already hinted at, Stagg seems (much unlike Kobek most of all) to suggest that the cause of the negative effects is mainly not intrinsic: social networks are what you want them to be.

We have seen authors range from the least Wallacian to the most, at least in some regards; in this last case, we could not be more far from Wallace. Yet *Surveys'* courage in facing the matter from within sets it apart, and its alienating effect on the reader, be it entirely accidental or not, would ultimately have met with Wallace's surprised approval.

CHAPTER 5

EXASPERATING THE NEW: INTERNET EXCURSIONS BY 'OLD' AUTHORS

In trying to answer our initial question, our work has so far delineated two areas of research – the first is one of electronic literature, that is, of artists trying to say something of value and thus contrast from *within* the vapidness, shallowness and sameness that the casual, unfiltered influence of the Internet brings to art; such a choice results from a specific strategic decision, that is, acting from the inside of the enemy is not impossible, it can produce results, and is in fact necessary for a matter of artistic relevance, so that your voice is truly heard in the contemporary scenario. The second batch is of formally traditional novelists instead. However, they all belong to a generation of close-to digital natives and millennials who have for the first time attempted to talk about the Internet 2.0 and its societal consequences in literature – and as far as possible, tried to implement it, to absorb some of its novelties within literary language, or to see to which extent it is possible to 'literalize' it. Both these camps, it goes without saying, have emerged in the last decade: their future and potential as art and world-changing powers is still very much a work in progress. The next few years will tell us what was a dead end and what will have, instead, evolved in an unexpectedly positive way.

To conclude our brief dissertation, an analysis of a third group will be here presented; formally, it is a group of novelists, so in a sense it should be considered in tandem with the previous chapter and optionally only as an appendix, yet given what our task is, this final parenthesis might be a relevant addition to the overall picture. We will briefly talk about a couple of very popular and

respected authors who were famous before the Internet 2.0 was, but eventually decided to turn their attention to it, at least for the time of a novel.

There is a good reason, or maybe two, behind our choice to analyze the following novels in a different chapter – their slant in tackling the Internet theme is different from the one of the ‘young’ books described in the previous chapter to the point that the two criteria of discussion we adopted above are no longer applicable here, and new ones will have to be conceived. First, and most of all, the issue of a ‘language of the Internet’ to implement or reject is not particularly determinant anymore. The authors focused on in the previous chapter were all debutants and close to digital natives, born in the 1980s. The authors faced here are well-established literary heavyweights if not living classics, become famous for writing about completely different topics; their incursion into the Internet is exceptional or circumstantial and, given the current stage of their career, can hardly have any lasting influence on an overall assessment of their style. Their take is much more from the outside, and the language of the Internet does not feel like it needs to become part of anything, except for what concerns the objects – the nouns, the surface. What opinion of the Internet they have might remain a little more relevant, but we should remember that this dissertation makes a point of focusing on new authors, as an outlook on the future, and the opinion of older generations on the topic will tend to be less vital and less influential. So why bother with it?

One more pertinent and interesting question, however, might actually emerge – that is, why these authors felt the need to tackle the problem, when surely they did not have any necessity to sell more copies by jumping on the bandwagon of a ‘popular’ theme or genre. More broadly, it is legitimate to wonder how the Internet topic connects with the rest of their production, thus paralleling the potential evolution that Wallace himself, another non-digital native, might have undergone had he survived past 2008. This chapter might thus, in a sense, function as a

supplementary chronological bridge – to complete the picture of how the Internet in literature possibly shifts generationally, or divides generations.

Two authors exemplary, among others, of what was reported above are Dave Eggers and Thomas Pynchon. They belong to different generations – the prolific and longevous Pynchon debuted as far back as the late 1960s, was one of the most significant representatives of the high post-modern period and a direct influence on the generation of Wallace; Eggers, instead, debuting in the early 2000s, comes after Wallace and is in fact vocal about the vast influence New Sincerity has had on him (*Jest Fest*, n.p.). Despite their age gap (Pynchon a late baby-boomer or pre-baby-boomer, born in the late 1930s, Eggers a Generation Xer), the same point can be made about what the two authors attempt with their one-time incursions into the Internet 2.0 – try to look at the phenomenon with a critical, but very personal, stance, as well as with the perspective and detachment of those who feel generationally outside of it.

Technology as a topic in literature very often leads us to dystopia; but not all recent relevant dystopian novels necessarily deal with the Internet 2.0 specifically. One that does, and that might thus be worth a few words, is Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013). It is essentially a mellowed, watered-down *1984* updated for the era, but with similar, even if obviously vaguer, political undertones; the threat is not communism but “infocommunist” (382) caused by the efforts of one single company, which becomes so powerful on the market that it creates a de facto private monopoly of all information – a scenario not so difficult to foresee now. Many signifiers that should indicate Eggers as a truthful heir to Wallace are there (and indeed, the two have often been linked within one thematic and stylistic genealogy): the obvious exposing of too much technology as bad, the call to ‘real values’ (see later about the character of Mercer, for example), and at the same time the flaunted abundance of technological lingo – which might seem at odds with the technology-condemning message, and can indeed be variably interpreted as ironic or as necessary to the

story's ends and atmosphere. But Eggers eventually falls short of leaving a literary mark. In terms of message, it does come across, and even too clear perhaps; but in order to really do so he renounces all subtlety and grasp of credible, complex humanity, coming up with a one-note, good sci-fi thriller novel (moderately thrilling) that loudly spells out the issue and is linearly didactic.

