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Diagnosing David Foster Wallace

Amanda Redinger
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Sponsor: Dr. Cheryl Foster

Diagnosing David Foster Wallace

It's been twelve years since *Infinite Jest* was first published, and by now David Foster Wallace's gargantuan novel should have had enough time to settle. Distanced from the hype and shock that accompanied its appearance and no longer experiencing a rush of heady emotion in the face of a 2lb 10oz 'novel of its generation,' the reading public has now had a chance to let its immediate impression of the book resolve itself into at least the beginnings of what *Infinite Jest* will be after passing through the hands of those of us who are completely responsible for its future, those of us who have read and given some significant attention to understanding it. The problem is that the future of *Infinite Jest* is particularly difficult to gauge, despite the fact that the reactions it provokes in readers are generally quite passionate. I suspect this is because the initial confusion that readers face when confronted with a 'new' type of literature has in this case given way not to any sort of readerly consensus but to a much more profound and conflicted version of their earlier disorientation; twelve years later and we still cannot tell this book's ass from its elbow. And for some of us, this is more than just a little upsetting.

When first chewing over the idea of using *Infinite Jest* as the subject of a paper I realized that my options were essentially twofold, and that the sheer volume of this book had already eliminated any chance of option one, i.e. my being able to stuff it under an eight-month long microscope and give it the kind of close reading it deserves. I only had four months. The second option was to abandon all hopes of pulling a clever new thread out of a book that's already yielded up most of its pressing concerns to other thoughtful critics and to examine *Infinite Jest*

under a wider lens that includes both the thinking of seasoned Wallace experts as well as responses from reviewers and critics. My interest is in where this book stands as an experienced phenomenon, as an amalgamation of stylistic decisions that are trying to perform various functions and communicate certain things to their audience. David Foster Wallace places great importance on the formal qualities of his work, an aspect of his fiction that is often commented on but rarely studied in any depth. Because of this, instead of focusing on the thematic content of *Infinite Jest*, which has been mined repeatedly by scholars, I've decided to give my attention solely to its style, structure, and formal qualities. I hope that a greater understanding of these neglected elements will help illuminate some of the reasons that *Infinite Jest* is, at base, a confusing experience for many people, and perhaps allow us to speculate on its chance of success with future generations of readers.

My argument in this paper is not very complex, but it's honest. I've taken what Wallace has said about fictional form in his many public announcements on the topic and analyzed *Infinite Jest's* formal qualities against the backdrop of his words. Over the course of several now-famous essays and interviews conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, David Foster Wallace explained how he feels about the phenomenon of metafiction, a series of techniques used in modernist and postmodernist literature to illuminate the fact that fiction, composed of language, carries with it a mediated third-party voice. Wallace believes that metafiction is no longer an effective technique for fiction writers to use, as its potency has been exhausted by writers who use it as an attention-grabbing gimmick. In these essays he also discusses irony, a technique that was also very useful for the early postmodernists but which has now been co-opted by the advertising industry, rendering it similarly useless for modern fiction. Wallace then claims that metafiction is still a useful tool; he thinks that readers should have to work hard to get something

out of fiction, because they need to learn to separate it from all the other media which they can easily and passively consume without thinking. As a result, Wallace still practices several metafictional techniques in his fiction, not to pad his already buxom reputation for cleverness but to keep his readers alert to their task.

In a further effort to make his readers sweat, Wallace also writes complex, difficult prose. However, in being hard on the reader, the prose also needs to be appealing to keep the reader engaged. Trying to embody both of these conflicting interests in the same formal element, Wallace ultimately ends up creating a prose environment that succeeds in doing both, but also allows the detested irony to thrive, much like a bacteria, on the two conflicting efforts manifested by the prose. Because of this, Wallace's efforts to create a new type of dialogue between author and reader are undermined by his own success. Though he uses metafictional techniques to successfully complicate the reading process without alienating readers, the tone of his prose keeps the reader at a certain distance, unsure whether or not they're being welcomed in or laughed at, and complicating the question of whether or not *Infinite Jest* succeeds in accessing what Wallace refers to as "the art's heart's purpose," (McCaffery 148), the most important job that he assigns to fiction.

**“The crux being that, if mimesis isn’t dead, then it’s on life-support courtesy of those who soon enough will be” (Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young 13).
-David Foster Wallace**

The foremost notable characteristic of *Infinite Jest*, on either the level of form or content, is that it is a very difficult read. *Infinite Jest's* length, disjointed structure, massive vocabulary and difficult prose style often get it into hot water with readers and reviewers who, like Michiko

Kakutani, appreciate its technical mastery while also feeling that some of its elements are gratuitous:

The book seems to have been written and edited (or not edited) on the principle that bigger is better, more means more important, and this results in a big psychedelic jumble of characters, anecdotes, jokes, soliloquies, reminiscences and footnotes, uproarious and mind-boggling, but also arbitrary and self-indulgent (Kakutani).

