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# "Goo-prone and generally pathetic": Empathy and Irony in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest

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“GOO-PRONE AND GENERALLY PATHETIC”: EMPATHY AND IRONY

IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S *INFINITE JEST*

by

BENJAMIN PEYTON

(Under the Direction of Joe Pellegrino)

ABSTRACT

Critical considerations of David Foster Wallace’s work have tended, on the whole, to use the framework that the author himself established in his essay “E Unibus Pluram” and in his interview with Larry McCaffery. Following his own lead, the critical consensus is that Wallace succeeds in overcoming the limits of postmodern irony. If we examine the formal trappings of his writing, however, we find that the critical assertion that Wallace manages to transcend the paralytic irony of his postmodern predecessors is made in the face of his frequent employment of postmodern techniques and devices. Thus, there arises a contradiction between Wallace’s stated aims that critics have largely endorsed and his clear stylistic debt to the very authors against whom he is supposedly rebelling. This critical consensus raises the question of how these distinctly anti-postmodern themes can be treated with identifiably postmodern literary techniques. The resolution to this apparent contradiction lies in the ends to which Wallace puts these postmodern means. Although Wallace’s fiction shares many characteristics with much of postmodern literature, he employs many of those same techniques to achieve a distinctly anti-postmodern goal: the praxis of a literary ethic that revolves around narrative empathy, both the textual empathy that the characters have for each other and the metatextual empathy that the reader has for the characters.

INDEX WORDS: David Foster Wallace, Postmodernism, Narrative empathy, Irony, *Infinite Jest*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### The State of Wallace Studies

David Foster Wallace provides an example of the interpretive problem that arises when an author writes literary criticism along with his fiction. Because of his privileged relationship to the work as the creator, the author's criticism gains a certain weight and significance that demands acknowledgement and analysis from any critic examining his work. The author's thoughts on literature naturally become a sort of ur-criticism of his own work, which, with a gravitational inevitability, warps the critical space around it. However, contemporary scholars must still address Wimsatt and Beardsley's dictum that preoccupation with authorial intent leads a critic away from the work itself. In order to avoid the intentional fallacy, New Criticism addresses works of literature as self-contained, self-referential objects. While this approach may serve those well who seek an insular evaluative experience, this study seeks to address the intertextual relationship between Wallace's fiction and his critical works that has come to dominate Wallace studies. The critic must begin with the question of how to align herself with respect to the author's criticism. Should the critic address the author's theoretical ideas and how those ideas apply to his own work? Should she endorse the author's views of literature and their application to his work or critique and oppose them? Or should she consciously develop an entirely separate approach that does not rely on the author's own framework for understanding and creating literature? No matter how a critic answers these and other questions, every critical assessment of the author's work will be affected by the undeniable presence of the author's theoretical ideas at the center of the critical solar system.

Wallace studies has evolved into precisely such a configuration in which every analysis of his work orbits around the central object of Wallace's own critical and theoretical ideas. He articulated his views on literature most famously in his essay "E Unibus Pluram" and in his interview with Larry McCaffery, for in both he laments the inability of postmodern irony, after dismantling the old systems for creating meaning, to build a new foundation for meaning and value. In the essay, he notes that postmodernism marked "a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative rejection of bogus values" (59). The postmodernists used tools like irony and metafiction to expose and dismantle the comfortable but fraudulent narratives and myths of postwar America. However, the postmodern critique has lost its edge, Wallace contends, because "television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of Low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative" (52). By co-opting the techniques of postmodern literature, television and advertising have rendered them impotent as tools for offering a cultural critique. As a result, Wallace calls for a new approach to literature that makes a positive case for the construction of an alternative value system that could help fill the culturally dominant moral vacuum of materialism.

The gaping maw of capitalistic moral nihilism has proven itself immune to purely negative approaches through its absorption of countercultural and subversive attitudes and its adoption of the ironic and self-reflexive trappings of the postmodern critique aimed at it. In the face of television's co-optation and consequent nullification of postmodern irony, Wallace sees the need for a new breed of writer: "The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels...who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" (81, emphasis in original). Wallace argues that fiction



today has to involve a return to forthright assertions of substantive beliefs, a method that fell out of fashion because the cultural beliefs and myths of postwar America were presented in precisely such a straightforward manner while they were in fact fraudulent. The malaise of postmodernism lies in its undermining of the very legitimacy of such a mode of expression, a sort of communicative collateral damage in the attempt to explode the rampant hypocrisy of postwar America. Wallace sets as part of his literary agenda the recuperation of frank expression for the affirmation of an ethics of care founded on empathy.

Expanding on his own relationship to his postmodernist influences in his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace says, “The problem is that, however misprised it’s been, what’s been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem” (49).<sup>1</sup> Wallace’s use of the word “misprised” is an allusion to Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, in which he argues that “the anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that [Bloom] call[s] ‘poetic misprision’” (xxiii, emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> By using Bloom’s terminology, Wallace is acknowledging that his generation’s understanding of earlier postmodern writing may be distorted by their own relation to it, but that understanding is operating on a functional level regardless of its accuracy as an artistic assessment. For Wallace’s generation, the legacy of postmodern literature has become a paralytic negativity that makes no attempt to “redeem,” that is, to recover and rehabilitate the aspects of human experience that have been neglected by the materialistic and televisual culture that postmodernism so sharply criticizes. Wallace argues that “in dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow

despite the times' darkness" (26). To merely point out and critique the inhumanity of contemporary society does not constitute resistance; only a new source of light can dispel the darkness.

As a solution to the hollow values of American culture, Wallace offers a focus on the parts of being human that still carry some spiritual or moral value on both an individual and a communal level: "What's engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price" (27)? Thus, in "E Unibus Pluram" and the McCaffery interview, Wallace lays out for himself and his generation a new manifesto for fiction that takes as its mission not merely to unmask the fraudulent value system of American materialism but also to affirm the inherent significance of human life and interpersonal connections, even within a system hostile to such endeavors to reassert basic moral principles in the face of nihilism. A rejection of hollow American cultural values requires an accompanying assertion of substantial moral values in order to offer an alternative orientation to finding or creating meaning in life.

Critical considerations of the work of David Foster Wallace have tended, on the whole, to approach his work using the framework that the author himself established. Following Wallace's own lead, the critical consensus is that he succeeds in overcoming the limits of postmodern irony.<sup>3</sup> This result is perhaps predictable since people who have an affinity for Wallace's work and his literary philosophy would be more inclined to study his work and publish articles that endorse his literary agenda, affirm his value as an artist, and argue for his importance to and influence on the development of contemporary literature. However, a number of these critics have been guilty of taking Wallace's critical and theoretical statements as gospel without

offering sufficient scrutiny and support and have neglected the question of how the remarkable and frequently *postmodern* form of the novel interacts with the presence and development of Wallace's anti-postmodern thematic concerns.

If we examine the formal trappings of his writing, however, we find that the assertion that Wallace manages to transcend the paralytic irony of his postmodern predecessors is made in the face of his frequent employment of postmodern techniques and devices. Indeed, many reviewers at the time of the release of *Infinite Jest* noted its postmodern characteristics in the stylistic similarities to such preeminent postmodern novelists as Pynchon and DeLillo. Dan Cryer wrote in *Newsday* that "Wallace lets loose with a triumphant high-energy linguistic rush worthy of a Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo." In *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani hinted at the seemingly opposed modes of writing that are present in *Infinite Jest* when she described Wallace as "a writer who's equally adept at the Pynchonesque epic and the Nicolson Bakeresque minute, a pushing-the-envelope postmodernist who's also able to create flesh-and-blood characters and genuinely moving scenes." Taking a suitably postmodern metacritical turn himself, David McLean wrote for the *Boston Book Review* that "when novels like *Infinite Jest* appear, the name Pynchon arises as a kind of critic's crutch, as a way of saying I don't really need or particularly want to say more, you know what I mean, the way poor fiction writers rely on brand name products as a substitution for characterization." These reviewers do not associate Wallace with postmodernism for no reason. Postmodern literary characteristics such as irony, metafiction, irrationalism, extraneous data, fragmentation, and a decentered narrative frequently appear throughout his oeuvre, *Infinite Jest* included. The styles and approaches developed and popularized by the postmodern authors he distances himself from in "E Unibus Pluram"

comprise a major part of the textual stratagems that Wallace uses to pursue the literary anti-rebellion he calls for in that same essay.

Thus, there arises a contradiction between Wallace's stated aims that critics have largely endorsed and his clear stylistic debt to the very authors against whom he is supposedly rebelling. This critical consensus raises the question of how these distinctly anti-postmodern themes can be treated with identifiably postmodern literary techniques. The resolution to this apparent contradiction lies in the ends to which Wallace puts these means. The postmodern techniques themselves do not have some inherent function that is necessarily postmodern; it is merely that a cluster of authors, the postmodernists, use a common set of techniques to achieve a common set of purposes. Although Wallace's fiction shares many characteristics with much of postmodern literature, he employs many of those same techniques to achieve a distinctly anti-postmodern goal: the praxis of a literary ethic that revolves around narrative empathy, both the textual empathy that the characters have for each other and the metatextual empathy that the reader has for the characters. Wallace's literary ethic contrasts with most postmodern writers, whose purpose has traditionally been one of undermining presumed foundations of meaning—at times including literature itself—through the use of irony. But before we can proceed further with our consideration of Wallace's paradoxical relationship to his literary predecessors, we must address the irksome term we have to this point used with a dangerous, haphazard nonchalance: postmodernism.

#### What We Talk About When We Talk About Postmodernism

To understand David Foster Wallace's relationship to postmodernism, we must first establish what we mean by the term "postmodern." This is not as easy as it may at first appear.

The term is notoriously vague and multi-purposed. In his critical study of the postmodern movement, Hans Bertens distinguishes three separate uses of the term that are frequently conflated:

[1] new forms of artistic expression that emerged in the late 1950s, gained momentum in the 1960s and became dominant in a number of artistic disciplines,...[2] a complex of arguments and ideas derived from and inspired by French poststructuralist thinkers,...[and] [3] a new stage in the history of Western culture, a new development whose origins were variously situated in the immediate postwar period (the collaboration of government and industry in the new military-industrial complex), the 1960s (the counterculture), the early 1970s (the oil crisis) or even somewhat later (the emergence of post-Fordist capitalism). (303)

These three definitions—or even *categories* of definitions—illustrate the nebulous and often contradictory uses of the term “postmodernism.” Before turning to *Infinite Jest* itself, we must navigate this inherited lexical confusion and arrive at a suitable working definition of postmodernism. A brief consideration of an example of each of the three definitions will allow us to discover which ones are potentially useful for addressing the question of Wallace’s relationship to postmodernism while avoiding detours into gratuitous, arcane analyses of or unjustified, grandiose declarations on the notorious and ill-conceived term.

Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is one of the most prominent examples of using postmodernism as a periodizing concept. As indicated by the title, Jameson presents a macroscopic Marxist analysis and argues that postmodern art and aesthetics are the product of certain developments in capitalism during the latter half the twentieth century. For Jameson, applying this definition of postmodernism to any literary text

would entail performing a Marxist analysis of how that writing is a superstructural expression of a new mode of capitalism. Such an analysis, while potentially interesting in its own right, would have little, if any, relevance to the question of whether and how Wallace counteracts postmodern literary exhaustion while apparently engaging in the postmodern tradition. Any similar attempt to periodize postmodernism will inevitably entail an equally restrictive approach in which the conclusion is sewn into the fabric of the general theory of postmodernism. We shall therefore avoid any periodizing definition of postmodernism, whether from Jameson or elsewhere, so as to allow concrete examples of postmodern literature itself to dictate its characteristics and objectives.

In *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, John McGowan provides an example of the second type of postmodernism: the poststructuralist theories originating in the 1960s and '70s. He begins by focusing on

the term's use to designate a specific form of cultural critique that has become increasingly conspicuous in the academy since about 1975...[that] is resolutely antifoundationalist—eschewing all appeals to ontological or epistemological or ethical absolutes—while also proclaiming itself resolutely radical in its commitment to the transformation of the existing Western social order. (ix)

This philosophical definition of postmodernism is more relevant than the previous one, because although it also imposes certain limitations on a critical analysis by requiring postmodern fiction to fit a preconceived critical mold, it does at times overlap with the literary agenda of some of the postmodern authors. However, the arguments of these postmodern theoreticians lie at best parallel to the developments in postmodern fiction. In other words, when these ideas are most relevant, they merely reinforce or restate what is already present in the postmodern fiction itself.

These theoretical formulations may have the potential to clarify or reframe the philosophical implications of some postmodern text, but they do not address the details of how postmodern characteristics create postmodern literary meaning, or the lack thereof. The usage of the term “postmodern” as a shorthand for the varieties and implications of poststructuralist theorizing is, therefore, unsuitable for our purposes, and will serve only to introduce ambiguity and confusion in the meaning of the already troublesome word.

Brian McHale argues in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* that the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction is a shift in focus from epistemology to ontology. Using Roman Jakobson’s concept of the dominant, McHale argues that the modernist author asks primarily epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge, who has access to it, how it is obtained and transmitted, etc. (9). The postmodernist, by contrast, asks primarily

questions [that] bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10)

All of this is not to say that modernists ask only epistemological questions and postmodernists only ontological but that the respective approaches are the dominant and therefore default frameworks for understanding their texts. Of the three definitions of postmodernism considered thus far, this one comes the closest to bearing on the question of Wallace’s relationship to the postmodern authors simply because it narrows its focus to postmodern literature. Applying this abstract formulation to our inquiry, however, would entail having to reverse engineer the

characteristics and techniques that postmodernists use to achieve these ontological goals. While it may be productive to invoke McHale's definition of postmodern literature and its ontological preoccupation at times, we must ultimately find a more concrete basis for our analysis.

It may be instructive to turn for a moment from this academic unpacking of the term to Wallace himself and see what he has to say on the subject. In one of Wallace's few television interviews, Charlie Rose asked him, "What does 'postmodern' mean in literature?" After a few moments of trying to dodge the question, Wallace responded, "It's a very useful catch-all term because you say it and we all nod soberly as if we know what we're talking about...and in fact we don't....[W]hat I mean by postmodern, I'm talking about maybe the black humorists who came along in the 1960s, the post-Nabokovians. I'm talking about Pynchon and Barthelme and Barth...DeLillo in the early '70s, Coover." In an attempt to come to some intelligible definition of postmodern literature, Wallace avoids formulating an explicit, general characterization of the literary movement. In fact, he expresses skepticism about whether the term even has a coherent definition. In place of an attempt to articulate some abstract, unifying principles or characteristics, he provides a concrete list of authors who share certain features and attitudes in their works. Such a list, however, is only useful for analytic purposes after breaking down the techniques and their functions that define the distinctive character of these authors and their works.

We shall begin with a similarly concrete list of authors whose works will help to define postmodernism in action. Because it is one of the only ways to arrive at an intelligible and useful definition of the term, and it is sufficient for the purposes of this argument, the word "postmodernism" will designate, hereafter and unless otherwise noted, not some abstract period or movement in literature but a specific group of American authors who exhibit an array of



shared attitudes, techniques, and themes in their fiction. Even more specifically, because this paper is an examination of Wallace's relationship to his literary predecessors, we will focus on those authors who had a pronounced and recognizable influence on Wallace's fiction in general and on *Infinite Jest* in particular. As we proceed, we will use one work from four authors—representative of not only the American postmodernists in general but the narrower group with and against whom Wallace actively engaged and paradoxically rebelled—in order to establish with concrete textual examples the form and function of postmodern literary techniques as employed by prototypical postmodernists: *The Recognitions* by William Gaddis, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon, *Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth, and *White Noise* by Don DeLillo. These texts have achieved canonical status as seminal postmodern works that provide clear and illuminating examples of the typical postmodern techniques and their functions in these indisputably postmodern texts.

Ultimately, we must build our working definition of postmodern literature from the bottom up, beginning with precisely the type of list of specific techniques that Brian McHale dismisses as “more or less heterogeneous catalogues of features – the *membra disjecta* of literary scholarship” (6-7, italics in original). Beginning with such a list that is founded on and illustrated through concrete textual examples will correct the previous critical lacuna: how these defining postmodern techniques function in their quintessential texts and how their functions differ in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace provides further support for this approach when he states, “The only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs, and maybe a set of formal techniques” (49). Since he explicitly rejects the “aesthetic values and beliefs” of his postmodern predecessors, we must examine

Wallace's application of those "formal techniques" in his fiction that we can trace back to the earlier postmodern authors.

Instead of setting up the techniques of such postmodern authors to contrast with the techniques Wallace employs—as one might do with, say, the techniques of Raymond Carver's minimalist fiction—we must acknowledge that Wallace's fiction appears similar to that of his literary forebears because he uses many of the same techniques that appear in the prototypically postmodern fiction of Gaddis, Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo. If the critical consensus that Wallace overcomes the limitations of postmodern irony is to be taken seriously, then we must identify and demonstrate how the defining features of postmodern fiction are operating in an antithetical way to how they function in the prose of postmodernists proper. The first step in that process is to consider the main subject of Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram": postmodern irony.

## CHAPTER 2

### IRONY AND EMPATHY

#### The Problem with Postmodern Irony

Because of his extensive writing on the topic, the central postmodern characteristic that any critic must address when discussing Wallace is irony. First, we must be clear and specific in what we mean by postmodern irony, for there are a variety of types of irony, and they are as functionally diverse as they are numerous. The irony prevalent in postmodern fiction is, first of all, tonal; it primarily manifests not in the structure, characters, or events of the narrative but in the tone of the narration. The most common usage of this ironic tone is satirical, focused on exposing to ridicule and condemnation the American postwar systems of social organization and cultural myth that comprised, in reality, a superficial veneer over a morally and spiritually hollow core. While it ranges in severity from biting critique to ludic teasing, the fundamental ironic approach remains the same. In “E Unibus Pluram,” while discussing the artistic agenda and stratagems of the postmodernists, Wallace provides a brief description of what postmodern irony is and does: “irony — exploiting gaps between what’s said and what’s meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are — is the time honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy” (65). This critical application of irony is clearly separate from, for example, the saccharine irony of O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi.” The situational irony of O. Henry’s story reinforces the value of the lovers’ gifts as genuine affirmations of love. While postmodern works also feature situational irony, the irony that Wallace refers to is not strictly a feature of the narrative but of the narration; it arises not from the story itself but from the telling of the story. “The Gift of the Magi” could be rewritten with such narration by inserting signals to the reader that the characters and their condition are the object of the author and the reader’s

shared mockery. Their gifts could then become, for example, a farcical demonstration of the futility of love. The plot of the story would remain the same, but the tone of the narration would suggest an antithetical reading to the original. Similarly, certain features of a story might serve to establish or reinforce the satirical or ludic attitude of the dominant postmodern irony, but, fundamentally, this type of irony derives from the author's *treatment of* the material rather than the material itself. It is an entire process of discourse that, while not necessarily encompassing every part of those narratives, does dominate the approach of the prototypical works of postmodernism.

In her enlightening study of the subject, *Irony's Edge*, Linda Hutcheon dissects the functions and effects of discursive irony, that is, the "strange mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude toward it" (2). She distinguishes between the ironic function from the ironist's point of view and the interpreter's point of view. For the ironist, an ironic statement consists of "the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented" (11). This strategy involves a certain amount of danger for the ironist because if the interpreter fails to attribute irony where it was intended, the received message will often be the opposite of the intention. The benefit of irony, as identified by Hutcheon, is the communication of not only the meaning but also the attitude of the author toward that meaning. The interpretive engagement with irony involves "the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid" (11, emphasis in original). If the interpreter deems a statement to be ironic, then the received meaning—regardless of the intentions of the speaker—is threefold: the literal statement, the ironic meaning, and the implied attitude arising from the distance between

the literal and ironic interpretations. As readers, we are naturally operating as interpreters of a discourse and must look for signals from the narration as to when and where to attribute irony. The presence or absence of such signals determines, for critical purposes, the text's attitude toward the narrative, regardless of the author's stated intentions outside of the work. In the case of Wallace, we cannot use his statements outside of the text as evidence that his work lacks a postmodern, ironic tone. There must be concrete textual differences that justify either an ironic or a sincere reading.

Hutcheon also emphasizes the range of the ironic mode and its functions, cautioning that "the existence of one signifier—'irony'—should never blind us to the plurality of its functions as well as effects. Under that deceptively comprehensive label is included a complex and extensive range of tones, intentions, and effects" (42). She then provides a list of its functions, labeling them and cataloguing the adjectives used to describe them by those who approve and those who disapprove. Taking Wallace's examination of postmodern irony in the McCaffery interview, we can see how the manner in which he describes it reflects some interesting shifts in his perception of it. He begins by saying that "the great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities," but because such critiques have been "done and redone," irony has "become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy" (49). Applying Hutcheon's list of adjectives, we can see Wallace's evaluation of postmodern irony shift from approval of the "corrective" and "satiric" fiction of the founding postmodernists to disapproval of the "exclusionary" and "elitist" shibboleth that he argues it has become (45). This change indicates not only a move from approbation to censure but also a switch from what Hutcheon calls "assailing" irony, whose function is to criticize through ridicule (50), to "aggregative" irony, whose function is to differentiate between in-group and out-group

members (51). It is partly this change in function from criticism to social distinction that bothers Wallace and motivates his critique and rejection of postmodern irony.