Mae, a young college graduate unsatisfied with her job, is ushered by her friend Annie into arguably the most famous and powerful company in the world, the Circle, which deals with information, communication and technology and has by this time bought out all the great social network companies of our era. In Mae, initial enthusiasm for the new, unexpected first-rate job is accompanied by admiration for the company's apparent squeaky-clean image: despite their financial power, all they are committed to seems to be humanitarian projects, improving human lives, and eliminating social problems. Gradually, a different truth obviously emerges – the company's ambitions verge on leading humanity to a paroxysmic obsession with constant digital contact, impossibility of being offline, and destruction of all privacy: everything in the world will be visible through satellite cameras all the time, everyone will be traceable and visible online all the time, etc. The plot follows the progressive indoctrination of Mae, who barely tries to resist the drift; a couple of other characters try to oppose a more thorough resistance, but they are hopeless, and as a matter of fact in the book the 'crowd' only consists of employees of the Circle, who number in the tens of thousands and seem to see, almost unanimously, this line of evolution as totally positive. It is not clear how the outer world is receiving the gradual innovations that de facto proceed to destroy their freedom; outside the Circle only three or four characters in total are described – two old couples and a lone man, so one cannot generalize. If anything, Eggers seems to suggest that any external attempt at rebellion will be pointless, and/or that most young people will gladly welcome the Circle's actions, as they are digital natives and already highly used to the culture of 'constant updating' anyway. Indeed, most young readers are likely to identify with Mae,

who is charmed and hypnotized by the new, rather than with her Internet-phobic ex-boyfriend, Mercer, who represents the opposite pole.

The character of Mercer, for a start, is a good example of the least successful things about the book. He is heroic resistance personified: all of his speeches are didactic, and what comes through them is really the author schooling the audience; as a character he is flat, the perfectly idealized hermit that heroically avoids technology and lives a more 'healthy' lifestyle; and except for a very young readership, towards whom such a character and perhaps the whole book is ultimately aimed, his monologues are overlong, over-explanatory and predictable. Similar limits appear elsewhere – for instance, a subplot is developed that seems at odds with the rest, or at least superfluous (the bosses of the Circle are financing a project to capture and contain animals from the yet-largely unknown Marianas Trench and map its fauna) until towards the end of the book we realize the only narrative purpose of it was to reuse some of those sequences (a shark devouring all the other animals in the water tank) as a clarifying metaphor for the Circle's work:

We saw every creature in that tank, didn't we? We saw them devoured by a beast that turned them to ash. Don't you see that everything that goes into that tank, with that beast, with this beast, will meet the same fate? (383)

Even the final dialogue, which reads like an ultimate, summarizing philosophical confrontation between the two camps (pro-Circle and anti-Circle) is pretty barren and one-directional. In it, Mae confronts Ty, one of the three original creators of the Circle and the one who eventually started to regret the project and shied away from it; since, for some reason, he cannot publicly 'resign' nor leave the campus, he hides in it under an alias. Mae is attracted by his mysterious attitude and has an on-and-off affair with him without knowing who he really is; eventually, Ty reveals his real identity along with the notion that he had seen Mae all along as the right person to start a

counter-revolution against the Circle. Such faith proves very ill-placed, however. In the final verbal confrontation, which is an excuse to sum up the whole message of the book and the depth of the issue as far as Eggers can see it, the following exchange is particularly significant; had it been further developed, it would have made for a different book, one in which the reader would have seriously been provoked to reflect about the advantages and disadvantages of the “closing of the circle”:

- But who wants to be seen at all times?
- I. / want to be seen. I want proof of my existence. (383)

So, Mae hopes that the ‘closing of the circle’ will be a shield against the paranoias of solitude and insignificance, and by extension, against the fear of death. This is something we all feel, and Mae’s answer here is thus an interesting glimpse; Eggers could have made the book seriously provocative, putting the reader’s judgement to the test, while the dialogue the excerpt above is taken from reads like the exchange between a glaring sage and an irrecuperable madman. This one-note linearity and obvious sense of righteousness affects the whole novel. *Infinite Jest* was dystopian, but it was much more than that as well. It had a sense of complex humanity, it shoved real suffering in your face, and even in terms of message it was multi-layered, which was allowed for by at least some degree of humor; a vaguely, uneasy sardonic atmosphere. *The Circle* is remarkably devoid of humor.

So ultimately, Eggers’s purpose seems mostly didactic and condemnatory, his standpoint external and superior; if he tackles the issue it is because he does find it important, but he cannot get past generic, paternalistically worried tone and content; furthermore, his choice to make an accessible, linear thriller-style dramatization of the dangers of the Internet implies that authorial personality and original re-elaboration are toned down and much of the supposedly amazing sci-fi contents

has grown dated in just a few years, seeming now almost obvious. It seems clear from this book that if an author intends to face the Internet seriously in literature, and hope for a more long-standing appeal and relevance, they should be more synthetic and less analytic and not focus too much on an easy sci-fi slant.

