DICTION ADDICTION: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND METAFICTION

by

MARC D.A. PRITCHARD, B.A.

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Abstract

David Foster Wallace's fiction is reminiscent of a literary avantgarde tradition that defines itself in partial terms of its distance from the hegemony of mass culture. Wallace is sympathetic with such cultural and literary theorists as Fredric Jameson, Gerald Graff, and Andreas Huyssen, each of whom is concerned to show capitalism to be largely responsible for the homogenization of the avantgarde and mass culture. This homogenization, from Wallace's perspective, is manifest in mass culture's appropriation of the formal devices of the last "legitimate" avantgarde literature--namely, metafiction. The metafictional device with which Wallace is foremost engaged is self-conscious irony. Perpetrated, for Wallace, primarily by television, the mass appropriation of self-conscious irony has yielded an unprecedented American solipsism. Wallace's novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" and his novel *Infinite Jest* are both concerned to show the possibilities for human communication in a solipsistic and televisual social environment.

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Diction Addiction: Metafiction and David Foster Wallace

Chapter One:

The rise and fall of postmodern metafiction

"A solipsist had better get on well with himself,
successfuller than I that ensuing season."

-- John Barth, "Anonymiad"

In the story "My Appearance," collected in David Foster Wallace's first volume of short stories, *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), Edilyn, a television actress introduced as "a woman who appeared in public on 'Late Night with David Letterman'" (175), is asked by a David Letterman who has just listed her numerous assets¹ why she has been appearing in television commercials for Oscar Meyer wieners. This is a situation for which Edilyn's husband (Rudy) and a television producer friend (Ron) have been coaching her, their tutelage amounting to the insistence that the only way to survive on-stage with a David Letterman who "feeds off ridiculousness" (180) is

¹These assets include a successful television series, a husband successful in television production, a daughter successful in film and television, and an Emmy nomination.

to "make *yourself* look ridiculous, instead of letting *him* do it for you" (182).

Thus when the David Letterman of "My Appearance" is described as one who "chooses to ridicule himself," and when that self-ridicule is said to exempt "the clever bastard from real ridicule" (Wallace, "Appearance" 181), readers are invited to share Wallace's sense of a cultural irony that manages to be anything but sincere. Edilyn's response to Letterman's question is that she is "not a great actress" (193). Indeed, she even says, more than once, that she just wants to "be honest," even though Ron and Rudy's coaching had consisted of directives to worry only about how she appears: the self, in their terms, is a function only of its own performance: "So really being a certain way or not isn't a question that can come up, on shows like this," Rudy tells her (189). The nature of Rudy and Ron's ideal performance, moreover, is also fully prescribed: "Laugh in a way that's somehow deadpan. Act as if you knew from birth that everything is clichéd and hyped and empty and absurd, and that that's *just* where the fun is" (183). But Edilyn, "a woman who lets her feelings show" (184), responds to Letterman's question with honesty. For Edilyn, the moment is one of complete vulnerability, but one in which she can also be seen to be sincere. The

narrative result is not the eruption into ridiculousness that Ron and Rudy fearfully expect, but rather a visible tension that Edilyn manages also to dispel by explaining that none of the assets Letterman had just listed have anything to do with Edilyn's identity. The question of acting in a television commercial, for Edilyn, is simply a non-starter: "Those things you listed [. . .] are assets, is all they are. [. . .] They're my assets, David, they're not me. I'm an actress in commercial television. Why not act in television commercials?" (193).

Edilyn's situation, which finds its conflict in Letterman's seeming inability to understand why an actress as "loaded" (193) as Edilyn would need to appear in wiener commercials, is central to Wallace's general concerns as a writer of fiction. The purpose of fiction, for Wallace, is to be "a living transaction between humans" (142), a transaction that functions to communicate "truth" "at a level that not only [isn't] intellectual but [isn't] even fully conscious" (201). Consciousness, for Wallace, especially self-consciousness, all too often seems to lead to pitfalls in which communication is rendered impossible. "My Appearance" can thus be read as a satire of a specifically American culture that, by the end of the

1980s, had become cripplingly self-conscious and falsely mannered: this is Wallace's own generation, which he describes as

Watergate's children, television's audience, Reagan's draft-pool, and everyone's market. We've reached our maturity in a truly bizarre period in which "Wrong is right," "Greed is good," and "It's better to look good than to feel good"--and when the poor old issue of trying to be good no longer even merits a straight face. ("Conspicuously Young" 52)

Wallace attributes much of the responsibility for the style of this falsely performing self to postmodern metafiction. Metafiction, for Wallace, was effective and useful in its beginnings because it helped "reveal fiction as a mediated experience" (McCaffery, "Interview" 142). Metafictional tropes, however, are also solipsistic in that they prioritize cleverness ahead of sincerity. The fiction of a writing student character in another of Wallace's stories, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) is described as having "a certain 'Look-Mom-no-hands' quality" (234) about it. This description figures as a companion to the description of appearance-performance offered in "My Appearance." In that story, Letterman is described as a "clever bastard"; likewise, the writing student of "Westward" is accused by the narrator as being infatuated with "her own crafted cleverness" (234). Cleverness in

both cases functions, in Catherine Nichols's words, "as a permanent, though superficially heterogeneous, mask that is used to avoid confrontation with a wider scope of human vision" (3). Letterman feeds off ridiculousness while the writing student writes a "twenty-page poem that's *all* punctuation" (251). Neither is concerned with the basic humanity of their audiences. Both stand accused of insincerity, which, for Wallace, prevents human communication.

This study explores David Foster Wallace's perspective on the status of contemporary American fiction as it stands in the wake of postmodern metafiction and postmodernism, where postmodernism is understood as what Fredric Jameson calls the "cultural logic" of late capitalism (55). For Wallace "it is axiomatic that the present is grossly materialistic"; however, Wallace also insists that "human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, [and] genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price" (McCaffery, "Interview" 132). Postmodern metafiction figures high on Wallace's hit list precisely because its institutionalization and subsequent commercialization reified what Andreas Huyssen calls the "vital dialectic" between the avantgarde and mass society, a dialectic that located the avantgarde as a progressive, spiritual

leadership (4). Wallace is clearly sympathetic with this perspective; since he "think[s] of [himself] as a fiction writer" (*Charlie Rose*), he is most definitely the sort of fiction writer that John Barth praised in his seminal essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" as a "technically up-to-date artist" (66), or one who is "aware of what one's predecessors have been up to" (68). Wallace's predecessors are not only Barth's predecessors, but also Barth himself, and the predecessor of Wallace's fiction is metafiction. For Wallace, whose "secret pretension" is to "make people think about some of the choices we are making, and what we pay attention to and give power to" (Wallace, "Stivers"), a consumer capitalist appropriation of metafictional tropes functioning to forestall on effective criticism of consumer capitalism itself is partially responsible for what Wallace perceives to be his generation's intense solipsistic imprisonment, an imprisonment from which release is, he believes, nonetheless possible.

Once William Gass had introduced the term *metafiction* in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970), those who had made careers of literature--in particular, critics and literary artists--were both divided and frantic about its implications. The immediate issue involved nothing less than the very possibility of the

continued validity of literature itself. Postmodern metafiction emerged as certain writers' responses to their feeling that the aesthetic project of modernism, which among other things assigned value to literary texts as sacred artifacts, had been completed. Metafiction can be defined, with Linda Hutcheon, as fiction that contains "its own first critical commentary" (*Narcissistic* 6). Hutcheon observes that "[t]here can be no 'theory' of metafiction" because "each self-informing work internalizes its own critical context" (155). She is also wise to make an appropriately critical distinction between the term *metafiction* and what is more generally and historically figured as *postmodernism*. This distinction is predicated on the conviction that *postmodernism* is "very limiting" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 2), whereas metafiction had become too "broad" a phenomenon to be so singularly contained. Metafiction, in other words, admits of no clear taxonomy precisely because each individual is its own species.

The underlying principle that governs Hutcheon's study is that metafiction (i.e. "narcissistic narrative") does not represent a break from the novel's traditional function as a mimetic genre. The distinction, she says, has to do with what metafiction attempts to imitate. Where traditional realism trafficked in a "mimesis of

product," in which readers are "required to identify the products being imitated [. . .] and recognize the similarity to those in empirical reality," metafiction traffics in a "mimesis of process," which takes its cues from the recognition that "[r]eading and writing belong to the processes of 'life' as much as they do to those of 'art'" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 38, 5). Robert Scholes's essay, "Metafiction" (1970), also issues a defense for the "range and vigor of contemporary metafiction" (107), claiming that "that rarefied air of metafiction" (115) functions in the assimilation of "all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself" (106, my emphasis).

Building on the work of Jean Ricardou, Hutcheon detects in metafiction two principle patterns, which she names the "overt" and the "covert" (*Narcissistic* 7). Overt forms of narcissistic narrative do not hide their self-consciousness and self-reflection; rather, they repeatedly and explicitly call attention to their fictional ontology, imitating the very act of narrative construction. John Barth's "Life-Story" is among the most clearly demonstrable of overt metafictions:

But the reader! Even if his author were his only reader as was he himself of his work-in-progress as of the sentence-in-progress and his protagonist of his, et cetera, his character as reader was not the same as his character as

author, a fact which might be turned to account. What suspense.(123)

Conversely, covert forms of narcissistic narrative begin with the recognition that reading and writing are as much a part of "reality" or "life" as weather and clothing, and proceed to "actualize" this recognition: "such a text is self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 7). Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* is a good example of covert metafiction, as it presents a paradigm of reading that catches the reader in the "paradoxical position of being forced by the text to acknowledge the fictionality of the world he too is creating" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 30), while at the same time forcing him to participate (intellectually, creatively, and affectively) in that world's creation. Oedipa's quest for the Tristero, in this light, is interpretable as any reader's quest for a unifying meaning to any work of fiction. This issue of covert metafiction and forcing the reader to work will become more pertinent in Chapter Three, which deals with David Foster Wallace's difficult novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996).

Patricia Waugh's "theory of metafiction," detailed in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), is not what its title seems to herald: that a clear, theoretical, and duplicable framework is evident through the range of metafiction. Instead,

Waugh's study argues that the range of metafiction suggests that its various authors collectively (though independently) explore theory "through the *practice* of writing fiction" (2). Waugh writes: "Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact [*sic*] in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). For Waugh, the issue is a particularly twentieth-century one, and has to do with an apparent post-World War Two tendency among novelists "to become much more aware of the theoretical issues involved in constructing fictions" (2). The distinctions between the artist and the critic were collapsing, and at the fault-line of that collapse was process--that is, in Waugh's terms, literary "practice."

The feature that unifies Hutcheon, Scholes, and Waugh's accounts of metafiction is that each prioritizes the fact of process, which includes the processes not only of writing, but also of reading. This move connects the genre of metafiction, which is usefully considered a discursive phenomenon within postmodernism concerned specifically and directly with narrative, with the larger discourse of postmodernism itself. A key feature of postmodern theory is "polysemy," or multiple readings:

individual literary texts are taken to be open to a variety of interpretations, the most accurate of which tend not to be unequivocal. As Jorge Luis Borges says: "[a] book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships. One literature differs from another, prior or posterior, less because of the text than because of the way in which it is read" (214). Metafiction participates in multiple readings precisely to the extent that it thematizes the reading process. Through its process of criticizing its own processes, the self-critical and self-reflective voice of Barth's narrator in "Life-Story," quoted above, thematizes interpretation. Moreover, the intra-fictional thematization of both reading and writing enables the recognition that each is necessary for the creation of meaning, that readers are not merely passive receivers of authorial intent. Thus, for Hutcheon, postmodern metafiction enabled a change in the role of the reader: "Reading was no longer easy," she writes, "no longer a comfortable controlled experience; the reader was now forced to control, to organize, to interpret" (*Narcissistic* 25-6). Self-conscious, postmodern metafiction had revealed the assumed passivity of the reader as an illusion.