It's true that *Infinite Jest* seems willfully difficult, even intentionally painful for the reader in the way it deploys specific narrative devices, many of which are traditionally postmodern both in practice and in origin. *Infinite Jest* sits on a solid metafictional base that Wallace uses to deliberately complicate the act of reading; these complications starts with the very first chapter of the book, which is chronologically the last chapter of the story. Readers discover that Hal, a graduating high school senior and recreational drug user, suffers from a severe disjunction between what he thinks is coming out of his mouth and what everybody else hears him saying. In what is actually the culmination of 1,000 pages of plot (much of which explains Hal's gradual deterioration into this final state of total communication breakdown), a lot of significant, critical information is revealed to readers who have no sense of its importance until they finish the book, usually a month or two later. This prominent chronological confusion is just one of many continuity disruptions which combine to imply that *Infinite Jest* should be read cyclically in a kind of shoutout to the concept of infinity or, at the very least, heavily back-checked to keep the facts straight. Not being linear, *Infinite Jest* keeps readers constantly on their toes and constantly taking notes in an effort to remain oriented in the story, whether it be because they've forgotten someone's nickname or because a minor event long since dismissed by the harried reader has suddenly, hundreds of pages later, become significant.

Contributing to the novel's apparently disjointed structure is a second popular metafictional trick: Wallace's trademark device, his passionate commitment to footnotes.

Footnotes alone constitute 96 pages of text as supplements to the novel proper. They can run anywhere from one word long (footnote 349: “*sic*”) to 17 pages (footnote 110, which details an important phone conversation between Hal and his professional football-playing brother Orin), and perform a variety of functions. Many exist for the sole purpose of breaking the reader’s engagement with the story, while others reveal important plot points or lead off on long, seemingly irrelevant tangents. Some footnotes even reference other footnotes (note 304 being referenced at least three times), encouraging the reader to go over the same spot of text multiple times to understand it in different contexts. There are several footnotes that actually have ...footnotes. With footnotes cropping up left and right, sometimes the reader has to pause in the middle of a 5 page paragraph to read a 10 page footnote. Under these circumstances it’s impossible to get through *Infinite Jest* with just one bookmark; the reader is perpetually flipping back and forth, losing their place, and otherwise just situating and re-situating themselves inside a narrative that just doesn’t want them to get comfortable.

By foregrounding *Infinite Jest*’s chronological complexity and footnote surplus I want to draw attention to the deliberate destruction of linearity in this novel. Of all the disrupting devices Wallace uses in this book, non-chronological structure and a reliance on footnotes constitute the most well-worn and recognizable trademarks of the postmodern literary tradition, a tradition that provides a conflicted heritage for *Infinite Jest* and is directly addressed by it in many ways. But the fact that his book is nonlinear and full of footnotes is important, as these qualities stand in an apparently direct contradiction to much of what Wallace has said in his essays and interviews, where he strongly condemns the very same metafictional devices that *Infinite Jest* puts into practice.

Wallace's professed intention is actually to *avoid* writing metafiction, as he disdains the idea of clinging to the coat tails of his forefathers, like one of whom he calls the 'little gray people,' "who take the machines others have built and just turn the crank, and little pellets of metafiction, come out the other end" (McCaffery 135). At first glance it seems like *Infinite Jest* might be doing exactly this, which only implies that Wallace must either be a complete hypocrite (unlikely) or else his use of metafiction is actually a more important and interesting phenomenon than it first appears to be. If Wallace doesn't want to be turning cranks all his life, why would he choose to complicate the linearity of his novel, since this is a common attribute of many serious works of fiction written in the late 20th century? Despite this, Wallace is still disdainful, and supplements his criticism of metafiction by pointing to a specific time period for its decline, saying that "by the eighties [metafiction had] become a god awful trap" (142), and that by now (or at least by the mid 90's) the use of formal innovation as an end in itself had become defunct and empty. Are these same elements, clearly present in his own work, supposed to be the opposite, relevant and somehow full under different circumstances? How can we reconcile Wallace's use of metafiction with the fact that he outwardly and vehemently condemns it to the gallows of a previous decade?

Wallace, unlike many of today's fiction writers, is as much engaged in the meta-discussion of contemporary fiction as he is in the production of it. Some of his most important thought on the subject can be found in his 1993 essay entitled "E Unibus Pluram," where he argues that "the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony" (E Unibus Pluram 161). In this paper Wallace identifies that "television's biggest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding" (163). It lures people – particularly

Americans – to spend an average of six hours a day basking in its fluorescent glory by offering an addictive product bolstered by a healthy dose of irony:

TV's self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence, transgression, a glorious 'giving in' (again not foreign to addictive cycles) is one of two ingenious ways it's consolidated its six-hour hold on my generation's cajones. The other is postmodern irony. The commercials for Alf's¹ Boston debut in syndicated package feature the fat, cynical, gloriously decadent puppet advising me to 'Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV!' His pitch is an ironic permission slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position; a pose of passive reception to escape, comfort, reassurance. The cycle is self-nourishing" (165).

The TV, by making light of itself, reinforces the viewer's confidence in spending their time doing what they (and the programming itself) already know to be destructive and isolating.

Because it has so effectively co-opted the American brain, television has naturally spread its little succubus tendrils into the arts, and has by now thoroughly infiltrated Wallace's own personal domain:

Irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems (171).

