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David Markson's Postmodern Turn: *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and "Minor Literature"

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"Was it really some other person I was so anxious to discover, when I did all of that *looking*, or was it only my own solitude that I could not abide?" (*Wittgenstein's Mistress* 31, 134; emphasis added)

[1] David Markson's para-millennial novels, or, in Tyler Malone's phrase, "the notecard quartet,"^[1] represented by *Reader's Block* (1996), *This is Not a Novel* (2001), *Vanishing Point* (2004), and *The Last Novel* (2007), are notable for their stylistic idiosyncrasies and postmodern characteristics, including pastiche, indeterminacy, and metafictional reflections. His previous novels, among them *The Ballad of Dingus Magee* (1965), *Going Down* (1975), and *Springer's Progress* (1977), exhibit little to no associations with postmodernism—aside from fragmentation and intertextuality, which Markson uses throughout his career and can be claimed by both modernist and postmodernist traditions—instead embracing the aesthetics of modernism, extending the legacy of Joyce, Gaddis, and Markson's mentor, Malcolm Lowry. Thus, the novels Markson published over the last two decades of his life exhibit a decisive break with his previous efforts, allowing him to explore what he depicts as a peculiarly contemporary anxiety and loneliness. Reflecting on a mad world requires "mad" language, or what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a "deterritorialized" language, one which celebrates the fluid and schizoid characters who rebel against the "logic of late capitalism," in Frederic Jameson's famous phrase.

[2] In other words, Markson's "postmodern turn" represents the postmodern turn in the arts in general, and examines many of the larger issues at stake in the discourse surrounding these nebulous, and controversial, concepts. By neglecting traditional narratives for an increasingly postmodern style, Markson's final works recalls the efforts of experimental and psychologically troubled authors ranging from de Sade through Bataille, Blanchot, and Artaud, who declared "I would like to write a book which would drive men mad" (59). Deleuze and Guattari codify this tendency as a genre, terming it "minor literature," characterizing this new genre as a postmodern intervention that celebrates obscurity, hybridity, and innovative structures over traditional narrative in order to express marginalized and deviant perspectives. As they explain,

A major, or established, literature follows a vector that goes from content to expression. Since content is presented in a given form of the content, one must find, discover, or see the form of expression that goes with it. That which conceptualizes well expresses itself. But a minor, or revolutionary, literature begins by expressing itself and doesn't conceptualize until afterward. (*Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, 28)

[3] Interpreting Markson's "notecard quartet" through the lens of minor literature, then, this paper explores the relation between the later Markson's style and his thematic interests in contemporary "undefined anxiety" and "social abandonism,"^[2] a union appearing for the first time with the publication of his masterpiece *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988).

[4] *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) represents a critical locus of investigation for this profound rupture in Markson's career, a liminal point between his modernist past and his postmodern future. This novel clearly features many characteristics we don't see in any of his previous work; however, at the same time, there are traces of his older modernist aesthetic clinging to it, effaced perhaps, but not erased entirely. These vestiges can be traced most significantly in the short story "Healthy Kate."^[3] Originally published in the journal *Confrontations* in 1986, "Healthy Kate," represents the first draft of what would later become *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, but is almost unrecognizable as a precursor text.

[5] In a 1990 interview with Joseph Tabbi, Markson himself acknowledged that he required the radical formal transformation from "The Healthy Kate Project" to *Wittgenstein's Mistress* to portray certain ideas about the contemporary world. As he explains, "finally I began pushing that central concept, the idea of aloneness, and I contrived it as extreme a metaphor for it as possible—quite literally turning [Kate] into the only person on earth" ("An Interview with David Markson," 112). Not only did these revisions highlight the "idea of aloneness," an idea that has a rich personal and philosophical meaning for Markson,^[4] but they also operate to make the writing more radical and experimental. "Suddenly," Markson elaborates, "there it was, that opening of the woman 'claiming' she was alone but nothing in the text to verify it, and improbable to the reader—opening things up for all sorts of infinitely more subtle questions of reality than I would have been able to deal with the other way" (ibid.).

[6] While *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and the novels that followed have received extensive critical treatment, no critical attention up to this point has analyzed the revision process of "Healthy Kate" into *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.^[5] This gap in Marksonian scholarship demands a critical intervention to interrogate the textual changes that resulted in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* to illustrate the relationship between these changes and larger cultural and aesthetic elements of postmodernity, specifically in psychopathological modalities. Therefore, this essay first juxtaposes "Healthy Kate" and *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and then adopts Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "minor literature" to demonstrate the connections between *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, "minor literature," and the epidemic of anxiety and social abandonism within postmodernity. This essay pursues a rigorous analysis of the psychological impact of postmodernity where we cannot know things for sure, and therefore do not know how to feel, how to belong, and feel ontologically alone.