Hutcheon notes further, citing *Don Quixote* (1604; 1614) and *Tristram Shandy* (1760-7), that self-consciousness (i.e. narcissism) has always been a fundamental technique of the novel: "narcissism can be argued to be, not an aberration, but the 'original condition' of the novel as a genre" (*Narcissistic* 8). Change has occurred, however, concerning both the ways in which self-consciousness has been used and the ends to which it has been put. With the "institutionalization" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* 2) of metafiction, these changes can be seen primarily in an acknowledgment that language, more than being simply the means to an end (of characterization, say), constitutes both means and end. For Hutcheon, the development of metafiction increasingly demanded the readerly awareness that "the existence of verbal and structural materials conditions the formation of images, [and] that the human imagination is exercised in working with these materials" (*Narcissistic* 14). This is the condition of mediation, which marks the essential value, for Wallace, of early metafiction. Metafiction, "mimesis of process," can likewise be called a mimesis of mediation because mediation is fundamentally a process of exchange between two or more minds, or, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, an "extension" of human sense (35). The subject of much of John Barth's fiction, for instance, is

mediation itself, which, for Barth, finds its apotheosis in storytelling: through the process of storytelling, Barth explores some of the processes of life.

In his critical musings, Barth is more formally interested in the terminology of postmodernism than he is in *metafiction* (a term he rarely uses); but his overriding concern with the nature and status of storytelling generally, coupled with his interest in postmodernism, nevertheless affirms his constant proximity to metafiction. Barth the critic is best known for his pair of essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction" (1980), both of which originally appeared in *The Atlantic* and have since been widely cited and translated. The first essay was Barth's attempt to explain what he took to be the sense among certain contemporary writers of fiction, himself included, that most forms available to them for the creation of their particular art had, by the 1960s, been exhausted. Some writers, however, had managed to find ways to use these "felt ultimacies" against the exhaustion of literature itself (Barth, "Exhaustion" 71), and in so doing had created new works of literature.

"The Literature of Exhaustion" was evidently widely misunderstood, or so Barth claims ("Replenishment" 205).

"The Literature of Replenishment" is predicated as an explanation or clarification of the first and is Barth's account of what the term *postmodernism* might be able to mean "if it is to describe anything very good very well" (198). Barth's strategy is first to survey current critical reflections on the topic, then to follow with his own formulation of an "ideal postmodernist author" (203). This author, for Barth, neither "repudiates nor merely imitates" (203) his immediate twentieth-century modernist precursors nor their precursors, the nineteenth-century realists. Instead, the postmodernist author should aspire to a synthesis of modernism and what Gerald Graff calls "bourgeois realism."

Graff himself is instructive on this point. According to Graff, the bedrock of bourgeois realism is a faith in both a discernible, objective "reality" and the power of the language of the bourgeoisie to represent this "reality" faithfully, accurately, and, above all, meaningfully. One of the effects of modernism was the exposure of this belief as naïve. Once this belief was discarded, a sense of loss eventually took its place. According to Graff, moreover, truth and meaning would then be seen to be derivative not of language's power to imitate but of the modernist artist's imaginative ability to order, arrange, and create meaning. Eventually,

however, even this belief in the power of the artist to capture truth in his arrangement--or, as Nabokov once put it, his provision of "combinational delight" (*Pale Fire* 69)--would become fuel for continuing novelistic parody.

Fully convinced that the rise of postmodernism was in no way a "breakthrough," Graff suggests that the transition from modernism to postmodernism is most apparent visible in the distance between the prefiguring of "the loss of belief in a significant external reality" ("Myth" 403) and the acknowledgment of this loss in the articulated perception that even imposed authorial order is arbitrary, and thus not to be taken seriously. In other words, narrative play for its own sake began to be figured among the highest of literary virtues. The biggest problem Graff faced when dealing with postmodern fiction was that the liberal bourgeois values so condemned by modernism had, by the late 1960s and early 70s, "been so thoroughly eroded" that to reject them already seemed superfluous ("Babbitt" 307). Nevertheless, Graff concluded, this condition of ignored erosion was the "social context" of postmodern fiction. Graff concedes that postmodern fiction realized the logical extreme of the modernist alienation from realism, and that the strictly modernist enterprise had been "executed only in part" ("Babbitt" 307); still, this one

concession could not salvage, for Graff, what amounted to little more than "a historically conscious *style*" of alienation, an affected, personal symbolism modeled, for instance, after the much-glamorized images of James Dean and Elvis Presley ("Babbitt" 317). Like Jameson, who argues that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (54), Graff detected the implication of this style in contemporary American capitalist culture, which had produced a veritable "alienation industry" (320) of publicists, theoreticians, consultants, therapists, artists, and ideologues. This industry advertises to, and is supported by, an audience ultimately derived from Graff's "type" of alienated being, an audience broken away from the collective sensibility of bourgeois society and which monopolizes that sensibility's antagonism. The irony is that the swarms of "individuals" must behave identically in the purchase and consumption of products and services that indirectly claim to confer individuality on their consumers. This phenomenon amounts to a kind of conformism that contradictorily rails against conformity.

Andreas Huyssen describes conformism as the chief sickness infecting contemporary, postmodern society and points further to its manifestations: (1) in the

"depoliticization" and institutionalization as "administered culture" of post-World War II art; and (2) in "academic interpretations" (4). Academic interpretation--that is, professional criticism--is particularly irksome to Huyssen because, he claims, it fostered the canonization of the avantgarde, of modernism, and of postmodernism, which in turn "severed the vital dialectic between the avantgarde and mass culture in industrial civilization" (4). The literary avantgarde's primary means of communication tended to shock and disturb the status quo, but the function of this shock and disturbance was precisely to communicate some sense of why the reading and writing of fiction is important. Professional criticism, on the other hand, in Huyssen's view, explains not why fiction is important but how it is so. Since, in Huyssen's opinion, the tendency of academic interpretation to canonize operates contrary to the progressive nature of the avantgarde, however, the canonization of the avantgarde leads inexorably to the avantgarde's demise within the very mass culture with which it had been dialectically engaged.

For Huyssen, mass culture "depends on technologies of mass production and mass reproduction and thus on the homogenization of difference" (9). Canonization parallels mass production, in that the establishment of a

core bibliography (i.e. the canon) effectively validates the dismissal of all works not included in the canon-- canonization, in other words, is the homogenization of genius. Since mass production operates on the inverse principle that "popular is good," it thus produces only what large groups of people seem to want. For Huyssen, the increase in proliferation of technologies of mass production fueled the imaginations of the avantgarde and "penetrated to the core" of their work (9). From here, following World War II especially, discourse concerning the avantgarde "congealed into the reified two-track system of high vs. low, elite vs. popular" (14). Postmodernism, especially in the United States, had, according to Huyssen, "some of the makings of a genuine avantgarde movement" (194), but for the paradox that it was also "the endgame of international avant-gardism" (195).

These developments deeply inform Wallace's concerns. Resembling Huyssen's conception of a postmodernity in which significance is increasingly accorded with materialism, the culture presented in "My Appearance" is one in which appearances are not to be trusted because appearances do not tell the whole story of an individual's identity. To Edilyn's insistence that she intends simply to be sincere and that Letterman himself

is "basically sincere" (193), Ron tells her that "Sincerity is out" and that "The joke is now on people who're sincere" (182). Wallace explains his sense of this situation as a problem for both U.S. culture and aspiring fiction writers in the much cited essay, "*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*" (1990), the chief thesis of which is that "irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective [. . .] at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture" (49).

The paradox for Wallace--since irony deeply informs both his fiction and his non-fiction, as both Andrew Hultkrans and Alexander Star have pointed out--involves somehow writing self-consciously ironic literature that is diagnostic and possibly prognostic of a culture that has become excessively self-conscious. For Hultkrans, who claims that it is "painful to watch [Wallace's] awkward attempt to transmogrify from arch metafictionist to champion of Meaning" (15), the paradox is irresolvable. The "transmogrification" of which Hultkrans writes takes place in the transition from Wallace's story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair*, to his collection of essays, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997). For Hultkrans, whereas the essays declaim a message to "Stop the Irony!", Wallace is

nevertheless a "pomo prodigy" (15) whose *Girl with Curious Hair* is "decidedly style-over-substance" (16). For Star, on the other hand, for whom self-consciousness amounts to an "adolescent twitch, a mannered style, a way of holding back from the potency of one's materials" (27), Wallace's work is self-conscious. But Star also recognizes that Wallace, with "implacable resolve, tries to write intimate, heartfelt fiction about a nation overrun with information and images" (27, my emphasis). The paradox is resolvable, and the resolution has to do with parody.

Parody, in the words of G.D. Kiremidjian, "retains the form or stylistic character of the primary work, but substitutes alien subject matter or content" (qtd. in Waugh 68). For Bakhtin, all parody will "transpose the values of the parodied style" (75), and, as such, will emphasize some elements of that style while deemphasizing others. Linda Hutcheon makes use of the term "complicitous critique" to show how parody--postmodern parody, in particular--"is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation" (*Politics* 94). Each of these formulations revolves around the same point: that parody's critical effectiveness is dependent on a

reader's familiarity with the parodic object. In Wallace's case, the diagnosis and prognosis of an excessively self-conscious and self-deprecatingly ironic culture must include a representation of that excess. Thus, a story like "My Appearance" offers a view of popular self-irony coupled with a view of one possible response to that self-irony: Edilyn's engagement of the ridiculousness of David Letterman, itself a metaphor for the ridiculousness engendered by millions of people's daily apotheosis of ridiculousness, consists in being sincere, whether or not sincerity is "out."

The fictional analogue of contemporary self-irony, for Wallace, is manifest in postmodern metafiction. Metafiction, Wallace says, echoing Graff, "was really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great theoretical nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it" ("Pluram" 34). The issue, for Wallace, especially as it concerns aspiring fiction writers, centers on television, which serves as a synecdoche for a society that has become too ironic. Wallace's parodic challenge is to a collective American culture that is "not dumb" but that has allowed itself to become "lazy and childish in its expectations" (McCaffery, "Interview" 128). This challenge begins in

Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1989), carries through several shorter fictions, and reaches climactic and covert force in the gargantuan novel *Infinite Jest* (1996). But Wallace "blames" neither television nor even the broader mass media for this laziness of expectation. Although he says that "TV and the commercial-art culture" have "trained" us to be lazy (McCaffery, "Interview" 128), the real culprits are ourselves: we have chosen our circumstances, as we choose them everyday. Postmodern metafiction is implicated because it became commercial, then familiar; once familiar, postmodern metafiction had become comforting. Comforting fiction, finally, is easy to consume because it provides an approximation of pure pleasure. The *raison d'être* of the commercial-art culture, of which television is an influential juggernaut, has always been, for Wallace, simply to discern and reflect what large groups of people want ("*Pluram*" 22) and what they already believe ("*Westward*" 271). But television is nevertheless for Wallace only a symptom of more general tendencies, including self-protective irony, addiction to pleasure, and valuation of pleasure as an end.

Many anti-television critics decry television for transforming Western society into a mere collective of low-affect voyeurs; for Wallace, this charge is false.