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, a point of interest concerning these 'older' authors' take on the Internet might be to see how their specific Internet-related effort connects with the rest of their production. Due to issues of symmetry I will here reduce this to a comparison with one much earlier work, necessarily non-Internet related, and more specifically, it makes sense to choose Eggers' first novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002) to compare the two chronologically farthest poles in Eggers' work up to *The Circle* and thus offer the widest picture possible (*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* was Eggers' actual first major release, but it is not technically a work of fiction). The comparison between the two books is interesting and surprising in many respects. The plot of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* follows two longtime friends, Will and Hand (Will narrating in first person) as they decide to spend a week worth of vacation time off work to travel around the world – as many countries as possible. Their purpose, however, is not touristic, but more equivocal: they have tens of thousands of dollars in cash that Will has obtained in a stroke of luck, and they intend to distribute them to whoever seems to be more in need of it. We thus follow the two through Senegal, Morocco, Estonia, Latvia among other countries; by their dialogues and occasional encounters with other people we learn that the two have lost a dear friend, Jack, in a car accident, and the tragedy still haunts especially Will, posing a threat to his mental health on top of his cardiac problems. Gradually, we realize the trip does not originate out of a charitable impulse only, but has a much wider, symbolic scope for Will's life.

As with every road story, *You Shall Know* explores the tropes of searching, of wondering; seeing new things leads the protagonist to question certainties and break down preconceptions:

I understood the Earth's shadow on the moon. I knew that the Earth was hiding most of the moon from the light this night, leaving a curved white blade. What I didn't know was why the moon and its shadow should be clear, the lines so clean. The sun wasn't at all clear; its outline was debatable and changing. And though I know the sun is gas and the moon is rock, still I wonder why the moon's circumference would be so clear, its edges so crisp – cut from cardboard with scissors. (38)

On the surface, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* is a completely different novel from *The Circle*, written in a completely different style and tone about a completely different topic – one would have a hard time recognizing the same writer behind the two works. For a start, one thing that might baffle us is that *You Shall Know* seems as far from being interested in technology as it can get. But this might be the very point, actually, to connect the two chronological poles of Eggers' work: he is not interested in technology but in the escape from it; this is what, in a sense, both books are about. *The Circle* desperately condemns the near-impossibility of such an escape now, while *You Shall Know* still revels in that possibility, even though far-fetched (the story of *You Shall Know* is not only and not mainly an escape from technology, but surely an escape it is). The idea that Eggers' only interest in the Internet is that of a chased prey – a desire to escape – would perhaps explain the relative carelessness, hastiness and naiveté that many critics have accused him of (Ullmann, n.p.; Sacks, n.p.) when it comes to making the technological context plausible, well-crafted but not banal, and the story involving. If Eggers is, indeed, excessively prejudiced towards the topic, conditioned by a sort of agenda – a desire to demonstrate the negative sides of the phenomenon - it is only natural that his portrait of the Internet will be shallow, if not logically and historically shaky.

You Shall Know Our Velocity is, coherently, a book where technology is remarkably absent. Apart from several references to music, most technological forms, especially those that were state-of-the-art in 2002, appear ignored or abhorred, the very choice of the characters to visit several so-

called third-world countries bespeaking an urge to plunge into a negation of civilization. Exceptions may obviously be the means of transport (car and airplane), but then again they are continuously cursed and criticized for their technical and logistical faults, especially the latter. The telephone is also a remarkable element, or anti-element: although the novel was released in 2002, no cellular phone ever appears. Will uses the phone regularly through the journey to contact his mother, but always a hard line, even in Estonia (243), Denmark (342), and the United States themselves (275), all of which surely cannot have the excuse of a so-called 'backward' country. At the beginning of the book Will calls Hand, and he is likely to be using a mobile phone because he is "pacing" as he talks and "[walking] from the Western edge of the apartment... and then east" (2), but the reference is carefully kept hidden.

This said, the book does occasionally come up with indirect questions, although left marginal and never answered, that are relatable to the ones the *The Circle* faces. Here follows the only passage where a cellular phone is mentioned:

We learned that Raymond worked in cellphones. Something GPS and cellphones and how, soon enough, everyone would know – for their own safety, he insisted, with a fist softly pounding on the table, in a way he'd likely done a hundred times before – where everyone else in the world was, by tracking their cellphone. But again: for good not evil. For the children. For the children. For grandparents and wives.

It was the end of an epoch, and I didn't want to be around to see it happen; we'd traded anonymity for access. I shuddered. Hand, of course, had goosebumps. (61-62)

This is by far the most striking and explicit moment (and the only one as such) where we get a hint to the one point of connection with *The Circle*, but more subtly, later on in the book something else returns: an obsession with multiplicity, the utopia of ubiquity and therefore immortality,

which is recuperated in *The Circle* in a possibilistic and thus genuinely technological key, whereas here it emerges as sheer existential restlessness:

“...but maybe we’re not dying. If you combine the quantum physics paradigm with the idea of the subjectivity of time, we’re basically all alive in a thousand places at once, for a neverending present... the thing is, it’s basically immortality for atheists... and we don’t need to wait for any sort of technology catch-up.”

