

The Voices of David Foster Wallace:

Comic, Encyclopedic, Sincere

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

The power and intimacy of Wallace's narrative voices allow him to affect his readers powerfully on multiple levels: cognitively, linguistically, and affectively. *The Voices of David Foster Wallace: Comic, Encyclopedic, and Sincere* offers a systematic analysis of Wallace's poetics of voice, identifying a dominant voice for each, pinpointing its techniques and influences, and casting it in a career arc of Wallace's evolving novelistic purposes. The careful shaping of voice is central to Wallace's distinctive prose and its impact on contemporary American fiction. The project identifies Wallace's three dominant voices—comic, encyclopedic, and sincere—and shows how voice identifies not just the particular agent communicating with the reader but creates a global atmosphere in texts, deeply shaping our experiences and interpretations. Drawing on and refining James Phelan's model of voice for Wallace's fiction, I define voice as the synthesis of values, tone, style, and rhythm, elements that come together in complex ways to create the gestalt effect of narrative voice. I develop tools for examining the micro elements that create the macro quality of the reading experience—helping illuminate how Wallace uses voice to “rewire” the way readers see and feel, changing our relation to language and to the world. Further, I emphasize the sonic dimension of reading whereby Wallace's sentence and paragraph rhythms impact the cognition of readers, thus joining the recent turn in literary studies toward reading with the grain, by advancing and synthesizing

approaches to rhetoric, affect, formalism, and literary phenomenology. The picture of Wallace that emerges from my analysis is one of uncertainty (and ambition) regarding his place in the literary world, a restless desire to add more voices to his repertoire. Adopting comedy, knowledge, and finally emotional depth as his purposes, Wallace progressively widens his ideal audience, reaching readers in a variety of ways in his ongoing project to create fiction that will be an “anodyne against loneliness” (Kennedy/Polk 16). These different modes, with their range of affective commitments, underscore the deeply social (and thus implicitly communal and political) nature of narrative voice as a tool for authors. Thus *The Voices of David Foster Wallace* offers a multi-layered argument that advances not just Wallace studies, but the study of rhetoric in fiction, prose poetics, and readerly affect. That Wallace’s career has an immense influence on current (and future) American literature cannot be overstated; *The Voices of David Foster Wallace* aims to be a vital intervention in Wallace studies and a substantial contribution to American literary history.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Narrative voice is perhaps the most-lauded and least-understood element of David Foster Wallace's narrative technique, often making readers feel that someone funny and smart is "right there talking to you" (Schmeidel 59). This engaging immediacy is an effect of voice, and in the end, David Foster Wallace will be remembered for his voice, or voices, for his remarkable ability to capture not just the many voices of late-20th-century American culture but the "brain voice" many felt as their own. He took the measure of his moment and gave us on the page the fast, looping trains of self-conscious thought, the staccato quips of entertainment media, and the weightiness of a solemn, authentic engagement with life and death, seeking the flourishing of the life of the mind in what seemed the utterly inhospitable environs of the millennium. To A. O. Scott, he "exemplified and articulated the defining anxieties and attitudes of his generation," offering readers a "persona—at once unbearably sophisticated and hopelessly naïve, infinitely knowing and endlessly curious—[that] will be his most durable creation" ("The Best"). Scott continues: "Hyperarticulate, plaintive, self-mocking, diffident, overbearing, needy, ironical, almost pathologically self-aware (and nearly impossible to quote in increments smaller than a thousand words)—it was something you instantly recognized even hearing it for the first time. It was—is—the voice in your own head" ("The Best"). Wallace's excellence has to do with this capacity, not just to engage the multiplicity of

the self-conscious experience, but to render his own presence in the text: a sense that someone familiar and friendly was there, speaking to us as readers.

Wallace was also distinct for his desire—or anxiety—not to become too consistent in his narrative voice. As a writer, and as a stylist, he is always on the move: as soon as he feels he has mastered one style, or one technique, he wants to move on. Shortly after publishing *The Broom of the System*, he found it excessively immature, and much of his growth as a novelist is linked to his development of what I will call the “encyclopedic voice,” his ability to capture not just the antic energies of *Broom*’s intellectual quest but the many dimensions of knowledge and experience that characterize *Infinite Jest* in all its plenitude. And after *Infinite Jest* he wanted, again, to go beyond the techniques—turns of phrase, syntactic patterns, preoccupations—that threatened to become tics. Such a resistance to stasis and a “fear of automatism” (Smith 262) leads Wallace to be an eternal student, apprenticing himself to the authors he loved and using their example to transform his own writing. In this project, then, I track the development of voice throughout Wallace’s entire career, focusing on each of his novels and separating them into three major phases, each of which has a different voice as its dominant: *The Broom of the System* is defined by its comic voice, *Infinite Jest* by its encyclopedic voice, and *The Pale King* by its sincere voice.

In so doing, I pursue a number of interlocking analyses: (1) I specify the defining traits of each voice: what are its techniques, and what are its intended effects? (2) I identify the authors who are the most significant influences for each voice, showing the way their voices are mimicked and transmuted by Wallace. And (3) I build on James

Phelan's account of narrative voice, adding to his definition and offering new methods for approaching voice. Each of these objectives is inflected by my focus on the sonic and temporal qualities of Wallace's prose, following Wallace's own understanding of his writing as dominated by his *ear* for language and rhythm. And through this dimension of sound, I develop a multileveled analysis of prose rhythm, its role in Wallace's fiction, and its importance to each of his main voices. As a result, my project has implications at once for Wallace studies, studies of literary influence, 20th and 21st century American literary studies, and, more generally, for the analyses of narrative voice and of prose poetics.