I

"Analyst, in thy orisons be all my jests remembered." ("Healthy Kate," 136)

"In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street." (*Wittgenstein's Mistress*, 1)

[7] "Healthy Kate" was re-published "with corrections" in a 1990 volume of *Review of Contemporary Fiction* commemorating David Markson and John Barth. In a brief fourteen pages, it traces the general plot that would later be narrated (and obfuscated, diffracted, fragmented, etc.) in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Even a

brief scan of its hypotactic sentences, conjoined by an army of semi-colons and behemoth paragraphs, often lasting for pages, reveals its stylistic differences from *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. For example, when describing the death of Kate Winter's son^[6] in "Healthy Kate," Markson writes loquaciously

And why even the grave, which I saw only once, that one indelibly radiant Oaxacaquenan morning when they lowered his small coffin into the ground and with no clergymen to speak of either since there would have been none in the town save Catholics, with the echo of a Dylan Thomas line about someone having stars at their elbows and feet breaking over and over, incessantly, against my skull, until that dour and normally incommunicate elderly Hungarian to whom I had spoken less than Buenos Dias for three years stepped from the cluster of our fellow expatriates to press my hand and, softly, in Latin, recite the Lord's Prayer? (131)

[8] In this passage, we see the traditional markers of high modernism—stream-of-consciousness, high culture allusions, obscure vocabulary, free indirect discourse, along with a Mexican setting reminiscent of the Quauhnahuac of Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, a novel on which Markson had written his M.A Thesis. The exposition, while difficult, is nonetheless precise and the details acutely observed. We have a well-established character, we can empathize with her emotions, and can place her in a given environment.

[9] Such things can't be taken for granted in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. In a parallel scene, writing again of Kate's son's death, Markson's revisions jump off the page as if written in Magic Marker:

I am not at all certain that I was mad when I drove to Mexico, before that.

Possibly before that. To visit at the grave of a child I had lost, even longer ago than all of this, named Adam.

Why have I written that his name was Adam?

Simon is what my little boy was named.

Time out of mind. Meaning that one can even momentarily forget the name of one's only child, who would be thirty by now.

I doubt thirty. Say twenty-six, or twenty-seven.

Am I fifty then?

There is only one mirror here, here in this house on the beach. Perhaps the mirror says fifty.
(8)

[10] It's easy to see startling differences in these passages, not just stylistic but psychological, not just aesthetic but philosophical. These differences become even more noticeable when one compares the actual plots of the two texts (although claiming *Wittgenstein's Mistress* even has a plot is a tenuous claim), which begin relatively congruent but diverge as a result of the massive innovations introduced in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, innovations whose importance remains obscure without a brief summary of "Healthy Kate."

[11] The narrative of "Healthy Kate" begins nine years after the death of Kate Winter's son, Simon, in Oaxaca, Mexico. As she relates, immediately after his death she "had driven the three thousand-plus miles back to New York with only one stop other than for gas or a meal, one night, somewhere in eastern Louisiana" (134). Since then, she has painted and exhibited at galleries around Greenwich Village, consulted a sequence of psychotherapists, and begun an affair with a married man, the unsuccessful

novelist Lucien. Markson locates the narrative in late May of an unspecified year, three-and-a-half months after “it” started. The story leaves “it” unexplained, but a reader infers that it is a form of depression or anxiety related to her disappointments in herself as a mother, wife, and, finally, artist. All of the ways she had tried to be in the world have proven to be exhausted. As Kate Winter reflects:

I knew full well when *it* started, even late into May could peg that, all right, to the day. To the hour. Three and one-half months earlier, on February ninth, when my last show had come down; at eleven-fifteen in the morning to be precise, when all twelve of the canvases were off the walls...the titles still in place but the room itself so inexorably empty that there already seemed no evidence that I had shown at all, that an artist named Kate Winter even existed. (134)^[7]

