Do Not Go Gentle Into That Night



Soon, it will all be over. Hard to believe, but true.

The end.

Denouement.

Fin.

The end of the arguments, the pitched battles on Facebook and in the comments section of your favorite newspaper, the unbridled anger, the long friendships dashed, families split asunder. The embarrassed glances as your neighbor plants another sign for *that* person, that idiot fraud who is going to destroy democracy as we know it, that tool of the special interests whose only interest is in undermining your freedom, your very way of life.

But enough about the race for Leon County Property Appraiser<fn>Which is, in fact, a nearly perfect microcosm of the entire U.S. political circus.</fn>. There seems to be some kind of reality show contest underway to see who gets to live in the Big House That Slaves Built. And it all comes down to November 8. Come November 9, we will either wake up to a bright tomorrow or to the certainty that our polis will soon descend into a scorched earth hellscape upon which once-promising seed will find no purchase.

Here’s my humble prediction: no matter who wins, the entirety

of our electorate will find themselves in one or the other of these mindsets. The rosy scenario, alas, is possible only if MY preferred candidate wins. Otherwise, all is lost. Naturally.

Tuesday will mark the twelfth consecutive Presidential election that I have followed, dating back to 1972, with an almost clinically-diagnosable degree of obsession. In that time, I have watched every major election return – all the way into the late West Coast returns – and every national party convention. Gavel to gavel. Coast to coast. If recognizing a problem is the first step toward beating it, I'm good.

My name is Rob, and I am a political junkie.

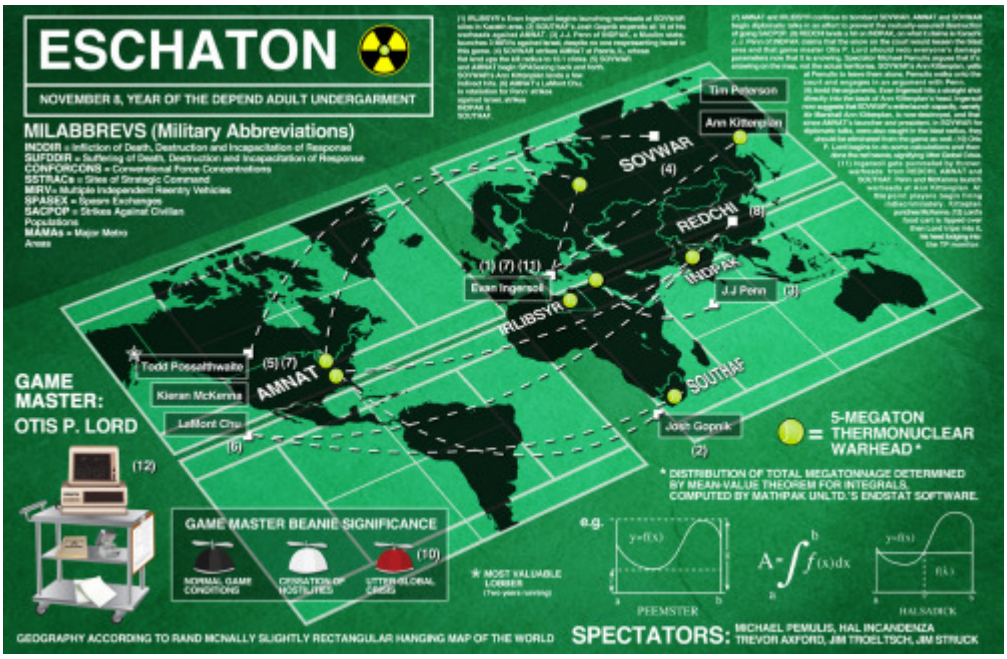
(Faithful followers of the blog [all three of you] have wondered why Your Narrator, of all people, has not written more about the election this year. Short answer: what could I possibly say that hasn't been said at least 7 times already? Also, too: I've had a hard time making any sense of it. It beggars belief, really.)

Anyway, November 8 is a pretty Biden big deal. It is a critical hinge-point in one of the greatest sagas ever told, a day of epic convergences and salient plot development.