Considering narrative voice involves an interlocking set of tasks: one needs not only a definition of the elements of voice, but also to show how they interact to create the global effect of voice. The idea of "voice" is a long-standing metaphor in literary analysis, but as I hope to show, it is not just a metaphor: there is something audible, something sonic, in our experience of literary texts. When we read, we not only process the visual marks on the page and translate them into ideas, images, and worlds—we also, to varying degrees, *hear* the language in our heads. Musicologists call this *audiation*,¹ and built into my argument in this book is the belief that Wallace's texts in particular invite us not only to think and feel along but also to hear along: part of what makes his

¹ The term "audiation" was introduced by Edwin E. Gordon, a music researcher and educator, in his 1976 *Learning Sequence and Patterns in Music*. As Gordon writes more recently, "audiation is the process of assimilating and comprehending (not simply rehearing) music we have just heard performed or have heard performed sometime in the past. *We also audiate when we assimilate and comprehend in our minds music we may or may not have heard, but are reading in notation or composing or improvising*" (3-4). This is a form of "simultaneous translation" (4) between two media: the signs that are given on the page and the virtual experience of them in the mind (Gordon 2007). Similarly, James Phelan has argued for a kind of "synesthesia" that takes place in reading ("Voice, He Wrote"), an idea I will take up in this introduction's section on voice.

long, complex sentences feel quick and fresh rather than slow and tedious has to do with their navigation of rhythmic pulses on the sonic level, making them spill out as if they were spontaneously spoken by a particular speaker.

In order to identify the three main narrative voices in Wallace's fiction, I start from James Phelan's definition in *Narrative as Rhetoric* of voice as a synthesis, or "fusion," of "style, tone, and values" (45). And I add a fourth element: rhythm, which for Wallace is an important dimension of his voice effects. In the chapters here I pinpoint each element, working backward: first I demonstrate what values are communicated by a particular voice, then move to tone to show how it helps create our understanding of values. I then turn to more discrete elements of style, showing how they contribute both to tone and to values—for instance, how particular sentence structures help create our sense of the speaker's attitude and character. Finally, I consider the particular rhythmic profiles that differentiate Wallace's voices, examining the effects they create for readers and showing how the effects on this lowest level have upward effects on those higher levels of style, tone, and values. This order helps me move from the more obvious dimensions—e.g., the values around amusement and sexuality in Wallace's comic voice—to those that require a much finer focus, progressively zooming in on Wallace's language to show how carefully his voice effects have been created by the interaction and synthesis of these different dimensions of the texts.

I identify each of the voices examined here as the *dominant authorial voice* of its novel—dominant because it pervades much of the novel, and authorial because I am less concerned with character voices than with the voice that presents, assesses, and balances

them. The concept of the “dominant” is one that Brian McHale adopts from Roman Jakobson to talk about the transition from modernism to postmodernism: its flexibility allows us to identify large-scale trends within often irreconcilably heterogeneous wholes, whether those wholes are periods in literary history or individual texts (for McHale, the movement from an epistemological to an ontological dominant characterizes the shift from modernist to postmodernist fiction). But it need not be applied only to such a large scope. As McHale quotes, from a 1935 lecture by Jakobson,

The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure . . . a poetic work [is] a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. (qtd. in *Postmodernist Fiction* 6)

Applied to the framework of voice(s), the dominant helps us see the rhetorical unity around which Wallace’s texts cohere, despite their undeniable heterogeneity. Wallace’s novels are full of elements that go beyond their dominant; for instance, *The Pale King* contains moments of humor, but that humor is subordinated to the dominant voice of sincerity, so it does not define Wallace’s rhetorical purposes in *TPK* the way that it does in *BotS*. In a similar way, *IJ* contains many moments that reach toward the sincere voice of *TPK*, but in the big picture these are subordinated to the central encyclopedic purposes of the novel. As Jakobson writes, the dominant is a “focusing component” around which a work of art is structured, and so in each novel the detectable presence of secondary voices operates in concert and in conversation with the dominant voice, inflecting it meaningfully.

If, as I show, Wallace is an author who distinctly refuses to settle into a particular voice, my further goal is to answer how and why this is the case, making a broader argument about Wallace's career trajectory. Wallace's choice of his different voices is not a matter of haphazard attraction to particular ways of writing. His development from funny, to knowledgeable, to emotional shows that his choices about voice follow shifting priorities about how he relates to his imagined readers—and whom he imagines as those readers. His changes also show his increased interest in the ethics of voice: his growing sense of his own responsibility to offer his readers an authentic connection with another person. He articulates his ethical attitude throughout multiple interviews and essays, starting in the late 1980s. He wants the reader to feel both the intimacy of a friend and the benefit of a teacher: it's "sort of like a smart person is sitting right there talking to you," but the content is "high-level and complicated," creating a challenging and worthwhile exchange (Schmeidel 59). In the 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram" he underscores his commitment to a humanist fiction that faces "plain old untrendy human problems" (81). Throughout his career he commits himself to the ideal that fiction can "make us feel less lonely inside," but what changes as Wallace ages is whether that loneliness should be attenuated by laughter, knowledge-sharing, or a sense of sincere gravitas. And these changes also reflect shifts in Wallace's construction of his ideal audience; even though all three of the voices are evident to differing degrees throughout Wallace's career, the audience who delights in the predominating antics and juvenile gags of his early fiction may not be the same audience who relishes the poetic stillness and sadness that dominates the late fiction.

By identifying the variety of voices in Wallace's growing repertoire, and what they tell us about Wallace's craft, his purposes, and his position relative to different imagined audiences, I not only seek to intervene in Wallace criticism. I also seek to reconfigure how we talk about voice, to guide considerations of voice away from questions of irreducible individuality and toward questions of craft, highlighting the unstable relation between identity and language use, and the uncertain role of choice and agency in that relation. That is, by immersing himself in the language of others—by understanding himself as a mimic, sensitive to the rhythms and patterns in other authors' voices—Wallace puts on the masks of others so effectively that they become his face. A “weird kind of forger”—as Wallace understands himself (Lipsky 258)—is thus a weird kind of individual, never quite insulated from the language patterns of others but instead intensely porous to, and thus vulnerable to, the patterns of his milieu. I will say more in each chapter description about the different writers who make up Wallace's personal canon and their different roles in his fiction, but the larger takeaway that we might learn from Wallace's mimicry is connected to his own persistent critique of the isolated individual: rather than solipsistically isolated in our own minds and ways of speaking, Wallace shows by example that we are, of necessity, constituted by the sociality of language. For him, then, personal agency takes place not in the refusal of that vulnerability but in choosing from what one has: surfing, in a sense, the diverse waves of language that crash through our lives. So while my understanding of Wallace's mimicry may seem uncontroversial—of course all authors admire certain others and often imitate them—understanding the conditions of possibility for such linguistic “contagion” helps

me push back against the common criticism that “voice” relies on an appeal to individual genius and metaphysical presence.