Television, for Wallace, allows the "deep thesis" that the most significant quality of authentic people is watchableness; that "real" human value is not just coextensive with watching, but is equivalent to watching; and that the most important aspect of watchableness is seeming to be unaware that one is being watched ("*Pluram*" 26). The grisly illusion facing the multi-millions of daily high-dose television watchers at whom Wallace's critique is mostly aimed is that television actors are perfectly aware that they are being watched, and, further, that it is the watching itself that energizes the performance. Television viewing is not voyeurism at all; in fact, it is more insidious. For Wallace, television provides the illusion that other people are present while simultaneously foreclosing on any possibility of connection with those other people. Television is more insidious than voyeurism because, for Wallace, connection with other people is "important to basic mental health" ("*Pluram*" 39). LaMont Chu of *Infinite Jest*, for instance, finds himself "haltingly confess[ing] to an increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame" (Wallace, *Jest* 388). LaMont wants to see himself being seen in the glossy photographs of magazines, but this desire has revealed a terrible fear of losing. His obsession is "crippling" precisely

because it has made LaMont lose, so he believes. The advice he receives from Lyle, a sort of "guru" in the weight-room who literally lives off the sweat of others, is that "Fame is not the exit from any cage" (389). Fame, in other words, will not heal LaMont of his obsession for fame itself; only connection with living human beings can heal him.

Wallace has deflected consideration of his aims as those intended "to edify or teach, or to make us good little Christians or Republicans" (McCaffery, "Interview" 131). Fiction, says Wallace, has no such necessary partisan obligation. But fiction is communication, and Wallace believes himself to be communicating with an audience that is willfully drifting from a simple, secular spirituality that values feeling, trust, and empathy. Thus Wallace himself applies to fiction words such as *redeeming* and *nourishing*, qualities he identifies most with readerly identification with characters' pain. For Wallace, reality is suffering, or "51 percent pain" (128). Thus, because "true empathy's impossible," if we can identify with another's pain through fiction, "we might also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own" (127). While he sees the contemporary United States as a culture offering nearly unlimited options in entertainment, it is nevertheless also

possessed of a vast, obliterating sadness. The problem for Wallace is not located in the media of network television, Hollywood, or the Internet, but in our collective choices both to criticize and to lustfully consume. Much of this criticism and consumption, furthermore, occurs in solitude. Wallace thus imagines an entire nation of individuals shut off from themselves, each behaving identically in their atomized spaces while hiding from one another. For Wallace, retreat to livingrooms and bedrooms to lie prostrate before televisions, fixated on celebrities and other public figures, bespeaks the paradoxical human needs both to be seen and to hide. And both needs are met: hiding, literally, because our homes provide privacy; and being seen, delusionally, in our willingness and need to identify with those we watch, in so doing imagining ourselves in their place.

For Wallace, the collective choices that contemporary U.S. culture seem continuously to be making describe an insidiously circular, recursive pattern of attraction and revulsion. The insidiousness of this pattern is also television's greatest attraction: passivity. Whereas Barth had encountered his aesthetic conundra in the processes of storytelling, Wallace encounters his in the popular media--specifically, in the

way the popular media use irony to absorb all ridicule and thus remain impervious to criticism. The popular media consist of what Wallace calls "commercial art," which he opposes to "serious art." Commercial art is propelled by profit; it can be highly entertaining but is not necessarily nourishing. Serious art, on the other hand, looks to "aggravate" a reader's solipsistic sense of self, thereby engaging a communicative enterprise that has the potential to be vastly rewarding: "serious art [. . .] is more apt to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort" (McCaffery, "Interview" 128). Serious fiction stands further opposed to commercial fiction in that, for Wallace, commercial fiction is predicated on the assumption that audiences prefer 100% pleasure. From Wallace's perspective, the pleasure gained through work is more rewarding than that gained passively.

Fredric Jameson observes that "the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods [. . .] at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" (56). Wallace's contempt, then, is primarily reserved

for what he calls "crank-turners" (McCaffery, "Interview" 135), an explanation of which is the fundamental virtue of Timothy Jacobs's reading of Wallace. Crank-turners are those who do not "participate in an aesthetic conflict of their own and, instead, convey an inherited and diminished aesthetic that benefits neither writer nor reader" (Jacobs 219); they are the human engines of Jameson's "rates of turnover." Jacobs argues convincingly that, for Wallace, "emerging artists must make their own art out of the fragments of the inherited past, adapting it to the conflicts of their culture" (220). The same can be said of postmodernism and modernism alike. Wallace, furthermore, is not interested in exposing postmodernism as directly responsible for contemporary crank-turning so much as he is interested in exposing crank-turning as indirectly culpable for an aesthetic stasis in the contemporary United States.

One reading of Wallace that recognizes this concern with stasis is contained in Larry McCaffery's "Avant-Pop," a genre that McCaffery defines as a hybrid of "Pop Art's focus on consumer goods and mass media with the avantgarde's spirit of subversion and emphasis on radical formal innovation" (*Crash* xvii-xviii). Paradoxically, this is a movement that is no movement, as McCaffery himself insists ("Reconfiguring" 12) and as Alter had

also said of postmodernism (209). Pawel Frelik is concerned about this lack of cohesion: while he recognizes both Avant-Pop's continuation of, and departure from, the traditions of both the modern and postmodern avantgarde, he also realizes that "[t]he apparent parallel to the relationship between Postmodernism and Avant-Pop can be discerned in the one between Modernism and Postmodernism, where the transition is viewed in terms of a change in the dominant rather than as a subversive and ground-breaking revolution" (23). Frelik's conclusion sputters in a skepticism that would be sad if it were not also revelatory: "Avant-Pop may seem naïve. As it solidifies and matures, it may as well stiffen and by its own logic become yet another hyperconsumer commodity finally giving way to yet another cultural phenomenon" (23). Frelik may be right: the basic premises of two recent commercial films might have been lifted clean from Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which concerns, among other things, a "killer videotape." One film, *The Ring* (2003), features a videotape whose viewers die seven days after watching it. The other, *Fear Dot Com* (2002), is about an Internet site that, again, eventually kills its visitors. Both films, however, seem to collapse the intricate cultural critique of *Infinite Jest* into an exchange only of money for potentially

disturbing images, the attraction evidently being the audience's desire for fear.

Wallace, referring to the United States as a "sloppy intersection of desires and fears" (*Jest* 83), tends to link these two emotions to suggest a latent pattern of self-destruction in the contemporary U.S., a pattern that finds its literary analogue in metafiction. Postmodern metafiction, for Wallace, displays a fascination, in Barth's terms, with "ultimacy," a term that takes the disparate senses both of "the last" and of "the best." To say, with Wallace, that metafiction's "real end has always been Armageddon" (McCaffery, "Interview" 134) is to say that metafiction has always paradoxically desired the very condition it fears most, namely exhaustion. This paradox may have no resolution. For Wallace, who on this point unfortunately does not cite specific postmodern metafictionists, the contemporary situation is one in which the only "rule" left to govern aesthetic production is that rules must be broken. The paradox is especially evident here, for there seems to be no way both to break and follow a rule that prescribes only rule breaking. Television, whose role in the self-destruction mentioned above has to do with its capacity to "engage without demanding" (Wallace, "*Pluram*" 37), is, for

Wallace, "from the surface on down [. . .] about desire" (22).

Wallace's fiction is about communication in a televisual age, even when meaning seems to have been forsaken. The next chapter will examine Wallace's early novella, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," arguing for Wallace's imperfect articulation therein of a means to overcome his sense of U.S. post-metafictional stasis. A parody of metafiction, this story frames the redemptive system that resides at the heart of the subject of the third chapter, the novel *Infinite Jest*. Chapter Three's argument is that *Infinite Jest* provides a more perfect update to the diagnosis and prognosis of U.S. culture offered in "Westward," and that that update consists in a rejection of the televisual thesis that pleasure is both means and end to itself. In place of this thesis, *Infinite Jest* substitutes the conviction that the experience of hardship can lead to a pleasure that is infinitely valuable. This system is completely incapable of forgetting its literary heritage, its self, and, most of all, its tomorrows.

Chapter Two:

Out of the Funhouse: "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way"

"I am a writer," says John Barth, "who has spent his professional life exploring some the [sic] limits of the ancient art of storytelling [. . .]" ("The Limits of Imagination" 49). Let us take *exploration*, as The Oxford English Dictionary does, to mean something like a process leading to a "critical judgment or test." Exploration, then, is, by nature, critical. Interestingly, one of Oxford's several sub-definitions of *criticism* makes use of *investigation* and of "passing judgment," which, since *investigation* is also allied synonymously with *exploration*, admits of recursion: *exploration* means *criticism* means *investigation* means *exploration*. This lexical journey is, perhaps coincidentally, significant, for, in describing recursion, it also describes metafiction. But the above quotation is important for another word--"limits"--because Barth's essay is especially involved in exploring whether "anything [is]

beyond the reach" of his ideal human imagination (57).¹ Barth's exploration undertakes first the prefatory exploration of the phrases "limited imagination" and "limitations of imagination." A limited imagination is deficient, unable "to anticipate accurately and to come up with the really new or more effective idea" (51). The *limitations of imagination* are also the result of a deficiency, in their case from "insufficient ballast of information or experience" (52). With the creative imagination, with which Barth is chiefly concerned, the exploration leads to a paradox: "the human imagination would appear to be limited only by the limitations of our human imaginations" (60). Barth explains that certain "literary-artistic images" are "larger than the works that contain them"; furthermore, for him, there are only four such "cardinal" images:

Odysseus, striving homeward from Troy across the wine-dark sea; Scheherazade, yarning through the night to save her neck; Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, chatting their way across the plains of La Mancha; and Huckleberry Finn, rafting down the heart-waters of America. (61)

Though he repeatedly reminds his reader that there is yet for him no fifth cardinal image, Barth concludes the

¹Barth formulates the ideal in "The Limits of Imagination" in terms that evoke the much earlier "The Literature of Exhaustion": "Let us suppose a strong, mature artistic imagination, soundly ballasted (but not swamped) by information and experience both of life and of the artist's particular medium; powered by high intelligence and training to the point of mastery" (56-7).

essay with an optimistic assertion that such an image "might be being done next door" (63).

For Wallace, Barth figures among a group of writers to whom Wallace referred, on the television program *Charlie Rose*, as "post-Nabokovians"--in other words "the first writers to read a lot of criticism" (*Charlie Rose*). Criticism in the period following the Depression and the Second World War had become an institution. While criticism, in T.S. Eliot's famous words, "is as inevitable as breathing" ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 431), and while it dates as far back as ancient Egypt and Greece, according to Gerald Graff, not until its development in university "language and literature departments" did literary criticism's legitimacy as a vocation arise ("Humanist" 58).

Barth's chief means of exploration was the self-conscious text--metafiction--through which, for Heide Ziegler, his "self-questioning [authorial] voice" questioned the "very role of author" and became a "literary trademark" (13). For Ziegler, Barth's questioning of writerly authority amounted to an exploitation of the impossibility of reconciliation between "the ontological, perhaps metaphysical, rupture between art and life" (13). Stories--that is, narrative--for Barth had become the single means of bridging the

gap between art and life: *storytelling*, then, serves to signify not only one of admittedly many artistic media but also life itself, in the sense that *life* is a story, one told in the living (i.e. the telling). As Fenwick Turner of *Sabbatical* declares near that novel's end: "The doing and the telling, our writing and our loving-- they're twins. That's our story" (Barth 365). What Fenwick means is that the seeming ontological separation between art and life is not inherent. Hutcheon's observation that "[r]eading and writing belong to the processes of 'life' as much as they do to 'art'" (5) resonates here in the recognition that Barth, metafiction's ostensible patriarch, manages through narrative not only to blur but to erase the distinction.