I am speaking, of course, about David Foster Wallace's gargantuan *Infinite Jest.*<fn>Available at a fine local bookseller near you!</fn> In lieu of rehashing the obvious and over-determined plot points and characters of the Clinton-Trump pas de deux, what say we resist my electoral OCD and spend a little time on an addiction in front of which Your Narrator finds himself compelled to pay attention to every tiny fucking detail no matter how inconsequential in the larger scheme it may actually be. Just like this fucking election.

Pages 321-342 of *IJ* describe the last, epic contest in the game of Eschaton. This is DFW at his comic peak, his closest

brush with the fiery arc of Pynchon flaring rockets. Eschaton is a game invented at Enfield Tennis Academy in which youngsters with tennis rackets play out a nuclear holocaust scenario by lobbing “tennis balls so bald and dead”, each representing a 5-megaton explosive, on a quartet of tennis courts marked off to represent a world map. Various items of clothing — shorts, shirts, socks, jockstraps — demarcate military installations, civilian population concentrations, transportation assets, &c. Each kid represents a different world power<fn>Or non-power; Canada in particular takes a heaping share of disregard.</fn>, and battle is waged according to strict decision trees derived from game theory, international relations studies, and the ability of said kids to accurately lob a tennis ball onto or into a nation-state and its clothing-represented assets.



It was Sunday, November 8, that this last and final Eschaton contest of all time, a game that had heretofore been a staid and measured contest of skill and strategy, descended into *Lord of the Flies*-esque blood-letting, a free-for-all melee in which propriety and acceptance of civilizing norms are discarded in favor of a winner-take-all-damn-the-torpedos orgy of anything-goes savagery in which anger and vengeance seem to be more important than arriving at mutually beneficial

outcomes.

Sort of like this fucking election campaign. Damn. Can't get away.

And it happened on November 8. The Day of Eschaton.<fn>To be clear, it was a Sunday, not a Tuesday, this November 8 in the Year of the Depends Adult Undergarment was. YDAU is likely equivalent to our own 2009. Noting that the main action of this novel of a dystopian future is now several years in the old rear-view is as jarring as growing up with, and living past, the years of action described in *1984* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Time's arrow is relentless in its poking of Your Narrator's hind bits.</fn>

November 8 is also, in the *IJ* mythos, Interdependence Day, a celebratory occasion that marks the declaration by President Johnny Gentle of the forced union of the US, Mexico, and Canada. Johnny Gentle, a germ-o-phobic lounge crooner cum television star – a man described as having a "pathological inability to deal proactively with any sort of real or imagined rejection" – has defied the odds by winning the Presidency on the platform of, basically, 'everything is filthy and awful and I'm the only one who can clean it up'. That he has never been bothered by two or more ideas occupying his mind at the same time, or that he has disturbing and obvious sociopathic and authoritarian tendencies, is of no apparent concern to a largely imbecilic American electorate which is anxious to have someone place a firm hand on the wheel.

Forget building a yoooge wall. Johnny Gentle forced Canada to accept a "gift" of a massive swath of land comprising most of Northern New England and New York, a land that will be used as a toxic dump for America's trash and radioactive waste. The land is quickly rendered uninhabitable for humans, though rumor abounds that giant feral rodents, perhaps descendant of liberated pet hamsters, roam the wilds feasting on garbage

hurled by massive catapults from the south.

Also, too: Johnny Gentle dismantles NATO, ostensibly because they won't carry their own weight, defense-spending wise.

Also, too, also: the mysterious Joelle Van Dyne – aka radio cult personality Madame Psychosis (which we are intended to hear as 'metempsychosis'); formerly-aka the Prettiest Girl of All Time (PGOAT), subsequently a victim of a hideous acid-hurled-in-the-face deformity episode, and currently a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (UHID) – is admitted into Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House on November 8, YDAU.

Of note: JVD is also the featured performer in *The Entertainment*, a video cartridge that is so compellingly mesmerizing and entertaining that anyone who starts watching it will sit transfixed, through episodes of hunger and thirst and bladder/colonic evacuations, until actual death occurs.

Something like this fucking election campaign.