This said, the theoretical position that this book works from is largely kept in the background: instead of unpacking theory from chapter to chapter, I demonstrate the mechanics of voice as I understand it, as a synthesis between different strata: values, tone, style, and rhythms. My primary purpose here is less to articulate a new theory of voice than to expand and extend Phelan’s model, and to demonstrate the capacity of the revised model to enhance our understanding of an authorial career. So while later in this introduction I will survey the history of theorizing voice and argue for the conceptual value that voice studies offers to literary study, let me first present the overall arc of the book in terms of what it offers both to Wallace studies and to literary studies more broadly.

Arc of the Book

In Chapter 1 I consider Wallace's comic voice, with a focus on his first novel, *Broom of the System* (1987). Humor is the most neglected element of Wallace's writing; critical attention to *Broom* focuses on its play with philosophical ideas, from Derrida to Wittgenstein, Austin to Lacan. In this chapter I will address the myriad modes of Wallace's humor, from the predominant physical humor to his parodic engagement with Nabokov and Updike. Marshall Boswell has called the novel a "slapstick bildungsroman," "in many ways a compendium of gags (some of which are laugh-out-loud funny)" (*Understanding* 21), and early reviews likewise emphasize the absurd and hilarious patchwork of nested stories. Importantly, the narration is influenced heavily by comedic visual media, with their depersonalized narrative position; *Broom* is peppered with long, cinematic descriptions and section changes that feel remarkably like film cuts. Because of this, I argue that the humorous voice shows Wallace relying heavily on tone as well as style. I pinpoint two scenes in *Broom* that effectively rewrite analogous scenes from *The Crying of Lot 49*: I show how Wallace uses but transforms Pynchonian elements in his process of establishing an antic, slapstick aesthetic. The influence of visual media—cartoons and cinema—is undeniable in both Wallace and Pynchon, and I explore the literary historical connections to the "black humor" fiction of the '60s, in which a variety of authors (including Barth, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Coover, and others) temporarily resembled each other (especially with regards to tone) in their use of dark and biting humor. Wallace's early adoption of humor writing shows him becoming comfortable with a form that accommodates his manic and intellectual, yet adolescent,

energy but also his refusal of emotional immediacy: being funny is an orientation toward the world that gives the Wallace of *Broom* a masculinized position of power and emotional guardedness.

In Chapter 2 I examine Wallace's encyclopedic voice, with a focus on *Infinite Jest* (1996). The encyclopedic voice is deeply concerned with transmitting information in a friendly, accessible-yet-exhaustive manner: it offers abundant specialized knowledge, but in the interests of more than just teaching. Rather, this voice wants to integrate a capacious amount of knowledge in order (1) to expand the reader's understanding of a complex, interconnected world, and (2) to expand the reader's patterns of ethical judgment. As Wallace states in a 1996 interview, "Fiction's job isn't just to list the information, but to show the information being used, to make it plausible, contextual. Then (the information has) a taste to it" (Stivers): the purpose is not just to offer knowledge but to integrate that knowledge pragmatically into a reader's understanding of the world, and to show how one piece of knowledge is linked complexly to multiple domains of knowledge and human activity. This voice asks the reader to engage knowledge not just cognitively but also in terms of ethics: the knowledge-sets that Wallace offers lead the reader to make nuanced judgments about entertainment overuse, drug addiction, and responsibility. A number of critics have considered Wallace's treatment of information, ideas, and knowledge, but few have done so in terms of its rhetoric and ethics, and I link the novel's intervention in the encyclopedic tradition to the particular way it links ethics and knowledge. The chapter will then show how the factual voice works heavily through style—using long sentences and paragraphs, and

consistently establishing and then counterpointing a scientific register to guide the reader to reconsider ethical judgments about the abuse of technology, personal responsibility for addiction, and unexpected consequences for individual actions. Rhythmically, the encyclopedic voice is slower and more dilated than the manic humor of the comic voice; it develops the “rhythm of long things swinging” (*Infinite Jest*) in an attempt to stretch the reader’s attention and to expand the reader’s sense of what information is relevant. As I demonstrate the fundamental poetics of this voice’s style, I will also show how the style connects to the voice’s tone and values, identifying Wallace’s engagement with Joycean epiphany in an effort to consider form, knowledge, and responsibility.

In Chapter 3 I will consider Wallace’s sincere voice in *The Pale King* (2011). Wallace had wanted *Infinite Jest* to be “extraordinarily sad,” and moments of genuine despair punctuate that novel, but they lapse into grotesque comedy or are framed by encyclopedic distance. Wallace is much more successful in *The Pale King* at actualizing sincere emotionality. In this way the sincere voice aims to establish a sense of stillness that offers a space for emotional reflection, valuing meditative attention, self-sacrifice, and devotion. *The Pale King* shows Wallace at his most vulnerable as an author, trying to engage his own emotional depth and not laugh or describe his way out of it despite fears that he “can’t do that as well” (Goldfarb). While I do not aim to read Wallace’s sincerity biographically, Wallace’s aesthetic desire to pursue emotionality and vulnerability in his fiction does connect with his lifelong experience of depression, and D. T. Max has written that Wallace went off his antidepressant Nardil in large part because he was “upset that he couldn’t seem to get *The Pale King* to move forward” (Williams, “God”);

the risk may have allowed him to write more emotional fiction, but it may also have contributed to his eventual suicide. Criticism that addresses Wallace's "sincerity" and the moral commitments of his fiction constitutes the most developed domain of Wallace studies, with frequent reference to his extra-fictional comments on the need to move beyond a postmodern irony that had become co-opted by popular media. While current critics consider some of the more global formal components of Wallace's transformed metafiction, they seldom address questions of voice and narration. Developing on Adam Kelly's account of "new sincerity," I link Wallace's sincere goals to a distinctly reverent, serious tone and the use of shorter, simpler sentences with lower register, techniques that help him slow down the reader's pace to create stable, often iambic rhythms. I identify Updike as a central influence on Wallace at this time, showing how Wallace teaches himself from Updike to write slower-paced, "pretty" prose, adopting Updike's style and tone while revising Updike's values around sexuality and religion.