[12] Kate Winter’s efforts to identify the cause of this “it” propel and ground the narrative of the story. The title itself, “Healthy Kate,” ironically adverts to this investigation into the stability or adequacy of Kate Winter’s “health” and “sickness.” In fact, the story at times reads like the transcript of a dysfunctional psychotherapy session, repeatedly interrogating this process of “happening,” specifically in Kate Winter’s frequent attempts to answer what caused “it.” She incessantly yet unsuccessfully wonders about how different people, events, and disappointments in her life have engendered her “sickness,” noting,

something was happening to me, something I could not quite particularize, but I was sick. I was fine, I was certain I was fine; but I was undeniably sick. And why was I focusing so intently on Simon? I thought about him perpetually, of course, and particularly in moments when other loss occurred, or in in periods when the world I had created for myself might appear to turn empty. (“Healthy Kate,” 138)

[13] The style of writing here reifies the philosophical foundations that Kate Winter (and the world of the story) still have faith in. The ability to access truth, the belief in causality, the scientific faith that knowledge leads to cure.

[14] “Healthy Kate” represents Kate Winter’s futile attempts at modernist self-understanding, at finally and substantively determining the cause of “it” by cobbling together facts and memories according to a Freudian or Enlightenment model that suggests if one can find the proximate cause or repressed memory, one can assuage the pain caused by it. Unfortunately, the problem appears insoluble. She continues to reflect upon memories of her adultery, of drunken blackouts, of artistic failures, the deaths of husbands and sons, but none of these serves to make her “healthy.” A psychological scar remains that can’t be healed by self-knowledge. As she asks herself in frustration, “But still, but still...how explain all the rest? All that malaise, that incapacity, that defeat, vacuity....*all that sitting on my ass?*” (139).

[15] The idea of “looking” here operates as the among the most recognizable features shared by “Healthy Kate” and *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, for in the latter too Kate is always “looking” (the word is used roughly 100 times in the novel),^[8] although this “looking” operates differently in the latter novel because of the formal changes rendered by Markson’s revisions in late 1987, influenced by his study of Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* and its thematization of solipsism, unreality, and factual indeterminacy. Looking for self-understanding, looking for the repressed events whose uncovering will lead to cure, is replaced by looking for connections, by looking for an order among atomic facts and solipsistic musings—ultimately, looking for a place to not be alone, to be released from the cocoon of solipsism.

[16] The last book Markson published before *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was *Malcolm Lowry's "Volcano": Myth, Meaning, Symbol* (1978). In this study, an expansion of the 1951 M.A. Thesis he submitted at Columbia, Markson reveals a fecund critical and imaginative understanding of literature and philosophy latent in his early fiction and criticism. Two ideas in particular demonstrate how profoundly writing about *Under the Volcano* influenced Markson's transition from a modernist to a postmodernist author. In writing of the function and effect of the Consul's madness/terminal alcoholism on or in *Under the Volcano*, Markson argues that it results in a kind of retreat into the self, that "[Lowry] has made an organic use of the philosophic idealism of George Berkeley, and in an oblique but inescapable manner the entire novel is meant to be seen as unreal" (*Malcolm Lowry's Volcano*, 7). Not only is this idea of "unreality" and solipsism organic and related to the primary themes and concerns of *Under the Volcano*, as Markson educes them, but "with the possible exception of the dream narrative of *Finnegan's Wake*," Markson argues stridently, "where of course traditional fictional form itself is distorted, this is almost certainly unique in fiction— philosophic idealism as a *functioning creative concept*" (187). In approaching *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, it will be productive to remember Markson's fascination with "retreating into the self" and philosophic idealism [i.e. Berkeleyan solipsism] as "functioning creative concepts." Markson uses the trope of solipsism to transform Kate Winter's world of scandalized psychoanalysis, adultery, and art into Kate's apocalypse world, an emptied world, described by one woman's monologue, looking for connections to remedy her loneliness.

II

"'Subjectivity is reality.' One more talisman I underlined once. Heavily." (Markson, "Reviewers in Flat Hells," 125)

[17] *Wittgenstein's Mistress* was published in 1988, after 54 rejections, by Dalkey Archive Press, famous for publishing experimental works by such authors as William Gaddis, Djuna Barnes, and Ishmael Reed. Narrated by a middle-aged woman named Kate, who is either the last person remaining on earth or delusionally believes this to be the case,^[9] the novel functions as a series of utterances, allusions, and anecdotes made by Kate, the self-proclaimed curator of the emptied world. In a metafictional moment of reflection, Kate regards the book as "a novel about somebody who woke up one Wednesday or Thursday to discover there was apparently not one other person left in the world" (230). Like Kate Winter, she is a painter and divorcee whose son has died, although in the reconfigured universe of the novel, one of the new "functioning creative concepts" is that truth is indeterminate, leaving the reader, *as well as Kate herself*, in a state of confusion regarding whether her son's name is Adam or Simon or Terry, or whether her husband is named Simon or Lucien or Terry, or in fact whether her son in fact died at all.