As Pierce noted in a recent post: "Are We Not Entertained?", both camps have pulled out all the stops to capture our eyeballs, from HRC's parade of celebrities we love to watch – like the celebrities currently occupying that Big House That Slaves Built on Pennsylvania Avenue, no to mention A-listers like Bey, Katy, Bruce, &c. – to Trump's parade of Chachi and Ted Nugent and uh, mm, uh…… OK, granted, Trump can't call down the star-power the way Hils can, but it doesn't matter…he himself is The Entertainment *ne plus ultra* of this campaign. He is the can't-stop-looking train wreck that everybody watches just to see what happens next. Some of us are horrified, some of our neighbors thrilled, at the "authenticity" of his antics. Either way, the folks with the teevee cameras know that if they point at him, a goodly number of us will gawk, perhaps not through embarrassing episodes of defecatory/excretory mishap, but certainly in great enough

numbers to keep the camera pointers focused on what we have deemed most important this year.

“So,” you ask Your Rambling Narrator, “the fuck what? I can’t stand this stuff and I *never* watch/listen to any of this crap.” Indeed. And why should you?

(You just know I’m gonna tell you why. But not yet.)

I recently re-read some Joan Didion essays about the 1988 conventions and election – a moment of relative civility in the recurring preznential drama – and I found myself wondering<fn>Heads up! We’re back to *IJ* again.</fn> what was the real-life equivalent of the instant that snivel-nosed Evan Ingersoll snapped to the in-built contradictions of Eschaton’s niceties and agreed upon “apparatus of the game”, which realization led him to drill a frozen rope, line driven tennis ball into the base of Ann Kittenplan’s skull – she representing what we would all recognize as Putin-land – which action shattered the “civility” of old-line Eschaton strategy and unleashed the hellish fury of a full-bore Eschatological melee that culminated with Otis P Lord ending up with an old-school CRT computer monitor fitted tightly over his skull, glass screen side first – pondering how/when/why the norms of “civilized” political battle fell into glass-slivered pieces, looking for the exact moment when our own so-called *real* political culture turned the corner into the lunacy that has us contemplating the actual-if-slight possibility that a spray-tanned reality show host might actually assume the office of the Presidency. Our own Johnny Gentle.

Your Narrator is compelled to consider one of i2b’s guiding principles: Reagan Ruined Everything. Perhaps St Ronald was the metaphorical tennis ball to Kittenplan’s skull?



Consider Ronnie's abject demonization of the word "liberal" and the various schemes and machinations of the Reagan campaign, their dickying the Iran hostage crisis and stealing debate books and barely concealed racist appeals. Is this it? Here, after all, was a man careening headlong into dementia, a dim bulb in the chandelier ascending to the presidency, a B-movie contract hack with name recognition largely derived from his silver screen history. Saint Ronnie indeed left a trail of carnage and terrible policies in his wake. But no, Reagan had at least been a Governor, as had many Presidents before him, and despite his anti-towering intellect and retrograde policy inclinations, he was a legitimate choice for President.

I glance back at *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* and I find myself amazed that History's Yard Waste himself looks almost good in comparison. But no, this was not the moment.

We can think about Willie Horton or Al Gore inventing the internet while he wrote *Love Story,* or the Great Clenis Hunt of the 1990s, or or or….and sure, all these things are contributors to our current debaclish condition, grim harbinger of the degradation to come. But not quite the nadir.

In the end, I think the line drive tennis ball to the nape of

our political neck<fn>Block that metaphor!</fn> comes down to the moment Mavericky John McCain, with the help of his fawning media monkeys, convinced America that a barely-literate nobody from a tiny village of Alaskan meth heads was a legitimate choice to sit second in line to the presidency.



And really and come on, that was the moment where the “apparatus of the game” got thrown against the rocks and our descent into Gentle Trumpery was ordained. Not that it wouldn’t have happened anyway, eventually, that somebody would see the weakness inherent in the politico/media co-dependency and knife that soft-underbelly with almost Stradivarian skill. But that moment when a reasonably sentient Presidential nominee selected a barely sentient snowbilly in 4-inch Louboutins to stand as second-in-line to the Presidency, when the media broke its own back bending to deal “even handedly” with a person who justly deserved all the mockery we could

muster – that was the moment of insemination, the moment the Trump monster was made possible. Because once we treated her as though she were in the least qualified, all bets were off for any future carny act that wanted to play the media like small-town marks in front of a cartload of snake oil.