Before I consider Wallace's changing ideas about the reader-author relationship, let me remark on the texts I do not examine: the short stories and the nonfiction essays. I see the short stories as, often, incubators or test sites for new voices: this means, by and large, that there is much more variation in Wallace's voices in the short stories. In the stories Wallace may play with voices that he never uses again (e.g. in *Curious Hair*'s anomalous "John Billy" and "Say Never") or with voices that he will return to increasingly over the career (e.g. the minimalism of "Everything is Green"). Some of his work is—like the interviews of *Brief Interviews*—overtly an exercise in voice, in generating personae who speak in such a variety of ways that we marvel at Wallace's

linguistic performance. But many of these (largely character) voices may not be able to sustain a novel, whereas the authorial voices of *BotS*, *IJ*, and *TPK* are more developed, guiding readers' reactions not just when those authorial voices are prominent but also when Wallace allows character speech to dominate the novels. As a result, while the short stories follow some of the broader patterns I identify in the novels, they do not always showcase the authorial voice, and their variety makes it more difficult to identify career-spanning shifts in Wallace's fiction. In my view, then, the best picture of Wallace's work with voice comes from a study of the novels, which offer a more continuous communication with the reader.²

Wallace's essays, too, are a fascinating site of his play with voice. While the stories are a site of intense variety, the essays are perhaps the inverse: Wallace's essay voices are more continuous over his career, varying slightly according to the same progression as the novels (comic, informational, sincere) but maintaining throughout their intricately detailed attention, as well as their amusing and humane qualities. As Wallace admitted to David Lipsky, in the essays "There's a certain persona created, that's a little stupider and schmuckier than I am" ("Lost Years" 173). As in the novels, Wallace finds different ways to speak to his readers in the highly communicational mode of the essay. But because Wallace collects and organizes factual and not fictional material in the essays, an approach to the rhetoric of Wallace's voices in the essays would differ from what I do here. Such an analysis would benefit from examining their values, tone, style, and rhythms, but because the essay persona changes less than the authorial voices in the

² To Lorin Stein, Wallace characterizes the difference between short stories and novels as one of commitment: "Novels are like marriages . . . it's so sad to end them. . . . Characters in stories are different. They come alive in the corners of your eyes. You don't have to live with them" (Stein 93).

novels, a better point of focus for the essays would be how Wallace goes about shaping his factual material: what he does and does not foreground, what he decides to include, and what he leaves out of the account. For these reasons of approach, as well as those of space, I do not treat the voice (or voices) of the essays here.

(1) Wallace and His Audience: “A Living Transaction between Humans . . . Erotic or Altruistic or Sadistic”

As Wallace changes voices over his career, he’s not just shifting his aesthetics; he’s also changing his ethics, and his relation to his authorial audience—the audience he imagines as ideal for his fiction—changes drastically over the years. At first, upon discovering fiction, Wallace was so thrilled at the sheer joy of writing that he did not think of the reader; the reader was an afterthought to his own pleasure. But as he grew as a writer, in particular under the influence of his friendship with Jonathan Franzen in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he began to reconsider the reader’s needs as a more important part of his work as a writer. He became more committed to the rhetorical interplay between author and reader, viewing the connection between author and reader not only as a communication but as a relationship—perhaps friendly or even erotic—in which the power differential is quite uncertain. His goals at each stage of his career index his shifting relation to, and conception of, his readers, both the authorial/ideal audience as well as his anticipation of his actual audience. As a result, considering Wallace’s remarks about his readers will help us understand the connection between his own voices and his changing conception of fiction as a relation to the reading other.

The initial pleasure Wallace found in writing was intense; as he explained to Franzen in a letter, “When I discovered writing in 1983 I discovered a thing that gave me a combination of fulfillment (moral/aesthetic/existential/etc.) and near-genital pleasure I’d not dared hope for from anything” (Max 144). This fulfillment was not only exciting but totally absorbing, as he tells interviewers repeatedly in his early years: to William

Katovsky he says, “Writing fiction takes me out of time. I sit down and the clock will not exist for me for a few hours. That’s probably as close to immortal as we’ll ever get” (Katovsky 7). And to Helen Dudar he recalls sitting down to write over lunch and not looking up until dinner time had passed: “I don’t know where I had been but I hadn’t been on earth for a few hours. I have approached nothing like that in any kind of emotional and intellectual endeavor before” (Dudar 8). The total engagement with *Broom of the System*, which “felt like it was using 97 percent of [Wallace],” was even more engrossing than his thesis in philosophy, which only took “50 percent” (Lipsky, *Although* 261).

This discovery of writing meant that Wallace was not inclined to think of the reader, nor of the traditional guidelines for fiction’s mechanics; rather, he was interested in “taking joys in the process of creation”—the “occult or spiritual side of writing” (Katovsky 6) whereby

[f]iction for me is a conversation for me between me and something that May Not Be Named—God, the Cosmos, the Unified Field, my own psychoanalytic [sic] cathexes, Roqoq’oqu, whomever. I do not feel even the hint of an obligation to an entity called READER—do not regard it as his favor, rather as his choice, that, duly warned, he is expended capital/time/retinal energy on what I’ve done. (letter to Franzen August 1989, qtd. in Max 145)³

In this way of thinking, Wallace is relating to himself more than to any externalized consciousness; he admits that in *BotS* and *GwCH* “the primary thing was ‘can I make myself laugh so hard that I fall out of the chair?’” (Kipen). And the joy in being able to do that allowed Wallace to tap into an absorption and transcendence of the sort that he

³ Roqoq’oqu seems to be a deity invented by Wallace. On a 2012 Twitter thread started by Robert Moor, D. T. Max tweets, “no one knows. i think it might be made up. would love to know otherwise!” and “j franzen & i speculated about possibility. it may just be dfw trying to sprinkle some smart dust on JF” (Moor).

would examine in his writing over his entire career—through narratives about tennis, drugs, sexuality, and work.