[18] As Wittgenstein argued, the very notion of truth requires a society of shared language, or *LebensForm*, that is precisely absent from the novel. Being alone in the novel's universe, it is Kate's curse to have no access to a community of speakers who can verify her musings about what has happened to her or remember the cultural factoids that function as pastiche. Markson's move here, by introducing solipsism, results in an indeterminacy of facts that creates and sustains a mood of depression and "undefined anxiety" for Kate, who as a result is unable to succeed in her role as "the appointed curator of the world" (227).

[19] As in "Healthy Kate," in which Kate Winters identifies a problem (*it*) and "looks" for a solution in the appropriate modernist manner, in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* Kate too continuously looks. However, because

Markson has, in the revised version of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, omitted the traditional narrative architecture required for self-knowledge or epiphany, the looking here infrequently lasts for more than two or three brief lines before Kate becomes distracted by precocious musings: wondering whether she is in fact Helen of Troy,^[10] or if Rembrandt and Spinoza would have gotten along, or whether Brahms' compositions would still be Brahms' compositions if they had not been created by Brahms. If there is a literature of ADHD, this is it. In almost all cases, as well, her musings about history and art are sad and lonely.^[11] She ruminates upon the anecdotes of Helen, Rembrandt, Spinoza, Brahms, and Wittgenstein et al. to understand her own loneliness and depression. As Kate wonders repeatedly,

I believe I have said that I felt depressed at least once before, while writing these pages.

Although what I perhaps more exactly said I felt once before was a certain undefined anxiety...

And so which would really not have been anxiety at all, but only an illusion.

Even if one would certainly be hard put to explain the difference between the illusion of anxiety and anxiety itself.

And in either case how I still felt this was depressed.

Even if I had no idea why. (*WM* 221; ellipses added)

[20] Perhaps, as indicated above, it is this undefined anxiety about problem-solving ("Even if I had no idea why"), and its subsequent demand for iteration and repetition, that most resembles the mood of frustration over the ambiguous nature or etiology of "it" in "Healthy Kate." As Sherrill E. Grace asserts astutely, "the oral idiosyncrasy of Kate's monologue is created in at least three ways: fragmented or inverted sentence structures, repetition, and specific locutions...Repetition is, in fact, the structural principle of the text" (211-212). However, in "Healthy Kate," the repetition is, simply, repetition—a sort of monomania or obsessive thinking about the same things, events, facts, people. These repeated events are stable; they operate the same way each time. In the latter novel though, the seeming repetition is "repetition with a difference," as Deleuze writes (see endnote 11).^[12] Every time Kate repeats an anecdote or piece of cultural trivia, she changes it, mixing them up with others. This fits in with the mood of a fading (or faded) world so pervasive in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.

[21] This comparison with modernist models of knowledge are ultimately untenable in the postmodern world of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, simply because Kate is unable to cherish or properly "nostalgize" famous thinkers, artists, and writers because she can't remember or express them in any precise, unproblematic way. "The baggage that remains in one's head," she reports, "meaning remnants of whatever one ever knew" (15). There is an implied epistemological quest at the center of "Healthy Kate" that is absent from the ontological world of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. The former is concerned with "how to know," while the latter is concerned with "how to be, when you cannot know." I propose this is why, in the novel, the cultural and even personal "facts" are skewed, superficial, and "sad,"^[13] in David Foster Wallace's view. For example, when Kate muses about cultural anecdotes, she doesn't discuss them in a cerebral or artistic way that provides salvation or redemption (the way Eliot does in *The Wasteland* or Pound in *The Cantos*), but rather in an inane listing of quotidian details—where Guy de Maupassant dined, what Heidegger wrote in a letter, how Rembrandt's students tricked him. In this way, she transforms and crumples up into noise, trash,

gossip, trivia what for the Modernists had the power to redeem culture—Kate *tabloidizes* high culture. What Eliot “shored against his ruins” Kate litters and destroys, leaving in her wake as she wanders on, looking for something more, something adequate to *her* world. For instance, when Kate reflects on Ludwig Wittgenstein, what she contemplates is not the consequences of a logically atomistic metaphysics, or the possibility of a private language, but rather a confused account of clarinets and toilets:

The instrument that Ludwig Wittgenstein used to play was the clarinet, by the way.