It did sound appealing. Consciousness or not, to be alive, always, somewhere. And what about dreams? That’s got to figure in – but what I wanted, really, was every option, simultaneously. Not in some parallel and irrelevant universe, but *here*. I wanted to stop and work at the field hospital and fall in love with the local beauty, but also be home in a week so I could do so many other things, fifty life-directions all seemed equally appealing and possible... (120)

This might ring a bell with *The Circle*, and yet “no need to any sort of technological catch-up”, Eggers carefully specifies. The aura of a committedly anti-technological, anti-progress, pro-degrowth book (even if with dutiful limits and reservations) is also enhanced by the anecdote that Hand tells towards the end of the story, and that gives the novel its title. Hand recounts to Will a curious legend he was told and impressed by:

...these people [from the Chronos Archipelago] had this theory, or maybe belief is the better word for it probably, that all people carry all of their relatives with them. Like in their blood, in their heads... you carry all of their memories with you. All of their *souls*. You carry their dreams and their pains and their anger and everything... apparently they wanted that density of soul. The density is desirable. Apparently they see the soul the opposite as we do, where it’s the lightest thing, the wimpy ghost thing. They think of it like a mountain. Like a mountain each of us carries around, and you want your mountain strong and dense, because that means your family has lived lives of great experience. But the trick I guess is to find a way to move around. (319-20)

Later on we learn that this tribe, called the Jumping People, were oppressed and eventually set under siege by the Spaniards, who eventually force them to flee; the conquistadors are an obvious allegory for technology and aggressive innovation, disrespecting tradition, ancient wisdom and heritage – in line once again with Eggers’ anti-technological message. But the Jumping People are torn: they believe in the importance of remembering, of sharing and accumulating knowledge, and of carrying weight upon their shoulders (the ‘mountain’ – memories, issues, experiences) as a deep value and not as a disgrace; and yet they fall in love with “flying”, which surely would work best if you unburden yourself of weight. Once again it is the traditional and very American struggle between solidity, roots, sacrifice, attachment, and freedom, individuality, creativity. It is surely mirroring a similar struggle that Will feels – the trip has a moral value to him, it is in some way about honoring and remembering Jack, and also hoping, perhaps, to better process and understand the tragedy and what it meant to him; yet probably Will, perhaps more secretly and unadmittedly, also hopes to forget.

The ending of the book – unresolved, emotionally ambivalent, and intentionally rushed, as the end of a trip always feels rushed, like awakening from a dream – photographs Will’s emotional swing at a high, which we had hardly ever seen so far; since it is an essentially unmotivated rush of positivity, we guess it is only a truce, even though the novel’s last words imply that he remained in this phase until his death (Will is dead, as he announces on the first page of the book, and narrates from the afterworld). It is an ending, in short, that confirms the novel as a consistently involving and non-trivial road story, and Eggers a writer perfectly capable of nuances and multi-layered emotional resonance. It is all the more baffling, then, that *The Circle* comes across as the denial of all this. Eggers is almost unrecognizable; the comparison greatly fosters the suspicion that *The Circle* was largely an exploitation move, and a very media-conscious one – the cliffhangers, the all-

too-classic plot twist at the end, the bewilderingly superfluous sex scenes, a couple of silly, very Hollywoodian action scenes such as the car chase – on a hot topic.

Thomas Pynchon is another author who has tackled the Internet lately after a long and acclaimed career. Quite differently from Eggers, though, his style in the book we are about to analyze has remained much more similar to the past, probably due to how well his penchant for post-modern pastiche, parody of advertising and trash pop culture, and obsession with searching and not finding, still finds familiar ground amidst elements of today's Internet culture. *Bleeding Edge* (2013) is, much like *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967) many years before, an apparent detective story, where nothing is ultimately resolved. It is set in 2001 in the months around 9/11, and the event itself is described, focusing on how it disrupts (or, paradoxically, does not disrupt) the lives of the characters in the days and weeks that follow it. Pynchon here, especially, attempts to explore possible, real, or imagined links between the tragedy and the influence of the latest technology; which, however, in a very Pynchonesque tradition, is described in a way that constantly oscillates on the line between up-to-date scientifically accurate and borderline plausible sci-fi.

Maxine Tarnow, the protagonist, is the head of Tail 'Em and Nail 'Em, a detective agency specialized in frauds. The plot follows Maxine's investigations around suspicious proceedings going on at hashslingrz, an Internet security firm led by Gabriel Ice – the firm's financial movements are shady or incomprehensible and a money laundering scheme is legitimately suspected. This trail leads Maxine to encounter numerous people and go through equally numerous misadventures, many of them surreal and never decisive to a resolution of the mystery; when she believes she has finally found one of the culprits or individuals closely involved, he commits apparent suicide, the circumstances of which are never clearly reconstructed. Immediately afterwards, the occurring of 9/11 is a watershed in the story, but never for a resolution of the actual mystery – it is simply a powerful element of disturbance that reshuffles the lives of the protagonists prompting several

changes – for example, the rapprochement of Maxine and her ex-husband, Horst. But all that happens is eventually presented as haphazard, incidental, non-linear, without any meaning, let alone moral lesson – otherwise it would not be Pynchon.