Of course, no high lasts forever. After the initial wild spurt of writing *BotS* and then developing the stories of *Girl with Curious Hair* while in graduate school at the University of Arizona, Wallace found himself “struck dumb,” unable to write because the pleasure was gone (Max 144). Franzen suggested to him that they focus on the pleasure of creating characters and on the “humble, unpaid work an author does in the service of emotion and the human image” (ibid), and Mary Karr—whose opinion Wallace valued highly—recommended he write “more direct prose” and try less to be clever (Max 148). Finally, it stuck, and Wallace began thinking about writing in terms of “emotional communication with people” (Max 158). This didn’t come easily, and Wallace immediately struggled with the new hold an imagined audience had on him: “Writing, you’re having to worry about your effect on an audience all the time. Are you being too subtle or not subtle enough? You’re always trying to communicate in a unique way, and so it makes it very hard” (Kennedy and Polk 14) to find a communicative balance. Despite his desire to “make people less lonely,” Wallace acknowledged that “sometimes . . . if I try to be particularly offensive or outrageous or whatever,” it’s from “being really hungry for some kind of effect,” remarking “You can’t make sure that everybody’s going to like you, but damn it, if you’ve got some skill you can make sure that people don’t ignore you” (Kennedy and Polk 16). Even as Wallace began to think of the reader, he thought not just in terms of communication but also of attention.

Returning to the question of “near-genital pleasure,” we can see more how Wallace’s attitudes to writing and the reader were frequently sexualized. He admits in 1996 that early on he saw his relationship with the reader as “a sexual one,” involving seduction (Donahue 71). Because *IJ* is so large and challenging, Wallace knows people must be convinced to read it: “I wanted to write something that would make somebody say, ‘Holy, shit, I’ve got to read this,’ and then *seduce* them into doing a certain amount of work” (ibid., my emphasis). Wallace engages this idea again with David Lipsky, saying, “For me a fair amount of aesthetic experience is—is erotic. And I think a certain amount of it has to do with this weird kind of intimacy with the person who made it.” He wonders further about “the different kinds of seduction in different kinds of art,” suggesting that literature works differently from drama (Lipsky, *Although* 72). In language, at least, intimacy and seduction are fraught with complicated power dynamics for Wallace, and Wallace’s own “seduction” of the reader asks her to accept not only hard work but some degree of hostility from the author. Wallace acknowledges that his readers must not only “kee[p] track of enormous amounts of information” but also accept that “certain formulaic expectations that go along with reading commercial stuff [will be] fucked with. Not just disdained. Fucked with” (Donahue 71, 72). As soon as the reader enters his writing imagination, even if she is being seduced, she must also bear this antagonism.⁴

⁴ As Mary K. Holland shows, Wallace’s career-long concerns with gender frequently intersect with questions of authorship: “Wallace’s striking unease about ‘hirsuteness’ in [‘The Empty Plenum’] thus signals his apprehension not just about being a (heterosexual) man, but about being a writer, and about the possibilities for manipulating, appropriating, and dominating others that come along with both” (7). Given that Holland argues that Wallace’s fiction offers “distance” as “one mechanism for successful communication between desiring men and women” (8), the uncertain distance at the heart of the author-

Such antagonism is unsurprising to readers familiar with *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, Wallace's early novella modeled on and critical of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. There, Wallace has a writer-character (who is in an MFA program) who thinks, of the story "Lost in the Funhouse," "The story does not love, but this is *precisely because it is not cruel*. A story, just maybe, should treat the reader like it wants to . . . well, fuck him" (*Curious Hair* 332). A story that would offer the reader a truly authentic connection, Mark thinks, "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 this model, love and hate are mutually dependent upon each other, and the gift of fiction to the reader is also necessarily a violence against him (or her; Wallace varies the gender of the reader from context to context). When asked about this line by Larry McCaffery, though, Wallace gets evasive and then defensive about such a project:

DFW: I guess I'd need to ask you what kind of cruelty you thought the narrator meant there.

LM: It seems to involve the idea that if writers care enough about their audience—if they love them enough and love their art enough—they've got to be cruel in their writing practices. "Cruel" the way an army drill sergeant is when he decides to put a bunch of raw recruits through hell, knowing that the trauma you're inflicting on these guys, emotionally, physically, psychically, is just part of a process that's going to strengthen them in the end, prepare them for things they can't even imagine yet.

DFW: Well, besides the question of where the fuck do "artists" get off deciding for readers what stuff the readers need to be prepared for, your idea sounds pretty Aristotelian, doesn't it? (23-4)

He is cagey first because he doesn't want to be "perceived as manipulative" (as he says to Arden 98), but also because his hostility is a bit more debased than McCaffery suggests

reader relationship in Wallace's fiction bears further study for the way it links a philosophy of language with complicated social and sexual dynamics.

above. Wallace feels threatened by the immense power of the reader because he feels “excessively dependent on simply being liked” (McCaffery 25). As he continues: “It’s the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: ‘[. . .] since your good opinion is the sole arbiter of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it’” (ibid.)

Of course, Wallace *does* believe that his fiction is training the reader: not only does *Infinite Jest* train readers to navigate the ethical complexities of addiction and entertainment, it also imagines that it might create readers with the power of will actually to resist the enticement of the endlessly pleasurable videotape at the heart of the novel. We need not reduce Wallace’s relation to his readers at this point to one goal, though: as he elaborates later in his conversation with McCaffery, even as early as *Westward* he wanted to “reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans, whether the transaction was erotic or altruistic or sadistic” (McCaffery 41). All three dimensions (and perhaps more) are present in his various conceptions of the reader.