The terrifically vexing problems that television culture poses to fiction are best seen in what Wallace calls post-postmodern or 'image' fiction which includes the late 80's wave of works like William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels* and Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. This type of fiction is, by



¹Alf:

demanding fictional access behind lenses and screens and headlines and re-imagining what human life might truly be like over there across the chasm of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, image, and appearance, paradoxically trying to restore what's (mis)taken for 'real' to three whole dimensions, to reconstruct a univocally round world out of disparate streams of flat sights (172).

Image fiction attempts this restoration by treating empty media and pop culture as legitimate objects of fictional attention themselves, not merely as signs or symbols of a deeper reality.

Wallace writes that “the new fiction of image uses the transient received myths of popular culture as a world in which to imagine fictions about ‘real,’ albeit pop-mediated, public characters” (171), and that “most imagist writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context” (173). In other words, image fiction does not use postmodern ironic techniques to further the breakdown of old notions of linear time and easy communication, which have already been given a thorough spanking by modernists and the first wave of postmodernists. Rather, image fictionists use ironic techniques to get under the world of images to something tangible, human, and ‘real;’ “The fiction of image is not just a use or mention of televisual culture but a response to it, an effort to impose some sort of accountability on a state of affairs in which more Americans get their news from television than from newspapers” (172).

Wallace, though he recognizes the good intentions of image fiction, condemns in on the basis of its failed technique:

Almost without exception, image-fiction doesn't satisfy its own agenda. Instead, it most often degenerates into a kind of jeering, a surfacy look ‘behind the scenes’ of the very televisual front people already jeer at, and can already get behind the scenes of via Entertainment Tonight and Remote Control (173).

The reason why Wallace finds image-fiction unsuccessful is the aforementioned terrifically vexing problem posed by TV: “What makes television’s hegemony so resistant to critique by the

new fiction of image is that TV has co-opted the distinctive forms of the same cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist post-WWII literature that the imagists use as touchstones” (177). Essentially, TV has gotten behind image fiction’s attempts to dig something meaningful out of it by taking preemptive possession of fiction’s weapons. Irony and ridicule no longer belong to the destructive forces of cultural upheaval but to advertising; in order to keep viewers watching, television needs to make them feel as though their choice to continue watching is cool, hip, and acceptable. Ironizing like Alf’s encourages the audience to ridicule their own actions, which they know are lazy and ultimately unfulfilling; this technique works better than if the networks were to adopt the habit of telling bald-faced lies to their viewers, who are likely to see right through any trick promoting television as a productive activity. Irony, by contrast, while ridiculing its audience sends the message that being ironic is *cool*, that it’s better to consume six hours of *Family Guy* ironically every night than it is to take an actual stand against (or for) any of the issues brought up by the antics of Peter Griffin.

In the case of *Family Guy*, the phenomenon being openly mocked is often seriousness itself. The fact that this show is presently among the very most popular on network television lends credence to Wallace’s prescient observations of the early 90’s, where he acutely identifies postmodern irony as itself having been co-opted by that which contemporary fiction strives most to overthrow: a society of isolated, alienated watchers who disdain the idea of taking control of themselves as strongly as they secretly disdain what they’ve become. As such, fiction can no longer lay claim to what in the sixties had been a legitimate tool for breaking down assumptions about the univocal authority of an author or the empty values of once-persuasive ideologies. Fiction cannot use irony (or its compadres sensationalism and cynicism) to overcome undesirably antiquated ideas and literary techniques, as the destructive tools themselves have

been subsumed under those very cultural institutions most in need of a good fat critique. Irony as a method has gone bankrupt.

Where, then, is the connection between this failed irony and metafiction? In his 1988 essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” Wallace writes that all ‘cutting-edge’ fiction shares “a loss of innocence about the language that is its breath and bread” (Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young 14), and has

An unblinking recognition of the fact that the relations between literary artist, literary language, and literary artifact are vastly more complex and powerful than has been realized hitherto. And the insight that is courage’s reward – that it is *precisely* in those tangled relations that a forward-looking, fertile literary value may well reside (14).

With this he refers to the groundbreaking theorists of post-structuralism like Barthes, Lacan, and everyone else who helped writers understand the fact that

The idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium for the transfer of - (anything) from artist to audience, or that it’s any kind of inert tool lying there passively to be well- or ill- used by a communicator of meaning, has been cast into rich and serious question (13).

It is metafiction, of course, that was created to address these complications, but Wallace then goes on to criticize it, saying that it is one of the “two² most starkly self-conscious of the movements that exploit human beings’ wary and excited new attention to language” (14) and is unlikely to “indicate the directions in which the serious fiction of ‘whole new generations’ will move” (14). This is because Wallace sees a tie between the ‘self-conscious’ technique of metafiction and the destructively self-conscious phenomenon of postmodern irony; metafiction as an empty formal technique meant only to draw attention to itself. “The real point of that shit”, declares Wallace, “is ‘Like me because I’m clever’” (McCaffery 134). According to Wallace the benefits of metafictional devices have been exhausted by earlier artists, leaving their current use

² The other being minimalism

questionable, to say the least. Televisual culture has co-opted metafiction, and instead of being seen as a useful technique to highlight the mediated quality of literature metafiction now, like everything else in televisual culture, serves only as hip, cool, clever self-reflection. Metafiction, whether it be in the form of a book that makes a nuisance of itself by being a non-linear jumble or in the shape of an author who pops in to reveal important information to characters, is funny. It's *ironic*. And herein lies Wallace's distrust of metafiction as a literary device: just like irony, it now exists solely for the purpose of parading its own cleverness. Instead of being a productive literary technique used to bring the reader into an awareness of the fact that what they're reading comes from a mediating third party, contemporary metafiction only serves to regurgitate the lost ideals of rebellion and destruction that have now been co-opted by forces that only want to use them to continue the passive consumption that metafiction and irony were supposed to have interrupted to begin with. Instead of productively disrupting, they've both become part of the loop of empty consumption.