The feat is not insignificant: while, in the modernist tradition leading to Barth, the ontological gap between life and art had become material of concern, it was not the validity of the gap so much as the viability of bridging it that was at issue. Among the characteristics for which Barth is now famous was his desire to have things "both ways, to tell and live stories" (Ziegler 81). This desire is evident in *Sabbatical* as well as in *Lost in the Funhouse*. To tell a story, for *Sabbatical's* Fenwick, is to live that story. *Lost in the Funhouse*, a sequential collection of 'short-

stories,' presents itself as, on one hand, a *Künstlerroman* (Ziegler 49), which tells specifically of the developing artist, in this case one Ambrose M____; on the other hand, *Lost in the Funhouse* (for Ziegler, at any rate) suggests itself as a substitution "for the artist" (Ziegler 55). The story of development that the fourteen "short" stories tells proceeds from a union of sperm and egg ("Night-Sea Journey") through Ambrose's development, in the title story, to age thirteen--notably, the age at which puberty, the ability to reproduce sexually, tends in males to commence. At this stage, Ambrose, as Ziegler puts it, "disappears or gets lost [. . .] when he decides to become an artist" (51). The "funhouse" of *Lost in the Funhouse* stands for "life" or "existence," as well as for "literature" or "art." Ambrose gets lost in life when he decides to make art because he decides that the distinction between his life and what he would take to be his art is not at all transparent. "[T]hough he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (Barth, "Funhouse" 97), in deciding to become the designer, Ambrose becomes as well the design. Ambrose, in other words, is *Lost in the Funhouse*. His arrival as *Künstler* is dramatized in "Lost in the Funhouse" as Ambrose's and his family's most recent thrice-annual visit to Ocean City and its boardwalk

Funhouse. It is Independence Day, "*the most important secular holiday of the United States of America*" (Barth, 72). Since Ambrose is in the United States, his and his family's trip to Ocean City necessarily moves them toward the perimeter of the country, in other words, literally away from its center. This motion coincides perfectly with the sort of postmodern and poststructuralist theory that celebrates the dismissal of bourgeois rationalism, in which "Truth" is seen to occupy the center of existence and to be its origin. Jacques Derrida, for instance, refers in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966) to this concept of a center as "the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, and terms is no longer possible" (279). Since the center, says Derrida, is

at the center of the totality, and [. . .] since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure--although it represents coherence itself [. . .]--is contradictorily coherent. And as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire. (279)

Derrida conceived of this condition of the center meeting its antithesis in itself as a "*rupture*" (278), the predication of which he attributed primarily to Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, who began to think that "there was no center, that the center [. . .] was not a

fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (280). This rupture is the recognition of discourse, in which language is figured as both means and end--that is, when *everything is language*. To say that everything is language is to say that the objectivity of the world "external" to the individual self had fallen under doubt. But this incredulous formulation does not necessarily mean to dismiss the world's existence; rather, it affirms its existence as *text*, and entertains an expansion of possibilities for participation within that text. Ambrose, then, experiencing a similar incredulity, finds he is nevertheless able to construct his self in the textual terms of language.

Ambrose and his family's destination to an Ocean City necessarily somewhere between a center and that special endless horizon that only a seascape can offer is a metaphor for the seemingly infinite proliferation of differences made noticeable by Derrida's "rupture." Ambrose, confronted with discourse--specifically, "the endless replication of his image in the [Funhouse] mirrors, [. . .] *the reflection* that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible" (Barth 94)--joins in the play of proliferating differences, which takes the literary form of constantly prioritized

formal novelty. The mirror and the observer amount to mediation, which in turn amounts to a potential for distortion. The implication is that difference is made valuable for its own sake. Difference, in other words, may well be the message.

But difference, according to the narrator of "Westward," "is no lover; it lives and dies dancing on the skins of things, tracing bare outlines as it feels for avenues of entry into exactly what it's made seamless" (Wallace 346). Postmodern metafiction's avantgarde obsession with experimentation for the sake of experimentation has, for Wallace, resulted in an excess of categories. For Wallace "the intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in [the United States] is one of the things that's gutted our generation" (Miller par. 12). Categories, intellectual constructions of academic interpretation, whether they intend to be or not, for Wallace, are agents of separation; as such, they are incapable of the communication of human sensibility. In other words, categories cannot enable Mark Nechtr, "Westward"'s ostensible protagonist, to write "something that stabs you in the heart" (332)--something, that is, that might move a reader. Mark Nechtr wants to know why to write

fiction, and in the process of answering his own

(implied) question comes to believe that

dividing this fiction business into realistic and naturalistic and surrealistic and modern and postmodern and new-realistic and meta- is like dividing history into cosmic and tragic and prophetic and apocalyptic; is like dividing human beings into white and black and brown and yellow and orange. It atomizes, does not bind crowds, and, like everything timelessly dumb, leads to blind hatred, blind loyalty, blind supplication. (346)

Such distinctions may be more useful in terms of literature and criticism than in terms of life. Barth's "Tragic View" of categories claims to recognize the arbitrariness and essential fictionality of categorical distinctions while simultaneously claiming to need those categories not only for conversation but also for sanity ("Postmodernism Revisited" 149). This view is reasonable enough; however, for Wallace, its logical extreme can only teach *how*, not *why*, one writes and reads fiction. Wallace's position that art is "a living transaction between humans" makes possible his extended position that "good, serious art" does not, or should not, aim to divide either literature or people; rather, its aim should be to unify. For Wallace, the most effective way to achieve this unity of both artistic texts and their readers is through the aggravation of a reader's sense of loneliness, or solipsism, not to increase that sense but

rather to show that she is not alone--at least, not insofar as she has a sense of loneliness. This is a paradox that Wallace himself has noted (McCaffery, "Interview" 136). For Wallace, good art is both entertaining and challenging: it is entertaining in that it yields pleasure; it is challenging in that the reader, as well as the writer, must participate rather than simply consume.

The driving project of "Westward" concerns the legacy of metafiction as it affects and influences the possibilities open to young contemporary fiction writers. Metafiction, in the topography of "Westward," is the single reigning literary phenomenon, and it is the lot of the story's characters either to be subordinated by it or to question and oppose that subordination. The action is focused on three creative writing students from the East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program under the tutelage of one Professor Ambrose, supposed author of "Lost in the Funhouse," American metafiction's "most famous story" (Wallace 237). In naming his story's mentor- and father-figure after the author-protagonist of Barth's book, Wallace manages both to affirm Ziegler's account of *Lost in the Funhouse* as an example of art becoming the artist (and vice versa) and to establish Barth's postmodern metafiction as the literary parentage most in need of its

own children's rebellion. Indeed, Wallace's choice of *Funhouse* as parodic object has more to do with Barth's book's canonic rank than with any particular flaw perceived in the book itself. Since parody must include its object's form, and if *Funhouse* is American metafiction's "most famous story," Wallace's use of it serves to ensure a maximum of readerly familiarity. David Morrel seems to agree: "'Lost in the Funhouse' seems in retrospect the most important, progressive, trend-defining American short fiction of its decade" (96). As such, "Westward" is involved in a project of searching for the lonely artist, in order to offer him a way out of the funhouse.

The story's conceit is that the advertising firm of one J.D. Steelritter is holding a gala reunion of everyone who has ever appeared in a commercial for McDonald's Restaurants, "the world's community restaurant" (Wallace, "Westward" 246). The reunion is set to occur in Collision, Illinois, deep in the heart of the United States and the fictional site of the first McDonald's. Two of Ambrose's writing students are McDonald's commercials alumni. Ambrose himself is involved because his famous *Lost in the Funhouse* is in the process of making the move from story to "reality": a chain of "mirrored discotheque franchises" (240) is set

to open, to be known as The Funhouse. Ambrose has doubts about the enterprise, we learn, connected to the potential for criticism: "Criticism: it never left him alone. It lowered his quality of lifestyle" (239). But J.D. Steelritter, supposed advertising genius, disagrees, believing that "Criticism is response. Which is good" (240). For Steelritter, criticism is attention, and attention means engaged imaginations and, most importantly, sales. Criticism, married to interpretation, "works off desire" (240): for Steelritter, successful advertising amounts to conceding the "hopelessly true, what you can't make folks ever want to not be so" and then investing most if not all creative energies into exploiting "whatever's open to interpretation" (240). Opening up interpretive possibilities means ensuring the broadest possible attraction for engaged imaginations, each of which imagines itself to have the truest purchase on the text. Attached to all of this, however, is fear: Steelritter believes that a "big soaked wedge" (240) must be driven into the space made possible by the very possibility of interpretation. This wedge, symbolic of the exploitation of interpretive possibility, must be worked down into those spaces "where folks feel alone, fear their

genitals, embrace their own shadows, want so badly it's a great subsonic groan" (240).

In Wallace's view, 'serious' fiction should be pursuing a similar approach. For Wallace, a significant task confronting the serious writer of fiction is to provide readers with "imaginative access to other selves" (McCaffrey, "Interview" 127). In "Westward," we are introduced to several selves, each of whose participation is the function of a dialogue that itself functions exploratively. Modally, "Westward" is a parody of *Lost in the Funhouse*. Its time is *Funhouse*'s future: the child Ambrose is grown into one Professor C_____ Ambrose; Magda, the object of child Ambrose's desire, is also grown. Magda, however, is still and forever only an object, "never once [. . .] made to be anything other than what others see" (Wallace 353). As Bakhtin claims in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "the hero of a novel is always more or less an ideologue" (38), or proponent of a specific ideology. In the case of "Westward," no one of the three primary characters is the hero; rather, they all function in unison as a dialogized trinity of self, in which each represents one aspect of what "Westward"'s narrator calls a "true" self--"the blindly loyal [Mark Nechtr], the greedily past-impassioned [D.L. Eberhardt], and the self-imprisoned hating [Tom Sternberg]" (Wallace,

"Westward" 358). The sum effect of this trinity is the criticism and parody of American metafiction.

Of the trinity, Mark Nechtr's development is more dramatized than summarized, lending him a focused urgency. His name is a pun on both Barth's "Ambrose His Mark" and on the word *ambrosia*, which is otherwise known as the "nectar [Nechtr] of the gods." Mark's greatest fear, we are told, is "solipsistic solipsism: silence" (Wallace, "Westward" 337). He is thus distinguished from Sternberg and Eberhardt, who seem not to be aware of their own solipsistic tendencies. Mark is also characterized repeatedly as "valued" and a "born listener," but one who is easily distracted. Mark's susceptibility to distraction is in fact his "big flaw" (279), though he seems to overcome the flaw's attendant complications by virtue of the fact that he is supposedly "one of those late-adolescent chosen who radiate the kind of careless health so complete it's sickening" (233), perhaps a figurative compensation for his inward-focused, solipsistic mind. Mark's blind loyalty is a function of his need to "be able to see himself as a decent and responsible guy" (238); thus do we find him "civilly married" to a supposedly pregnant D.L., despite the fact that very few descriptions of her are at all flattering,

such as "she was slatternly and exuded pheromones apparently attractive only to bacteria" (233).

In addition to being a creative writing student, Mark Nechtr is also described as a competitive archer of some accomplishment. As such, the reader learns of Mark's ambitions and thoughts as a fiction writer in terms of archery. Mark's formulation of his ideal story figures the story itself as an arrow, the reader as the target, and the text as the bow: a trinity. Mark's ideal arrow is a "regulation competitive arrow, at full draw" (333), which is to say that it is an arrow (i.e. a fiction) that has conceded to a variety of rules. *Funhouse's* collapse of author and story allows Mark to leave the author out of the trinity. The bow, or text, of Mark's ideal story "gets in the way" (333) because of the distance and resistance between author's and reader's subjectivity--which is to say, as Wallace has in interview, because "true empathy's impossible" (McCaffrey, "Interview" 127). Mark thinks to name his fiction "Trinitarian fiction" (Wallace, "Westward" 347), which points clearly and immediately to a *telos* of redemption. For Mark, the trouble with metafiction, then, is that it is solipsistic: its target is not the reader but itself. And it is from solipsism that Mark would be redeemed. But he is still stuck with something of a

paradox because he realizes that "it would take an architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetrate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict" (332)--in other words, to write the story he envisions or to build such a Funhouse. This cruelty is not explicitly named, but we can call it "truth," "sincerity," "love," or all three, and it does not reside in metafiction because metafiction is untrue; and metafiction is untrue because it can love only itself. Metafiction, like Fenwick's hat in *Sabbatical* and Mark Nechtr's arrow, engages in the motion of travel only to return.

