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May 5, 2014

Post-Postmodernism?

Hi, everybody. I thank Professor Boldea for his introduction and the kind invitation to speak before you prior, as I understand, to your University's conference on globalization and national identity. Now, my talk is not going to be a curtain raiser proper. Think of it, if you will, as more of an intellectual warm-up, perhaps as an opportunity to react to a couple of critical, theoretical, and historical "provocations." Issued in deliberately broad brushstrokes, these considerations are submitted to you with an eye to getting some discussion going.

Needless to say, the upcoming conference is neither the first event of this kind nor the only one taking place around this time; there is, as you may know, another gathering on the same topic and held in Sibiu only two weeks before yours. And there have been, and there will be, so many more—and so much more culturally and theoretically, all attesting to what I have determined as a post-Cold War *paradigm shift*. Occurring across not only across the humanities but also across the world, across its epistemological and cultural-existential practices, this shift traces, simply speaking, a move away from the postmodern and postmodern studies and into the global and global studies. This move has to do, among other things, with how people—commoners, artists, critics—picture the world. What I am talking about is a change in the *cultural imaginary*. This is, I argue, a mutation that affects not only how one sees the world but also how one acts in it, worldly praxis. The change in question, I maintain too, prompts us, literary and cultural critics, to fine-tune our instruments.

The consequences of this transition for our various national identifications are also paramount. A highly contested term and reality, the global is upon us, whether we like it or not.

It is here to stay, forcing us all, no matter who and where we are, to rethink our national allegiances and locations, descriptions and self-descriptions, destinies and destinations in a way comparable to the flight itinerary that brought me to Târgu Mureș: not via Bucharest, the traditional checkpoint of the self-centered, territorially centralized, and epistemologically territorialist nation-state bureaucracy, not even through Cluj, Transylvania's "capital city," but by way of Sibiu. Of course, it is all an issue of relays, transfers, conversions, and connections—of "interconnectedness." This is the global-age shibboleth, an old chestnut by now for sure but also the very protocol of our lives.

In fact, I am not even going to Bucharest this time around. Neither is my lecture, argument-wise. Do not get me wrong; it is not a matter of giving the cold shoulder to a place so dear to me. But, to my mind, the Lufthansa line of flight allegorizes a worldview or a principal trajectory across it, as well as an epistemology. It is a conceptual *ligne de fuite* that charts a *geocritical lateralism* keen, as in Deleuze and Guattari, on the growing, worldwide, and destabilizing pervasiveness of the "outside": a globally déterritorialized understanding of the individual and of his or her community. More exactly, what we are dealing with is a déterritorialization-with-réterritorialization that réaggregates cultural identity and cultural production according to a cognitive-affective mapping increasingly at loggerheads with available national—de facto nationalist—cartographies of governance, with how modernity has been situating the national body (*and* the national cultural *corpus*) in space, on official maps, and with how we have been mapping this body across time, in national historiography, including literary historiography.

Very briefly, if we are to take the global seriously in this context, we need to rethink location in general and the national in particular as a *way station* for lateral traffic, traffickings,

and exchanges essentially transnational, not to say “trans-sylvanian”—for itineraries transnationalizing and postnationalizing in nature; this transnationalism must be distinguished both from those capital transgressions only interested, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, in setting up the same exchange system everywhere and from the ongoing territorial expansionism of anachronistic empires such as Russia and China; we also need, and still under the pressure of the global, to reconceptualize the cultural model that, inside and outside the Euroatlantic world, has been brought to bear on the national in the post-World War II era, namely, the postmodern; and, finally, we have to revisit the very timeline we have been applying to this period. I want to suggest, actually, that the *contemporary* does not span the time lapsed since 1945 any more (it did when I went to college), but only the years passed since 1989, when the Second World War finally ended. To me, the contemporary is synonymous to the late global, a historical stage in which we are witnessing the twofold crisis of the nation-state and postmodernism as modernism’s (and modernity’s) spectacular grand finale. Indeed, the passing of the national as the Cold War’s default modality of mental world mapping goes hand in hand with the passing of the postmodern. More to the point, if the communal matrix of modernity is the nation, and if the modern state’s primary brief is to territorialize a national mythology institutionally and geographically, then this matrix holds less and less with late modernity and with the postmodernity of the late 1980s, which witnesses yet fails to solve the crisis—the déterritorializing processes—facing the nation-state in the globalizing aftermath of the Cold War.