From a theoretical standpoint, Wallace also accepts some of the lessons of deconstruction—especially from Barthes and Derrida—about the death of the author and the instability of meaning. His strong sense of his rhetorical presence in his language is countered by his acceptance that, as originator of that language, he is still completely powerless before the reader. To McCaffery he says, “the way Barthian [sic] and Derridean [sic] poststructuralism’s helped me the most as a fiction writer” is that “once I’m done with the thing, I’m basically dead, and probably the text’s dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but through the reader. The reader

becomes God, for all textual purposes” (40).⁵ So, once he can give up on the need to be liked, his feeling of powerlessness turns from disabling to enabling. Further, this is not just self-help via shallow deconstruction: Wallace’s comment is informed by deep reading in literary theory, as is clear in his review of H. L. Hix’s *Morte d’Author*. But even there, Wallace’s commitments are clearly critical of a total rejection of the author, as he ends his remarks by identifying himself with “those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another” (*Supposedly* 144). That means that as early as 1990, when Wallace pens that piece for the *Harvard Book Review*, he is already moving away from poststructuralist literary theory and toward a more rhetorical understanding of literature.⁶

Wallace’s embrace of the communicative act with the reader increases more and more as his career progresses. He understands that “There’s some weird, delicate, I-trust-you-not-to-fuck-upon-me relationship between the reader and writer, and both have to sustain it” (McCaffery 25). The relationship is not simply cognitive, though he emphasizes in a later interview that “the reader cannot read your mind” (O’Brien). It is also ethical: “you can feel most vividly how alienating and unpleasant it is” when someone “on public transport” is “producing communication signals but . . . in actual fact you don’t even need to be there at all” (O’Brien 114). Instead, Wallace wants to manifest himself to the reader in a conversation—a phenomenon that he doesn’t quite understand:

⁵ Whether Wallace actually adheres totally to this belief we might doubt, but the elevation of the reader at least allows him to relinquish his obsession with controlling her responses.

⁶ Or perhaps he is merging them. Staes argues that even the intensity of *IJ*’s information is in the service of a more direct author-reader relation, “to provoke a conscious effort to engage with the text by presenting his readers with heavily mediated data . . . in an attempt to resuscitate the living interaction between reader and writer” (“Only Artists” 468). Wallace’s comments to Larry McCaffery about being aware of the medium as well as the message support Staes’s claim, but as I explore in my chapter on *Infinite Jest*, the heavily mediated data also betray a darker dimension by manifesting Wallace’s hostility to the reader.

“a piece of fiction is a conversation. There’s a relationship set up between the reader and the writer that’s very strange and very complicated and hard to talk about” (Miller 62).

Indeed, it is hard to talk about, in part because literary techniques work together in recursive, complex synthesis: impacting each other, delimiting each other, combining to produce uncertain effects, and so on. Even on a more local level, this is also true with respect to voice, as I will show in the section “Voice as a Synthesis of Complex Interactions” below. But also this is hard to talk about for Wallace because he is juggling multiple concepts of reader, that is, audience: the authorial audience, which is Wallace’s ideal audience for whom the text is composed, and the the actual audience, namely the flesh-and-blood people who read the book but who may not accept the communication Wallace offers.⁷ The rhetorical approach to narrative usefully distinguishes between these

⁷ Rhetorical narratology distinguishes these two categories of audience from those that exist internal to the storyworld: the narratee and the narrative audience. The narratee is the figure in the storyworld whom the narrator addresses (see Prince, “Introduction to the Study of the Narratee”), and the narrative audience is the position within the storyworld that the authorial audience takes; it is especially pertinent to issues of belief, as when a reader of fantasy enters the narrative audience position by, e.g., at once believing and disbelieving the existence of hobbits when reading *Lord of the Rings* (Rabinowitz, *Before* 95). The narrative audience is not a concrete entity within the storyworld in the same way the narratee is, but rather a role that the authorial audience enters. For more on these audiences, see Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction” and *Before Reading*; Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric* c. 7; and Prince, “Reader.”

I bracket the story-internal roles here because I examine in this section Wallace’s statements about his readers (rather than audience-entities or roles within the storyworld). Broadly, though, much of Wallace’s fiction plays with alignments and misalignments in these positions to create distinctive effects. For instance, Wallace frequently dramatizes the position of the narratee, especially in *Brief Interviews* where his male speakers address a female interviewer—Q—whose resistance they attempt rhetorically to surmount. In that situation, the narratee and the authorial audience have some overlap, as Wallace wants us not only to marvel at the rhetoric of these men but to share the subject position of the woman (Q) whose voice is elided. By contrast, the narratee and authorial audience do not overlap in the sections written in African-American Vernacular English like the often-criticized “Las Meninas” or the less-discussed “yrstruly” passages of *IJ*: the storyworld figure whom these speakers address would likely not share many traits with Wallace’s authorial audience. (By “often-criticized” I mean that the “Las Meninas” section is frequently used as conversational evidence that Wallace was culturally insensitive.) An account of readers’ responses to these dialect voices would rely on an analysis of the tensions between the audience positions, but such an account is out of my scope here. For more on Wallace, race, and dialect see Lucas Thompson, “Wallace and Race”; Matthew Alexander, “Repressive Taboos”; Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts; and

dimensions of “audience” because attending to each one can yield different insights: if we consider Wallace’s authorial audience, we can generate insights about his intentions and his purposes vis-à-vis how he conceives of his ideal readers. If we consider his authorial audience, though, we can see some of the ways that Wallace’s narrative communications—and those parts of it I focus on, his voices—could be misunderstood, disliked, or outright refused by an actual reader (just consider how many readers of *Infinite Jest* claim to have thrown the book across the room in frustration).