Mark's function is thus to dialogize the artistic position--or, "aesthetic"--of postmodern metafiction: where Ambrose is the self-discovering *Künstler* of *Lost in the Funhouse*, choosing operation of the Funhouse over participation in it, Mark is his heir, whose own eventually articulated position begins with Ambrose and metafiction but does not end with them. For Mark,

A story can, yes [. . .] be made out of a Funhouse. But not by using the Funhouse as the kind of symbol you can take or leave standing there. Not by putting the poor characters in one, or by pretending the poor writer's in one. The way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself in one. For a lover. Make the reader a lover, who wants to be inside. Then do him. Pretend the whole thing's like love. (Wallace, "Westward" 331)

To understand this passage, it is necessary to understand the Funhouse, to understand for instance that it is "carefully designed utilizing mostly systems of mirrors" (280); as such, it is foremost a reflector, "burnished to reflect and refer to every other part" (344) of itself. Since "The mirror does not lie" (280), neither does the Funhouse. What the Funhouse mirrors reflect are desire and fear in an infinite and eternally mutual embrace, one interanimating the other. This Funhouse, moreover, seems to have no discernible exit.

Greedily past-impassioned Drew-Lynn Eberhardt, who "couldn't see far enough past her infatuation with her own crafted cleverness to separate posture from pose, desire from supplication" (Wallace, "Westward" 234), is a caricature of Wallace's "crank-turner." Her civil marriage to Mark is the product of her claim to pregnancy with Mark's child. Complementarily, D.L.'s contribution to Ambrose's writing workshop is described as "fiendishly, coldly fertile" (234). We eventually learn, however, that D.L.'s claims to pregnancy are false, suggesting that her fertility as a writer has also been false. In light of this, it becomes important to note that D.L.'s postmodernism is self-declared: "she actually went around *calling* herself a postmodernist," the narrator tells us. "No matter *where* you are, you Don't

Do This. By convention it's seen as pompous and dumb. She made a big deal of flouting convention, but there was little to love about her convention-flouting" (234). Convention-flouting, of course, is equivalent to rule breaking. The fact of D.L.'s making a "big deal" of rule breaking most clearly characterizes her near the ranks of the postmodern avantgarde, which Gerald Graff effectively dismisses as superfluous ("Myth" 385), but only "near" because it is also implied that she is not a pioneer, not the kind of genius that Wallace distinguishes as one who "weather[s] real shock and invent[s]" (McCaffrey, "Interview" 135). D.L. is a crank-turner because her work, the narrator suggests, is entirely bereft of all communicative impulse: early in the story, the narrator quotes and then dismisses "the opening line of the first story [D.L.] turned in for the very first workshop: 'Nouns verbed by, adverbially adjectival'" (Wallace, "Westward" 234); another of her efforts, noted in Chapter One, is "a twenty-page poem that's *all* punctuation" (251), possibly parodic of *Lost in the Funhouse's* "Menelaid," which in its attempt to effect seven degrees of narrative embeddedness (Barth, "Short Story" 101-2) can seem almost to be constructed more of quotation marks, ellipses, and parentheses than words. D.L. complains to Mark that he "hardly ever" gives her

feedback, to which he replies that he does but that this tends to be "not the reaction [she] want[s] to hear" (Wallace, "Westward" 251). Sternberg's perception of D.L.'s scent is particularly accusative of crank turning: "she smells weird--orangy on top and then a whiff of something dead and preserved underneath" (282). She is, in other words, clever, but this cleverness is one that merely masks her ultimate conventionality and infertility.

Self-hating Tom Sternberg's heroism is most completely tragic, although in his case the tragedy is not constituted in some grievous error in judgment or failure to heed prophecy, but in a physical flaw:

What's *contemporarily* tragic about Sternberg is that he has a fatal *physical* flaw. One of his eyes is turned completely around in his head. From the front it looks like a boiled egg. It won't come back around straight. It's like an injury. It's incredibly bad for his ambitions as a commercial actor. He doesn't talk about what the backward eye sees. He's offended that D.L. in person asked him right off the bat. (Wallace, "Westward" 250)

This passage serves not only to describe the local, "realistic" features of Sternberg's ostensible humanity. Note the first of the many "intrusions" that punctuate "Lost in the Funhouse"'s narration, there accounting for Ambrose's learning how to write fiction: "A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for *italic*

type, *which in turn* is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases [. . .]. Italics are also employed, in fiction stories especially, for 'outside,' intrusive, or artificial voices [. . .]" (Barth 72). In the case of the passage from "Westward" quoted above, the italics are both emphatic and intrusive: on the one hand, their modification of *physical* points to a materialism perceived to be inherent in contemporary United States (circa 1989); on the other hand, since the italics themselves neither explain nor further the plot, they are an indication of the presence of an intrusive authorial agenda. This passage describes the contemporaneity at large in the story's world, a contemporaneity concerned more with its own appearance than with its being, more with its surfaces than with its depths.

Sternberg is elsewhere described by the unnamed narrator as "diplopic" (Wallace, "Westward" 235), which means something like "possessed of 'double vision'." Physiologically, diplopia results from improperly aligned eyes. Whereas eyes that are aligned properly transmit images from two slightly different viewpoints--allowing for the fusing in the brain of a single image--eyes that are not aligned often transmit images whose viewpoints are too different, preventing the necessary fusion. The result is the paradoxical perception neither of one image

nor of two different images but of two identical images. In some cases, the brain suppresses the image from the deviating eye in order to avoid diplopia. In time, such cases experience a complete loss of vision in the diplopic eye. Consequently, since the reception of two slightly different perspectives contributes to the perception of three-dimensionality, the loss of vision in one eye results in a loss of perceptible three-dimensionality, which is to say, a loss of depth. "Westward"'s narrator thus reveals that Sternberg never talks about what the backward-looking eye sees because all it sees is "sometimes a spidery system of synaptic color, if he tries to move the bad eye too quickly. But usually nothing" (280).

The implications of this condition for Sternberg as ideologue of contemporaneity are central: the United States of the late nineteen-eighties has lost sight of the human world around it, choosing instead to concern itself (at least half of the time) only with its own appearance--that is, its surfaces. However, because diplopia is an ailment--and since, for Wallace, contemporary America is addicted to instant-gratification, whose antitheses are ailments--America's "brain" gradually refuses to receive the self-image until its inward-looking eye no longer sees anything at all.

This condition also recalls Wallace's perspective on the contemporary condition of contemporary metafiction. Not only does Sternberg have one backward eye, his face is also "unfortunately one big chaos of poison-sumac cysts, infections and scars, dimpled as a metal roof post-hailstorm" (Wallace, "Westward" 261). Add to this disfigurement Sternberg's ambition to be a professional actor and what remains is one of Wallace's most poignant illustrations of his sense of the sadness that has become American culture. Tom Sternberg's greatest fear is described as "whatever he's inside" (337)--in other words, his own embodiment--and it is suggested that he is "the most claustrophobic individual in the history of his generation" (277). Sternberg is explicitly made to be "an emblem--or synecdochical appendage--of *his generation*" (260). As such, in his embodiment of the fear of embodiment he represents contemporary America's fascination with the "misdirecting pose of bloodless abstraction" (254), otherwise known as ideas, which are the basis of criticism. The problem, for Wallace, does not involve criticism itself so much as criticism used as aesthetic subject matter. Sternberg is a critic who desires to be a performer--which is to say, he wants to be seen. This desire, however, is forestalled by his fear of being recognized for having a body, which is a

fear of being seen. Sternberg the critic knows he is trapped; what he does not know is that ideas alone will not free him. He is thus "suspended between exhaustion and replenishment, between input too ordinary to process and input too ordinary to bear" (254). *Exhaustion* and *replenishment* are important words here because they take Barth on his own critical terms while simultaneously challenging Barth's assertion that what he called the literature of replenishment--postmodern fiction--has in fact turned out to have been even further exhausting; moreover, for Wallace, that fiction is now, as Barth claimed of high modernism, exhausted.

Wallace's foremost desires in "Westward" are (1) to light up the Funhouse's exit, and (2) to communicate that exit's location. Precisely because even metafiction, Wallace's narrator insists, is itself dependent on "just as many" undisclosed assumptions as Realism, it is both untrue and apocalyptic. Apocalyptic fiction, we are told, "desires the inevitable change it hides behind fearing" (Wallace, "Westward" 347). This is to say that apocalyptic fiction desires the very center--epistemological and ontological certainty--which it claims to have dismissed but cannot stop discussing. To accommodate this desire, Wallace sends his hero(es) literally toward the center, in this case Illinois, whose

soil, apparently, "is second only to the Nile delta in terms of decayed-matter percentage, fertility" (257). Because the characters are headed for the center, the reader is headed likewise, where, it follows, she has not been for some time. The center is thus unfamiliar, indemonstrable except through parody. On "Westward"'s model, the center is an environment of abundant growth and populous fertility--not the closed, "ruined amusement" that the Ocean City Funhouse of Ambrose's youth had become even before Steelritter approached Ambrose about opening the chain of discotheques. Because the Ocean City Funhouse is ruined, Ocean City--the community of difference--is ruined. The importance of this ruin is that Ocean City has ruined itself with the very *classification* of difference. Classification, through which difference carves its niches, for the narrator of "Westward," is tantamount to masturbation and is symbolized as the roses which J.D. Steelritter fries in oil and which both Ambrose and Mark regularly eat. The roses, Steelritter says, are "Advertising embodied" (337). Advertising, Steelritter admits, "produce[s] what makes you want to need to consume" (338). Advertising, public relations for consumer capitalism, thus builds fears in order to sell products that are advertised as the objects of those very fears' end. The roses are

also, Steelritter further admits, "just symbols" (338); so revealed, they are overtly metafictional technique. Much of Wallace's criticism of metafiction is delivered through Steelritter, though not always reliably--that is, not everything Steelritter says should be equated with Wallace's position on metafiction. Part of the reason for Steelritter's often-poignant illumination of how fiction works serves to indict the very marketers and advertisers whose energies are too often directed at the cooptation of the avantgarde for mass production². For Steelritter, the roses "Take what you fear most and turn it into wishes" (337). Thus when Sternberg, in desperate need of a bowel movement but afraid to move because movement would reveal the fact and presence of his body, eats a fried rose in the Central Illinois Airport's terminal, he suddenly finds he is able to move. But the narrator (along with Magda and Steelritter) knows the roses' symbolic portent is graver still, that they are equally symbolic of recursion. First, the flowers represent beauty, as flowers in literature often do; moreover, that the flowers are roses can be taken to symbolize symbolism itself. That the roses are fried

²(E.g. "Stories are basically like ad campaigns, no? [. . .] Which they both, in terms of objective, are like getting laid [. . .]" (Wallace, "Westward" 330). It is important to note that Steelritter's terminology is decidedly more crude than the narrator's

indicates their role as product, and not a particularly healthy product at that, in these nutritionally vertiginous times. They are thus representative of a beauty that has been packaged and sold and consumed and otherwise valued only as fuel. As such, they indict postmodern metafiction and its perpetrators for "put[ting] what's beautiful inside [them] [. . .] when the whole reason it's beautiful is that it's outside you" (339). Steelritter's idea that the roses "digest fear into desire" (349), furthermore, is criticized for being recursive because "Fear and desire are *already* married" (349).