Wallace has, however, another, more important motivation for criticizing postmodern irony: it mandates that the reader should approach the narrative from an emotional distance. If there is a gap between the literal text and the ironic meaning, then there must also be a gap between the characters and the reader; otherwise, the reader will, along with those characters, become the target of the satiric irony. To identify or sympathize with the characters exposes the reader to the criticism of the author's satire. Postmodern irony, as a particular mode of writing, inculcates a particular mode of reading in which the reader must maintain her distance from the narrative in order to have the expected ironic interpretation. Searching for an ironic meaning necessarily separates the interpreter from the literal meaning; in the case of a narrative, that separation entails an emotional detachment from the material being narrated, that is, the characters and the events that comprise the story. The increased intellectual and critical engagement elicited through a satirical approach comes at the cost of the reader's emotional investment in the narrative and identification with the characters. In response to the need to posit values and modes of living that are viable alternatives to the hollow, materialistic systems and cultures satirized by the postmodernists, Wallace argues for a move away from the ironic mode of postmodern writing and the consequent emotional distance it creates between the characters and the reader. Instead, writers need to recuperate the earnest narration and genuine treatment of their material that grants basic human respect to the characters and their struggles. This anti-ironic approach allows the reader to forge empathic bonds with the characters, thus closing the emotional distance that an ironic tone would create.

It is important to note that the irony aimed at exploding hypocrisy—the irony of satire—does not entail the sort of moral relativism that postmodernism is often charged with, including the implication in Wallace’s own argument that these postmodern texts failed to offer any alternative value systems to those they attempted to dismantle.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, as Hutcheon notes, “since satire is...ameliorative in intent,” there must be “a set of values that [the satirist is] correcting toward” (50). The problem, then, is not what postmodernism was but what it has become. The strategies and attitudes of the postmodern authors are not inert in their own works but become ends in themselves in the imitators that follow them. This distinction returns us to the central quandary: by all appearances, Wallace is exactly such an imitator, employing many of the techniques of postmodern fiction, yet he, by his own and the general critical account, has attempted and succeeded to move beyond the trap of postmodern irony. Now that we have a better understanding of postmodern irony’s definition and function, we can better assess whether and how Wallace opposes and overcomes it in *Infinite Jest*.

#### Wallace’s Solution to Said Problem

If postmodern irony is the target of Wallace’s anti-rebellion, then the natural alternative is a sincere approach to the narrative material. This does not mean that *Infinite Jest* is free from satire; indeed, it makes excellent use of postmodern irony to bolster the satirical aspect of, for example, the system of “Subsidized Time™” in which companies pay the government to name the year after their brand or product, resulting in such ludicrous annual names as the Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken and the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment (223). In a classically satirical manner, this funding system exaggerates the capitalist impulse to commodify every aspect of life, including the very names of the years. Even the basic signifiers around which

society organizes itself are for sale. Thus, this specific example exhibits postmodern irony in much the same way we would expect it to in a work of postmodern fiction. Occasionally, *Infinite Jest* has these elements of satire that run counter to the primary mode of genuine narration. Even though Wallace himself admits that he has “a grossly sentimental affection for gags, for stuff that’s nothing but funny, and which I sometimes stick in for no other reason than funniness” (Burn 24), he centers his principal literary agenda on creating empathic connections between the reader and the characters, connections that invite emotional engagement and identification instead of distance and ridicule. While *Infinite Jest* is by no means the “irony-free zone” of the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings it features (369), Wallace makes a concerted effort to close rather than create distance between the reader and the characters.

In order to analyze how Wallace tries to close that distance, we will need to come to some understanding of the psychological mechanism—empathy—that lies at the center of Wallace’s literary approach. In her essay attempting to establish the basic characteristics and effects of empathy, Amy Coplan defines it as “a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation” (5). She elaborates “that it is simultaneously a cognitive and affective process...[that] involves the representation of a target’s states that are activated by, but not directly accessible through, the observed perception” (5). The insurmountable boundary between two conscious minds is, to some extent, circumvented through this process of empathic simulation. Empathy thereby provides “a unique kind of understanding through which we can experience what it is like to be another person” (6).

In the case of narrative empathy, that is, empathy directed toward fictional characters, the reader must construct and simulate the mental states of a character after having already



constructed the character out of whole cloth. The starting point for the narrative empathic experience, then, is the words on the page, the literary techniques and narrative tools that authors use to craft their stories. While this extra step in the empathic process may initially seem to increase the separation between the empathizer and the target of the empathy, the results are counterintuitive. Based on the evidence she collected and presents in her monograph *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen argues that “readers’ perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion” (xiii). In a sort of emotional extension of the traditional suspension of disbelief, the fact that the mind and experiences of a fictional character are contained entirely within the mind of the reader liberates the reader to identify more readily and completely with such a character than she could with a real person.

While the process of reconstructing another person’s experience would normally begin with an observation of that person’s condition, thus prompting the simulation of their presumed mental states, the process of narrative empathy begins instead with the description of the character and circumstances. Depending on the style and content of the narration, however, this diegetic starting point can provide a more direct avenue of access to the character’s mental states than would otherwise be possible with a real person. Because the character’s mind is constructed in the first place, the boundary separating the reader from the character’s mind is also constructed and can therefore be deconstructed and discarded by representing the character’s mental states directly through, for example, stream-of-consciousness narration. By allowing a cognitive and emotional connection between the reader and the characters, narrative empathy offers an alternative to the ironic distance of postmodern fiction.

Wallace has articulated his views on the importance and power of narrative empathy in a few interviews. In the McCaffery interview, Wallace asserts that “a big part of serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves” (22). This experience of narrative empathy is key to the redemptive potential of fiction because “if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside” (22). This aspect of fiction’s role is stifled by an ironic tone that creates distance between the reader and the characters. In an interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, Wallace gets at the unique potential of narrative art for inducing the empathic experience: “all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as an anodyne against loneliness....[T]here’s a way, at least in prose fiction, that can allow you to be intimate with the world and with a mind and with characters that you just can’t be in the real world” (16). This difference between empathizing with a real person and empathizing with a character rises from the ability to remove the barrier between minds when dealing with a literary construct.

In an interview with Laura Miller, Wallace identifies a different type of connection that is an extension of narrative empathy, arising in moments when the reader feels that “[s]omebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do....I feel human and unalone and that I’m in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don’t with other art” (62). The experience of identifying with a character creates a bond not only between the reader and the character but, because the character is a product of the author’s imagination, also between the reader and the author. If the reader can identify that strongly with the description on the page, then the source of that description—the

author—must have had a similar experience to the reader. Thus, there is a secondary communicative connection between the consciousness that crafts and the consciousness that reads the narrative.

The importance of empathy to Wallace's literary approach carries an implicit moral concern founded on the principle of valuing others' well-being just as highly as one's own. The contemporary moral philosopher and virtue ethicist Michael Slote has examined and described this moral system, calling it an "ethics of care" (*Ethics of Care and Empathy* xiii). Slote draws from the tradition of empathic moral philosophy pioneered by David Hume and Adam Smith and further developed by feminist ethicists Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings. He calls empathy "the cement of the moral universe" and contends that it "offer[s] us a plausible criterion of moral evaluation" (*Moral Sentimentalism* 13; 21). The central role of empathy in the act of caring is clear because "caring involves a 'displacement' of ordinary self-interest into unselfish concern for another person" (*Ethics of Care* 12). Empathy is the psychological mechanism for achieving precisely such an unselfish "displacement." The resulting mindset consists of "pay[ing] attention to, and [being] absorbed in, the way the other person structures the world and his or her relationship to the world" (12). This description doubles as both an account of empathic caring and the reading experience of narrative empathy. Thus, Wallace's use of narrative empathy within the text of *Infinite Jest* manifests a literary ethic of care, centered on the creation and exploration of the empathy that emerges between the reader and the characters.

The standard critical approach to discussing empathy in *Infinite Jest* is, after citing Wallace's own proclamations on its central importance to his literary philosophy, to observe that it is a prominent theme within the novel, using the Alcoholics Anonymous sections as the primary examples. We shall now take an example that will *show in action* the difference between

the ironic and empathic modes of writing. The tension between the ironic and the empathic impulses in the text manifests itself in the conflict between Don Gately, a reformed drug addict, and an antagonistic Assistant District Attorney, usually referred to as the A.D.A, back when Gately was still an addict and committed burglaries to fund his habit. When the incident first appears, it is presented as a comic anecdote with an ironic distance keeping the reader from appreciating any of the emotional weight of the episode. In the chapter that introduces Gately, the reader learns that the dispute he had with this A.D.A. arose from “a really unpleasant three-month bit in Revere Holding on nothing more than [the A.D.A.’s] circumstantial suspicion...[which] cost Gately a nasty impromptu detox on the floor of his little holding-cell” (55). In this chapter, the experience of withdrawal is neglected; there is no substantial narrative exploration of Gately’s withdrawal for another 800 pages, and the reader does not get any careful and detailed unpacking of withdrawal in general for another 250 pages, when the narration treats another character’s process of withdrawal with a depth that is absent here. The reader is not invited to connect to Gately and share the suffering he endured; instead, the event operates as a set up for Gately’s comic response.

An “implacable exponent of the Don’t-Get-Mad-Get-Even school...[and] a believer in the Revenge-Is-Tastier-Chilled dictum” (55), Gately bides his time until the opportunity for such chilled revenge appears. While the A.D.A. and his wife are out one evening, Gately and a friend break into the A.D.A.’s home and intentionally make it look like a botched burglary. A month later, the A.D.A. receives in the mail “two high-pixel Polaroid snapshots, one of big Don Gately and one of his associate, each in a Halloween mask denoting a clown’s great good professional cheer, each with his pants down and bent over and each with the enhanced-focus handle of one of the couple’s toothbrushes protruding from his bottom” (56). The treatment of this incident is

thoroughly ironic, though it has more of a softer, ludic tone than a harsher, critical one. Once again, there is no effort to explore the psychological fallout for the characters; the narration invites the reader to point and laugh at the A.D.A. and his wife from a safe distance, providing no description of the effects of this incident on their lives for another 900 pages. It is only near the end of the novel that the reader comes to understand the horrors of both Gately's withdrawal and the A.D.A.'s psychological trauma triggered by Gately's sophomoric prank. The ironic distance here reflects the distance between the two characters, neither one considering the other as a human being with his own internal experience. Instead, the narration denies the reader an empathic connection because the characters themselves have failed to establish one, and, following the narrative's privileging of Gately's perspective as a major character, the reader laughs at the A.D.A. and congratulates Gately on his revenge well served. This episode illustrates the emotional distance that the postmodern ironic mode of narration inculcates in the reader. This ironic treatment contrasts with the careful unpacking of both sides of the psychological trauma later in the novel that implements an empathic mode of narration, closing the distance between the characters and the reader.