Compare the amount of coverage of Palin v Obama in 2008. Compare the amount of coverage of Trump v everybody else this past year. The media gazed upon Palin/Trump as do the victims of *The Entertainment* – they are willing to endure anything because the freak show is so damned compelling. And while we may not be down with soiling ourselves, it's pretty clear that we will swallow pretty much anything.

Along comes Trump. The shattered apparatus of the game was no match for a guy who couples razor-sharp media instincts with the morality of a Kimodo dragon. When Johnny Gentle emerged:

> *the Dems and G.O.P.s stood on either side watching dumbly, like doubles partners who each think the other's surely got it, the two established mainstream parties split open along tired philosophical lines in a dark time when all landfills got full and all grapes were raisins and sometimes in some places the falling rain clunked instead of splatted, and also, recall, a post-Soviet and -Jihad era when – somehow even worse – there was no real Foreign Menace of any real unified potency to hate and fear, and the U.S. sort of turned on itself and its own philosophical fatigue and hideous redolent wastes with a spasm of panicked rage that in retrospect seems possible only in a time of geopolitical supremacy and consequent silence, the loss of any external Menace to hate and fear.*

The GOP was caught flat-footed by Trump, struck dumb by his remorseless manipulations of the very same elements the Party had assumed were their personal playthings, rendered impotent by a stable of so-called contenders who were either utterly

content-free, horrifically unlikeable, or both. The Republican party – for all the earnest, very public soul-searching by the very same people who set the table for this Bosch-like feast<fn>Looking at you, Bobo.</fn> – built this damn monster. But unlike Frankenstein's feared and hated creation, the townspeople loved Himself, and turned on Himself's creators when they tried to reign him in. Shelley never saw that ending coming.

One of William F Buckley's notable quips was "Don't immanentize the Eschaton", which was directed at the do-gooder utopians who he accused of attempting to hasten a post-Armageddon kingdom of god. At root, it was just a fancy way of complaining about government intervention in human affairs, but it made the speaker feel all plummy and clever about his (almost always his) disdain for the lily-livered, oatmeal-brained, pusillanimous pukes of the liberal persuasion. I first heard the phrase in an undergrad pol sci class.

But now it seems the equation is flipped. We have the Great Orange Menace casually declaiming "I'll bomb the shit out of them" and other such expressions of policy, much to the great delight of his devotees who are ready to blow the whole damn thing up out of frustration and anger. We have arrived at the inversion of Buckley's concern in which the purported conservative candidate – our own Johnny Gentle – is the one calling for a thoroughgoing cleansing.

Fortunately, and unlike the sad picture of the Dems and GOP as hapless doubles partners offered in *Infinite Jest*, the Democratic Party found itself nominating a candidate with perhaps the greatest set of qualifications and experience in the history of the Republic.<fn>With the possible exception of James Madison.</fn> And barring some calamitous turn, our next President will be a woman – a WOMAN! – who has been preparing her entire life for this opportunity. An opportunity which, one should note, nobody could have foreseen as even remotely possible when Hillary Clinton began her long climb.

This is history, right now, obviously and colorfully unfolding each and every day. It is an amazing thing, this system of governance, with its peaceful transfer of power (at least up to now…stay tuned) and its sometimes maddening pace of non-change, its deference to compromise and consensus, to finding something resembling common ground. It is utterly imperfect. Not watching this would be like not paying any attention to the Civil War or the Depression if you'd been alive then. I cannot fathom the disinterest; then again, Your Narrator is notoriously lacking in empathy and imagination. Mea culpa.

I reckon that within a very short period of time, President Clinton II will disappoint me in some profound ways. In this she will join every other President, including Barack Obama, who I consider the finest President of my lifetime, and one of our all time top 5.

I am damned glad that she is the Democrat who stood in battle with our very own Johnny Gentle. When we wake up on November 9, we better hope (hell, pray if you want to) she took the prize. Anything else is, literally, unthinkable.

My Favorite World #37



Eagle-eyed readers of this here bloggy pontificatory nonsense are well aware of Your Narrator's affection for professional

tennis. It’s what makes the two weeks that wrap around Labor Day my favorite sporty time of the year. Yep, it’s US Open time.