As a parody of metafiction, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" makes necessary the use of certain of metafiction's institutionalized techniques, both overt and covert. Much of this use involves the narrator commenting "intrusively" and metafictionally on the status of his narrative, as in "By the way, not too much of this is important, either. But it's true [. . .]" (Wallace, "Westward" 245). Contrarily, however, the narrator also intrudes to comment not just on his own metafiction but also on metafiction generally, primarily

(e.g. Steelritter's "laid" versus the narrator's "love"), which further indicts the coopting energies of capitalism.

in the interest of denying that his narrative is metafictional:

[. . .] if this were metafiction, which it's NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominate reference would very probably be mentioned, which would be a princely pain in the ass, not to mention cocky [. . .], but in metafiction it would, nay *needs* be mentioned [. . .].(265)

This tactic has raised critical eyebrows, Wallace's retrospective own included. While Bharat Tandon's review of *Girl with Curious Hair* concludes approvingly, it consigns "Westward" to the status of portent for "the willful [*sic*] prolixity of *Infinite Jest*," primarily for "colluding" (22) with the very object of its parody--i.e. with metafiction. Wallace himself has referred to the story as "crude and naïve and pretentious" (McCaffrey, "Interview" 142), an admission to which Lawrence Norfolk is probably referring when he claims that Wallace had "forcefully disowned" (25) it. For Wallace, recursion is a "trap"; in trying to show that trap with "Westward," Wallace believes himself to have fallen into it. Stephen Burn, in the preparatory overview of Wallace's oeuvre in *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, takes Wallace more or less at face value on this point and passes by "Westward" with little additional comment. Tandon's is thus the only critical disavowal of the story that makes an attempt to clarify, however vaguely, its own position.

Any credibility attendant upon these disavowals resides in a tension between what the narrator *says* and what the narrator *shows*--that is, between what is summarized and what is dramatized. The narrator repeatedly says that "Westward" is not metafiction, as in the passage quoted above. But in its parodic use of metafictional technique, it nevertheless flirts with metafictional form, which itself is a capitalization on the tension between summary and drama, in many cases collapsing the distinction between the two. One explanation for this flirtation has already been given: "Westward" is parodic. Nevertheless, the piece *is* metafiction, whose "only real value," for Wallace, will be its demonstration of "the kind of pretentious loops" (McCaffrey, "Interview" 142) that occur when dealing with recursion. It seems possible that such value remains nonetheless high.

"Westward"'s narrator's criticisms of metafiction function as overt propositions. Readers are thus required either to agree or to disagree, once they have acknowledged the narrator's analysis. As such, the narrator's propositions effect a description of postmodern metafiction and the system in which metafiction has always operated. And if these readers are embodied in Sternberg, "who like most people of his

generation tries to brush eye-averted and shoulder-first past whatever disorder he causes" (Wallace 290), they will have their work cut out for them with *Infinite Jest*, the subject of the next chapter, which places work itself, in the forms of concentration, focus, and deliberation, at its center, from which all pleasure worthy of that appellation radiates.

Chapter Three:

Infinite Jest: The World is Too Much

"Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" is an overt work of metafiction whose primary thesis is that postmodern metafiction and its avantgarde apotheosis of rebellion for the sake of rebellion has run its course. By contrast, Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996), is simultaneously the covert case against the exhaustion of possibilities both desired and feared in the discourse of postmodern metafiction, and the diagnosis and prognosis of a culture that is, in Neil Postman's words, "amusing [itself] to death" (*Amusing Ourselves to Death* [1985]). *Infinite Jest* is metafictional to the extent that it is aware of the implications it poses for fiction, though fiction does not figure among its dominant surface interests. *Infinite Jest* is thus, in Hutcheon's terms, covertly metafictional. Its subject is the limited infinity of human imagination, which Wallace explores through the themes of addiction, top-level sports, popular media, mathematics, and political paranoia and corruption, each

of which function according to rules. This subject is the same as Barth's in "The Limits of the Imagination," and it is fair to say that Wallace sympathizes with Barth's conclusion. For Wallace, who notes that it has become possible to "break any or all of the [artistic] rules without getting laughed out of town," it is nevertheless also "valuable and brave" (McCaffery, "Interview" 149) to work *within* a set of rules. For Wallace, postmodern metafiction was once a valid artistic response to a specific cultural situation. This response, however, is rendered facile by its internalization of the avantgarde drive toward originality. Postmodern metafiction thus congealed into an "anesthesia of form" (McCaffery, "Interview" 136). "Anesthesia" here takes the shape of the popularization and subsequent commercialization of the forms of narcissistic narrative. For Wallace, metafiction, once the cutting edge of experimental, serious fiction, has become comforting and easy. *Infinite Jest* is a response to this situation.

The novel's plot is usefully apprehended as three intertwining subplots, all of which threaten to assume centrality (though none of them finally does). One subplot involves the students, staff, and faculty of Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.); another involves the

residents and staff of Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, located literally down the hill from the academy; the third involves the search by federal agents and terrorists alike for a film that threatens to debilitate the nation, possibly the world. The majority of the novel's action occurs during the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. Canada, the United States, and Mexico, under the American Presidency of one Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner, have become the Organization of North American Nations, otherwise known as O.N.A.N. (All masturbatory implications are, in this regard, encouraged; e.g. "the tumescence of O.N.A.N.ism" [283]). The recording of time, in the United States, is now "subsidized" by the highest bidder, a practice that was begun as a post-millennial funding solution to the problems created by the barrels of toxic waste supposedly "found" in New England.¹ Much of New England, in fact, has been "reconfigured" entirely off the map of the United States and onto the map of Canada. Because of the toxic waste, the area is unbelievably volatile; sections

¹ "CHRONOLOGY OF ORGANIZATION OF NORTH AMERICAN NATIONS' REVENUE-ENHANCING SUBSIDIZED TIME™, BY YEAR: (1) Year of the Whopper; (2) Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad; (3) Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar; (4) Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken; (5) Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishmaster; (6) Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-To-Install-Upgrade For Infernatron/InterLace TP Systems For Home, Office, Or Mobile (sic); (7) Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland; (8) Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment; (9) Year of Glad" (223).

of its territory are subject to monthly cycles of intense growth and utter decline. This so-called Great Concavity/Convexity has been designated by the United States as its national waste dump. Having forced Canada to accept both political control over the contaminated territory and its continued use as a dump, the United States engages what seems to be a national hygiene crisis. Consequences for citizens along both sides of the newly reconfigured territory's border are largely teratogenic: children are regularly born in Quebec without skulls, while the birth of Mario Incandenza, a major character, is reported to have been "a complete surprise and terribly premature" such that he "had to be more or less scraped out, Mario, like the meat of an oyster from a womb to whose sides he'd been found spiderishly clinging, tiny and unobtrusive" (313). Other Concavity/Convexity-influenced narratives include feral hamsters, mile-high toddlers, carnivorous flora, and "marsh-gas that melts your face off and leaves you with exposed gray-and-red facial musculature for the rest of your ghoulish-pariah life" (670). The times are, not surprisingly, often referred to as "troubled."

The aforementioned film--specifically, a film-*cartridge*, the latest in home entertainment technology, modeled, obviously, after videocassettes and digital

video discs (DVDs)--is at the center of the three plots. This film is ostensibly titled *Infinite Jest*, the final effort of James O. Incandenza, founder of E.T.A. Groups from both the United States and Canada are in quest of the cartridge. From Canada comes the nefarious terrorist organization known as Wheelchair Assassins--vicious, paraplegic Québécois separatists who want the Master cartridge, the only copy from which further copies can be made, so that they can wield it in their overriding efforts of separation from Canada. In the U.S. reside agents of the Office of Unspecified Services, an amalgamation of the pre-millennial, pre-Subsidization N.S.A., A.T.F., D.E.A., C.I.A., O.N.R., and Secret Service. What makes the film so pivotal is the reportedly homicidal effect attendant on its viewing. This effect is rumoured to be fatal: any viewer who sees the film becomes incapable of either doing or wanting to do anything but continue to watch; inevitably, the viewer's body, having been neglected at the service of an altogether insidious and passive sort of pleasure, expires. As the dual plots of the students and staff of E.T.A. and of the residents and staff of Ennet House unfurl, oblivious to the current continental crisis of Entertainment, the quest for the film-cartridge threatens to infiltrate, disrupt, and, effectively, terminate them.

All narrative evidence suggests that the film's fatal effect is the result of a lens and a person, one Joelle Van Dyne, who is featured in *Infinite Jest* (the film)

as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant, her hideously deformed face either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color or anamorphosized into unrecognizability as any kind of face by the camera's apparently very strange and novel lens [. . .]. (Wallace 788)

This "strange and novel lens" is the contribution of filmmaker James O. Incandenza, whose background prior to founding E.T.A. includes a successful career in "hard-core-math-based optical science" (81). The lens was designed, we are told, "to blur things in imitation of a neonatal retina, everything recognizable and yet without outline" (222), an effect referred to elsewhere as "auto-wobble" or "ocular wobble" (939). In one of the film's scenes, Joelle as the Death-Mother figure is inclined over the specially-fitted camera, explaining in very simple language that individuals have many lives, that "Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life's mother" (788). Given that the camera lens suggests an infant's perspective, we are to conclude that the camera, a sort of "audience-synecdoche" (789),

pulls the viewer-as-infant into the film. Joelle's "wobble-lensed" (999) image proceeds to explain to the camera-as-viewer-as-infant that the reason for mothers' obsessive, consuming, driven, "and yet somehow narcissistically loving" (789) behaviour towards their children has to do with this recursive condition of being those children's murderer in their past lives, such that "the mothers are trying frantically to make amends for a murder neither of you quite remember" (789). Joelle has never seen the film; through her story we are told that its Master cartridge is buried with its maker in L'Islet Province of "Nouveau Québec," now deep in the midst of the Great Concavity's annular generation-decimation cycle. Its recovery, potentially bringing the end of the world with it, is the event to which all subplots inexorably move. The most difficult element of this "tripartite plot" (Cioffi 161) is that resolution is not clear.

Like "Westward," *Infinite Jest* looks always ahead, and, thus prognosticating, it is Wallace's effort to redeem U.S. culture from both the paralysis of hyper-self-consciousness and its valuation of pleasure as an end unto itself. To do so, the novel plays on motifs of work, addiction, and recursion in order to effect, in Catherine Nichols's words, "a temporary suspension of

official order that [allows] for a creative and therapeutic admixture of the symbolic forms of cultural life" (3).

The recursive cycle describes an enclosure, the viciousness of the circle that does not know its own perimeter and which takes the form of the "cage" metaphors punctuating *Infinite Jest's* topography. These metaphorical cages are representative of solipsism, evocative of human beings enclosed inside their own skulls, perpetuating and imposing, failing to impose, or statically deliberating on whether or not to impose themselves on a world that may or may not care for them. The problem with this kind of solipsistic enclosure is that knowledge becomes entirely open to doubt. Highly self-conscious, the solipsistic individual fears she may not be cared for. Since this individual is, like all humans, a being in time that must either live until natural death or commit suicide, she must do something: she must respond to her fear. The response with which Wallace is chiefly concerned is escape, primarily in the form of what he calls "malignant" addiction, defined according to whether or not "(1) [the addiction] causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as a relief from the very problems it causes" ("*Pluram*" 38). So defined, addiction is annular, an escape that begins

and terminates with itself. In the infinite jest of *Infinite Jest*, just about everything is potentially subject to this pattern: "gambling can be an abusable escape, too, and work, shopping, and shoplifting, and sex, and abstention, and masturbation, and food, and exercise, and meditation/prayer [. . .]" (Wallace, *Jest* 202). Not surprisingly, most of these activities can be performed alone, further implicating U.S. culture's addiction to solipsism.