What initially seems like a gag "[stuck] in for no other reason than funniness" becomes a detailed exploration of the sheer mental and physical pain that these characters inflicted on each other. Much later in the novel, while lying in the hospital, Gately recalls the experience of withdrawal, allowing the reader to see the suffering that the earlier "nasty impromptu detox" formulation had kept at a distance. Gately describes how he coped with the intense and overwhelming pain of withdrawal by taking it one moment at a time:

Being incapable of doing it and yet having to do it, locked in....Feeling the edge of every second that went by. Taking it a second at a time. Drawing the time in around him real

tight. Withdrawing. Any one second: he remembered: the thought of feeling like he'd be feeling this second for 60 more of these seconds — he couldn't deal. He could not fucking deal. He had to build a wall around each second just to take it. The whole first two weeks of it are telescoped in his memory down into like one second — less: the space between two heartbeats. A breath and a second, the pause and gather between each cramp. An endless Now stretching its gull-wings out on either side of his heartbeat. (859-60)

The depth of Wallace's exploration of Gately's withdrawal and the pain that accompanies it contrasts with the superficiality of its function as a plot point and comedic set up when it is first mentioned. The level of attention paid to his experience opens the possibility for the reader to form an empathic connection that was previously unavailable. The reader's sharing in Gately's experience leads to a greater understanding of his suffering and illustrates the empathic mode of writing that Wallace uses to counteract postmodern irony.

The A.D.A.'s side of the exchange also receives a deliberate and thoughtful unpacking through a conversation he has with Pat Montesian, the manager of Gately's halfway house. The A.D.A. has joined Phob-Comp-Anon, "a decade-old 12-Step splinter from Al-Anon, for codependency-issues surrounding loved ones who were crippling phobic or compulsive, or both" (961). The A.D.A.'s participation in a 12-Step program places him on the same path toward recovery and self-control that Gately has been on. His actions and statements reside in the same context of striving for a grasp on life in the face of severe hardship and failure, providing some contextual legitimation to a character that has thus far been only a tool for the novel's comedy. The A.D.A. reveals that he joined Phob-Comp-Anon because "[his wife] Tooty's been in torment over some oral-dental-hygienic-violation issues" (961), a clear reference to Gately's

method of revenge. He chronicles his own part in the fallout: “the hiding the car keys, the cutting off her credit with different dentists, the checking the wastebaskets for new brush-wrappers five times an hour” (961). These concrete actions render the A.D.A.’s suffering more real and legitimate, making it harder for the reader to laugh at him. He also provides further details of the effects on his wife: “Tooty’s lips will still be white pulp from the peroxide, her enamel in tatters from the constant irrational brushing and brushing and *brushing and —*” (962, emphasis in original). The breakdown of his speech parallels her psychological breakdown and the collateral effect on him.

The A.D.A.’s purpose for the visit is to discuss his requirement as part of his 12-Step program to make amends to people he has harmed in the past. This list of people evidently includes Gately, and, in expressing his revulsion at the prospect of asking Gately for forgiveness, the A.D.A. reveals not only the depth of his trauma, but also the depth of his hatred for Gately:

I have to look that rotten — no, *evil*, I’m convinced in my heart, that son of a bitch is *evil* and deserves to be removed from the community. I have to walk in there and extend my hand and tell him I’ve wished him ill and blamed him and ask for forgiveness — him — if you *knew* what *sick, twisted*, sadistically *evil* and *sick* thing he did to us, to her — and ask him for forgiveness. (963)

Gately’s revenge on the A.D.A.—what the narration earlier treated as a joke—has lost all trace of comedy. The reader’s thoughtless laughter at Gately’s revenge morally implicates her in the same neglect of the A.D.A.’s internal experience that was a prerequisite for him to carry it out in the first place. Each of these characters inflicted severe pain on the other in part because they did not consider the other’s humanity. The mutual lack of empathy leads to immense suffering for both of them, but after denying the subjectivity of both characters and making the reader

complicit in such a dehumanizing move, the narrative later reclaims their humanity. Their interaction illustrates the tragedy of human cruelty by allowing the reader to empathize with both of them. The novel's implicit moral calculus changes from retributive to merciful as the goal shifts from satisfaction to stopping their suffering. The A.D.A.'s language of moral condemnation demonstrates how easy it is for someone who is, as the reader knows Gately to be, not evil to nevertheless inflict immense amounts of pain on other human beings. The section raises the moral stakes of empathy and, by extension, the dichotomy of postmodern irony and sincere narration.

The context of the A.D.A.'s description of his and his wife's struggle bears on the mode of reading that the section invites. Given the ironic introduction of the incident and its inherent comedy, the narrative has primed the reader to approach the A.D.A.'s confession with the emotional distance of postmodern irony. However, Wallace provides clear signals that the A.D.A.'s story should not be read ironically and that to do so is to perpetuate the moral unconsciousness of postmodern irony. When the A.D.A. mentions that he is trying to complete the ninth step and then defines that step for Pat, who as a manager of a halfway house obviously already knows the twelve steps, she exhibits "a tiny spiritual slip...in the form of a patronizing smile" and offers the ironic remark, "I have a nodding acquaintance with [Step] Nine myself" (962). Even this momentary ironic attitude constitutes a "spiritual slip" because it creates distance between the characters, thereby undermining the empathic connection and identification that form the foundation of both the Alcoholics Anonymous methodology for building a community and Wallace's methodology for building a connection between the reader and the characters.



The difference between Gately's stream-of-consciousness and the A.D.A.'s dialogue with another character carries further significance for the reader's practice of narrative empathy. While the free indirect style of Gately's section gives the reader direct access to his thoughts, the scene with the A.D.A. is filtered through Pat Montesian, creating a different dynamic for the reader's interaction with each of the two characters and their respective explorations of their psychological trauma. By rendering the character's internal experience on the page, Gately's section maximizes the ease and intensity of the reader's potential empathic connection. The A.D.A.'s story, by contrast, comes through the description not of his mental state but of his words, actions, and expressions. Wallace does not take advantage of the ability to dismantle the boundary between minds that the character's fictionality grants him. Instead, he places on the reader the same burden that is on Pat as she listens to the A.D.A.: she must make an active attempt to practice empathy. Thus, the section prompts the reader, through the act of reading, to practice the very moral principles that are raised in the scene.

The contrast between the initial ironic treatment and the subsequent sincere exploration dramatizes the moral stakes of the irony/empathy dichotomy with respect to both writing and living. The reader's distance from the characters in the first account of the dispute leads the reader to dismiss the two characters' suffering and maintain a pose of detached amusement. After learning about the extent of their agony, the reader must countenance the moral implications of her earlier dismissal, invited by the text though it may have been. Not only should Gately and the A.D.A. have considered each other's potential suffering, but so too should the reader have bridled at the distant and ironic narrative treatment the episode received. Thus, writing that encourages empathy aligns with a morality founded on a constant and conscious other-directed humanization of everyone.

In this instance, as in the novel as a whole, Wallace turns away from an ironic approach to a sincere treatment of the characters and their struggles. Many critics, however, mistakenly argue that Wallace turns postmodern irony against itself,<sup>5</sup> but such an assertion has entirely missed the point of his “E Unibus Pluram” essay. It is not Wallace but *television* that has turned irony against itself, resulting not, as many such critics allege, in some radical clearance of artistic space for the sort of anti-rebellion Wallace calls for, but in a paralysis maintained by the ironic distance of this new televisual aesthetic: “For to the extent that TV can flatter [the viewer] about ‘seeing through’ the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in him precisely the feeling of canny superiority it’s taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling” (63). The new postmodern sophistication of television content invites the viewer to smirk with self-satisfied contempt at the very content he is watching, as though through such ironic watching he transcends the content rather than succumbs to it. Because the ironic viewing experience elicits a feeling of superiority to the content being viewed and, implicitly, to the people that *genuinely* watch and enjoy said content, the postmodern irony that television has co-opted satisfies the viewer’s need to separate himself from the content and its audience even as he watches it as a member of that audience. The result of this loop of self-reflexive irony is that “it is now *television* that takes elements of the *postmodern* — the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion — and bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption” (64, emphasis in original). Rather than try to follow the methodology of the televisual nullification of postmodernism, Wallace performs an inversion of this dynamic: he takes elements of the postmodern and bends them to the ends of empathy and interpersonal connection. But in order to achieve that goal, he cannot preserve the typical tone of postmodern irony. He must turn the

postmodern techniques against precisely this detached, ironic attitude that casts those who risk genuine expressions of sentiment as “goo-prone and generally pathetic” (*IJ* 695).

There are, however, postmodern devices present in *Infinite Jest* whose functions in Wallace’s work are mostly the same as their functions in postmodern fiction. For example, the encyclopedic mode of writing, in which unnecessary digressions into technical subjects are incorporated into the narration, embodied primarily in the endnotes of *Infinite Jest*, is another postmodern stratagem present in the novel;<sup>6</sup> however, because it does not contribute to the development of postmodern irony, Wallace had no need to rework its application to suit his anti-ironic agenda. It functions in much the same manner in *Infinite Jest* as in Gaddis’s *Recognitions* or Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, forcing the reader to contend with digressive, irrelevant, hypertechnical, or otherwise incomprehensible or unhelpful information. We can expect, then, that the postmodern techniques that traditionally act as engines of postmodern irony will, in *Infinite Jest*, serve to create narrative empathy. Specifically, we can examine how the postmodern characteristics of ludic irrationalism, metafiction, and decentered narrative function in the novel. Wallace reworks these postmodern techniques that support the ironic tone of postmodern writing so that they instead act in service of his use of sincere narration to create empathic connections between the reader and the characters.

## CHAPTER 3

POSTMODERN TECHNIQUES IN *INFINITE JEST*

## Ludic Irrealism: “It’s not funny anymore”

One hallmark of postmodern fiction is what Nelson Goodman termed “irrealism”: incomplete pluralistic “world-versions” that offer particular versions of reality rather than actual descriptions of it (4). In literature this irrealism manifests itself through the deliberate inclusion of absurd characters, events, or scenarios in an effort to subvert the conventions of realism. These absurdities undermine any resemblance to the real world that the fictional narrative may have had, thereby advancing the postmodern literary goal of making the reader conscious of their consumption of a mediated narrative. This purposeful cultivation of irrealism has, however, another role in postmodern fiction beyond subverting realism. In his study of American postmodern fiction, Gerhard Hoffmann analyzes postmodern irrealism, which he refers to as “the fantastic” (225). He identifies as a major characteristic of postmodern fiction “the satirically and grotesquely fantastic that is directed aggressively outwards, exposing through extreme deformations of the narrative surface the deformations of society” (233). In this way, the irreal elements in postmodern narratives are an essential ingredient because, as Hoffmann observes, satire “require[s] a fantastic deformation of the world in order to function” (239). If the basic methodology of satire is to take some flawed logic or system to its absurd conclusion, then featuring elements of the absurd, even or especially at the expense of plausibility, furthers the artistic purpose of the work.

It is important to note that these irreal instances are of a particular type, different from, for example, the irreal events of magical realism. The postmodern irreal is distinctly ludic, operating not only as a rejection of the realist goal of establishing a recognizable fictional world

similar to reality but also as a mechanism for portraying satirical targets as absurd. It functions as an engine of the farcical tone that is typical of postmodernism. The ludicrous details act as a signal to the reader that the narrative is an ironic treatment of the topic at hand, which encourages the reader to distance herself from the characters and adopt an attitude of ridicule. Postmodern irrealism is therefore one of the primary means by which the postmodernists establish the emotional disengagement that follows from a state of play. The irreal fictional world is recognizably not our own but is an ironic commentary on it.