On this account, and even though the nation as a still functioning, geo-institutional apparatus is far less passé than postmodernism as a cultural paradigm, the passing of the nation and the passing of the postmodern—the postnational and the ugly sounding “post-postmodern”—are the two faces of the same coin. On each, one can make out the ongoing

predicament of the historian of post-Cold War literary-aesthetic circulation, interchanges, and overall sociocultural *change*, in the U. S. and elsewhere. In effect, many would tell you that, for some time now, we have been witnessing the weakening if not the “passing” of postmodernism (*The Passing of Postmodernism* is the title of a 2010 book by Josh Toth). Full disclosure here is probably in order: some of us have not only built careers on and around the postmodern, but we have also invested in it politically, before and after 1989.

It is probably for this reason also that, for many of us, the question or questions remain if this passing equals a neatly demarcated exit and thus the end of an era; if the cohort of hot rods and fancy imports so eager to leave the postmodern roadster in the dust—digimodernism, performatism, hypermodernism, altermodernism, metamodernism, and, of course, globalism—are sufficiently marked stylistically, thematically, and otherwise; if the ironic, parodic, manifestly intertextual, and cross-generic discursive signals they send as they pick up speed on the interstate of aesthetic and cultural history allow for an effectively individualizing profile; if authors who have driven previous shifts in taste and form, and who still are central to the postmodern, postcolonial, and multiethnic canons in the U. S. and abroad—from Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Chang-rae Lee, Junot Díaz, and Mark Z. Danielewski to Zadie Smith, Michel Houellebecq, Mircea Cărtărescu, Haruki Murakami, Orhan Pamuk, and Roberto Bolaño—can be cavalierly enlisted in a *Paradigmenwechsel* argument plausibly geared toward the supplanting of postmodernism; if, more specifically, a writer like DeLillo can be postmodern in *White Noise* and post-postmodern in *Point Omega*; if the decoupling of the postmodern and the poststructural has really occurred; if the digital, Internet-based experiments of style, format, and venue à la Jennifer Egan will reach critical mass or will ever amount to more than a digitalization of the postmodern; and if the much-advertised return to realism, new eclecticism,

new “earnestness,” or new “sincerity” (and to “new weirdness” too), along with the comeback of the empathic, the ethical, the metaphysical, and the temptation of the “post-identitarian” and the “grand narratives” will prove enough to set off a well-configured, *epoch-making paradigm shift* away from postmodernism and toward something else truly post-postmodern.

Many critics have lost sleep over these questions. Jeffrey T. Nealon’s 2012 book *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* is only the latest installment in a series of inquiries clustered around the “what comes after postmodernism?” dilemma. For a real dilemma it is, and, again, one that is hardly recent. Initiated by postmodern critics themselves, disputes around postmodernism’s limitations and obsolescence started, significantly enough, at the end of the Cold War, probably with Australian critic John Frow’s 1990 landmark contribution “What Was Postmodernism?” to Ian Adams and Helen Tiffin’s collection *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*. Frow then reprinted his piece in *Time and Commodity Culture* (1997). The original essay and the book chapter allude, of course, to Harry Levin’s 1960 classical article, “What Was Modernism”; in 2007, Brian McHale replied with his own article bearing the same title, in *Electronic Book Review*. A few years before, in 2001, Andrew Hoberek and others had examined the same thorny subject in “Twentieth-Century Literature in the New Century: A Symposium,” a special-topics issue of *College English* 64, no. 1 (September 2001). And so have done, since then, Timothy S. Murphy, in “To Have Done with Postmodernism: A Plea (or Provocation) for Globalization Studies,” in *symploke* 12, nos. 1-2 (2004): 20-34; Robert L. McLaughlin, in “Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World,” in the same *symploke* issue (53-68); Neil Brooks and Josh Toth in their collection *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism* (2007); Alan Kirby, in “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” in *Philosophy Now* 71 (January/February 2009),