So what is it about Wallace's use of metafiction that excuses him from the recursive, ironic loop he so despises in the work of the image fictionists? In an interview with Larry McCaffery Wallace criticizes commercial entertainment for having tremendous shock value but also for being too easy for the viewer:

'A Clockwork Orange' is a self-consciously sick, nasty film about the sickness and nastiness of the post-industrial condition, but if you look at it structurally, slo-mo and fast-mo and arty cinematography aside, it does what all commercial entertainment does: it proceeds more or less chronologically, and if its transitions are less cause-and-effect-based than most movies', it still kind of eases you from scene to scene to scene in a way that drops you into certain kinds of easy cerebral rhythms. It admits passive spectatorship. Encourages it. TV-type art's biggest hook is that it's figured out ways to 'reward' passive spectatorship. A certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying – with whatever success – to do the opposite. It's supposed to be uneasy (McCaffery 137).

McCaffery then pre-empts our next question by asking Wallace himself, “How is this insistence on mediation different from the kind of meta-strategies you yourself have attacked as preventing authors from being anything other than narcissistic or overly abstract or intellectual? (137). The answer to this question is simple: Wallace’s use of metafictional techniques is different from the image-fictionists because in his hands they *serve a purpose beyond themselves*. He does not use metafictional devices for the sole sake of making himself look clever; instead he seeks to reveal fiction as the mediated experience that it is. Wallace says of image fiction that “far from being a trendy avant-garde novelty, [it] is almost atavistic... a natural adaptation of the hoary techniques of literary realism to a nineties world whose defining boundaries have been deformed by electric signal” (E Unibus Pluram 172). He draws a line between the type of fiction he writes and the veiled resurgence of Realism that, echoing the disjunction of modern society and still enslaved by the ‘love-me-watch-me-I’m-so-clever’ syndrome, devolves into the destructive, ironic metaphysical loop he so detests.

And so, Wallace would have us believe that he does not confuse the structure of his narrative because he wants to echo the confusion of modern life and at the same time look trendy for having done so. In fact he thinks that the popularization of ironic self-consciousness may be beneficial for the most narcissistic population of writers (loosely defined as everyone and anyone under the age of 30, or so he often implies). “This co-optation might actually be a good thing,” he writes,

If it helped keep younger writers from being able to treat formal ingenuity as an end in itself. MTV-type co-optation could end up a great prophylactic against cleveritis- you know, the dreaded grad-school syndrome of like ‘watch me use seventeen different points of view in this scene of a guy eating a Saltine’ (McCaffery 134).

Although he admits to succumbing to a considerable amount of cleveritis in his earliest works, Wallace uses formal metafictional devices in *Infinite Jest*, mainly because simple linearity would

make the reading experience too easy, and he truly wants it to be difficult. He does not want to let his readers feed passively on *Infinite Jest* as they would on other media, and so he uses footnotes to break up immersion in the narrative, knowing full well that it's a real pain in the ass to read a book so confusing that it needs two bookmarks, not to mention a book so huge that it needs its own personal Sherpa just to move it around. By making readers flip back and forth every three or four sentences, he's keeping them from getting caught up in the narrative the way they get caught up in, say, television drama. And because of the novel's size and breadth, the risks Wallace takes are significant, as readers may well give up on a book when they realize that they're never going to 'get into' it. In essence, Wallace is trying to take back metafiction as a way of undermining the zombie-like qualities that television, having already stolen the technique for that very purpose, instills in its viewers. Eschewing the empty, self-congratulatory message of contemporary metafiction, Wallace's work seeks to do what no other contemporary fiction can do, since most other metafiction has been co-opted; even a backlash of traditional, linear Realism no longer has the power to reveal any new truths to an audience that's been anesthetized by Lifetime movies.

So we've arrived at the fact the *Infinite Jest's* metafictional devices cannot be looked at as though they're merely the regurgitated conventions of a bygone era. His use of these techniques are very well-supported by Wallace's own theorizing about what contemporary fiction ought to be doing, and are intended to serve as a sort of vaccination against passive modes of consumption rampant in most other venues of American life. But of course we already knew this, as it would be ridiculous for us all to assume that he just *accidentally* slipped for a thousand pages into the same narrative style that he publicly denounces during the off season. Why, then, have I spend so much time elaborating it? In part because noting the density and extent of his

thought on this topic illustrates Wallace's deep commitment to the future of the fictional form. Since both "E Unibus Pluram" and his interview with Larry McCaffery were products of 1993, we can be sure that *Infinite Jest*, product of 1996, was heavily informed by all the notions we have just been discussing. *Infinite Jest* should be regarded as the culmination of many years worth of careful thinking about the form and function of fiction, and an attempted step in the new direction Wallace was yearning for. Another reason is that this thinking informs not only *Infinite Jest*'s structure but its other formal qualities, which we have not yet exhausted. Keeping this in mind, it's time to continue looking at the formal qualities of *Infinite Jest*, this time focusing on those elements of its style that aren't directly related to the metafictional techniques I've already discussed.