In postmodern fiction, the examples of ludic irrealism manifest as the absurd elements of the works' postmodern satire. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* centers around Jack Gladney, the "chairman of the department of Hitler studies," an academic subject he invented one day "in North America in March of 1968" that "was an immediate and electrifying success" (4). The absurdity of an American academic contriving a field of study out of Hitler's life and work is one part of the novel's satire of academia. It works in conjunction with other features like Murray Siskind's academic, analytic ramblings and the fact that Gladney—a supposed expert on Hitler—has not even learned German, to form a parody of the insulated and fraudulent nature of academia.

Another example of the irreal in *White Noise* is Jack and Murray's trip to "the most photographed barn in America" (12). There is a crowd of photographers taking pictures of the barn; however, the barn only qualifies as a spectacle because of the people who have taken photos of it, making the photographers themselves a part of the spectacle. Thus, the barn's status as the most photographed barn in America leads to a self-perpetuating loop in which the reason for the spectacle and the spectacle itself collapse, as Murray explains, into one recursive event: "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces

the aura....They are taking pictures of taking pictures” (12). Because the spectacle has become self-sustaining, the underlying reality of the barn has become irrelevant. This absurd example is both a manifestation of the theme of simulacra and a hyperbolic treatment of the tendency for reality to get lost in the media-saturated society of contemporary America.

Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* also features irrationalism, although it has a darker tone than in *White Noise*. In the novel, Oedipa Maas follows a series of clues hinting at a conspiracy surrounding a mysterious postal group, the Trystero, coherent and consistent enough to seem indisputable but also absurd and implausible enough to call into question her very sanity. She eventually thinks that she “hoped she was mentally ill; that that’s all it was” (141). She cannot go to anyone for help because “they were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead” (141). The process of Oedipa trying and failing to construct solid meaning and sense out of the chaotic, unreal world she inhabits mirrors and undermines the reader’s parallel attempt to understand the chaotic, unreal narrative. The ambiguity of Oedipa’s sanity—of whether these connections are the result of a real conspiracy or severe paranoia or an elaborate prank—creates such profound epistemological and ontological doubts about the nature and her knowledge of reality that the entire endeavor of “making sense” becomes delusional. The irrationalism functions as a satire of such endeavors to build meaning.

Similar examples of irrationalism abound in *Infinite Jest*. Some of these instances do in fact perform a function analogous to those in the postmodern works. Because *Infinite Jest* is not entirely free of postmodern irony and satire, it occasionally employs the absurdity of ludic, unreal elements to bolster its satire. The aforementioned example of subsidized time is a manifestation of ludic irrationalism as the premise of sponsoring the names of years is the *reductio ad absurdum* of advertising. The preservation of the satirical function is by no means typical, however. The unreal

elements in *Infinite Jest* usually receive the same genuine treatment afforded to the more realistic parts. It is this fusion of absurd narrative and sincere narration that changes the function of the irrealism in the text from satirical to empathic.

In his analysis of the maximalist novel—a postmodern subgenre, called maximalist because of the “multiform maximizing and hypertrophic tension [in] its narrative” (241), that exemplifies many of the characteristics of postmodern fiction—Stefano Ercolino identifies this blending of realist and irrealist narrative elements as “hybrid realism” (253). While such a narrative contains “stories and characters...[that] are implausible, grotesque, or even ridiculous,” these anti-realist aspects coexist with “elements that recall the tradition of the realist novel,” such as “the subtle psychological analysis of *Infinite Jest*” (253). This stylistic juxtaposition results in “a realism that, in order to be critical, paradoxically has to *defamiliarize* the real, since in an epoch of diffused unreality the only way to represent the world is to make it almost unrecognizable” (254, emphasis in original). When treated seriously, the irreal elements exchange their postmodern satirical function for a sincere but disturbing defamiliarization. The reader must grapple with the emotional consequences of these impossible scenarios as if they were real because that is the attitude that the narration takes toward them.

An example of Wallace’s subversion of the postmodern usage of irreal elements is the character of Marathe and his fellow wheelchair assassins. The *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* (A.F.R.) is a radical and violent group of wheelchair-bound terrorists that seek the independence of Quebec from the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.—an acronym which itself is both ludic and rife with social commentary), a new political entity resulting from the merger of the United States, Mexico, and Canada, mainly for the benefit of the United States at the expense of Canada. The relevant geopolitical detail is that Canada, more specifically Quebec,

now has an area that is effectively a toxic wasteland whose pollution causes extreme genetic mutations and physical deformations. The premise of a group of terrorists who are all in wheelchairs is so patently absurd that it became a standard reference for reviewers trying to establish the novel's lack of realism.<sup>7</sup> Absurd details such as these create the expectation of a satiric and ironic treatment, but in the case of Marathe, the most prominent representative of the A.F.R. in the novel, no such irony is present. His character, a wheelchair assassin who fights for the freedom and independence of his country but betrays his freedom-fighting terrorist allies for the sake of his comatose and congenitally deformed wife, is, despite the patent absurdity, treated as a serious and legitimate figure in the novel.

Marathe, in his broken Québécois English, relates his story to Kate Gompert, a recent and suicidal initiate into Gately's halfway house for an addiction to marijuana. The two of them meet by chance and talk in a bar, with Marathe eventually explaining to Kate his struggle to overcome his depression and apathy. After losing his legs and witnessing the subjugation and exploitation of his country, Marathe despairs of effecting any meaningful political change and, drifting listlessly through life, contemplates suicide. He finds, however, that he cannot kill himself despite his suffering: "The more pain in my self, the more I am inside the self and cannot will my death, I think. I feel I am chained in a cage of the self, from the pain. Unable to care or choose anything outside it. Unable to see anything or feel anything outside my pain" (777).

Marathe remains stuck in this depressive paralysis until a life-changing event wrenches him out of his catatonia. Sitting atop a hill in his wheelchair and seeing a woman standing in the road about to be hit by a truck, Marathe springs into motion, rolls down the hill, and saves her life. He explains that it was through this action that he found some meaning in his life, by subordinating his own well-being to that of another: "In one instant and without thought I was



allowed to choose something as more important than my thinking of my life” (778). This experience transforms Marathe’s philosophy of life, as he comes to recognize the importance of an other-directed orientation to finding meaning in life. It is through this spontaneous act of altruism that he breaks out of the “cage of the self” in which he was imprisoned. Despite the absurd premise of his character—a wheelchair-bound political terrorist—his personal story receives the same sincere treatment as the A.D.A.’s psychological trauma. His epiphany through life-saving action is not an ironic send-up but an affirmation of his lesson: to live for something beyond and greater than oneself.

The woman he rescues and eventually marries is as grotesque a figure as the novel has to offer. Due to the pollution from the toxic area of Canada, she was “born without a skull,” had “more than standard accepted amounts of eyes and cavities in many different stages of development upon different parts of the body,” and had “cerebro-and-spinal fluids which dribbled at all times from her distending oral cavity” (779). She is so disfigured by her mutations that she is more monster than person, but it was she that allowed Marathe to begin living for something other than himself. In spite of his revulsion toward her, he finds that he succumbs again to his former depressive apathy when he tries to leave her. He concludes that his choice of loving her is a prerequisite for his freedom: “It is no choice. It is not choosing [my wife] Gertraude over the A.F.R., my companions. Over the causes. Choosing Gertraude to love as my wife was necessary for the others, these other choices. Without the choice of her life there are no other choices” (781). Paradoxically, in order to gain a sense of agency, he must first submit, even if it is to a goal as absurd as maintaining the life of his hideous, deformed, barely-human wife. This idea of submission as empowerment is not presented as a ludicrous logical fallacy to ironize

and delegitimize Marathe and his story. The contradiction is respected as a powerful insight into how to live as a human being.

Every aspect of Marathe and his irreal and absurd narrative seems to invite the reader to laugh at him from an ironic distance; something so ridiculous could naturally warrant only the response of ridicule. However, the narration's sincere treatment of Marathe and his story counteracts the impulse toward ironic detachment. In this instance, the irrealism functions not to satirize but to emphasize, to create a scenario so extreme and grotesque that the principle on which the story rests becomes even more poignant than it would be with a realistic narrative. Contradicting book reviewers' emphasis on the comedy of *Infinite Jest*, Eric A. Thomas notes "the basic undercurrent of anxiety and dread that permeates each character in the novel...[including] a legless wheelchair assassin [Marathe] who betrays his Québécois brethren for the love of his incontinent and comatose wife" (276). Thomas states bluntly that, at some point in the process of unpacking these bizarre sources of real trauma, "It's not funny anymore" (276). As in the case of the A.D.A.'s anguish overwhelming the absurdity and comedy of its source, the irrealism of Marathe and his wife has been stripped of its ludic aspect by the relentlessly earnest treatment that the narration affords it. It then becomes an extreme and grotesque illustration of the principle of living for something larger than oneself. The irreal premise serves not to establish a ludic tone but to stretch beyond the limitations of realism while maintaining a serious attitude toward the material. By abandoning the constraints of verisimilitude while preserving the emotional integrity of the narrative, this strategy opens expressive space for the development of more extreme but serious scenarios to simultaneously reflect and defamiliarize the grotesque reality we live in.

In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace discusses the difficulty that confronts fiction writers trying to render contemporary American life in a somehow believable manner:

For our generation, the entire world seems to present itself as “familiar,” but since that’s of course an illusion in terms of anything really important about people, maybe any “realistic” fiction’s job is opposite what it used to be—no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar *strange* again. It seems important to find ways of reminding ourselves that most “familiarity” is mediated and delusive. (38, emphasis in original)

To reinforce the familiarity of everyday American experience is to contribute to the anaesthetizing approach of mass entertainment and advertising that bombards the American public with such a sustained and ubiquitous audiovisual assault, vying jealously for each and every eyeball’s gaze, that the eventual and inevitable result is for the audience to adopt a jaded filter that interprets even the most extraordinary spectacles as unspectacular. In response to this desensitization of the audience, the author must take extreme measures, including the flagrant violation of verisimilitude. By breaking this narrative convention, the author also breaks the unconscious mode of mental processing and filtration that the reader, as a resident of this media-saturated society, has developed and maintains as a psychological defense mechanism. By default, the irrealist elements set up expectations of an ironic treatment of the narrative, but *Infinite Jest* subverts these expectations through its insistence on a genuine approach to the emotional consequences of these absurd and irreal circumstances.

While the irrealism of postmodern fiction is ludic, in *Infinite Jest*, the narration persists in treating the irreal absurdities with relentless sincerity, until the impulse to laugh at what seems ridiculous is slowly replaced by an emotional investment that legitimizes the characters’ irreal

experiences as deserving of real respect. Ultimately, the irrealism in *Infinite Jest* is in service of Wallace's empathic literary agenda. Ludicrous though his story may be, Marathe affirms its fundamental message: "I am not telling for disturbing you, poor Katherine. I am telling of pain and saving a life, and love" (781). Disturbing the reader is a necessary means to an empathic end.