It’s not just that your guide has attended the US Open – once at the venerable Forest Hills Club, where he had the great fortune to have the great Pancho Gonzales take a leak in the urinal next to his, and where the legendary Alan King deigned to sign his player program *and* flick a cigar ash in his, Your Narrator’s, general direction.

“Have fun kid, don’t get drunk.”



Such a sweet man. Nah, I’m kidding. He was an arrogant asshole. But he did sign my program.

Later, at the grandly named US Open Tennis Center out in Flushing Meadows, Young Narrator watched Laver and Connors and Rosewall and Stan Smith and some perky little blond named Chrissie playing her first big match against Billie Jean, &c.

The last visit in 1985 found Your Narrator yelling for/against Wilander and Edberg, Connors, McEnroe, and that guy who sounded like a disease. Gerulitis. Yeah.

And it’s not just because that stadium<fn>Specifically, Louis Armstrong Memorial Stadium, nee the Singer Bowl. By another turn of fate, someone who looked just like me and had my acne attended his first-ever bigtime rock and roll show in LAMS, nee Singer. The bill was Jo Jo Gunne, the James Gang, and the frankensteinian Edgar Winter Group. The world, it is small.</fn> in Flushing Meadows sits across the concrete plaza from Shea Stadium<fn>Where, as it happens, Narrator saw Game 4 of the 1969 World Series, but did not, repeat, did not see either The Beatles *or* Grand Funk Railroad.</fn>, and in the shadow of the 1964 World’s Fair tower/needle/useless phallic appendage, the selfsame place where the pre-elementary Narrator discovered *It’s a Small World* in the Disney Pavillion. To his parents’ everlasting despair.

Nope, it’s none of this. It is that Your Narrator is a kneeling, evangelical mendicant at the Shrine of the One True Sport. You can have your teams of people running around like noggin-deficient chickens, your behemoths beating each other senseless between the ropes, your vroom vroom, hyper-steroidal go carts spinning round in circles, your various stick and ball fiasci. As much as one may like these games (some more, some less), it’s the well played tennis match that makes the Narrator’s heart fly like a vicious down the line forehand screamer.

One could go on here about Andre Agassi, or Roger Federer, or Ashe or Steffi or any of the others whose games have made the world a better place for years. One could talk about the epc amalgam of grace, power, speed, and brute physical endurance that makes this *the* sport worth watching above all others. But not tonight.

Because tonight, since Venus and Serena are about to face off in the quarterfinals – with Serena on a path to the first true Grand Slam in almost 30 years – well, let’s make do with one curious observation.

After years of debating the visual acuity of every linesman and umpire, of disputing and arguing furiously over close line calls (“You CANNOT be SERIOUS!”<fn>All linesmen insults are the intellectual property of one J McEnroe</fn>), we have all gone gently into that good night wherein an impossible technology automates line calls so effortlessly that the “integrity of the game” has been purified to its most error-free essence.

It’s not that the added drama and strategy around line challenges are lost on us. It’s that we’ve been robbed of the drama and spectacle of one of our favorites being literally robbed of a point, a set, a match, all because a human being blinked or had a bee fly by or simply lacks the visual acuity to make a decent call (“ARE YOU BLIND?”). And that we have simply acquiesced, in an act of faith as deep as any Road to Damascus moment, to the power of the machine to determine our destinies. Even the most Luddite of tennis fans turns to the Chase Official Review as the Diviner of Truth. It is, in its childlike way, almost touching.

It may be more fair, but is it better? Alas, the jury is not out, but rather has bellied up to the bar to watch the Sisters battle it out. And that’s where we should all be.

My Favorite World #10



The athletics-entertainment machine, especially at the professional level, never fails to bring us a parade of behaviors that, if it were our own children acting out so, would make us want to crawl behind the nearest rock in shame and disgrace. Every game from bouncing balls to twirling on the ice to driving around in circles real fast has its Hall of Shame inductees. Go back at least to Ty Cobb<fn>At least…we have no way of knowing, but I'm willing to bet that the guys who were winning marathons in ancient Greece were probably over-indulged boobs themselves.</fn> and bring it on up to today.