If we think of Wallace’s pronouncements about his reader in this light, we see not only an increase in his thinking about “the reader,” but changes in *which* reader he imagines, and *how* he feels about that reader. As a young author he writes almost purely for himself, imitating and parodying other authors as well as delighting in the act of fictional creation: “I thought I was really smart and really clever and that anybody would be privileged to read whatever I’d written” (Caro 56). Writing *Infinite Jest*, though, he is struck by the disjunction between authorial and actual audience, worrying over how complex the narrative dynamics are, and whether the reader will be too frustrated by the ending; he tells readers in a chatroom that “Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book’s failed for you” (Word E-Zine); with Patrick Arden he also acknowledges that with some readers, who think the book is pointlessly difficult, that he has “failed” (99).

Wallace knows that a limited number of his actual readers will fully enter his authorial

Kelly’s reply to Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts. See also Cohen, “Whiteness.”

audience, and though he aims to make the book fun to entice or “seduce” his readers, he also admits that “if stuff is going well, it feels like I’m talking to somebody . . . and I think it’s somebody rather suspiciously like me” (O’Brien 110). But as Wallace continues to write about characters who are much different from himself, he wants nevertheless to “get some empathy with the reader,” to “get a reader to inhabit the consciousness of a character who . . . isn’t a hero or isn’t a very nice guy, and feel that person’s humanity and something of his 3-D contours while not pretending that he’s not a monster” (Crain 124). He wants to reach readers who may not be like him—who nevertheless can empathize with the characters he creates. His desire is, as he writes *The Pale King*, to achieve “a very complicated emotional resonance as opposed to an intellectual or kind of meta-artistic resonance (Goldfarb 149-50). This does not mean he gives up on his intellectual readers, as he never gives up the formal play of his novels (or his short stories). But he is increasingly aware of his actual audiences: people who may not understand the entirety of his work, share his knowledge, or experience his writing the way he imagines. And by wanting to “move” his readers (rather than simply delight them or impress them), his voice increasingly appeals to a broader range of human experience—and thus a broader range of readers who might be willing to join the authorial audience.

In this light, there are two arcs in Wallace’s conception of fiction and his relation to his audience, one from deconstruction to rhetoric, and then within his understanding of rhetoric, a broadening out of his anticipated audiences and an acceptance of their agency. First, Wallace has to give up his preoccupation with the “occult or spiritual side of

writing” (Katovsky 6) whereby he feels, in a Derridian sense, written by language rather than in charge of it. Becoming aware of audiences, though, makes him feel threatened and hostile, exposed. But eventually (and as he explores the problems of rhetoric in *Brief Interviews*⁸) he becomes more comfortable with rhetoric as the fundamental reality of communication, not manipulation but rather the nature of language itself. And in that comfort he matures into the mode of increased emotionality we see in *The Pale King*, again not giving the intellectual and comical sides of himself up but rather augmenting them with more of the “spiritual urgencies” he admires in literature (Jacob).⁹ These come to dominate not only his purposes, but, as I will show, change the quality of the voice, which is why I would like to turn now to exploring what voice is and how it works in my account of Wallace’s fiction.

⁸ Not just in the interviews themselves—consider how “Octet” dramatizes the author/reader relationship by playing at speaking directly to the reader, by talking about what it’s like to be an author, and by asking questions of the reader as if they could be answered by a real-life interlocutor.

⁹ In this way I argue against Cory Hudson’s recent claims about the “fraudulence of empathy” in Wallace studies. He argues that Wallace’s statements about his relation to the reader have led to overdetermined readings of the fiction, privileging empathy over other important purposes in Wallace’s work. Then he uses “Good Old Neon” to argue that the story’s purposes are not empathic: “it would be more correct to read the short story as an exhaustive attempt to demonstrate the impermeability of the bounds of consciousness” (304). While I agree completely with his first claim about the reductionism of Wallace criticism about empathy, regarding “Good Old Neon” I find that Hudson commits the same error: he simply replaces one partial truth with another. Rather than trade empathy for “impermeability,” it would be *most* correct to see how Wallace’s fiction embodies the principle of *both/and*. In pursuing empathy Wallace’s fiction finds (in proper Derridian fashion) that its condition and its limit are one and the same: the distance between people that must always be bridged, or mediated, by signs.

(2) Narrative Voice: A Concept

Now that I've outlined the distinct voices and the career trajectory in Wallace's fiction, elaborating on how Wallace's change of voices is informed by his changing relations to both authorial and actual audiences, I'd like to return to the question of voice. Voice is such a contested, variably used term that I can only hope to gesture here to the larger contours of its usage, identifying the different approaches to voice that scholars take and my place in that heterogeneous collective. Appealing as it does to ideas about expressivity, style, self-presence, and identity, "voice" allows critics to engage with language use in all its personal *and* social, momentary *and* historical, written *and* spoken aspects. Voice frequently refers to the author and in ways that are often coterminous with the use of "style"; in an excellent overview of voice, Els Jongeneel writes that "the concept of 'voice' is one of the most discussed hobbyhorses of classical narratology," an "embarrassing and misleading metaphor" that has nevertheless preoccupied decades of narratological criticism. As I elaborate below, I join James Phelan in his rhetorical narratological approach to voice, adopting and lightly revising his model of the elements of voice; but first I will briefly survey the study of voice (and its challenges) in narrative theory.

Voice: what is it? A gestalt effect of narrative prose, but not exclusive to narrative; a sign of a personalized speaker, but not necessarily a direct sign of the author; an expression of a subject, but not necessarily individual, or human; definitely discourse, but not always separate from story. Recognizable but difficult to pin down; immanent but also transcendent, the illusion of metaphysical presence and yet always, incessantly,

changing. Position, power, expression, *sound*. Critics may desire to evoke one of these dimensions or may object vociferously to another, and problem that Paul Dawson explores in his account of “reasons for the relative lack of attention to voice in narrative theory”:

a general critical climate of skepticism about voice as the stylistic expression of authorial identity; the influence of deconstructive critiques of the metaphysics of presence, of logocentric approaches to writing as speech embedded in the metaphor of voice (see Gibson); and a general impulse, consistent with a modernist aesthetic, to demonstrate that narrative fiction need not possess a narrator, from Chatman’s ‘non-narrated’ narratives to Banfield’s ‘empty deictic centre’ to critiques of the narrator as an anthropomorphic construct of readers. These come together in the general theoretical and critical orientation across literary studies and within narratology . . . (*Omniscience* 47)

“One of the most controversial areas in narrative theory,” says Aczel simply, “voice” is a term with baggage: not only does this proliferation of positions inhibit study of voice, but also a deeper uncertainty about what we even mean when we use the term.