### Metafiction: The Ghost in the Text

Another of the defining characteristics of postmodernism is metafiction. In her monograph on the subject, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Waugh correctly observes that all works of metafiction "explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (2, emphasis in original); however, she mistakenly limits the technique's potential range of functionality by presenting the traditional postmodern purpose as definitive: "In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2). While the postmodernists use metafiction to question not only the relationship between reality and fiction but also the nature of reality itself and how we relate to it outside of any fictional context, this application is not the only role that metafiction can play. It is simply the role that arises from the "more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world," an epistemological concern that rose to prominence in the 1960s (3). After the famous linguistic turn, literature, already a product of language, was in a unique position to explore the now-central question of how people, language, and reality are related:

If, as individuals, we now occupy “roles” rather than “selves,” then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels. If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of “reality” itself. (3)

The use of metafiction to interrogate the nature of reality and how we relate to it is the closest affinity that the postmodern authors ever show for postmodern theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. Authors such as Barth and Coover, two preeminent metafictionists, express in their fiction a skepticism similar to that of the poststructuralists toward the idea that language can refer to objective reality in a straightforward way. This skepticism of language entails an accompanying skepticism of literature as a communicative act, an exchange between the author and the reader. Instead of carrying a particular message, the text becomes a linguistic field of play in which the reader can create, rather than discern, meaning. Interpretation thus becomes a creative act in its own right.

There is an important distinction between two types of metafiction: the first, what we will call “explicit metafiction,” overtly breaks the fourth wall through the author's violation of the traditional boundaries of diegesis; the second, “implicit metafiction,” treats fiction, and by extension the work itself, as a theme within the diegetic world. While both methods entail the same self-referential recursion in the process of interpretation, the status of the diegetic barrier between the author and the fictional world carries major implications for the reader's experience and interpretation of the story. A violation of that ontological boundary between reality and fiction forces the reader to grapple with the relationships between herself, the author, and the text even as she engages in those relationships. Implicit metafiction introduces such recursive

analysis only when the implications of the thematic treatment of fiction are applied to the work itself. Explicit metafiction more aggressively and forcefully raises the associated ontological problems by confronting the reader with the fact that the “world” she has been constructing is precisely a constructed illusion.

John Barth wrote one of the seminal and most influential examples of explicit metafiction in his short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse*. In the eponymous short story, the narrator deconstructs the standard techniques and strategies of storytelling even as he is in the process of telling the story. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator analyzes how he should be telling the story according to standard narrative conventions and how he has thus far failed to fulfill them:

The function of the *beginning* of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationships, set the scene for the main action, expose the background of the situation if necessary, plant motifs and foreshadowings where appropriate, and initiate the first complication or whatever of the “rising action.” Actually, if one imagines a story called “The Funhouse,” or “Lost in the Funhouse,” the details of the drive to Ocean City don’t seem especially relevant. The *beginning* should recount the events between Ambrose’s first sight of the funhouse early in the afternoon and his entering it with Magda and Peter in the evening. The *middle* would narrate all relevant events from the time he goes in to the time he loses his way....Then the *ending* would tell what Ambrose does while he’s lost, how he finally finds his way out, and what everybody makes of the experience. So far there’s been no real dialogue, very little sensory detail, and nothing in the way of a *theme*. (77, emphasis in original)

The narrator does not use the structure he has here described because this convention has been so overused that the reader would not imaginatively engage with such a formulaic and clichéd narrative. The story would be following a pattern so familiar that, rather than immerse the reader in the narrative, it would instead reveal the narrative for the contrivance it is. The narrator inserts himself into the narration, violating the diegetic barrier, in order to shatter these lifeless narrative conventions. The narrator thereby raises the question of how one tells a story when all of the methods and strategies of storytelling have been rendered inert through overuse. The irony of the final statement, that the story has not established a theme, is that the theme of the story is the exhaustion of the realist narrative strategies that the narrator deconstructs, a theme in part established by the very declaration that the story has no theme. It may not have a traditional, realist theme, but it certainly has a postmodern, metafictional one. The narrator develops that theme on the opposite side of the traditional diegetic barrier so that while the story he tells does not yet have a theme, the metafictional story of which he is a part has one. The metafictional aspect of the story undermines the narrative as it is presented, replacing the reader's potential emotional connection to the characters with intellectual and philosophical quandaries about the relationship between fiction and reality.

There are also postmodern examples of implicit metafiction, in which the barrier between external author and internal diegesis is preserved while the thematic content comments on the nature of fiction and its relation to reality. In DeLillo's *White Noise*, for example, the prominent theme of mediation through radio and television also extends to fiction. The character of Willie Mink perceives language as reality, so when Jack says "[p]lunging aircraft" (295), Mink reacts by "kick[ing] off his sandals, fold[ing] himself over into the recommended crash position, head well forward, hands clasped behind his knees" (295). This interaction raises questions about how

the reader engages with the fictional world created and conveyed through language: is reading narrative fiction not a similar form of delusion in which language is used to construct reality? Gaddis's *Recognitions*, with its major theme of the impossibility of artistic originality, is based on Goethe's *Faust*, which is itself derived from folk tales that originated with the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* from which Gaddis took the name of his novel. The recycling of an old narrative and the hopelessness of artistic legitimacy all bear on the novel itself, creating the self-reflexive dynamic that characterizes all metafiction. If the reader pursues the metafictional themes in these novels, she will find that, just as in "Lost in the Funhouse," a similar interpretive distance arises from the recursive nature of the technique. It is not her emotional connection to the characters that is of central importance, but the general relationship between reader and character, reality and fiction.

In all of these cases of postmodern metafiction, whether explicit or implicit, the technique demonstrates that the structure of narrative art and the act of reading it is founded on several unstated assumptions. The metafiction problematizes these assumptions and calls into question the traditional legitimacy and value of literature. The basic function of postmodern metafiction is to reveal narrative as artifice and to make the reader conscious of that fact so as to avoid the dangers of naïve reading. The resulting self-conscious reading, however, comes at the expense of the reader's emotional investment in the narrative. Postmodern metafiction then becomes a source of distance between the reader and the narrative, a stance that is directly opposed to Wallace's literary agenda.

In order to make sense of the metafictional elements of *Infinite Jest*, we must establish the novel's place in the arc of Wallace's relationship to and application of metafiction. This arc begins with the novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," a direct response to



Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse." While Barth in "Lost in the Funhouse" uses metafiction to pull back the veil on realism, Wallace in "Westward" uses metafiction to pull back the veil on metafiction itself. As in "Lost in the Funhouse," the narrator inserts himself into the narration; however, in "Westward," the narrator dissects the tools and conventions of metafiction instead of realism:

if this were a piece of metafiction, which it's NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominate referent would very probably be mentioned,...a required postmodern convention aimed at drawing the poor old reader's emotional attention to the fact that the narrative...is *not* in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an "artifact," an object, a plain old this-worldly thing, composed of emulsified wood pulp and horizontal chorus-lines of dye, and *conventions*, and is thus in a "deep" sense just an opaque forgery of a transfiguring window, not a real window, a gag, and thus in a deep (but *intentional*, now) sense artificial,...this self-conscious explicitness and deconstructed disclosure supposedly making said metafiction "realer" than a piece of pre-postmodern "Realism" that depends on certain antiquated techniques to create an "illusion" of a windowed access to a "reality" isomorphic with ours but possessed of and yielding up higher truths to which all authentically human persons stand in the relation of applicand. (264-265)

By taking the recursion inherent in metafiction one level further, thus producing meta-metafiction, Wallace tries to turn metafiction against itself in order to demonstrate that it is "naïve baloney-laced shit, resting on just as many 'undisclosed assumptions' as the 'realistic' fiction metafiction would try to 'debunk'" (265, emphasis in original). "Westward" is Wallace's first attempt to both use and move past postmodern metafiction, in this instance through the

application of the devices of metafiction in order to attack that very form. In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace, from the retrospective distance of a few years, gives a harsh evaluation of his meta-metafictional project: “Everything I wanted to do came out in the story, but it came out as just what it was: crude and naive and pretentious” (41). Because his application of meta-fiction required of the reader the same self-conscious reading strategy as standard metafiction, the story ultimately failed to counter the emotional distance from the narrative that such an interpretive process creates between the reader and the fictional world. After this early work, one that Wallace himself considered a failure, he shied away from explicit metafiction until his final and unfinished novel, *The Pale King*.

In *The Pale King*, Wallace incorporates a few sections that feature explicit metafiction, but the approach is entirely different from that of “Westward.” Instead of some meta-fictional attempt at self-deconstruction, the authorial intrusions into *The Pale King* begin with an assertion of the Author’s<sup>8</sup> presence and humanity: “Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona” (66). Rather than highlight the artificiality of the narrative, the metafictional sections become a conversation with the Author; he even identifies himself by name as “David Wallace” (66). The Author contends, however, that “[a]ll of this is true. This book is really true” (67). This claim is made in spite of examples of unreal elements in the text—levitation, for example—and the Author providing biographical details that are clearly untrue for the real David Foster Wallace, like his employment with the IRS. While these contradictions would seem to invite the kind of self-reflexive musings typical of metafiction, the Author assures the reader “that I find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too...and that the very last thing this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher” (67). The Author is an avatar of Wallace, the diegetic

manifestation of the writer, representing his presence in the text as both the creator and a part of the literary artifact. Wallace inserts the Author into the narrative in order to assert that the writer is a participant in the process of communication that is literature. In *The Pale King*, Wallace uses metafiction to affirm that literature is communicative, a real exchange between two human beings. Wallace violates the diegetic barrier not to invalidate the narrative but to assert the presence of a consciousness on the other side of the literary dialogue.

Published after “Westward” but before *The Pale King*, *Infinite Jest* lacks the explicit metafictional approach of those two works. Instead, the metafictional elements are implicit, leaving the diegetic barrier intact. Wallace had already tried and, by his own account, failed to get past the limitations of explicit metafiction while working within the genre, and he would not try again so overtly until *The Pale King*; in *Infinite Jest*, the comments on fiction are presented within the boundaries of the fictional world. The primary example of this implicit metafiction is the interaction between a wraith and Don Gately during the latter’s hospitalization. As Tom LeClair notes, “Wallace enters his narrative as a tall, lexically gifted, and etymology conscious ‘wraith’” (32). The wraith is the ghost of James Incandenza, Hal’s father and an experimental filmmaker. Through the interaction of the wraith and Gately, Wallace illustrates his conception of the interaction between the author and the reader.

When Gately falls into a convoluted meditation on whether he is dreaming and the possible significance of his awareness of his dream-state, Wallace shows the same aversion to the paralytic tedium of self-referential loops as in *The Pale King*:

Then he considered that this was the only dream he could recall where even in the dream he knew that it was a dream, much less lay there considering the fact that he was considering the up-front dream quality of the dream he was dreaming. It quickly got so

multilevelled and confusing that his eyes rolled back in his head. The wraith made a weary morose gesture as if not wanting to bother to get into any sort of confusing dream-v.-real controversies. (830)

Gately's eyes rolling back into his head represents the reader's disengagement with the text when confronted with the self-reflexive patterns that accompany any instance of metafiction. Because the undermining of the reader's emotional investment in the narrative that results from this sort of intellectual game is contrary to Wallace's literary agenda, he dismisses these postmodern, ontological concerns—here disguised as “dream-v.-real controversies”—as confusing and unimportant. This comment heads off any consideration of the ontological implications of metafiction on the text and the reader's interpretation of it. This instance of metafiction is meant not to problematize the relationship between fiction and reality, but to examine literature as a communicative act.