and then again in a whole book on “digimodernism.” Mary Holland, Amy J. Elias, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, Thomas Vaessens, Yra van Dijk, Alison Gibbons, Caren Irr, Leerom Medovoi, Rachel Adams, Min Hyoung Song, and even a writer like Bharati Mukherjee have followed suit, wrestling with this conundrum in a flurry of special-focus journal issues and critical collections, some of them still forthcoming. The “Epilogue” of my 2011 *Cosmodernism*, titled interrogatively “Postmodernism into Cosmodernism”? also articulates theoretically and historically, through a rather reluctant axiomatics, a transition—in my view, still under way—out of the postmodern. And some of the ideas presented there have been fleshed out in the 2013 issue on “metamodernism” I guest-edited for *American Book Review*.

I asked in that issue, and I ask again: What exactly makes postmodernism’s *passing* a conundrum other than that we get to a point in life where we end up wedded, perhaps a bit too much, to certain concepts and paradigms? I emphasize the word *passing* advisedly because, in answering the question, I want to dwell on this “passing” business a bit, especially on what it entails ontologically. No doubt, ontology is “dominant” in matters postmodern, as McHale has said. Besides, postmodernism has always been an ontological oddball. Out of sync with itself, it has been viewed *and* practiced as a form of cultural belatedness, as a poetics and politics of generalized if subversive *intertextuality*—a concept and practice of cultural discourse undoubtedly befitting our *network society*. Modernism’s allusive afterthought *after* the modernist fact, postmodernism has something inherently posthumous to it, a spectrality of sorts (Toth’s subtitle is “A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary”). After all, one cannot feed off the dead—one cannot quote them—decades on end with impunity. Sooner or later, it will rub off. And it has. Postmodernism’s heyday was a glamorous afterlife already. It is important to keep this in mind

when we couch questions (“What Was . . .?”) and otherwise speak about postmodernism in the past tense so as to chart the postmodern aftermath.

For, what we are talking about is an incomplete departure complete with extemporaneous returns. Postmodernism is not dead but “deadish,” as somebody said about zombies. In other words, this spectrality, the ambiguous passing of the postmodern paradigm, the passing of something that has always defined itself in this elusive and indirect, *en passant* mode, as a presence never entirely present, already passed but not quite past, in a Faulknerian sense, will in all likelihood play out as an exceptionally resilient specter. As we compose the chronicles of postmodernism’s foretold death, let us be mindful of the *revenant*; recursiveness is the curse the postmodern specter puts on us all. And so, chances are, for quite a while, we will have no choice but to revisit the postmodern so as to think through whatever seems to be superseding it. Our theoretical prophesies will be—are already—its visitations; it will reappear to us, over and over again, as we struggle to part company with it; it will continue to be in that modality of being that, suggests Derrida, deploys ontology as hauntology.

Compounding this struggle at a time world cultures awaken to an increasingly shared, planetary horizon are the postmodern’s largely *culturocentric* inheritance and bent. Coming to terms with the Western thrust and legacy of postmodernism will be another challenge any efforts to get past the postmodern post will have to face. Granted, postmodernism has been a most accommodating paradigm stylistically, as well as philosophically, culturally, and otherwise. At the same time, it has been demonstrably constraining, and more and more visibly so as we have entered the late-global era. Once again, the struggle has to do with how attached we have been, and are, to said paradigm at a juncture in world history when we may have no choice but to try and step outside the postmodern box as much as outside the box or confines of the nation.

Step into what, though?

Arguably, what begins to crystalize around this point in post-Cold War history is the global or, as some prefer to say, the planetary as a cross-national, deeply *relational* ambiance of discursive practices themselves revolving around a poetics, thematics, and ethics of relatedness.