According to N. Katherine Hayles, "*Infinite Jest* creates cycles within cycles within cycles" (684) through the exploration of "the underground seepages and labyrinthine pathways through which the abjected always returns in recursive cycles of interconnections that inexorably tie together the sanctified and the polluted" (687). These "labyrinthine pathways" are present in *Infinite Jest* as repeated instances of actions intended to drive off complications (such as suffering, pain, and reality) "past hope of return" (Wallace, *Jest* 294). It is this attempt to banish complication that, as Hayles sees it, constitutes the "illusion of autonomy" (678). The "illusion," for Hayles, involves "valuing autonomy without attending to recursivity," which leads to "destructive behaviors" (678). Ken Erdedy, for instance,

having tried to stop smoking marijuana approximately seventy or eighty times, has again

had to buy a new bong [...] because whenever he finished the last of the substances on hand he always threw out all his bongs and pipes, screens and tubes and rolling papers and roach clips, lighters and Visine and Pepto-Bismol and cookies and frosting, to eliminate all future temptation. (Wallace, *Jest* 18-20)

Erdedy is likened in this scene to an insect that resides in a shelving unit in Erdedy's condominium. The insect's behavioural patterns involve little more than entering and exiting a hole in the shelving unit. Revealingly, the narrator tells us that the insect

didn't seem to do anything. It just came out of the hole in the girder onto the edge of the steel shelf and just sat there. After a while it would disappear back into the hole in the girder, and [Erdedy] was pretty sure it didn't do anything in there either. He felt similar to the insect inside the girder his shelf was connected to, but was not sure just how he was similar. (19)

Erdedy is not sure how he is similar to the insect because he is "unprepared to commit himself to the course of action that would be required to explore the question" (20). He is, in other words, unprepared to do the work necessary to an understanding of the text of his life. In Hayles's terms, this illusion of autonomy involves the seeming belief that the self operates independently of an external world; and that, once driven off past hope of return, complication no longer resides in that self.

In the interest of redemption, Wallace expects his reader to work for meaning and pleasure. Yet, he is intensely aware of the degree to which too much work required of the reader is all too often the first criterion for a difficult book's premature abortion. And *Infinite Jest* is one such book whose reading, simply because of its physical length, is as often as not prematurely aborted. Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly*, for instance, refers to the novel as an "infinite burden," complaining that she "cannot lift the thing to crack its wonders" (146). Schwarzbaum's is an extreme case; but if it is sincere, it points all the more revealingly to the cultural condition that Wallace confronts.

Recently in *The New Yorker* (Sept. 30/02), Jonathan Franzen questioned the relative merits of so-called "difficult" or "intellectual" fiction, taking William Gaddis as his authorial model. Franzen's conclusion is that Gaddis, while certainly brilliant, technically innovative, and prodigiously talented, failed after *The Recognitions* to make any attempt whatsoever to communicate with his readers. Franzen arrives at his conclusion through a discussion of two "opposing models" of fiction. On one hand is what Franzen calls the "Status model" of fiction, which invokes a vocabulary of

"art," "genius," "value," and "importance," and assumes that "the average reader is a philistine" (100). On the other hand is the "Contract model," which involves a shared sustenance of trust between an author and his readers: "The discourse here," says Franzen, "is one of *pleasure* and connection" (100, my emphasis). As Franzen has been identified as a confidant of Wallace's, it is perhaps not surprising to recognize the deep resemblances between their positions with respect to the potential value both of literary art and of pleasure. Franzen finds himself "subscribing" to both the Status and the Contract model, whereas Wallace's dominant aim is to write fiction that "can provide a payoff and communicate a function rather than just seem jumbled and prolix" (McCaffery, "Interview" 137). This chapter examines whether and how *Infinite Jest* does succeed with Wallace's self-declared project of accessible difficulty, and with the implications this project holds for postmodern metafiction.

No critic of *Infinite Jest* has yet accounted for why *Infinite Jest* is a difficult novel. Some reviewers, like Michiko Kakutani, condemn the novel, taking it to be "an excuse for Wallace to simply show off his remarkable skills as a writer and empty the contents of his restless mind" (B2). These reviewers see Wallace as one of

Franzen's "Status" authors and are offended. But the difficulties of *Infinite Jest* are multivalent and purposeful. George Steiner's essay, "On Difficulty" (1978), is instructive on this point. For Steiner, whose focus on poetry does not detract from his theory's transferability to other literary forms, difficulty can be classified according to four categories: "contingent," "modal," "tactical," and "ontological." Contingent difficulties are "the most visible" (Steiner 27) and tend to involve a reader's unfamiliarity with specific words or ostensibly historical data. A text is modally difficult when it "articulates a stance towards human conditions which we find essentially inaccessible or alien" (28), or when the form in which this stance is presented is unfamiliar. Tactical difficulties are usually the result of a writer's intentional effort to be difficult, though sometimes, says Steiner, such difficulties arise "in the failure of adequacy between [the writer's] intention and his performative means" (33). Intentional tactical difficulty looks to achieve "specific stylistic effects" (33), and is compelled by impulses both to "create new words and syntactic modes" and to "revitalize" the common language (34). Ontological difficulty is a special case, in that it alone of Steiner's four difficulties is potentially

insurmountable: where contingent difficulties can be "looked up" and modal and tactical difficulties can be overcome with practice, training and work, ontological difficulties "involve trying to see and feel the world from a perspective other than one's own" (Davis and Schleifer 15). Distances ideological, temporal, and spatial tend to be impediments to overcoming ontological difficulties.

Infinite Jest is replete with contingent difficulties, most notably the army of medical and pharmaceutical terminology that Wallace marches across his pages, such as "scrofulodermic" (187), "arachnodactylism" (314), and "pentazocine hydrochloride" (984). Its modal and tactical difficulties are continuous, including the highly fragmented structure of the novel's plots and its 388 endnotes, which serve also to fracture and interrupt reading--in other words, to force readers to work. The novel's ontological difficulties are difficult to predict, as their activation depends upon the relativity of individual readers' experiences. It is nevertheless fair to suggest that specific sections of narration, particularly those written to accommodate idiosyncratic spoken dialects, will present impenetrable barriers for some readers:

It was yrstruly and C and Poor Tony that crewed that day and everything like that. The AM were wicked bright and us a bit sick however we scored our wake ups boosting some items at a sidewalk sale in the Harvard Squar where it were warm upping and the snow coming off onnings and then later Poor Tony ran across an old Patty citizen type of his old acquaintance from like the Cape and Poor Tony got over and pretended like he would give a blow job On The House and we got the citizen to get in his ride with us and crewed on him good and we got enough \$ off the Patty type to get straightened out for true all day and crewed on him hard and C wanted we should elemonade the Patty's map for keeps and everything like that [. . .].
(128-29)

This utterance goes on, its speaker eventually recounting a gruesome tale involving C's death from a bag of heroin mixed with Drano. Erik R. Mortenson is concerned specifically with this scene, though only as a means of tracing Wallace and Burroughs's "restoration" of "the addict's humanity" (37). As such, Mortenson is uninterested in doing the work of, for instance, identifying "yrstruly" as Emil Minty, resident of Ennet House. To Mortenson's credit, this identification is unclear; it is, however, traceable: "Emil still had [Poor Tony] marked for de-mapping as a consequence of that horrid thing with Wo and Bobby C last winter" (Wallace, *Jest* 300). Bobby C is "C"; Wo is the dealer who supplied the Drano-laced heroin; Poor Tony had cheated Wo; the Drano-laced heroin was for him.

Stephen Burn's *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*

begins with the question, "How difficult does literature need to be?" (9), and proceeds to note that "Wallace's novel has become a kind of exemplar for difficulty in contemporary fiction" (10). Critical work dedicated to the novel has concerned itself, however, more with specific locations and tactics of difficulty than with the questions of why the novel is difficult and how that difficulty is connected with Wallace's specific aims as a fiction writer. Burn's guide is primarily a response to all critics who claim that *Infinite Jest*, because of its "anti-confluent" form which seems to fail to reach an obvious climax, cannot be understood as a unified whole. These critics include Dale Peck, whose negative review for the *London Review of Books* ("Well, duh") includes the comment, "What makes the book's success even more noteworthy is that it is, in a word, terrible" (14); and Michiko Kakutani, who calls the book "arbitrary and self-indulgent" (B2). Burn's thesis is that, with effort, the seeming arbitrariness and lack of cohesion of the three plots can in fact be deduced. That it is the reader who is required to carry out this deduction is entirely Wallace's point.

Burn tries primarily to account for the approximate year-long gap in the novel's chronology, and his efforts

are regularly perceptive and illuminating. Of particular importance is his success in locating at least one instance of textual evidence suggestive of the supposedly absent climax. The novel's opening scene, which takes place in November in the Year of Glad, is the most advanced in the chronology. The year-long gap thus begins with November in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment (Y.D.A.U.). Hal Incandenza, who narrates the opening scene and is both a student of E.T.A. and son of its founder, thinks of "John N.R. Wayne, who would have won this year's WhataBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and [he] dig up [his] father's head" (16-17). John ("No Relation") Wayne is a fellow student of Hal's at E.T.A.; Don Gately is both a recovering oral narcotics addict and a live-in staff member at Ennet House. To inattentive readers like Peck and Kakutani, Gately and Hal never meet. In fact, as Burn's study makes clear, they do meet. Even so, Burn fails to mention another reference to the same exhumation, which occurs from Gately's perspective late in the novel, and which, furthermore, is still more revealing. Lying in his hospital bed, Gately has a dream in which

he's with a very sad kid and they're in a graveyard digging some dead guy's head up and it's really important, like Continental-

Emergency important [. . .] and the sad kid is trying to scream at Gately that the important thing was buried in the guy's head and to divert the Continental Emergency to start digging the guy's head up before it's too late [. . .].(934)²

Hal's inability to speak, both in Gately's dream and in the opening scene is, for Burn, "most likely" a result of the Wheelchair Assassins' capture of him (37). Other possibilities are suggested both in Hal's November Y.D.A.U. willful withdrawal from marijuana and in his and fellow student Michael Pemulis's plans to experiment with DMZ, a potent hallucinogenic. Burn's reading is inconclusive, as he grants that the novel's ambiguity is too great to synthesize entirely. Nevertheless, Burn is right to say both that *Infinite Jest* "place[s] demands upon the reader" and that the reason it does so is "organically connected to what the novel is trying to say about entertainment" (10). What Burn does not do, however, is elaborate on either the "organic" nature of *Infinite Jest*'s difficulty, or its thesis concerning entertainment. Difficulty is organic to *Infinite Jest* precisely because, for Wallace, contemporary fiction in the wake of postmodern metafiction had become "empty and solipsistic" (McCaffery, "Interview" 142), resulting in

²While this reference is indeed to a dream, which problematizes the possibility that it is also evidence of a meeting between Gately and

both writers' and readers' lazier expectations.

Difficulty in *Infinite Jest* functions always in the metaphorical service of the thesis that the best things in life are not free but earned.

Others who acknowledge the novel's difficulty more or less all comment on *Infinite Jest*'s physical size and length. Dan Cryer calls the novel a "mega-book" that "will prop open even a castle's gates" (par. 1). For Jonathan Dee, *Infinite Jest* is a "comic behemoth" (15). Alexander Star describes it as "a massive assemblage that creeps forward at an awkward gait" (27). R.Z. Sheppard, owing to the novel's length and title, calls it "doubly intimidating" and suggests that "the joke may be on the reader" (70). Timothy Jacobs equates the novel's difficulty with its endnotes alone (225), which does a disservice both to his own reading as well as to, in ignoring them, the novel's more textured layers of difficulty at the levels both of dramatization and thematization.