Which for some reason he carried in an old sock, rather than in a case...

Doubtless A.E. Houseman thought he was just somebody carrying an old sock, in fact, on the afternoon when Wittgenstein found himself with diarrhea and asked if he could use the toilet, and A.E. Houseman said no.

On my honor, Wittgenstein once needed a toilet in a considerable hurry, near some rooms at Cambridge that were Houseman’s, and Houseman would not let him come in. (*WM* 191)

[22] Here we see an opportunity for Kate to reflect on the possibility of a private language and how it may impact her situation as the last person on earth, but instead she gets distracted by Wittgenstein’s diarrhea and Houseman not letting him into his house. Instead, the sickness and loneliness of being denied entrance to a home is a symbolic equivalent of Kate’s experience, lonely and bereft, as the last person in the world.

[23] Steven Moore has remarked on this characteristic of Kate’s monologue, arguing in a remarkable essay on “David Markson and the Art of Allusion,” that, “for earlier writers (and in Markson’s earlier works), culture was stable and objective, an orderly accumulation of facts. In *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, however, culture is unstable and subjective, a fading memory of ‘baggage’ that teases Kate with false connections” (175).

[24] The above comparison between “Healthy Kate” and *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* reveals the highly formal and thematic changes Markson enacted to transform “Healthy Kate” into *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. I have postulated, following Brian McHale’s theorization of postmodern art as concerned primarily with ontology instead of epistemology, that along with the move from modernism to postmodernism we perceive a move from an epistemological model to an ontological one. As I hinted at above, this transposition of “how to know” as the dominant discourse with “how to be/feel, when you cannot know,” introduces fascinating psychological themes in the novel, psychological themes relating not to adultery, blackouts, or artistic failure (as in “Healthy Kate”), but a new world in which Kate cannot learn how to be. We also see a move from art as consolation and expression to art as low culture, pop culture, postmodern litter. The following section will demonstrate how *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* capitalizes on postmodern aesthetic techniques, especially Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of “minor literature,” to accomplish this transformation.

III

“There is no subject: *there are only collective arrangements of utterances.*” (Deleuze and Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?”, 18)

[25] Deleuze-Guattari popularized their theory of a “minor literature” in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975). According to Ronald Bogue, “central to the concept of a minor literature is a particular use of language, a way of deterritorializing language by intensifying features already inherent within it” (*Deleuze on Literature* 91). Other practitioners of minor literature, according to Deleuze in *Logic of Sense*, include

Artaud, Celine, e.e. cummings, Luca, and Beckett, to whom the later Markson is so often compared (101). This intensification often takes the form of radical experimentation, an experimentation that in many cases no longer looks like language, but like a schizophrenic's "word salad," as "the schizoid" is often deployed as a descriptor of this kind of text by Deleuze and Guattari, the latter of whom was of course a psychoanalyst specializing in treatments of schizophrenics. "For the minor writer," Deleuze and Guattari assert, "expression must break forms, mark new ruptures and branchings. A form being broken, one then reconstructs the content that will necessarily be in rupture with the order of things" (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 37) In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze-Guattari discuss how minor literature, by deterritorializing language, functions in a politically and socially liberating way, and thus parallels the nomadic's re-cultivation and multiplication of desires into different "lines of flight," these desires being potentially productive but harnessed by the neoliberal governmentality essential to the postmodern condition.

[26] While it shares many characteristics of minor literature, the political and collective action elemental to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the genre could not be more foreign to the *ethos* of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. There is no possibility for social action, political subversion, or "war machines" in *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, simply because there is no society, no politics, no community to persuade to rebel, to see alternatives to the hegemony, whether it be political, religious, economic, or normative.

[27] In the terminology of Deleuze-Guattari, the radical transition from the Lowrian prose of "Healthy Kate" to the "non-genre propositions" (the apposite phrase is Camelia Elias') of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* represents an *exemplum* of de-territorialized language, a move that seeks to claim representation for states of being declared outside of language by reason.^[14] For Markson, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, there is no political language effect, only an isolation language effect, emphasizing the loneliness and "nowhereness" of Kate.