I said I was not coming from Bucharest, and so I will not go to Cărtărescu's hometown and his *Nostalgia* or, better still, to his *Blinding* trilogy to illustrate my point either. Instead, let us go Pamuk's Istanbul and his 2002 novel *Snow*. For, what we have here is a "Turkish" book if there ever was one, but we also have, and *by the same token*, by the same post-postmodern fictionalization of Turkey, a geo-narrative of "Turkishness" with the country a crossover point (*point de passage*) or *network gateway* for transcontinental, trans-imperial, and ultimately planetary-scale circulation of cultural energies. Here, contemporary Istanbul, then, farther away, Eastern Anatolia's town of Kars, and entire Turkey with them claim "accessions" to wider geopolitical aggregates such as the EU and are simultaneously reclaimed by forces of religious, regional, and separatist entrenchment dead set on rescinding Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secularist legacy. Historically between a rock and a hard place, Pamuk's country finds itself trapped between incompatible alternatives: the greater world of NATO (since 1951) and Europe (an increasingly conflicted aspiration), for which the Young Turks' modernity-bent reformism had paved the way, and, pulling in the opposite direction, Iran-backed Islamists and yet in another, radical Kurdish autonomists (PKK), not to mention the Turkish government's recent attempts to control—territorialize, rein in—social media.

Turkey's predicament, Pamuk hints, lies in what might be called the extraneous fallacy: the assumption that, first, such options, positions, affiliations, and the cultural-religious models derived from or attributed to them are indomitably external to each other, following as they

allegedly do distinct trajectories in space and time; and second, that they are mutually exclusive as a matter of course. Nowhere is this antinomic worldview more ingeniously refuted than in the “telescoping” episode where Ka, the protagonist, tells us about “All Humanity and the Stars,” the “constellating” poem he composes in reaction to his companion’s comment that “the history of the small city [of Kars] has become as one with the history of the world.” “In the notes he made afterward,” we learn, “Ka described [the poem’s] subject”

as the sadness of a city forgotten by the outside world and banished from history; the first lines followed a sequence recalling the opening scenes of the Hollywood films he had so loved as a child. As the titles rolled past, there was a faraway image of the earth turning slowly; as the camera came in closer and closer, the sphere grew and grew, until suddenly all you could see was one country, and of course—just as in the imaginary films Ka had been watching in his head since childhood—this country was Turkey; now the blue waters of the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus and the Black Sea and the Nişantaş of Ka’s childhood, with the traffic policeman on Teşvikiye Avenue, the street of Niğar [*sic*] the Poetess, and trees and rooftops (how lovely they looked from above!); then came a slow pan across the laundry hanging on the line, the billboard advertising Tamek canned goods, the rusty gutters and the pitch-covered sidewalks, before the pause at Ka’s bedroom window. Then a long tracking shot through the window of rooms packed with books, dusty furniture, and carpets, to Ka at a desk facing the other window; panning over his shoulder, the camera revealed a piece of paper on the desk and, following the fountain pen, came finally to rest on the last letters of the message he was writing, thus inviting us to read:

ADDRESS ON THE DAY OF MY ENTRANCE

INTO THE HISTORY OF POETRY: POET KA,
 16/8 NIGÂR THE POETESS STREET,
 NIŞANTAŞ, ISTANBUL, TURKEY[.]

As the narrator adds in a reference to the snowflake-shaped cosmic diagram he comes across in one of Ka's notebooks, "discerning readers will already have guessed" that Ka's address "is located on the Reason axis but positioned to suggest the power of the imagination." Intersecting Reason and Memory, the Imagination re- or geo(-)positions Ka(r)—the artist, the place, and Turkey with them—planetarily, across worlds, rationalities, and individual-collective memories. By a mix of zoom-in and zoom-out scenes, Pamuk and his authorial alter-ego both locate their places in the outside worlds and make out these worlds in the bowels of the Turkish quotidian, lying inside one another like so many Chinese boxes, overlapping, or crisscrossing each other to weave the Alephic fractality—the intertextual "snowflake"—of planetarity.