It makes sense. Elite athletes are among the most pampered and cosseted class of people around. They've spent most of their lives being told how special they are. When they find themselves in trouble, there are often legions of protectors to make their troubles go away.<fn>As long as they continue to perform, naturally. Failure to excel means exile. It's a helluva motivator.</fn>

It's one part of why I really don't follow the sports world in any detail. I'll watch a game here and there (hockey is once again tickling my interest for an hour at a time), but I really don't care what happens.<fn>As long as the fucking Yankees take a kick to the junk on a regular basis. Fuck the fucking Yankees.</fn>

Except for tennis. I love tennis, and this week finds us midway through the Australian Open, the first major tournament of the year. The time difference makes watching it live a little hard, but I check the results every day, even after my second favorite player ever – and perhaps the best ever, period – Roger Federer was eliminated. Watching him play has been a big piece of My Favorite World for years.<fn>Also, too…David Foster Wallace wrote a profile of Federer for the NYTimes magazine years ago, and it's my favorite piece of writing on any sport, ever. Do yourself a favor…</fn> But even with Federer out of the tournament, there's still plenty to

love.

What really makes tennis stand out right now is that most of the top players in the men's game consistently behave with remarkable style and grace. Don't misunderstand. Tennis is filled with entitled schmucks, just like any other sport.<fn>The elite women have more than a fair share of prima donnas, though there are a few coming along now who threaten to upend the game with style, wit, and grace. Eugenie Bouchard and Madison Keys…I'm looking at you, ladies. Brava!</fn> Of the top five men, four always show class and sportsmanship. Federer's speaking, like his game, is elegant and deceptively smooth. Rafael Nadal, who may be the second best player ever behind Federer, has had the good luck to have a rival in Federer who brings out his own generous and elegant nature. Novak Djokovich,who's making his own case for joining the 'best ever' bracket, settled in as third wheel in this rivalry with incredible humor and a style all his own. And now, Stan Warwinka is making a run at the top tier, and as a Davis Cup teammate and countryman of Federer, he's had a great role model for how to behave like a champion.<fn>Pro tip: it has nothing to do with stepping on an opponent lying on the ground, for example.</fn>

These guys, especially the top 3 of Federer, Nadal, and Djokovich, demonstrate great skill and ruthless intensity on the court, but it never devolves into trash talking or strutting. <fn>I deliberately do not include Andy Murray in this group. His playing is often superb. But geebus, what a whiny dick.</fn>

The piece of the Aussie Open that really hits My Favorite World this week came in an early round match between Nadal and Tim Smyczek, ranked 112th in the world, present in the Open through the grueling qualifier process, and given no realistic chance of beating the top-ranked Nadal. But he gave Rafa a hard match, and was within reach of a fifth set victory. And as Nadal was struggling to win the set up 6-5, someone in the

crowd let out an intentionally distracting shriek as Nadal was in his serve motion. He shanked the serve. And Smyczek, who could have used the moment to regain the advantage, did what too many people call “unthinkable”. As the crowd was booing the noisy jerk for his rudeness, Smyczek raised two fingers to indicate that Nadal should receive a do-over on the disrupted serve.

This is about the same as offering a batter a fourth strike, or letting an opposing team have another shot at first down because something was distracting. Try to imagine any other sport where someone within a whisker of pulling off the greatest victory of his career would do such a thing.

The chair umpire was amazed. The crowd was amazed. Nadal’s team gave Smyczek a standing ovation. Even Nadal was amazed, but given a reprieve he quickly served the game out for the match. Think of it…you’re *that close* to beating one of the best in the history of the game, and you elect sportsmanship over cutthroat. Asked after the match why he did what he did, Smyczek replied:

> *I know my parents would have killed me if I didn’t. It was the right thing to do.”*

We grow weary of watching people time and again twist conditions to gain advantage – because to let the opportunity to take advantage pass by has come to be adjudged ‘loser’ behavior. We are often certain that we are being lied to or manipulated by people who long ago ran out of shits to give about whether or not their parents would approve of their choices. But here, in this favorite game of mine, involving one of my favorite players, an unknown kid from the Midwest made himself one of my new favorites through a simple act of decency.

Courtesy. Decency. Style and grace. Tim Smyczek. My Favorite World.