[28] Markson carves a new language out of a language that may appear similar. All of his works are written in English, of course, but starting with *Wittgenstein's Mistress* the language signifies *via negativa* — by not communicating, by not connecting. Likewise, Deleuze and Guattari cheerfully paraphrase Kafka's declaration: "No less than all designation, Kafka deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification... There is no longer any true meaning or figurative sense but a *distribution of states in the word's fan*" (22; emphasis added). This reconstruction of content that is characteristic of "minor literature" elucidates Markson's accomplishment in carving a postmodern *Wittgenstein's Mistress* out of a modernist "Healthy Kate." Joseph Tabbi explicates this development astutely, observing,

Markson is, with Gaddis, among the very few working novelists decisively to have carried the modernist tradition into the present, postmodern culture; a writer who, without claiming any particular knowledge of, or even affinities with, the more programmatic expounders of postmodernism, in recent work exemplifies many of the period's most vital developments." ("David Markson: An Introduction," 91-92)

[29] As I (and others) have suggested, Markson employs postmodern stylistic approaches like indeterminacy, fragmentation (Elias), allusion (Moore), and repetition (Sullivan) to tunnel out an isolated, lonely monologue for Kate, a language that follows the function of "minor literatures" by exposing the infinite possibilities of language when not constrained by conventional narratives or "logic of sense," in Deleuze's phrase. What all of this really comes down to involves how we register the psychological meaning of Kate's monologue. This observation reflects Sue-Im Lee's assessment, with which I agree, when she writes "the narrative that we

hold in our hands, then, is [Kate's] ultimate message, her final act of looking for 'everyone else.' Thus Kate's primary pursuit of 'looking' dramatizes the basic premise of dissenting community: a person who is entirely alone, yet whose condition is inconceivable without the concept of 'everyone else'" (142).

[30] Markson represents her loneliness, anxiety, and depression through atomized and fragmented paratactic statements that attempt to conjoin disparate facts. Evelin Sullivan notes, "The word *connection* or its verb appears in the book at least thirty times, and Kate frequently compliments herself on making connections"; and "on a sentence by sentence level, connections shape the text because of the way Kate's mind moves from subject to subject by association" (242-243). While Sullivan is correct to note the centrality of "connection" to Kate's behavior, it must also be noted that this mission is feckless and sadly misguided, for Kate never realizes the connection she seeks.

[31] Kate's failure, therefore, to communicate, to get out of her head (a solipsistic locution repeated numerous times in the novel),^[15] can be interpreted in another way (as Im Lee herself suggests) as a failure to connect: with the world, with her past, with the reader, with herself. But, again, this failure is not a character flaw, but rather a condition of the landscape of the novel. How are we to imagine Kate connecting in this emptied world? Instead, to return to the novel's title's father, the solution may lie in no longer looking for solutions, no longer seeing her connection as a problem needing healing, but rather an epiphenomenon to the landscape of postmodernity.

[32] This absence of connection, whether it be familial, communal, or societal, has often been observed as among the most pervasive and devastating aspects of postmodernity. Christopher Nash argues in the *Unraveling of the Postmodern Mind* that the absence of community results in a sense of social abandonment. "Abandonment," he writes, "is a word often associated with postmodernity's 'Dionysian' guise—an aspect that we've come to expect of postmodern living" (142). Deleuze and Guattari term this "social abandonment" and lament it as decreasing opportunities for political, collective action. Nash offers his own interpretation, one I find more striking in the context of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, arguing that "abandonment is actually about *control*. In its earliest use, and for centuries, the verb 'to abandon' meant: to subjugate, to rule." (142.) In the world of the novel, there is no potential for political action. In fact, perhaps Kate's sadness (or madness) operates as a commentary on Aristotle's notion of man as a "political animal." As people become increasingly solipsistic and abandoned by society due to globalization, neoliberalism, the decline of religious values and other metanarratives, they approach (but of course do not yet inhabit) Kate's condition, one of solipsism, anxiety, and ontological isolation.

[33] I have already referred more than a few times to Kate's attempts to "control" herself and her world by trying to connect fragments, by creating a stable self or redemption narrative out of her confused memories and assemblage of data and facts. Nash is correct, therefore, for it is clear that Kate's unsuccessful attempts to *control* functions as perhaps the ultimate symbol of her social abandonment/disconnection and loneliness/depression/anxiety/*whatever* she suffers from—the fact that one word doesn't function to signify Kate's tragedy is in fact the ultimate point of the shattering of the world represented by *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, as well as the undefined anxiety that permeates it. The indeterminacy at the heart of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is equivalent to the epistemic and normative indeterminacy at the heart of Lyotard's

report on “the postmodern condition,” which he famously renders as a suspension of believes in metanarratives.