The style and narrative dexterity of Pynchon here compared to *The Crying of Lot 49* is perfectly recognizable and comparable: the continuous references to the dazing excesses of advertising culture, mass media and pop art, the gusto for bizarre extravaganza, the irreverent irony, the abundance of characters, often unlikely and parodic as individuals, a parade of caricatures coming and going. From the tone, it is evident that Pynchon looks at the Internet phenomenon in a detached, anti-dramatic way, with the tepidity of someone who feels not very much touched by it – the world was foolish and incomprehensible, the individual lost, in 1967 already (*The Crying*): why make such a fuss about the possible consequences of the Internet? The widespread and amused irony and the lack of urgency in considering the most negative contingencies can doubtless be considered a sign of age, the detachment and disinterest one feels for the things of the world when the end of life is being reached. And yet, because of the very similarities with *The Crying* a different hypothesis might be proposed – that is, Pynchon's judgement, never positive, but never explicitly damning or fiery either, is consequential of what has in the end always been his ethics and aesthetics, and his philosophy.

At most, it often seems like Pynchon sees the web, unsurprisingly, as a game of mirrors, a trick, a deceit, a hide-an-seek, a maze: just like Oedipa, Maxine moves in a circle, roaming around without ultimately proving anything, between suspects never confirmed and trails that reveal themselves as cul-de-sacs; at the end of the book, she just seems to abandon the business unfinished and go back to her daily life, with 9/11 having changed her and the world for good... or maybe not.

Nevertheless, 9/11 happens – and it is clear that, even though Pynchon attempts to logically connect the two things – tragedy and digital world – (hackers may have facilitated or fostered the success of the attack) they are actually, in terms of tone, entirely distinct. This becomes especially evident at the beginning of chapter 30. Here for the first time since the beginning of the book, Pynchon turns more serious, and stops or slows down for a moment.

If you read nothing but the Newspaper of Record, you might believe that New York City, like the nation, united in sorrow and shock, has risen to the challenge of global jihadism, joining a righteous crusade Bush's people are now calling the War on Terror. If you go to other sources – the Internet, for example – you might get a different picture. Out in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace, among the billions of self-resonant fantasies, dark possibilities are beginning to emerge.

The plume of smoke and finely divided structural and human debris has been blowing southwest, toward Bayonne and Staten Island, but you can smell it all the way uptown. A bitter chemical smell of death and burning that no one in memory has ever in this city smelled before and which lingers for weeks. Though everybody south of 14th Street has been directly touched one way or another, for much of the city the experience has come to them mediated, mostly by television... (327)

Irony reappears, although colder and bitterer (not to mention more succinct), only at the end of this section:

The atrocity site, which one would have expected to become sacred or at least inspire a little respect, swiftly becomes occasion instead for open-ended wheeling and dealing, bickering and badmouthing over its future as real estate, all dutifully celebrated as 'news' in the Newspaper of Record. Some notice a strange underground rumbling from the direction of Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, which is eventually identified as Robert Moses spinning in his grave. (328)

But the gap in tone between the parts about 'web mysteries' and the parts about 9/11 is intentional and undeniable. There emerges, then, an interpretation of the Internet as distraction

from life, as a chimera, a mirage of meaning of which we fall prey only out of foolishness. What concerns Pynchon the most seems to be, comprehensibly, the tragedy, with its strong human consequences. The whole contour of the detective vicissitudes feels like a carnival, a parade of craze, something ultimately tangential, a welter of illusions that only drift us away from the truth – or perhaps distract us, in which case comprehensibly or even deservedly, from the absolute impossibility of finding it? After the event, we might expect a humanity turned upside down, or at least driven, maybe for the first time in a long time, to reflect deeply. Instead, gradually stepping back into his usual ironic voice, Pynchon introduces a humanity that refuses, forgets, and almost craves to be numb and dumb, not wanting to face the massively difficult challenge of pursuing a meaning. This interaction between two characters, shortly after the tragedy, is exemplary:

A month after the worst tragedy in everybody's lifetime and Horst is laughing his ass off.

- What is it Horst, delayed reaction you're alive?
- I'm happy to be alive, but this Mitch Hedberg guy is funny, too. (340).

Perhaps, Pynchon is intending to praise the strong moral temper of citizens who are recovering fast; but mostly, this is bitter irony that bespeaks a wasted chance – forgetfulness and refusal instead of pause from routine and reflection; and not by chance, the source of welcome distraction and oblivion is television, here a symbol of the digital equivalent to the Internet.

There are some other characters, to tell the truth, who take 9/11 more seriously and try – but never too deeply, seriously or consistently – to elaborate theories (many are tempted by conspiracy-related explanations); at other times, they are led back to attempt a connection with the Internet and the way it is changing lives:

- It's depressing. I thought Comic-Con was peculiar, but this was Truth. Everything out there just a mouseclick away. Imitation is no longer possible. Halloween is over. I never thought people could get too wised up. What'll happen to us all?

- And because you tend to be a blamer...