Ka does not have to invent the "little things" that make his compatriots live and die for, for these things are already there, in the Universal Studios picture of the turning planet. But he needs to turn to the picture an eye trained for this kind of planetary "detail." The magnifying-glass workings of the microanalysis also makes possible the macroanalytic flipside, which helps him detect the world's multitudinal footprints in snowy Kars. It is, arguably, all a matter of scale, of a revisionary scalarity no longer wedded to national-linguistic territoriality but willing to take the risk of another mapping. Both imaginary and real, so vivid in Kars's Turkish-Kurdish-Iranian-Armenian-Russian-West-European urban potpourri and so subtly reinforced by Pamuk's Brechtian-Pirandellian intertextual games, this is a complex cartography in which place, affect, faith, gender, ethnicity, and governance "crystallize" to gel, snowflake-like, into aggregates of culture inside, outside, and astride statal and sectarian turfs.

Or consider Joseph O’Neill’s New York City, from his 2008 novel *Netherland*. Via Google Maps—from God’s viewpoint, as Houellebecq might quip—protagonist Hans van der Broeck, has both Brook-lyn and “the physical planet” in his “sights,” and so intertwines them as he retells *The Great Gatsby* for post-9/11 America. O’Neill’s *Netherland* is concurrently the U. S., Nederland (Dutch for “Holland”) and thus The Netherlands, and also neither land because *all* lands participate in its planetary convulsions of life and death, in the world and the *netherworld*. Another case in point is Gish Jen’s New England in her 2010 novel *World and Town*, where a backyard pit dug out by Cambodian immigrants provides an apt synecdoche for something much bigger and gruesome: Pol Pot’s killing fields. Or consider Houellebecq’s neo-traditionalist France, from his 2010 *La carte et le territoire*, where the country’s cuisine, landscape, architecture, and identity generally have been de-modernized and re-encoded/réterritorialized as “old-fashioned” France by Russian and Chinese fantasies of Frenchness. Then, what about DeLillo’s 2003 *Cosmopolis*, where the protagonist’s stretch limo, stuck in Manhattan traffic as it is, takes in the whole world to boil it down to a stock exchange chart. Or Dubravka Ugrešić’s Amsterdam in her 2005 book *The Ministry of Pain*, where a classroom of asylum-seeking students from the former Yugoslavia becomes the place in which, as their teacher notes, a “new, completely different tribe will arise from the post-Communist underbrush,” the “web people”; and countless other places in Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Chang-rae Lee, Aleksandar Hemon, Gary Shteyngart, Colum McCann, Junot Díaz, Teju Cole, and so on.

What an author like Cărtărescu suggested *allegorically* in a book like *Nostalgia*, against the late 1980s political-epistemological pull of the nation-state, and what authors such as those just listed *spell out narratively* in the Cold War’s globalizing aftermath is this imaginary-cultural and critical decalogue of sorts:

first, the face of the earth, of the worlded, one-becoming planet, is present and increasingly readable (“telescoped”) in the little, the tiny, the humble, the territorially bound—in cultures’ *fine print*;

second, this presence is indexed, and foregrounded, by the participation of other places, texts, itineraries—of otherness generally—in the topo-textual fabric, in the arabesque of “small things” and their godly and human handlers, locales, styles, and places;

third, this geoaesthetic involvement of the other, the elsewhere, and the outside in the makeup of Being—of a place, a group, their literature—is, as Giorgio Agamben explains in *The Coming Community*, not an addition, a supplement, but that which actually *affords culture*, ensures that it can take, has, and holds its own place, unique, singular;

forth, cultural poetics, what makes culture, is movement, and what makes a culture’s place possible is displacement. Cultures do not first originate and *then* go around, “influencing” other cultures—this would be the ethnocentric-developmental story of modernity, modernism, and even postmodernism, and the story would be a narrative of repetition, which would hardly sow the seeds of singularity. It is the going around, one more and more decentered and indirect nowadays, of a whole world adrift, which gets things going. For there would be no “roots,” no “seminal” and one-of-a kind beginnings, without dissemination, no drive without the drift, no origin and originality without *dérive* and derivation, without a prior origin, without indebtedness to the world;

fifth, this “horticultural” singularity, thus understood, stems from the existence of something I would call not the world bank of literature or literary data—or the world bank literature, if you have seen the book by this title—but, perhaps a tad more encouragingly, the planet’s *intertextual commons*;

sixth, because literatures all over the world draw more and more from this commons and expand it as they do so, intertextuality has become or is about to become, beyond the postmodern West, a worldwide shared protocol of *poiēsis*;