[34] In her own opinion, Kate suspects “that quite possibly the whole point of the novel is that one can just as easily ask for Modigliani on a telephone that does function as one that doesn’t” (232). If this conclusion is unacceptable for us as readers (or for the 54 acquisition editors who passed on the manuscript), the problem is more ours than Markson’s: he has left us behind, waiting like children for resolutions—do we really want Kate to find that someone she is “looking” for, whether that someone is her self or another person? Of course not. The world, for Kate, and for us, has changed too much, Markson implies. It was to evoke or echo these changes that he revised “The Healthy Kate Project” into *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* in the autumn of 1987.

[35] As we now speak of the early Wittgenstein and the late Wittgenstein, so will future scholars speak of the early (modernist) Markson and the later (postmodernist) Markson, sitting at his typewriter in the East Hampton’s in 1987, “looking for” a way to tell Kate’s story, a “story” that ultimately relates the impossibility for Kate to follow Forster’s dictum to “only connect” (whether to facts, metanarratives, community) an admonition from another time, a time when facts made sense and connection was possible. The ultimate eulogy, *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* laments how, without community, there can be no language or political action, as advocated by Deleuze and Guattari, and without language, no way to describe or understand both the world and the reality of one’s emotions, of one’s place (or “no-place”) in the world. There can be no solution in the postmodern world because the very problematic is itself “undefined.”

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Notes

1. See Tyler Malone, "A Heavily Populated Solitude" in *The Scofield* 1.1 (Summer): pp. 7-10.
2. Deleuze and Guattari’s pejorative term for the lack of social bonds endorsed, he argues, by Lyotard, Baudrillard, et al. by multiplying differences and, in so doing, dismantling possibilities for collective political action, as explored, for instance, in their *Nomadology: The War Machine* (1986).
3. All references to "Healthy Kate" are from the version published in a special edition of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 10.2, 1990 devoted to John Barth and David Markson. While not drastically different in any way that would affect this paper’s argument, this version emendates "innumerable typographical errors and several unauthorized editorial changes [that] originally appeared in the 1986 *Confrontation* version."
4. As well as for Gilles Deleuze. See note 16 *infra*.
5. *The Scofield*, a literary journal modeled on the eminent 1920s journal *The Dial*, devoted over half of its Summer 2015 special issue to "David Markson and Solitude." "Healthy Kate" is not mentioned once.
6. In this paper, "Kate Winter" denotes the narrator of "Healthy Kate," while simply "Kate" denotes the narrator in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (Markson fails to provide a surname in the novel). In *Going Down*

- (1975), Markson names one of his protagonists *Fern Winter*, who, as described by Steven Moore is a “twenty-three-year old painter whose deterioration—‘going down’ into depression, perversity, and madness—is the principal activity of the novel, generating most of the literary and artistic references, either in conversation or the free indirect discourse in which most of the novel is narrated.” Moore, Steven. “David Markson and the Art of Allusion.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10.2 (1990): p 168.
7. It’s interesting to note, regarding Wallace, that this prenominate *it* as a stand-in for clinical depression (as he interprets her [see note 6 *infra*]) appears eight years later in *Infinite Jest* (1996) when Kate Gompert describes clinical depression as precisely such as *it*: “*It* is a level of psychic pain wholly incompatible with human life as we know it. *It* is a sense of radical and thoroughgoing evil not just as a feature but as the essence of conscious existence. *It* is a sense of poisoning that pervades the self at the self’s most elementary levels. *It* is a nausea of the cells and soul” (*Infinite Jest*, 695-696).
 8. Taken at random: “Well, even mad [I] was looking, or for what earthly reason else, would I have gone wandering off to all those other places? And I had been looking on every street corner in New York before that, naturally. Even before I moved out of SoHo, had been looking everywhere in New York. And so still was looking that winter when I lived in Madrid, as well... Looking. Dear heaven, how anxiously I looked. I do not remember when it was that I stopped looking” (*Wittgenstein’s Mistress* 18).
 9. Critical literature on *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* has evolved into a bifurcated community composed of those who believe Kate is insane and those that believe she is in fact the sole remaining person on earth. The former community, in fact, has developed its own sub-factions, interpreting Kate often as suffering from either unipolar depression, dissociative identity disorder, or schizophrenia, where the latter term is used not clinically but in the loose and arguably irresponsible nomenclature of many contemporary postmodernists. In this paper I choose to side-step the entire issue, agreeing with Evelin Sullivan’s statement that, while “some may argue that Kate is clearly mad and may point out that her world cannot be ‘real,’ and that the absence of bodies or of other evidence of the presumed global catastrophe by which all life but one vanished from the earth are marked impossibilities. My counterargument is simply that those concerns are not the point of the book.” Sullivan, Evelin. “*Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and the Art of Connections.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 10 no. 2 (1990): 242.
 10. Markson demonstrates her confusion here, and many in many other places, via a similar repetition with a difference formula. In this case, Kate recalls her mother praising her avocation as an artist, eliding a major difference: “You will never know how much it has meant to me that you are an artist, Kate, [my mother] said, one evening (33); “You will never know how much it has meant to me that you are an artist, Helen, [my mother said], that afternoon before” (228).
 11. It’s also noteworthy to consider the nature of Kate’s anecdotes about these people, as well as the circumstances of the people’s biographies. In almost all cases, the anecdotes are *lonely* anecdotes: Kate has no interest in relationships except for Rembrandt’s pupils tricking him by gluing coins on the floor, or the possibilities that certain contemporaries, for example Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman, could have passed each other in the street, unaware of their shared affinities. Secondly, in almost all cases the people are marginalized, i.e. homosexual, insane, reclusive, impoverished, alienated, etc. They are all, like Kate, alone.
 12. See Gilles Deleuze, “*Difference and Repetition*.” “Consider, on the border between these two cases, the repetition of a decorative motif: a figure is reproduced, while the concept remains absolutely identical. However, this is not how artists proceed in reality. They do not juxtapose instances of the figure, but rather each time combine an element of one instance with another element of a following instance. They introduce a disequilibrium into the dynamic process of construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect” (19).
 13. In Wallace’s view, Markson’s success in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* consists in its rendering of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as an actual lived world. “The basic argument here,” Wallace asserts, “is that