- Oh I blame the fuckin Internet. No question. (374)

Here, just as it is obvious that the author partly agrees with the character's opinion, it is equally obvious we should not identify his very voice with it. The similarity with certain opinions expressed by Kobek, by the way, is remarkable – as Pynchon refers to Comic-Con and 'the end of Halloween', we recognize traits of what Kobek opined about the cosplay phenomenon. This only highlights even more how Pynchon's tone, in comparison, is much mellower. At best, he believes the Internet to be the latest innovation in Pirandellian masks, helping us make our identities unseizable, elusive, and perhaps (but to which extent?) also diluting, dispersing identity. Apart from this, though, Pynchon sees little danger, or is not seriously worried about it. The Internet is called bad names without any earnest fierceness, but rather with light, comical derision; and as a matter of fact, the characters' voices in this passage have more than ever an intentional quality of naiveté, of banal chit-chat. Chapter thirty-four as a whole, to tell the truth, is significant in this sense. It describes a big Halloween party: behind an orgy of disguises and masks, in which Pynchon, at the top of his game, concentrates a true blizzard of references to popular and trash culture, the city symbolically renounces meaning, buries and forgets; the instruments of this yielding (and unexpectedly, we think of Wallace here) are the omnipresent irony (obviously, someone dresses up as Osama bin Laden) and non-identity, allowed for by definition at a costume party. Non-identity is humanistic anarchy; But, as Heidi had remarked in the passage quoted above, "Halloween is over" not because of this (costume parties have always been like that) but because at this party the boundaries between temporary non-identity and return to proper

identity are blurring, along with the awareness and importance of the detachment between the two - Halloween in a digital life is not only a day in the year anymore, but around the clock.

Kobek had said the same thing when talking of the cosplay phenomenon, and would here wholeheartedly agree. And yet once again, in comparison, Pynchon looks at this shifting humanity with much less serious and worried eyes. At seventy years of age, he might indeed see something truly new in what the Internet brings, but not very much after all, and certain human miseries that appear as unprecedented to Kobek's ardor look already quite familiar to an experienced post-modern author like Pynchon.

- I didn't mean that. The day was a terrible tragedy. But it isn't the whole story. Can't you feel it, how everybody's regressing? 11 September infantilized this country. It had a chance to grow up, instead it chose to default back to childhood. I'm in the street yesterday, behind me are a couple of high-school girls having one of these teenage conversations, 'So I was like, "oh, my God!" and he's like "I didn't say I wasn't see-eeen her?"' and when I finally turn to look at them, here are these two women my own age. Older! *your* age, who should know better, really. Like trapped in a fuckin time warp or something. (336)

Pynchon's curiosity, however, goes further. In the web he sees an intriguing launching pad to expand from the theme of identity and acknowledgement to a wider one – the mystery, death, the universally unknown. The starting point is the 'deep web' phenomenon which, distorted by Pynchon's imagination, becomes a place or non-place where people do not just trivially sell and buy as in the surface web - simply an excellent marketing and advertising platform – but (also) look for answers, like in some masonry or mysterious sept:

- These days you look at the surface Web, all that yakking, all the goods for sale, the spammers and spielers and idle fingers, all in the same desperate scramble they like to call an economy.

Meantime, down here, sooner or later someplace deep, there has to be a horizon between coded and codeless. An abyss.

- That's what you're looking for?
- Some of us are... others are trying to avoid it. Depends what you're into. (357).

This section of the book, when Maxine visits Deep Archer, a sort of highly advanced immersive software experience that is supposed to make you explore a virtual-reality equivalent of the Deep Web, is the one that most openly veers to science fiction. The plot, so far already punctuated with surrealism, exaggerations, symbols, irony and unreliability, goes one step further here into the dreamlike, almost disquietingly oneiric and indistinct – within Deep Archer reality and virtual illusion intermingle, suggesting the theme of the Internet as literally a different dimension, wholly independent. The theme of virtual realities has been widely discussed and in the book it is only hinted at, somewhat underdeveloped, as Pynchon intends to focus elsewhere as well. Therefore, the phenomenon is almost casually introduced, but no discernible judgement on it seems to appear. If anything, Pynchon seems at times more interested in how virtual realities, like the Internet as a whole, erase or blur authorship – and Maxine, being a detective, used to searching and finding, cannot help but wonder hopelessly about who creates what, who is responsible for what, and how easily this responsibility can be disposed of in a virtual world:

When the picture returns, she seems to be traveling in a deepspace vehicle... inside Maxine finds corridors of glimmering space-age composite, long as boulevards, soaring interior distances, sculptured shadows, traffic through upwardly thickening twilight, pedestrians crossing bridges, airborne vehicles for passengers and for cargo busily glittering... *only code*, she reminds herself. But who of all these faceless and uncredited could have written it and why? (355).