The wraith's telepathic mode of communication parallels the author's use of the written word to communicate with the reader. The wraith explains to Gately that a “wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody's like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something, which was why thoughts and insights that were coming from some wraith always just sound like your own thoughts, from inside your own head, if a wraith's trying to interface with you” (831). In his chapter on *Infinite Jest*, Marshall Boswell observes that this method of communication “is also how Wallace hopes to enter into the communitarian language game between text and reader” (170-71). As an author, Wallace himself communicates with the reader as she uses her “internal brain-voice” to process the words on the page. Thus, the author becomes a real presence both in and through the text, as the narrative forms a bridge between the minds of the author and reader. Because the text is an expression of the consciousness that

crafted it, it is impossible to read and interpret the text without, by extension, interacting with the author. This metaphor of the text as the author's wraith-voice conceptualizes the mechanism and manner of the literary process of communication.

The most important phrase of this metafictional episode is a seemingly insignificant ambiguity in the attribution of some of Gately's thoughts. Such confusion is only possible because the wraith's method of communication is phenotypically indistinguishable from Gately's own thoughts, originating in his own brain. Because the entire communicative exchange is occurring in Gately's mind, an ambiguity arises concerning the source of Gately's understanding of the wraith's message. The narration is equivocal in its attribution of the ideas in Gately's mind, refusing to specify whether "the wraith is saying or Gately is realizing" these thoughts (835). The ambiguity illustrates the process by which the author and the reader collaborate to create the meaning of a work of literature. Though the author, here given voice by a literal wraith, may in fact be dead (as Barthes would have it), he is still a real presence, the ghost in the text, profoundly involved in the synthesis of meaning that ultimately occurs within the reader's mind. He is, after all, the one who wrote all the words. Although the site of the construction of the text's meaning is entirely within the reader's mind, the author is an undeniable contributor to that process, and any understanding of literature must acknowledge not only the reader's role as interpreter but also the author's role as, at the very least, co-creator of meaning. Ultimately, the source of a text's meaning is so blurred as to create an ambiguity in whether it is the author positing or the reader discovering the significance.

This metafictional section is Wallace's greatest sustained attempt in *Infinite Jest* to address the connection between the author and the reader. Unlike in postmodern fiction, if the reader takes this metafictional commentary and applies it to the work itself, the result is not a

paralytic loop of ontological uncertainty and self-reflexive deconstruction, because the metafiction does not undermine the legitimacy of the reading process by emphasizing its artificiality. Instead, the self-commentary fleshes out and reinforces the themes of empathy and other-directed consciousness while simultaneously positing the author as a real and significant presence in the novel, one who participates in the creation of the narrative's meaning through the communicative processes of writing and reading. Inverting the standard postmodern function of the technique, the metafiction in *Infinite Jest* affirms the legitimacy and reality of the communication between the author and the reader.

#### Decentered Narrative: Other People Are People, Too

One of the defining characteristics of the postmodern maximalist novel is what we will call a “decentered narrative.” Instead of narrating the story from a single perspective or anchoring it to a central character or plot, the postmodernist filters the narration through multiple perspectives and voices while refusing to present any particular character or plot as the focus of the narrative. In his description of the maximalist novel, Stefano Ercolino names this characteristic “dissonant chorality,” and defines it as narration which “is systematically carried out by a multiplicity of voices that prevents one character or one narrative thread from becoming dominant” (246). This vocal plurality and denial of narrative cohesion that ensues from it disturb the reader into a more active interpretive engagement with the text than the narrative conventions of realist fiction, which invite the reader to accept unconscious immersion in the fictional world. This opposition to realism is not sufficient to constitute a postmodern approach, however, because modernism also rejects the tenets of realism and demands more interpretive work from the reader. The difference lies in where that interpretive engagement is directed. As with

metafiction, postmodern fiction tends to use decentered narratives as a means for destabilizing foundations of meaning. Denied the traditional organizing principles of realism, the reader must attempt to disentangle the chaotic multiplicity of narrative threads and perspectives in order to arrive at some coherent reading of the text. The reader, then, must impose order and meaning on the text, since the text will not provide them for her.

The most spectacular example of this technique in postmodern fiction is in Gaddis's *The Recognitions*. The immense cast of characters and crisscrossing subplots form a chaotic narrative that explores everything from pagan religious rituals to artistic forgery to pretentious art critics to banana plantations. The character closest to qualifying as the protagonist, Wyatt Gwyon, has his name effaced from the text throughout most of the novel, starting in Part 1, Chapter 3 and continuing for around 700 pages until he receives the new, false name of Stephen in Part 3, Chapter 5. He becomes a signified without a signifier, included in the narrative but excluded from the text. This technique undermines his status as the focal point of the narrative. Instead of a narrative cohesion, the novel crystalizes around a thematic resonance that reverberates throughout the entire work. Since the prototypical "center" of the text is a literal lacuna, there is no central consciousness to hold the story together; there is only the recurrence, in various forms, of fraudsters, fakers, forgers, phonies, hypocrites, liars, charlatans, thieves, plagiarists, mimics, and imposters. The absent center of the narrative reflects and reinforces the novel's destabilization of meaning. Thus, the novel prods the reader into questioning whatever foundations of meaning she takes for granted, be they religious, artistic, or otherwise, including the very novel she is reading.

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace also crafts a decentered narrative. The cast of characters and complex of subplots rival those of *The Recognitions*, encompassing a tennis academy, a halfway

house, a group of separatist terrorists in wheelchairs, drug addicts in various stages of addiction and recovery, the dysfunctional Incandenza family, an organization of deformed people who wear black veils over their faces, Alcoholics Anonymous and various offshoots, and the eponymous film that is so entertaining that anyone who views it neglects their own needs and watches it repeatedly until death. As Ercolino notes, “It would be rather difficult to assert, for example that Hal Incandenza is a more central character than Don Gately in *Infinite Jest*, or that the stories of the members of the Enfield Tennis Academy are more significant than those belonging to the rehabilitation community of Ennet House” (246). Furthermore, the novel is full of detailed treatments of the experiences of minor characters: Ken Erdedy’s anxiety and obsessive thoughts as he waits for a promised but delayed delivery of marijuana (17-27), Poor Tony’s traumatic withdrawal from heroin in a public restroom (299-306), Kate Gompert’s interaction with a young but earnest doctor after she has tried and failed to kill herself (68-78), Joelle Van Dyne’s attempted suicide by overdosing on freebase cocaine at a party (227-240), and Eric Clipperton’s story of holding a gun to his head as he played competitive tennis matches so that his opponents would forfeit until he reaches the number one rank and commits suicide (407-410; 430-434), are but a few of the myriad characters Wallace presents. Tom LeClair argues that some of the reasons for the great length of *Infinite Jest* are the “number of Wallace's characters, the intelligence or sensitivity of some of them, [and] Wallace's dedication to imagining the etiologies of muffled geniuses or fast-talking idiots” (32). One of the primary objectives of the novel is to delve into the internal experience of every character it can manage to examine. This decentered structure is an enactment of the artistic philosophy laid out by James Incandenza’s wraith. Through his remarks on his artistic agenda, the wraith acts as a stand-in for Wallace and



articulates the rationale behind the novel's decentered narrative structure and careful psychological approach to even the most minor of characters.

Incandenza's wraith describes his artistic program as giving a voice to "the myriad thespian extras on for example... 'Cheers!', not the center-stage Sam and Carla and Norm, but the nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar's crowd, concessions to realism, always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent conversations" (834). The wraith calls these silent background characters "figurants," and by giving the figurants in his films voices, he attempts to capture "real life's real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment" (836). Just as every person living in his own head naturally feels that he is the single most important person in the universe, the standard narrative structure centered on a protagonist who is afforded a crucial, privileged position naturally creates a similarly inequitable valuation of the characters' importance. Each person thinks of himself as the protagonist of his life, and the conventional "centered" narrative reinforces that perception by filtering the fictional world through the protagonist's focalizing consciousness just as the reader necessarily filters the real world through her own. By opposing this traditional narrative configuration, the decentered narrative prompts the reader to question this automatic organizing principle of her experience, that is, to stop treating the people around her like figurants.

Conscious of his novel's unconventional narrative structure, Wallace takes a preemptive shot at the critics who will misunderstand the reason for his novel's fractured and digressive form through the wraith's observing that "party-line entertainment-critics always complained...that they could never hear the really meaningful central narrative conversations for

all the unfiltered babble of the peripheral crowd, which they assumed the babble(/babel) was some self-conscious viewer-hostile heavy-art directorial pose, instead of radical realism” (836). The fictional film critics’ misunderstanding and disapproval of Incandenza’s art predicts, for example, Michiko Kakutani’s complaint that *Infinite Jest* was composed “on the principle that bigger is better, more means more important, and this results in a big psychedelic jumble of characters, anecdotes, jokes, soliloquies, reminiscences and footnotes, uproarious and mind-boggling, but also arbitrary and self-indulgent.” Wallace anticipated that people would see his novel as a work of postmodern fiction, but in reality, it merely uses the postmodern techniques to carry out his literary agenda, which he labels “radical realism.” One of the characteristics that makes this species of realism radical is its insistence on framing the narrative to reflect the equal importance of every character instead of focusing on a central protagonist.

Therefore, unlike the postmodernists, Wallace does not use this structure to destabilize meaning, but instead to combat a certain self-centered mindset. He articulates this “default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth” in his commencement address to the 2005 graduates of Kenyon College, *This Is Water* (38). Everyone has a “sort of natural, basic self-centeredness” that takes the form of a “deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence” (37; 36). This attitude arises from the fact that “there is no experience you’ve had that you were not at the absolute center of” and that “other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, *real*” (39; 41, emphasis in original). Because our own experiences naturally have this centralized coherence, it is only natural that the narratives we create do as well. Wallace, however, challenges this automatic organizing principle of human experience by decentering his novel’s narrative structure. Building on his use of metafiction to affirm literature

as a communicative act from author to reader, Wallace uses his literature as one such means for communicating “other people’s thoughts and feelings” to challenge the reader’s “natural, basic self-centeredness.” The moral extension of that literary philosophy is to decenter one’s life, to be conscious of the countless other lives around one and grant them and their experiences as much weight as one’s own. This principle is articulated in both the decentered narrative of *Infinite Jest* and the moral message of the commencement address.

