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Qualified Hope

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FUTURE, PRESENT, PAST

In many of his works, Fredric Jameson has associated our contemporary moment with “the end of temporality,” a demise characterized by “a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place.” As “a situation faced by postmodernity in general,” he contends that anyone producing art and ideas in the wake of temporality’s end is “obliged to respond” to this fundamental change in the nature of experience (“End” 708).¹ Contrary to the spatial turn that most scholars identify in those responses, *Qualified Hope* has argued that we should not, in fact, view typically postmodern literary forms—ideological knowingness, elaborate narrative terracing, collage, or a privileging of the signifier—as signaling an acceptance of temporality’s end. Instead, we should see them as an active resistance to that end. The tendency *not* to understand them as such—to view them as spatializing techniques—is symptomatic of what Jameson calls “the ideology of communication,” which “discredit[s] any philosophical representations that fail to acknowledge the primacy and uniqueness of language, the speech act, or the communicational exchange” (706). Whenever language-based thinking foregrounds the irreducible difference between subject and object, meaning and reality, or particular and universal—that is, any irreducible difference stemming from the inevitable mediation of representation itself—then the epistemological viability of temporal experience is being suppressed. This need not be the case since, as Jameson argues, “to position language at the center of things is also to

foreground temporality, for whether one comes at it from the sentence or the speech act, from presence or the coeval, from comprehension or the transmission of signs and signals, temporality is not merely presupposed but becomes the ultimate object or ground of analysis" (706). Only when linguistic mediation becomes incontrovertible Truth and reduces temporality to the present are we left with the false choice between an ironically savvy and detached approach to knowledge and one that revels blindly in the transparent and immediate bounty of experience. But this false dichotomy, which poststructuralism has wielded like a blunt club to chase phenomenological inquiry from the field of "play," oversimplifies the nature of temporalized thought. Recuperating temporal experience need not ignore the truth of linguistic mediation if approached as a question of production, which is always a mode of experience that depends on rather than ignores processes of mediation and the irreducible differences they entail, be they epistemological or ontological.

This is something that all of the authors discussed in *Qualified Hope*, committed as they are to locating difference in the productive temporality of a reader's interaction with literary form, clearly understand. However, because each author's turn to time occurs in the context of a specific political concern, we have seen temporal difference highlighted in assorted ways and to various effects. Perhaps the least effective texts that I have discussed here are Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and DeLillo's *White Noise*, both of which struggle against an array of governmental, technological, and media forces that overdetermine the meaning and significance of the future. Mailer resists these forces by altering his writing style according to the material being treated, while DeLillo constantly reveals and exposes instances of such overdetermination. In both cases, however, literary form—Mailer's metanarrative and DeLillo's self-knowing and revelatory narration that transforms *White Noise* into *de facto* metafiction—succumbs to the very preemptive logic it aims to fight. Metafiction, that most postmodern of forms, simply cannot resist political co-optation unless it is temporally mediated, as in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Proximity*. Put differently, in demonstrating that the future cannot simply be unknown and that self-consciousness cannot be wished away, Mailer's and DeLillo's novels teach us that the future alone cannot be the exclusive location of political hope and change. This is precisely the message that Automatic Alto delivers to N. in Nathaniel Mackey's *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, telling him that whether he predicates future progress on the wholeness or the fracture of African-American identity, he will just be spinning his wheels. Consequently, Mackey's own consideration of the political potential of futurity leavens every forward advance with an erosive retreat, predicating

wholeness and fracture of each other to yield a temporal form that moves forward, but only recursively and under constant qualification.

Of course, the future is not necessarily the preferred temporality of all politics, as Reed, Pynchon, Foer, and Scalapino all suggest in their various attempts to alter a reader's formally temporal experience of the present. For different reasons—Reed to avoid the circular relationship between essentialist and antiessentialist racial politics and Foer to overcome the temporal trauma of terror—these two authors are almost exclusively invested in the temporal form of the present in the same way that Mailer and DeLillo focus exclusively on the future. Committed to highlighting process over content (in Reed's case, the process of identity formation, and in Foer's, the process of understanding), both paratactically populate their novels with artifacts and images that force readers to experience the "how" rather than the "what" of political response. Scalapino is up to something similar, but rather than pursuing the kind of present-based performativity we see in Reed and Foer, she incorporates past and future into every present moment, creating a "thicker" version of instantaneity that she actually conceives as "duration." Given the history of feminist political thought in which her work intervenes, it makes sense that her presentism would also account for the past and the future. After all, the pure performativity of an isolated present could not critique choice-based feminism in the same way that her unique understanding of simultaneity—past, present, and future occurring all at once—allows. And yet, as the content of her poetry reveals, folding the past and the future into the present clearly runs the risk of incoherence and unintelligibility, something that Pynchon's own unique reformulation of the present instant successfully avoids. If Scalapino collapses the durational continuity of past, present, and future into the present, then Pynchon maintains that linear continuity but places it in the middle of an expanded instant. In doing so, he opens up a space of reflection—which in *Mason & Dixon* is also a space of narration—that accounts for the various durations that the rationalistic technologies of the Enlightenment exclude in their race to instantaneity and immediacy.