**“At a certain point hysterical grief becomes facially indistinguishable from hysterical mirth, it appears” (Infinite Jest 807).
-David Foster Wallace**

Aside from the nonlinear, transmission-interrupting elements, there are several other aspects of *Infinite Jest*'s style that seriously interfere with what could be considered an 'average' reading experience. Size is definitely one of them, and *Infinite Jest* is sometimes considered part of the 'mega novel' genre and boxed together with older behemoths of postmodern 'maximalism' like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Anybody unsure about making the ultimate commitment to read this book may well be put off by a simple glimpse at its size. There's also the problem of information overload, which arises as a side-effect of the novel's bulk, and which is one of the main reasons that it should be read twice. With so many minor details, some of crucial importance and others of no importance whatsoever, the reader has to wade through a virtual bog of information, unable to differentiate between the useful and the

useless, and as such unable to screen or skim out the parts that they need. The result is a reading experience that is truly unique and deserves an entire paper to itself, though I mention it here only in passing as just another of *Infinite Jest*'s many stylistic oddities.

Aside from its enormity and factual density, however, the single most difficult thing about reading *Infinite Jest* is in all likelihood not the logistical trouble encountered when trying to wade through a disjointed narrative, but the actual narrative itself. *Infinite Jest*'s prose is extremely complex, and the reasons for its complexity can be broken down into two basic categories. First, the level of vocabulary is several standards of deviation above the norm of colloquial English usage and might cause prohibitive difficulties for readers who aren't familiar with a wide vocabulary (i.e. readers who get their vocabularies from the televisual media that so vexes Wallace). In addition to having and using an extremely good grasp of the English language, Wallace expands his repertoire in *Infinite Jest* to include pharmaceutical and medical terms that nobody short of a surgeon moonlighting as a toxicologist should ever be able to recognize. Additionally, Wallace often coins his own neologisms and creates random abbreviations, sometimes before explaining them. 'ONANTA' (Organization of North American Nations Tennis Association) comes expressly to mind here, as does the 'AFR' (Assassins de Fauteuils Rollents (Wheelchair Assassins)). There is so much jargon specific to *Infinite Jest* that its vocabulary feels like a separate dialect, and it takes quite some time for the reader to become familiar with it to the point where they can read Wallace's words without feeling confused and out of their depth.ⁱ

Secondly, this expansive Wallace dictionary is combined into sentences that are extremely varied in length, voice, and structure, but are more often than not rather difficult to read. I do mean *rather* difficult, not straight up hard, because I don't mean to imply that *Infinite*

Jest is the type of book that makes the reading process intentionally *miserable*, as some others certainly do. Being responsible for keeping the reader ensnared, Wallace manages the prose very well, and so it never becomes truly too much for the reader to deal with, because he doesn't want them giving up on his book. The prose is organized so that the more difficult parts of the text are generally interspersed with parts that are easier to read, and also maintains the same approximate level of difficulty for the duration of the novel. This is to say that despite the many different options Wallace has to complicate his prose, he rarely writes a sentence of prohibitive density. For example, pages 487-489, which contain what is probably the longest sentence in the entire book, are also probably some of the easiest to read. Other, shorter sentences might be much more complicated, with clauses so profuse that the reader needs to literally go back and reconstruct them, following the sentence's logic consciously and with close attention. Although its size and unusual plot tend to attract much of the attention that *Infinite Jest* receives, it is its prose style that tends to attract most of its many praises. Dan Cryer of *Newsday* writes that "rarely does one read such audaciously inventive prose" (Cryer), while Jay McInerney's semi-critical review in the *New York Times* even admits that "while there are many uninteresting pages in this novel, there are not many uninteresting sentences" (McInerney).

It is clear to anyone who has studied Wallace that his prose is informed by the same reasoning that his non-linear, disruptive metafictional structure is, because *Infinite Jest's* prose functions as a microcosm of its larger structure. What it means to have a large vocabulary and complex, difficult sentences is that the reader has to do the the same kind of work to understand the prose that they do to understand the book as a whole. In addition to having to flip back and forth to footnotes or to other sections of the book, readers also find themselves scrounging around for copies of the DSM-IV and handy desktop physician's guides. Anyone who spends a

considerable amount of time purifying home-grown smack in their basement will find themselves at a distinct advantage when it comes to the frequent mention of substances like ‘Metaqualone,’ ‘Chlordiazepoxide hydrochloride,’ and ‘Numorphan,’ and for almost everybody, even the pharmacologically advanced, dictionaries must be in constant use. Readers also have to focus very intently on grasping the syntax of the sentences and discerning meaning from what seem to be interminable strings of hyphenated words. They have to struggle to remember nicknames, surnames, titles, and abbreviations. In fact, the same activity and motion that readers are obliged to undertake when approaching *Infinite Jest’s* overall structure also occurs in miniature at the level of each and every sentence. They have to flip around, they have to cross-reference, and they have to struggle to orient themselves against prose that resists them.