seventh, this being the case, such literature-making implicitly enables a meaning-making procedure geared toward foregrounding the cross-cultural multiplicity from which cultures, their homogeneous self-representations notwithstanding, are springing, today more than ever;

eighth, there is nothing natural, self-evident about culture's self-perceived and so much advertised homogeneity. Cultures are not monoliths, but uniformity—much goes hand in hand with the notion that cultures are territorially defined and confined—is the story a culture insists telling about itself, not a description but an ideology sponsored and institutionally enforced by the nation-state and its territorialized and territorializing historiographical apparatus;

ninth, at long last, our planet is swimming into our methodological ken. The earth's face is coming into view in its full material dispensations and cultural-intellectual affordances no matter how contradictory, uneven, or plainly objectionable some of these may be. The planet's culture, archives, and repertoires have become, for better or worse, more available, accessible, and shareable, by so many, than ever before;

and tenth, if this is true, this means that critics and humanists generally need to recognize intertextuality in its world play; to allow that representation and, more largely, cultural memory inside a certain tradition may well entail, after postmodernism, representing and recollecting something that said tradition may have never imagined or experienced. This means reading—whatever we happen to be reading—with the elsewhere, the other, and the otherwise, with the planet.

It is within this exchange horizon that what I call the outsourcing of identity is taking place. To clarify: whoever we are, whatever we become, or wherever we come from comes about these days under the impact of remote, heterogeneous sources, places, and styles. The familiar is less and less a function of the familial. More and more afforded by the alien, it does not exclude, as Wai Chee Dimock would say, a “long-distance kinship.” As a result, the economy of our being, whether individual or collective, is hardly self-sufficient, depending as it does on others for “loans” and “parts”—myths, fantasies, stories, symbolic structures, and the like. Leaving behind a separatedness-based model shaped by the center/margin, “in here”/“out there,” our culture/theirs, and other similar *disjunctions* typical of coloniality, postcoloniality, and the earlier stage of multicultural awareness, this economy is moving toward a *world-conjunctive* or *world-relational* model informed by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, borrowings, and barterings.

What does this mean?

Simply speaking, what it all comes down to is a relational dynamic wherein local, seemingly standalone, autonomous units become more apparently and more extensively that which they have been all along: “attachments,” relations, rumors of otherness, anchors in the elsewhere. This framework calls for a comparative approach, specifically, for a de- or, better still, trans-territorialization of literary histories. To repeat: as appendixes to various national histories and in that still indebted to a 19th-century mindset, these histories have been territorialized—defined and confined in terms of coverage—on the model of the nation-state. But the lines of cultural flight as well as the lines of credit extended to, and distinguishable between, the lines of Thoreau, Melville, Emerson, Whitman—not to say Eliot, Joyce, Pynchon, or Charles Johnson—cut across and reach far beyond the U. S. territory, through other countries and continents.

This is, of course, a reference to Dimock's 2007 book, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. Here, Dimock underscores the "diminished sovereignty of the nation-state" and the bearings of this process on the 21st-century humanities. While national borders and jurisdiction continue to exist, the way scholars map developments across the arts overlaps, she suggests, less and less with the nation, more specifically, with the nation-state's territorial identity. Thus, competing scales of aggregation—pre-, sub-, and transnational—challenge the classical paradigm of national territoriality. In other words, where U. S. literature "is," where it occurs or evolves, may differ from the geographic location of the nation. Thoreau, for example, is "on three continents." Margaret Fuller is, or was—and, in a sense, was from—Ancient Egypt and Italy before being from Cambridge, Massachusetts. In Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* Louisiana is closer to West Africa than to Illinois.

What this new, cross-territorial, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic scalarity helps visualize cartographically and appreciate critically is how much U. S. culture—pretty much like any other culture—has borrowed and is borrowing from world cultures and, accordingly, how much of the nation's cultural fabric consists of credit lines, threads, strains, and investments from elsewhere. It is our job, I think, to read between and across these lines so as to assess the investments, their returns, and, more generally, the workings of a planetary logic—of a cultural geo-logic that may well take us, indeed, past the postmodern post.