Mr. Markson, by drawing on a definitive atomistic metaphysics and transfiguring it into art, has achieved something like the definitive anti-melodrama. He has made facts sad. For Kate's existence is that of an atomic fact, her loneliness metaphysically ultimate" (89-90). For more on Wallace's review-cum-essay, see Dustin Illingworth's " 'He Has Made Facts Sad': David Foster Wallace and *Wittgenstein's Mistress*" in *The Scofield* 1.1 (Summer): pp. 85-87.

14. There are fascinating overlaps between Markson's envisioning of *The Last Woman on Earth* and Gilles Deleuze's fascination with the nomad. In his study, *Isolated Experiences: Gilles Deleuze and the Solitudes of Reversed Platonism*, James Brusseau discusses Gilles Deleuze's life-long interest in Robinson Crusoe and Rousseau's idea of the Noble Savage, relating it to Deleuze's philosophy of community and alienation. Here we find a thematic, not aesthetic, connection to *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Brusseau writes, "packing so much into our relationships with others is [sic] Deleuze pulling back a slingshot aimed for the other extreme: a world without others and an existence without odious depth" (Brusseau, *Isolated Experiences: Gilles Deleuze and the Solitudes of Reversed Platonism*, 175).

Brusseau elaborates his analysis of Deleuze's ideas of isolation by using the figure of Isabelle Eberhardt as a case study. As he describes her, Eberhardt was a Genevan-born "nomad" who wandered the Algerian deserts in the late nineteenth century, writing continuously of her solitary experiences and finally, historians speculate, committing suicide. Using Deleuze's revolutionary idea of alienation as liberatory, Brusseau demonstrates how Isabelle (according to Deleuze) embodies the opposite ideal of Markson's Kate:

There are two communities and two alienations...The first community is Socratic, or, better, Augustinian; it begins from something everybody must have in common, and hopefully that thing is the best thing. Here, alienation means being a lost sheep, it means drifting away from the group, it defines itself by a string of nots: not sharing the same beliefs, not practicing the same rites, not participating in the same habits. The other alienation defines itself as positively as an irrefutable and inescapable result of its own possession, its differential origin and accompanying, signature limitation. (178)

Brusseau concludes his case-study of Eberhardt by suggesting that the only solution for such an alienated figure is "to [renounce] everything beyond her, to [insist] that she and she alone controls the world, and even stronger that nothing exists in the world except herself, the final stage of alienation lies in controlling her own end" (195). This seems to be precisely what Kate can't do.

15. A theme transposed from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. See, for example: "The things that do remain in one's head after all" (22); "What do any of us truly ever know, however" (49); "Although doubtless all I have in mind is that if so if so many things would appear to exist only in my head, once I do sit here they then turn out to exist on these pages as well"(156); "Even if it is still hardly the real one either, naturally, being still only in my head" (240).

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