As per usual, his prose takes this difficult form because Wallace understands that a non-linear narrative alone cannot fully achieve his goal, which is to prevent his readers from becoming immersed in the story. Most readers are familiar with the phenomenon, often found in other types of metafiction, where a story, though disjointed and out of chronological order, still sucks the reader into the narrative world. In this type of fiction, the story shakes the reader out of their absorbed reverie only when some of the more overt metafictional techniques kick into play, and the reader wakes up to realize that they’ve come to the end of a chapter. It is only at this point that their immersion is briefly interrupted for a few moments while they acclimate themselves to a different point in the chronology of their story. This sort of metafiction is insufficient for Wallace’s purpose, which is to create a rigorous reading experience and a *perpetual* acknowledgement of fiction’s mediating qualities. Wallace is astute in that he seems to recognize that many metafictional techniques are largely ineffective against the phenomenon of narrative immersion, as even frequent references to the author’s existence or the guest

appearances of characters from other books or movies can simply become ‘part of the story.’ In *Infinite Jest* Wallace uses only those metafictional tricks that are most effective at keeping the reader aware of the reading process, the non-linear structural qualities that quite literally confuse and disorient the reader.

In addition to interrupting his reader’s engagement, however, Wallace is also using his prose to keep them attracted to the book. Like any good writer, his prose keeps his audience interested, amused, and engaged. Naturally funny and with the talent and vocabulary to bedazzle literally anything, Wallace has absolutely no problem doing this. He has no trouble turning even something as serious as a premature birth into a carnival, as he does in describing the birth of Mario, Hal’s older (and Orin’s younger) brother:

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, attached by cords of sinew at both feet and a hand, the other fist stuck to his face by the same material (*Infinite Jest* 313).

Wallace is an excellent writer, and there are few people who disagree about this. But he also has a very distinctive voice that tends to glitterize everything it touches, which can lead to complications, especially when dealing with subjects that are supposed to be serious. *Infinite Jest* contains a *lot* of serious, sad, and disturbing situations, all rendered in the same essentially comical tone. The serious, sad, and disturbing are rendered funny, sometimes even hysterical, by the way they’re presented to us:

Hal has never actually seen projectile-weeping before. Bain’s tears are actually exiting his eyes and projecting outward several cm. before starting to fall. His facial expression is the scrunched spread one of a small child’s total woe, his neck-cords standing out and face darkening so that it looks like some sort of huge catcher’s mitt. A bright cape of mucus hangs from his upper lip, and his lower lip seems to be having some kind of epileptic fit. Hal finds the tantrum’s expression on an adult face sort of compelling (807).

How are readers supposed to feel about this paragraph? Are they supposed to feel pity for Bain, or for Hal? Are they supposed to feel pity at all, are they supposed to feel revolted or disgusted or are they supposed to laugh? One of the most brilliant things about Wallace's prose is that sometimes, when it's at its best, it can make us do all three. However, I think that the specific ways by which Wallace makes his prose attractive to readers create real conflicts of interests in *Infinite Jest*, and interfere with its ability to communicate the things Wallace intends it to.

Marshall Boswell, in his book *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, writes that, "Hal's problem is that everything he 'feels' and 'believes' is mediated somehow, compromised by words" (Boswell 149). Though here he is referring to Hal's feelings, I think that what he says is also true on another level, namely that everything Hal tries to communicate to readers, both his thoughts and his feelings, are compromised by the words Wallace uses to describe them. One of the criticisms that Wallace's prose often receives is that it tends to interfere with the reader's ability to engage with the text on an emotional level. When discussing *Oblivion*, one of Wallace's more recent books, James Wood writes that "a faint apprehension of satire, of mockery, never leaves Wallace's treatment of his characters" (Wood 2). Also talking about *Oblivion*, Brian Phillips writes that

Fear of oblivion becomes the ground of the desperate, flailing objectivity attempted by each of the stories' narrators, who seize on technical, special, scientific language in a vain attempt to find some fixed vantage point, some definite mooring, in the unfixed, indefinite world. In the books' best moments, this works simply as a subtle lexical inflection, in which the narrators' clear desire to use the vocabulary of experts, combined with their clear uncertainty about how to deploy the vocabulary of experts, produces a gentle pathos that is almost the book's only hopeful note. Wallace's lavish parodic instinct compels him to exaggerate and overstrain the effect, leading to a sense that the purpose is sheer, smart mockery (Phillips 680).

Infinite Jest, written in Wallace's same, distinct style, also gives the frequent impression that certain things are overdone, exaggerated, and even out of control. Though on a certain level

Wallace has tremendous control over his prose, his free, indirect discourse (which is sometimes compared even to Dostoevsky's) often feels insensitive, mocking, and sarcastic. A lot of the time it is difficult to take anything about *Infinite Jest* seriously, despite the fact that underneath all the joking and laughter, Wallace is trying to communicate things of genuine importance.