Finally, as is already apparent from Mackey's erosive retreat, Scalapino's incorporation of the duration of past, present, and future into the present, and Pynchon's attempt to embed it there, the past, somewhat counterintuitively, proves to be a particularly rich source for the political imaginary. Of the several authors who evince a concern about the future's overdetermination (I am thinking here of Mailer, DeLillo, Spiegelman, and Scalapino), Spiegelman most thoroughly commits himself to recuperating temporal experience with assistance from the past. Similarly, Gilb also sees the past as the appropriate site of political possibility, although he does

so in response to a radically indeterminate future rather than a preemptively overdetermined one. Looking for a universal truth that will make his difference-based identity determinant, only the absolute pastness of the past—the pure empty form of its loss—provides Mickey with a sufficiently determinant difference that allows him to resume living. Spiegelman too would like to resume living in the wake of 9/11, but because the government and its preemptive war in Iraq have overdetermined his future, he draws on history's content rather than its form to reanimate his life in the present. The historical cartoon characters who populate his work provide the differentiation he needs—which, as a differentiation of particularized historical content, also happens to be precisely the kind of differentiation that Mickey needs to overcome—to live in the present. In the difference between Spiegelman's representational approach and Gilb's formal techniques, we can see that the specific political concerns addressed in a text directly affect the nature of an author's manipulation of that text's temporality.

Even though all of these authors clearly develop different literary techniques to address different political questions and do so with different levels of success, two common conclusions can be drawn. First, in rehearsing my claims about each text here in the conclusion, I have attempted to read across the “Culture of Politics”–“Politics of Culture” divide in the book to suggest a common trajectory within each section that moves from future, to present, to past. Although I would hesitate to claim that those authors who most thoroughly address the past somehow do a better job of achieving a temporalized politics than those who are more concerned with the present or the future, this organizational structure is intended to suggest that a politics of time might be found where we least expect it: in what has already occurred. Not only do those authors who turn most forcefully to the past discover productive ways to manage their particular political problems (Spiegelman, Mackey, and Gilb), but they also demand that we rethink the very nature of the present's relation to the past. In general, any invocation of history for political purposes—as in *Beloved's* famous championing of “rememory,” Justice Breyer's commitment to the “stubborn facts of history,” or Anzaldúa's call to learn the oppressive histories of other minority groups—treats the past as something to be remembered and honored for its own sake, simply because suffering and trauma have occurred there. However, as Mackey's texts highlight and as Saidiya Hartman describes in chronicling her travels to African slave ports, this emphasis on remembering quickly turns into an almost nostalgic relationship to trauma and oppression. Conversely, the treatments of the past that

we have seen from the authors discussed in *Qualified Hope* teach us that history does not exist to be remembered for its own sake; instead, its temporalized form and content are to be used to produce political difference in the present.

Lest I overstate the importance of this productive relationship to the past, the second common conclusion to be drawn from this array of texts maintains that any temporal politics should ground itself in more than a single panel of time, be it future, present, or past. Contrary to Grosz's futurism and Edelman's presentism, *Qualified Hope* has implicitly argued that the best models of temporal politics are those that integrate and intertwine multiple panels of time to produce unique temporal forms that incite us to think about politics in radically new ways. This is why simultaneity has played such a crucial role in so many of the book's chapters. When grounded in epistemological or ontological difference, politics adheres to a logic of mutual exclusion that limits its access to the kinds of productive temporal forms that phenomenological differences grounded in temporal experience make possible. Of course, crucial to this process is the formal flexibility of literature, which is free to shape temporal experience in ways that merely speculative thought can, at most, only describe.

As a corollary of this analysis of the political value of time, therefore, I have highlighted the prominent and complex role that temporal form plays in any literary text's production of meaning, and in so doing, I have demonstrated a mode of reading that need not reduce literary form to theme. I intend this reading model, practiced in each of *Qualified Hope's* chapters, to reveal a way to talk about the temporal form of the reading experience without ignoring the complicating insights about the irreducibility of difference that postmodernism's linguistic turn has taught us. As a result, *Qualified Hope* has identified some very convoluted temporal forms, some very complicated ways of knowing, and some very compromised politics. Looked at differently, however, these compromised approaches to time, knowledge, and politics are also newly *qualified* approaches, as they have wrested us from some extremely intractable paradoxes that have thoroughly dominated and, to my mind, limited postmodern thought. I do not claim to have solved the paradoxical relationships between time and knowledge, identity and difference, or universal and particular—after all, they are called “paradoxes” for a reason. Instead, I make the more limited claim that literary form can imagine and produce unique versions of temporal experience that allow us to think around these paradoxes and discover new ways to be political at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