For Frank Louis Cioffi, the "best label" for *Infinite Jest*'s "performative" structure is "encyclopedic heaping" (161) because *Infinite Jest* overloads the reader with information. But the overload is not, says Tom

Hal, it also resonates with Wallace's belief that the most effective aesthetic communications occur unconsciously.

LeClair, self-indulgent; rather, it sprouts from, "if anything, a too-earnest concern for readers and other living things" (16), which LeClair detects in Wallace's focus on prodigies.³ Cioffi argues that Wallace's communicative efforts in *Infinite Jest* "eviscerate" performance. This evisceration takes the form of constant interruptions, the frustration of both reader expectations as well as the novel's own "comfortable routines," and "syntactically reinventing the English language" (162). *Performance* refers literally to reading, which involves both cognitive ("noetic") and physical ("non-noetic") activity. In many ways, Cioffi's assessment is wholly apt: *Infinite Jest's* overt preoccupation is with the nature and context of demonstrated prowess, prodigy, or the Potential deliberating on and seeking to perform the Actual but in many cases slipping into despair at failures to perform. However, Cioffi's argument lacks a persuasively sufficient grounding in technical particulars, in those textual locations where *Infinite Jest's* "performance of disturbance" is, for him, "singular" (169). Furthermore, if the novel does "eviscerate" its own performance by a

³The root of *prodigy*, LeClair advises, concerns omens, portents, and monsters. Thus, for LeClair, *Infinite Jest* is "propelled" towards its own prodigious roots as a warning "against mankind's leaving the course of nature and becoming a monster in the world web of life, destroying itself in the process" (16).

reader, it does so only because it both dramatizes and thematizes difficulty.

Cioffi expends much less effort examining the novel's language than he does recounting his own responses to it. Describing *Infinite Jest* as a kind of "one-can-only-stand-back-and-clap" performance, Cioffi's argument assumes a specious, perhaps overly-impressionistic quality, for instance when he asserts that "we are not under the illusion that what is happening in the text is real; rather, for us, it is real, it has become real" (172). The performance of *Infinite Jest* requires more than a willingness to switch from primary text to endnote to dictionary--it requires concentration, focus, and attention to detail, which are very much noetic (or cognitive) tasks and are internalized in the text. Among the "many exotic new facts" one of *Infinite Jest*'s many narrators tell us we will acquire, "[i]f, by the virtue of charity or the circumstance of desperation, [we] ever chance to spend a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility" (Wallace, *Jest* 200), are that "it takes effort to pay attention to any one stimulus for more than a few seconds" (202); that "boring activities become, perversely, much less boring if you concentrate intently on them" (203); and that "concentrating intently on

anything is very hard work" (203). It is in precisely this very hard work of concentrating intently that redemption from what Wallace has called our "lazy expectations" is to be found, and in which the inhabitants of *Infinite Jest's* world variously succeed and fail.

According to Cioffi, *Infinite Jest* is an example of the "disturbing text," a phrase he uses "to describe the rather private performance of a text as it enacts itself within the consciousness of the reader," a performance the response to which is "powerful and longlasting" and which "for a few days strangle[s] normal life" (163). *Disturbing* itself implies readerly dread, fear, worry, and self-doubt, associations which accord with Wallace's interviewed comments concerning his interest in aggravating his readers' sense of mortality (McCaffery, "Interview" 136). But *Infinite Jest's* disturbing dread is in no way structured in images of facing "what we want to deny" (136). Rather, images of *failures* to face what we want to deny are juxtaposed against images of "those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the time's darkness" (131). These elements include "joy, charity, genuine connections, [. . .] stuff that doesn't have a price" (McCaffery, "Interview" 132), and are manifest in most cases not as efforts of

deliberately facing the denial of dread but as simply not turning from the possibility of redemption.

One example of a character in *Infinite Jest* who does not turn from what he wants to deny and who is thus associated with heroism is Donald Gately. As live-in Staff at Ennett House, Gately supervises the residents. Gately's addictive past had included a "career" in burglary, one of which "jobs" resulted in the accidental death of an "ambassador" for the Québécois Wheelchair Assassins. This particular accident attracted the attention of an Assistant District Attorney from Revere with an incredible capacity for the sustenance of grudges. Gately found his way to Ennet House primarily as a means of hiding from this Revere prosecutor, attended the required Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, followed the advice there proffered, and eventually discovered he no longer needed to use substances. His remaining at the House following his graduation speaks to his continued need to hide.

One night while on-duty, Gately is drawn into a situation wherein a resident under his charge--one Randy Lenz, recently taken to venting his withdrawal-rage on various neighbourhood animals--has provoked the reciprocal rage of a group of Canadians whose dog Lenz had just brutally killed. The Canadians follow Lenz to

Ennett House and a terrific showdown ensues. During the conflict, Gately subdues the retaliating Canadians but receives a gunshot to the shoulder. Once the commotion settles down, Gately is moved to a nearby hospital, where he is tempted with a reintroduction to his one and only former lover: Demerol. The level of concentration, focus, and determination that Gately has to enforce--intubated and strapped to a hospital bed, unable to speak, to move, or to write--coincides with Wallace's conception of the rewarding work involved in participating in serious fiction. Gately is faced with two primary choices: the first is to accept the narcotic pain relief urged on him by his doctor and thus risk succumbing once again to his addiction; the second is not to accept the narcotic, but instead to accept his suffering, and thus attempt literally to heal himself. Since, with Burn, it is reasonable to attest that Gately does in fact survive the gunshot, it is reasonable to attest that Gately chose wisely.

And Gately is rewarded. He is visited by a Wraith, which is probably the "spirit" of James Incandenza, though LeClair claims it to be an incarnation of Wallace himself (32). The Wraith's visitations can be read as covertly metafictional, especially in its disclosures to Gately of its intentions, in life, as a filmmaker. These

intentions can be understood in relation to literature as well as to film; as such, they help communicate the "payoff" to the reader of *Infinite Jest*. The Wraith says that Incandenza's films had always been driven by what it calls "radical realism," which involved giving every character in the film a voice instead of relying on soundless "figurants" who merely work their mouths in pretense of background conversation. The novel *Infinite Jest* likewise features a hugely multiple collection of narrators and voices, some of which, unidentified, the reader experiences only fleetingly. More than the Wraith, and because he has accepted his suffering, Gately simply begins to understand himself, his life, and his circumstances. He experiences "a sort of lexical rape," where words "Gately knows he doesn't know from a divot in the sod"--for instance, "scopophilia," "bricolage," and "chronaxy"--invade his consciousness with "ghastly intrusive force" (832) and point the reader to Gately's understanding both that "[n]o single second [of life] was past enduring" (890), and that any "conversation or interchange is better than none at all" (839). This lexical rape functions covertly to reveal Wallace's conviction that knowledge is mediated, by language as well as by images.

One example of the Wraith's (i.e. Incandenza's) "film work" is especially critical of metafiction. The hypothetical film genre, "Found Drama," theorizes the eschewal of all conventional appurtenances of theater-- i.e. audience, director, stage, set--because reality is not constituted of these things. Furthermore, the protagonist of a Found Drama must be unaware that s/he is a protagonist in the Drama because "in Reality nobody thinks they're in any sort of Drama" (Wallace, *Jest* 1028). Although hypothetical, Incandenza nonetheless managed to elicit respectably-published critical consideration of the supposed genre. It is revealed through Orin Incandenza that the Found Drama theory was, in fact, a revenge on critics who had negatively criticized father Incandenza's work, a revenge in the form of a joke. The joke is that the drama does not exist: nobody experiences it, and nobody knows what it was, even though Incandenza and company did like to speculate about its hypothetical nature over drinks. Production involved removing a page from the telephone directory and throwing a dart at it; the name hit by the dart became, for the following one and a half hours, the Found Drama's "subject." When the time was up, Incandenza and his partners would retire to a local drinking establishment (Incandenza, it turns out, having

been a hopeless alcoholic). Popular and academic critics alike, not "getting" the joke, began to reevaluate Incandenza's oeuvre, hailing Found Drama "as the ultimate in avant-garde Neorealism" (1028), though this praise would cease once Incandenza revealed the hoax. The success of the joke in the novel reflects Wallace's conviction that part of America's retreat from empathy is the result of the intellectualization of values and principles. The critics of Found Drama are made to be ludicrous, of course, because they are the tools of parody. The entire episode is presented in the novel in summary in the endnotes, in a one-sided conversation between Orin Incandenza and an agent of the U.S. Office of Unspecified Services in which only Orin's speech is given.

As Wallace told Valerie Stivers of *Stim* e-zine, his project with *Infinite Jest* was

to [do] something very hard: to write a book that's hard [but still] fun enough, so that someone is willing to do the work [. . .] so that the entertainingness of the book, and the entertainingness of the stuff the book talks about, enter into a kind of intercourse.
(Wallace, "Stivers")

By "intercourse" Wallace seems to mean a mediation of the paradoxical tension provoked in the composition of Wallace's brand of serious fiction, the paradox of trying simultaneously to entertain and to antagonize the

reader's received expectations about entertainment. The most resonant example in the novel of this intercourse of "entertainingnesses" involves the discussion of E.T.A.'s tennis philosophy, which can be related to our general concern with metafiction.

At Enfield Tennis Academy, tennis under Coach Gerhardt Schtitt is taught as a means to achieve not wealth or celebrity, but civic responsibility. Founder James Incandenza, mathematics genius, hired Schtitt because the coach seemed to know intuitively that tennis operates according to a "Cantorian continuum of infinities of possible move and response" (82). This description is based on the work of Georg Cantor, who proved not only the existence of infinity but that infinity is plural; and, further, that some infinities are larger than others. Cantor called his theory "set theory," the idea being that the "set" (or collection of terms) of all infinities must necessarily contain itself, and thus be larger than all other infinite sets. In the case of tennis--which, in *Infinite Jest*, like film and filmmaking, can be taken to be analogous to fiction--the continuum contains, as "terms," actual hits of a tennis ball by tennis rackets. At the beginning of a match, the end result--that is, who will win and who will lose--is impossible to predict because, in the absence of a single

hit ball, there are no boundaries to the possible outcome. Once match play is joined, however, boundaries fall into place, even though the possibility of response increases exponentially for each response: after all, there can be only one winner and one loser. Thus, while each individual volley admits of a growing infinity of choice, each choice in turn narrows the possibilities available for the final response. As such, match play is "infoliating, *contained*, [. . .] mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*, bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent" (82). This covertly metafictional analogy to fiction describes a process of interpretation, in which the reading of a novel involves the construction of a unified statement concerning what may have been anything but unified. What is most revealing about this philosophy is its insistence that

The true opponent, the enfolding boundary, is the player himself. Always and only the self out there, on court, to be met, fought, brought to the table to hammer out terms. The competing boy on the net's other side: he is not the foe: he is more the partner in the dance. He is the what is the word *excuse* or *occasion* for meeting the self. As you are his occasion. (84)

In terms of fiction, the same is true of writer and reader: self-competitive writing makes a better writer, as self-competitive reading makes a better reader. In

other words, work yields greater yield: "You compete with your own limits to transcend the self in imagination and execution" (84). *Infinite Jest* is one such self-competition for Wallace, and it would not be egregious to point to "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" as one of his own defining limits, which the later novel does indeed transcend.

Infinite Jest is a novel that concludes against conclusion, completing itself with a sigh that drifts out with a tide that, at the end, for Gately is "way out" (Wallace 981). While the novel's seemingly unresolved conclusion is an example of Wallace's practice of frustrating reader expectations, it also suggests an infinity of possibility whose limits make fiction possible in the first place, an infinity still available even after "yesterday's crash" or "the great divide"--after, that is, postmodernism and metafiction--and during today's recovery, which will not come easy.

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