Iannis Goerlandt, arguing that the novel is structurally susceptible to being read ironically, makes a claim that its *Infinite Jest* never escapes the ironic loop on the level of its content. I'm not making any claims on the book's content, as I think that any discussion of whether it succeeds or fails on that level is too difficult for anyone, even Wallace himself, to undertake. However, I do find that Goerlandt gives an accurate description of what it feels like to read *Infinite Jest*. She says that the audience can "look on it with suspicion" because it might just be "one big joke played on us all" (Goerlandt 320). I have to say that I personally did suspect that the book was untrustworthy, laughing at me behind my back while I fretted over what parts I should take seriously. This can't truly be the case, however, because Wallace openly confesses that he wants his work to resonate emotionally with its readers. In an oft-quoted section of his interview with Larry McCaffery, he says,

It seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved. I know this doesn't sound hip at all. I don't know... What's poisonous about the cultural environment today is that it makes this so scary to try to carry out. Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you really feel something. To be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow. Even now I'm scared about how sappy this'll look in print, saying this. And the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don't seem to have yet (McCaffery 148).

It would be unfair and reductive to claim that Wallace is accidentally falling into what looks to be the same self-congratulatory show-offery that he so strongly criticizes in others, though he also admits to not being 100% free of the impulse. To give him the benefit of the doubt and

assume that he *does* acquire the requisite courage by the time he writes *Infinite Jest*, we have to wonder why the tone, so carefully controlled, often gives a false impression.

I think that Goerlandt is on to something when she argues that *Infinite Jest* is lost in a loop of irony. I, however, think that this problem lies solely in the fact that Wallace's prose often comes across as falsely ironic. His style seems to work fine when his subject matter *is* worth making fun of, as are a number of characters in *Infinite Jest*. However, when dealing with subjects that ordinarily require a sensitive approach, his tone often sounds insensitive and mocking:

This is probably also the place to mention Hal's older brother Mario's khaki-colored skin, an odd dead gray-green that in its corticate texture and together with his atrophic in-curved arms and arachnodactylism gave him, particularly from a middle-distance, an almost uncannily reptilian/dinosaurian look" (*Infinite Jest* 314).

Like all of Wallace's sentences, this one is tweaked to be both difficult and amusing at the same time. Were we to eliminate the difficult parts, it would sound more like 'This is probably also the place to mention Hal's older brother Mario, whose sickly brown, bumpy skin and deformed arms made him look like a dinosaur from certain distances'. An entire book composed of this type of sentence, however, wouldn't keep the reader at a sufficient distance and would allow them to become too immersed in the narrative, which is not what Wallace wants. On the other hand, were we to eliminate the amusing part, the sentence would sound more like this: 'Note: Hal's older brother Mario's khaki-colored skin, an odd dead gray-green that in its corticate texture and together with his atrophic in-curved arms and arachnodactylism implied that he would be more comfortable in the mid-Cretaceous than the Holocene.' Eliminating the cavalier 'This is probably the time...' and exchanging the hysterically specific 'from a middle-distance' and outrightly funny 'reptilian/dinosaurian' for even more technical terminology would be too much for

readers to handle, as they would have nothing at all holding them to the text unless they, like Hal, were really, truly, deeply in love with the Oxford English Dictionary.

All this is nothing new, because as I've already discussed, these conflicting rationales are why Wallace strikes the balance that he does with his prose. Even so, I want to argue that, by combining them in this way, Wallace's double effort to distance the reader and to amuse the reader creates an unwanted side effect. Although easier narratives allow readers to passively consume text the way they do television and other media, one of the benefits of being immersed in a story is that it allows the writer to become emotionally involved with the characters and their plights. By insisting that his readers have to do so much work to unravel his vocabulary and syntax, Wallace inhibits a certain kind of connection that might allow readers to access his 'art's heart's purpose.' In trying to amuse his audience so that they have reason to soldier on, Wallace complicates his position by saying things that might otherwise, but for the already-distanced audience, be successfully poignant *and* amusing. But when the audience has trouble making an emotional connection with the characters, they're less likely to find Wallace's humor an asset, and more likely to find it excessive, satiric, and ironic.

By using his prose to fulfill these two different functions, Wallace is opening up his prose to the same irony that he so vocally detests. As with postmodern irony, Wallace's prose holds people at a distance and invites them to laugh at everything, all the time, even when they think that maybe they shouldn't. The solution that Wallace proposes to the problem of irony in our culture is for fiction to "ask the reader to really feel something" (McCaffery 149). In this, Wallace's success is dubious. Although his effort to use metafiction to disengage readers from immersion is successful in its aims, when combined with his attempts to engage his audience, it falls right back into the trap of postmodern irony and starts performing the same old tricks,

differing only in the admission that Wallace isn't *trying* to be hip and clever just for the sake of being hip and clever.

The result of all this is that it's easy for a reader to extrapolate from Wallace's conflicted writing voice and arrive at the wrong conclusion – that the reader and the characters are both being made fun of by the writer, who feels perfectly comfortable making fun of his own characters and making fun of his readers for being 'too stupid to understand' him. It's also easy for a reader to think that Wallace has so charmed himself with his own gift for words that everything else about his novel takes a backseat to the enormous amount of fun he would rather be having by looking clever and impressing people. Providing that we take him at his word, though, we know that Wallace definitely does *not* want to do either of these things; in fact, the true irony of *Infinite Jest* is that he's trying as hard as he can to do the *opposite* of creating irony, meaning that a good reading of *Infinite Jest* has to find another way to explain the conflicting and conflicted nature of Wallace's prose, which I hope I have just done here.