The key difference between the postmodernists’ and Wallace’s applications of the decentered narrative is the respective presence or absence of an ironic tone. Because *The Recognitions* treats the vast majority of the side characters and narrative digressions ironically, these elements cannot provide the same challenge to our “default setting” as they can in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace’s work comes back, once again, to the creation or closure of the emotional distance between the reader and the characters. If the reader is laughing at the characters from a safe, ironic distance, she will not recognize their experiences as legitimate and take a more conscious approach to considering others’ humanity in day-to-day life. If, however, the reader empathizes with the characters, closing the emotional distance between them, then the experience of empathizing will provide precisely such a challenge to her natural egoism. In other words, it is not merely the structure of the narrative, but also the treatment of that narrative, and how those two factors interact, that synthesizes this other-directed literary ethic.

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

## Postmodernism and Radical Realism

The critics who contend that Wallace moves beyond postmodern irony are, in a limited sense, correct in that he does repudiate the ironic tone in favor of a sincere mode of narration. However, most of them fail to examine how he achieves this shift in approach while still employing many of the defining techniques of postmodern fiction. Wallace does not so much move *beyond* postmodern irony as move away from it, retreating back to the traditional, sincere narration that the postmodernists spend so much time and energy attacking. The truth is that Wallace's methodology is unfashionable; it is aesthetically conservative and morally charged. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace has to rework the postmodern techniques because if they function as they do in postmodern fiction, then they contribute to the development of an ironic distance in both the text and the reader, and it is exactly such irony that is Wallace's great enemy.

Postmodern irony provokes a certain moral passion from Wallace because such an ironic treatment of the narrative material forces the reader to approach the characters and their experiences—the very thing that the author has worked so hard to render into prose fiction—from an emotional distance. The mere existence of such a gap undermines the reader's ability to empathize with the characters, and narrative empathy is the primary mechanism for Wallace to carry out his literary agenda in the same way that biting, satirical irony was that mechanism for his postmodern predecessors.

But if Wallace is not a postmodernist, what is he? Luckily, Wallace himself provided a label through Incandenza's wraith and his formulation of "radical realism."<sup>9</sup> After postmodernism, any species of realism, whether radical or not, is in some fundamental way a

move backward,<sup>10</sup> a return to a traditional approach, and that conservatism manifests in Wallace's attempt to recover the frank and direct style of narration that was the collateral damage of postmodernism. The radical aspect arises from Wallace's use of the postmodern techniques: his irrealism radically departs from the bounds of realism to defamiliarize the already grotesque reality we inhabit, his metafiction radically affirms the presence of the author in the communicative exchange that is literature, and his decentered narrative radically challenges the automatic self-centered organizing principle of conscious experience by dispersing the narrative focus through a plethora of minor and major characters. The text does not conform to the expectations or conventions of traditional realism, but neither does it conform to the detached and subversive approach of postmodernism. By combining elements from both of these traditions, Wallace risks being misperceived both as a "goo-prone and generally pathetic" sentimentalist for his lack of irony and as a self-indulgent and hyperironic postmodernist for his inclusion of postmodern characteristics in his novel.

Having established the concrete details, we can finally make an attempt at a more abstract description of Wallace's break with postmodernism in the same vein as Brian McHale's description of postmodernism's break with modernism. To put it in terms of McHale's use of the dominant, Wallace replaces the postmodern hand-wringing over the lack of firm foundations for ontology, and, by extension, epistemology, with a new focus on an ethics of care based on the empathic impulse. Instead of interrogating the primarily ontological concerns of postmodern literature, Wallace asks questions about "what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (Burn 26, emphasis in original), for instance: What is important to us as humans?; How should we go about our lives?; What has real value, and what has the fraudulent appearance of value?; How does the society we inhabit affect our lives, and how can we affect it?; How can we think and behave in

the quotidian grind of ordinary American life so that we don't feel like blowing our own or others' brains against the wall? And so on. This is not to say that Wallace's fiction does not address the epistemological concerns of modernism or the ontological concerns of postmodernism but that these avenues of inquiry are secondary to the dominant mode of his literary ethic. It is in terms of this artistic-ethical vision that *Infinite Jest* is best understood.

Wallace does not, however, try to re-establish the old objective foundations for meaning that the postmodernists dismantled. Instead, he approaches such philosophical questions pragmatically, focusing on consciousness as the source and site of meaning. Empathy is central to Wallace's literary philosophy because the empathic connections that unite us as human beings provide the capacity for shared experiences and understanding. Such a focus on empathy naturally leads to an ethics of care. Wallace articulates his own version of that ethic explicitly in *This is Water*, but he also tries to enact it in *Infinite Jest* through the creation of narrative empathy and the connections it forges between the reader, the characters, and the author. Because empathy is the psychological mechanism of profound self-effacing, other-directed experiences, it naturally complements a moral system that considers the experiences of others as just as rich and important as one's own. *Infinite Jest* enacts the empathic connections that are central to Wallace's literary ethic of care.

## NOTES

1. All references to this and other print interviews with Wallace are from the collection *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, edited by Stephen J. Burn. The only interview referenced in this paper that is not from this collection is the televised interview with Charlie Rose.

2. For two examples of applying Bloom's theory to Wallace and his relationship to Pynchon and Barth, see Tore Rye Andersen and Charles B. Harris, respectively. Arguing that Wallace owes more of a debt to his postmodern predecessors than most critics admit, Andersen focuses on the thematic connection of paying attention. Harris asserts that "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" is a deliberate misprision of Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," a self-conscious attempt to enact Bloom's theory.

3. Marshall Boswell asserts that Wallace "might best [be] regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed...third-wave of modernism" because he "proceeds from the assumption that *both* modernism and postmodernism are essentially 'done.' Rather, his work moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back" (1).

Formulating her argument in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, Catherine Nichols asserts that Wallace "exposes the potential of the postmodern carnivalesque to become a sort of literary Prozac that alters perception rather than attends to the alienation, despair, and isolation that the unmedicated perceive" (6).

Eric A. Thomas argues that "it has become more and more difficult to read any hip irony or cool detachment in *Infinite Jest* now that David Foster Wallace's intimate and life-long struggle with depression and suicide has been widely publicized" (276). He chides reviewers who

described the novel as funny for giving “the impression, given the levity of most of the positive notices, that many reviewers did not understand or even make it to the end of the novel” (276).

Examining the role of Wittgenstein, Buber, and Levinas in the philosophy of *Infinite Jest*, Petrus van Ewijk argues that “through his knowledge of Wittgenstein’s work and his familiarity with Kierkegaard’s religious philosophy, Wallace conceives a treatment for contemporary American solipsism that is drenched in hip irony and negates the ‘Other.’ Wallace’s infatuation with Wittgenstein clearly resonates off of the pages of *Infinite Jest* concerning Ennet House, where the rules of AA’s language-game forbid irony and encourage earnest communication” (143).

Mary K. Holland provides an important dissenting voice, writing that Wallace’s “greatest accomplishment in the novel will be to construct not a character strong enough to escape the ironic trap that the novel has set, but rather one earnest enough to suffer the irony and brave enough to struggle heroically to escape it, but still doomed, almost sadistically so, by an author who cannot overcome his own ironic ambivalence” (220). While our own study will ultimately side with the consensus on the general question of Wallace’s overcoming postmodern irony, Holland does Wallace studies a crucial service in critiquing the often flawed arguments that are proffered to support what we will contend is ultimately a solid conclusion.

4. Hans Bertens is correct when he asserts that “much of postmodern literature’s dubious reputation stems from the fact that almost right from the start it was taken to exemplify the other two, and considerably wider, definitions of the postmodern” (303), that is, the periodizing concept and the work of the poststructural theorists. Charges of moral relativism in spite of the moral standards implied by a satirical approach is just one example of this unfair association arising from the linguistic carelessness surrounding the term “postmodern.”



5. Marshall Boswell contends that “Wallace’s work, in its attempt to prove that cynicism and naïveté are mutually compatible, treats the culture’s hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray ‘goeey’ sentimentality; the result is that hip irony is itself ironized in such a way that the *opposite* of hip irony—that is, goeey sentiment—can emerge as the work’s indirectly intended mode” (17).

Paul Giles argues that “whereas Donald Barthelme and Robert Coover used the ironic depthlessness of postmodernism to hollow out modernist claims to central authority, Wallace turns this irony back against the postmodern condition itself,” resulting in “the ironization of irony [that] leaves scope for tantalizing glimpses of authentic presence” (340).

Catherine Nichols asserts that “David Foster Wallace turns the carnivalesque against itself to reveal a literary vision that foregrounds the line between transgression for its own sake and the use of art for redemptive purposes” (3).

Timothy Richard Aubry contends that, “recognizing that many of his readers will likely view this organization’s practices and values as unappealingly trite and old-fashioned, Wallace produces a compulsive reading experience designed to simulate the trajectory of addiction in order to overwhelm and oversaturate his readers’ desires, exhaust their internal mechanisms of defensive sophistication, and thus prepare them to confront AA as a salutary model for an alternative paradigm refreshingly at odds with their cynical impulses” (99).

The problem with these arguments is that, as Wallace demonstrated in “E Unibus Pluram,” hip irony cannot be used to defeat itself, hence the need for a return to “single-entendre principles” that will make authors “outdated...before they [have] even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic” (81). The critical assessment that Wallace somehow uses postmodern irony against itself is trying to have it both

ways, to contend that Wallace has somehow transcended postmodern irony and sophistication not by being frank and sincere but by being even more ironic and sophisticated than the postmodernists. If the critics acknowledge that Wallace's literary agenda is in many ways conservative, then they will make him—and, by extension, their arguments—vulnerable to precisely the attacks he predicted.

6. For an excellent examination of the role of the endnotes and the encyclopedic mode more generally, see David Letzler's study, in which he contends that the extraneous information included in such texts force the reader to develop a reading strategy that involves filtering out worthless information while focusing on the important content. This dynamic "is not just an interesting side-effect of the novel's structure: it is central to the way our minds interact with the information that *Infinite Jest* (and...the encyclopedic novel generally) presents" (134).

7. Michiko Kakutani, Dan Cryer, and David McLean all cite the wheelchair assassins in their reviews. Kakutani includes them in a list of characters and topics to illustrate the "random muchness of detail and incident that is *Infinite Jest*." Similarly, McLean mentions them in the process of attempting a plot summary that serves to demonstrate the range of topics the novel covers and the rules Wallace is willing to break, though McLean is significantly more positive in his judgment than Kakutani. Cryer, emphasizing the ludic impression of such an absurd part of the plot, refers to "the bizarrely hilarious plottings of the puritanical Quebec revolutionaries known as the Wheelchair assassins," citing it as a major source of the novel's humor.

8. We shall refer to this author-character as "the Author" in order to distinguish him from the actual actual David Foster Wallace. This distinction is an implicit acknowledgement that despite the Author's claims to the contrary, this metafictional intrusion is in fact every bit as artificial

and contrived as every bit of every work of narrative fiction, whether realist, postmodern, or otherwise.

9. This term is infinitely preferable to most suggestions, especially the nauseating “postpostmodernism.”

10. Of course, this formulation sounds pejorative, but it is Wallace’s recognition of the judgment that would inevitably accompany such an approach and his doing it anyway that demonstrate his artistic courage. Sometimes backing up is just what is needed.

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