Elaborating on this, other questions emerge, even more existential: the sense of 'otherness' that an idea like Deep Archer can evoke leads us back, in a more contemporary fashion (which, for Pynchon, means halfway between post-modern, of which he still maintains many elements, and

digi-modern as Kirby would have it – exaggeration, naiveté, non-identity, childishness, obsession with sagas, sequels, infinity) to the age-old illusion to give a shape to death, an image, a place; to tame it down, to tear it away from the unknown. This is how Pynchon connects the topic of death with the childish idiosyncrasies of our time:

Maxine continues to wander corridors for a while, striking up conversations at random, whatever ‘random’ means in here. She begins to pick up a chill sense that some of the newer passengers could be refugees from the event at the World Trade Center... for those who may be genuine casualties, likenesses have been brought here by loved ones so they’ll have an afterlife, their faces scanned in from family photos... some no more expressive than emoticons, others exhibiting an inventory of feelings ranging from party-euphoric through camera-shy to abjectly gloomy, some static, some animated in GIF loops, cyclical as karma: pirouetting, waving, eating or drinking whatever it was they were holding at the wedding or bar mitzvah or night out when the shutter blinked.

Yet it’s as if they want to engage – they get eye contact, smile, angle their heads inquisitively. ‘Yes, what was it?’ or ‘Problem?’ or ‘Not right now, OK?’ If these are not the actual voices of the dead, if, as some believe, the dead can’t speak, then the words are being put there for them by whoever posted their avatars, and what they appear to say is what the living want them to say. Some have started Weblogs. Other are busy writing code and adding it to the program files. (358)

Later on in the book, Maxine accesses Deep Archer one more time, and seems to obtain further proof than, within the sci-fi-tinged web as imagined by Pynchon (extremely close to reality, however – almost like in Eggers), an avatar, that is, a virtual identity corresponding to the real one of an individual person, can in some way become independent from the life or death of its real-life equivalent. Obviously, it is ambiguous to which extent this prolongs life or simply keeps projecting a shadow. The image is at once disturbing, comical and unlikely, yet easily familiar. The Internet is another instance of man’s demented dream of greatness, the same of doctor Frankenstein and

Prometheus trying to catch the fire; yet what seems new with it, compared to any previous technological innovation or religious/mystical delusion in man's history, is being at once illusion of escape (religion) and conquest of the unknown (science).

She finds a link that brings her into an oasis, a wraparound garden straight out of the Islamic paradise, more water than has ever flowed in all the broken country she's come in out of... wine and pipe smoke, melons and dates, a music track heavy on the hijaz scale... and then, with no intro,

- Hi, Maxine.

Windust's avatar is a younger version of himself, a not-yet corrupted entry-level wise-ass, brighter than he deserves.

- Never expected to find you in here, Nick.

Oh, really? This isn't what she hoped would happen? That somebody, some all-knowing cyber-yenta her online history has always belonged to, would be logging her every click, every cursor movement? Knowing what she wants before she does? (406)

The question resulting from this is something already widely discussed (how much do the wonders of the digital besot and delude our human limits, infantilizing us, or to which extent instead can they result in a true overcoming of it?) but it is a question curiously not touched upon by any of the 'young' authors. As digital natives or nearly so, they perhaps tend to have a more punctual but less wide-ranging gaze, and are more interested in the quotidian effects of the digital on the individual (at least Cohen and Stagg; Kobek's judgement is too universally negative to ponder such an open, unbiased question).

Going back to the central question raised in the previous paragraph, it is remarkable how Pynchon's comic and ironic vein leads to a possible assimilation, a surreal coincidence between two options that might seem opposite: the overcoming of ancestral human limits – death, the

separation between reality and dreams, control over nature, belief in myths – can in the end coincide, or be allowed for by, an infantilization. In this sense, the comical paradox in which Maxine and Horst try to substantiate the existence of Father Christmas to their skeptic children is telling; the wonders of the web can finally ‘explain’ the logical-physical incongruences of the legend:

- Hey. Nobody has any trouble believing in the Internet, right, which really is magic. So what’s the problem believing in a virtual private network for Santa’s business? It results in real toys, real presents, delivered by Christmas morning, what’s the difference? (398)

To summarize, Pynchon’s view of the phenomenon is much less monolithically clear than Eggers’. This matches well with their well-known artistic identities and backgrounds – one a New Sinceritist, committed to bringing back some clear, well-identifiable values; the other an old high post-modern heavyweight who has not really changed his ways in fifty years, and in the end sees in the Internet just further proof of the world being incomprehensible and of all values being relative. It is difficult to disagree. Pynchon’s stormy, dazed, postmodern portrait of the digital age is a good mirror of our uncertainties and total moral bafflement – not to mention guilty indifference at times – before the consequences of a huge phenomenon that is changing and turning upside down everything we knew.

We also made a point of trying to compare the two authors’ newer efforts with some significant products in their older output, a comparison we deemed significant to assess to which extent an older author might let a new phenomenon change their style and perspective – perhaps long-established ones. With Pynchon, the point of reference chosen was *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967) and the conclusion is that, after forty-five years, the similarity between the two novels is really striking, all the while without any sense of repetitiveness, cliché, or stale formula being perceived. Once again, this cohesiveness only further indicates how for Pynchon the Internet is no incredible

aberration – just the newest human folly among countless others; at best, one of the most interesting.