**“Whether I can provide a payoff and communicate a function rather than just seem jumbled and prolix is the issue that’ll decide whether the thing I’m working on now succeeds or not”. (McCaffery 137).
-David Foster Wallace**

When Wallace gave his interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, *Infinite Jest* was already in the back of his mind, if not already beginning to show up on paper. When he expressed in that interview a desire to ‘provide a payoff and communicate a function,’ he was of course referring to his novel as a whole, and not just its structure and manner of execution. The trouble is that readers just beginning their long journey with *Infinite Jest* are going to be thrown off by this book, because the way it is written seems to contradict everything that it, or Wallace,

says. Thematically, for the record, *Infinite Jest* is largely about the problems of self-consciousness and irony that I've been discussing here, which opens up yet another contradiction inherent in the novel in that the prose style seems to directly contradict much of what the book's content is trying to get across. Because the prose is susceptible to being read ironically, *Infinite Jest* as a whole is likewise susceptible to being taken as one big ironic gag and as a joke, regardless of what the characters (and the author) seem to say and do to contradict that aim.

Essentially, I think, what it comes down to is this. The formal qualities of *Infinite Jest* are twofold: on the one hand you have its grand structure, a colossal work of metafiction with well-worn and familiar techniques that astute readers recognize easily. Wallace's target audience, educated college graduates, are likely to know just from seeing them that the footnotes and the non-linear narrative are in this book to assert its specific literary heritage, whether or not they know about Wallace's conflicted relationship with metafiction. As a result, readers are unlikely to be disoriented in the face of his footnotes and chronology, though the techniques are effective in getting the readers to approach the book with the requisite distance desired by Wallace. On the other hand you have the building blocks of *Infinite Jest*, the vocabulary and syntactical elements that try to provide a fun, engaging time for the reader and simultaneously insert enough distance between the reader and the text to prevent any unconscious immersion in the story. While the metafictional techniques Wallace uses on a grand scale in *Infinite Jest* don't come off as self-serving or ironicⁱⁱ to readers, the way he writes his prose often does, because readers kept at a distance are already somewhat frustrated and likely to find it acerbic when Wallace tries to mitigate the difficulty of his prose through humor. While his re-appropriation of metafiction is successful both on the scale of the novel's overall structure *and* on the scale of individual sentences, by combining it with necessary attention-grabbing humor, Wallace inadvertently

opens up a place in his text where empty, mocking irony can gain a foothold in a book otherwise concerned with criticizing it. Whether or not this conflict suggests a limit as to how far an author should go in trying to control his readers' reading process is certainly a question that needs to be considered, as is the idea that narrative immersion, 'televisual' or not, is ultimately a detriment to serious or literary fiction.

What this conflict between narrative engagement and detachment says about how to approach *Infinite Jest* is anybody's guess. While I saw gratuitous and isolating irony festering in virtually every sentence of the book, I can't make any promises that you will, or even that *I* will, the next time I read it. I do, however, think that my hypothesis about Wallace's self-defeating form helps to understand some of the differing reactions people have had to this book, as well as a response to the feeling many people seem to have – that the book knows something they don't, or that the book is laughing at them. These things, I am convinced, are patently untrue, although to be fair, the only way I came to hold this opinion was through months of research beyond the book on its own terms. The casual reader may well find themselves snagged and unable to see past the confusion of the prose to the depth of the story, just as they may find themselves snagged on its length or its footnotes. Brimming with pitfalls, both intended and accidental, possibly the only thing that is likely to impact the future of this book is whether or not there are enough readers capable of navigating its difficult form. Only after that, when some sort of truce can be struck with its surface, will readers be able to access the quality of the fiction lying underneath.

Endnotes

ⁱ I want to point out as an aside that it isn't necessarily *important* for the reader to look up much of the unfamiliar vocabulary the way it's important that they attend to the other work that *Infinite Jest* makes its readers do. While it's critical both to read the footnotes immediately as they appear in the narrative and not after the main text is finished, and to struggle to retain a basic understanding of the story's chronology when reading, most of *Infinite Jest's* excessive vocabulary, especially the medical and pharmaceutical terms, are simply part of Wallace's effort to create an atmosphere of information overload. This is evidenced by the fact that Wallace often provides the definitions or descriptions of medical and pharmaceutical terms himself, generally in the footnotes, which particular footnotes clearly exist for the sole purpose of creating a distraction. I say this because I'm not convinced that a truly successful reading of *Infinite Jest* is one that focuses on understanding every little bit of information it contains, which is all but impossible. Still, the reader is accosted by these unfamiliar words and made uncomfortable by them, which is probably much closer to Wallace's true objective than it is to educate his readers about expensive designer synthetics.

Although while reading *Infinite Jest* readers may reasonably claim that the gratuitous footnotes and confused structure are tongue in cheek or ironic, this complaint seems likely to fizzle by the time the reader finishes the novel, at which point footnote-checking has become so routine that it's hardly noticed any more (which is not to say that it ceases to perform its function of disrupting the reader's immersion).

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