Of course, comparing just two artists in this chapter is too reductive to draw any conclusions, but it might represent nevertheless an interesting hint for future research – while with the younger artists tackled in the previous two chapters a common line and a common general purpose, in spite of significant differences, was traceable, quite significantly no compatibility at all is present between Eggers' and Pynchon's visions. Eggers is dismissive and catastrophist but, unlike Kobek, in a hasty way that fails to be emotionally hard-hitting and artistically/linguistically relevant; Pynchon embraces the Internet, but only as a compelling curiosity, disclaiming its reputation as a society-disrupting superpower. Pynchon is not just foolishly optimistic, but he sees the Internet as a part of a much larger, and older, whole. Although there is no space here to bring on further evidence of it, the comparison suggests that the answer to our original question should not be looked for in pre-millennial authors. Their inevitable genetic distance from the culture of digital natives seems to hinder them from coalescing around a cohesive, agreed, 'generational' vision of the phenomenon, as it is not perceived as urgent and emotionally close to them as instead happens with the younger generation, among whom some common line of intent (the perceived necessity of absorbing the 'language of the Internet' to some extent, an ambition to study how the individual's daily life and social milieu is affected by the Internet) is detectable.

CONCLUSION

A brief summary of the contents we have developed is the following: in the late 1980s and early 1990s, David Foster Wallace released some influent artistic and essayistic works underpinned by his realization that television, already a detrimental means of communication in his opinion, had reached a dangerous cultural hegemony and invulnerability by phagocytizing traits of the 'cultural dominant' of the time – post-modernism. Post-modernism had, in other words, become harmless as an opponent of television, annihilated. Wallace called for a significant change in literature in order to guarantee again a serious cultural opposition to television. This dissertation has tried to investigate whether the very same thing is happening today, brought forward by some ideal literary heir to Wallace, and regarding the Internet instead of television.

From a different perspective, even though the original question was more specific and 'political', this work has also tried to map what might be instances of a literature of the future in general, something that is significantly taking into account the massive changes occurred in the fruition of art. What was the criterion in picking these 'instances', since the number obviously had to be very limited? The choice required a rather clear idea of a 'pre-canon', that is, even though artists who are contemporary, young and still going through artistic development cannot by definition belong to any canon as such, still a set of similarities in terms of themes, attitude and message to bind the artists together had to be found, even regardless of the electronic/non-electronic distinction. The traits of such a future hypothetical school, or movement, now only vaguely observable but not undiscernible, might be: a desire to understand what influence the Internet has socially; a conviction that serious art can be made out of Internet forms and languages, at least when contaminated with good knowledge of more traditional artistic forms; and a necessity to be

critical, open and outspoken about the dilemmas and struggles of our age, despite the partial embracing of it (this is the only point where a Wallacian influence strongly comes through, actually).

Therefore, after a chapter dedicated to assessing what the latest and most significant schools of literary criticism have to say on this topic (revealing essentially a contraposition between conservatives, who argue that a 'new realism' is the real cultural dominant of the latest years, and progressivists who believe the digital is a force to be reckoned with) we proceeded with our original research. This enlightened at least two fields that may have something to do with our question. One is of artists committed to contemporary electronic literature, thus facing the Internet's 'mainstream cultural hegemony' from the inside. Making digital, inherently Internet-fueled art might seem at odds with opposing the communicative and artistic standards that the Internet in its dispersivity generally leads to; yet the worthy artists analyzed here, in their audacious and fresh, even if still often unripe and unfocused, efforts – blending poetry, storytelling, interactivity, videogame, images, video in one still-undefined format – show that the line can definitely be blurred when the content is artistically meaningful enough to go against the grain of mainstream digital banalization; furthermore, these artists' choice of format shows a crucial political choice – using the Internet in art is the only way to stay relevant and be heard, as certainly writing novels, a now dead format, is not. Whether this will prove true or false, such a conviction is a valid reason for their choice.

A second field examined is that of young novelists – new authors who, this time from the outside, have tried to penetrate some aspects of the Internet and bend them to the language of the novel. At the same time, obviously, the opposite will be true – a language of the Internet, provided such a thing exists, is studied and tentatively absorbed, implemented by these authors in an attempt to recuperate a contemporary relevance to the novel and not to confine it to a parallel dimension.

Finally, as an appendix of sorts or for the sake of completion, a third batch of authors was faced – pre-millennial, middle-age authors or older, well-established personalities who dealt with the Internet in one of their books as a one-time experience. The purpose here was to see what difference emerged from the younger authors’ approach; this section proved – and it is a significant detail – the least satisfactory, not in literary terms, but for the purpose of our research. The two ‘elders’ taken into consideration, although enormously different from one another, had one trait in common: being either less substantively (Eggers) or less ‘politically’ (Pynchon) committed to the urgent relevance of the issue than the millennials.

So not considering these two, all the authors analyzed have emerged in the last decade. The research takes it for granted that it is still too early to make artistic assessments beyond a certain degree or predict future developments. The conclusion is thus obviously an open question, but one that might foster a great deal of future research – will these small artists, who certainly have hardly surfaced into the mainstream yet or been linked to one another before, coalesce into some relevant movement into the open, a force to be reckoned with, or more than one, that will be able to seriously and deservedly morph the cultural panorama of the recent future? Or will they wilt without ultimately exerting much influence, suffocated in the underground? As it stands, it is very difficult to give an answer; but time will tell.

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