The most traditional meaning is the impressionistic sense that denotes an individual author as the metaphysical origin of the literary utterance. That impressionistic legacy, Phelan writes, is further part of the challenges for considering voice; as critics we “have no commonly accepted meaning for the term, no clear understanding of what constitutes voice” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 44). As Susan Lanser writes, five senses of the term are used in textual studies: first, the literal sense of “voice as the articulation of sound,” but more commonly the following four:

an expression of attitude or position (‘the voice of reason’; ‘a progressive voice’); a category of group identity or collective will (‘the voice of the people’); a synonym for style (‘a lyrical voice’); or a structural category that describes textual narrators. (Lanser, “Queering” 926)

When voice is mentioned in Wallace studies, it is generally in the middle three senses (i.e. “expression of attitude,” “group identity,” and “style”). Clare Hayes-Brady reflects on Wallace’s use or silencing of the “female voice” in his work (2015), and Wallace has been criticized for taking on the voice of an illiterate black speaker in the “Las Meninas” section of *Infinite Jest*. David Hering devotes a chapter of *Fiction and Form* to “vocality” as a central motif, connected to what he calls “linguistic possession” (*Fiction and Form* 20), but surprisingly he does not define voice, seeming at times to equate it with style. Samuel Cohen writes that the voice of *Infinite Jest* was “built out of old voices, recombined and repurposed” (“To Wish” 77), coming closest to my usage but remaining somewhat impressionistic. This is not to dismiss the work of these scholars—Wallace himself spoke of voice in often similar ways—and I find encouraging the interest in voice among Wallace scholars. But my interest in voice comes from a desire to adopt a more precise, systematic approach that will enable more refined analyses of Wallace’s work.

Lanser’s final meaning, a “structural category,” refers to Genette, who in *Narrative Discourse* transposed the linguistic category “voice” into narrative to mean the “generating instance” of narrative discourse (213), defined in terms of “relations between the narrator . . . and the story he tells” and broken down into the “categories of time of the narrating, narrative level, and ‘person’” (215). That is, as Paul Dawson puts it, “voice is understood as where (level) and when (the time of narrating) in relation to the story the narrator (person) is narrating from” (*Omniscient* 49). This is certainly important—the narrator’s position vis-à-vis his story will certainly make a difference for how it makes sense to tell it. But this is only part of what we value when we talk about a narrator in

terms of voice, and Dawson points out that “rhetorical narratology suggests the need for greater attention to the functions of the narrator: to whom and why is the narrator narrating?” (49), and by implication, how is the form of the narrator’s telling in the service of those contextualized purposes?

Seymour Chatman has written that “any discussion of narrative discourse rests” upon “the analysis of narrator’s voice” (*Story and Discourse* 147); because the narrator’s voice is so fundamental to the texture of the discourse itself, I approach it as a *qualitative* phenomenon (following Aczel), based not in identity or cultural position but rather in linguistic signals operating in a complex and recursive feedback loop, a “synthesis of style (diction and syntax), tone (a speaker’s attitude toward an utterance) and values (ideological and ethical)” that operates as a narrative resource (Phelan, “Voice, Tone” 49). Like Phelan, I want to address voice “as a distinct element of narrative, something that interacts with other elements like character and action but that makes its own contribution to the communication offered by the narrative” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 44). While this means certainly taking Genettian structural models of the narrator’s relation to storyworld into account (i.e., heterodiegetic and homodiegetic as structural positions of a “voice”), it also means we need a more fine-grained and rhetorical approach, as Booth advocates in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “we can hardly expect to find useful criteria in a distinction that throws all fiction into two, or at most three, heaps” (150).

Before turning to a more detailed description of each element of voice, I want to pause and answer a question my readers may be asking: what makes voice different from the implied author? Alan Palmer, in *Fictional Minds*, has suggested that there is no

difference: “I have not found it possible to maintain a coherent distinction between the agency that is responsible for selecting and organizing the events (as Prince described the role of the implied author), and the voice that recounts them (the narrator)” (117). Contra Palmer, I think this is a significant distinction, which we can consider in three ways: overall agency versus a means for executing that agency; narrator characterization; and level. Addressing the first: the implied author selects and organizes the events in ways that can be incredibly rhetorically subtle or formally very inventive; but what if the voice that recounts those events is a naïve, undesigning one? More generally, not just a naïve narrator (nor even necessarily a character narrator), but *any* voice may be constructed such that it is naïve to the larger structural machinations of the implied author. If we think about the author as a technician, both narrator and voice are resources in a repertoire that the author can use in various ways (see Phelan, “Authors, Resources, Audiences” in *Somebody Telling*). In this light, it is certainly possible to imagine a non-naïve narrator who is not aware of certain structural elements, because the narrator’s telling is always framed by the author’s overall construction. As a result, to collapse voice and implied author can be, especially in some cases, a mistake, and readers must judge whether or not to distinguish between these two entities to understand how any given story produces its effects.

Second, considered as to level: I see voice as a local phenomenon rather than a global structure, and it is an effect that is subordinate to the implied author’s aims. The implied author is responsible for *all* the choices of the text, but the voice (in all its variations) exists as a changeable (and rarely uniform) continuum through the text. This

is not to say that voice, as local, is sometimes there and sometimes not—to the contrary, voice is always present, and we experience it immanently as we read one sentence to the next.¹⁰ Its qualities, though, are entirely up to the changing needs of the author, making a voice sometimes expansive, sometimes minimal, sometimes reliable, sometimes not. That is, as Phelan writes, voice is “subject to frequent change as a speaker alters tones or expresses different values, or as an author double-voices a narrator’s or character’s speech . . . consistency of voice is not necessary for its effective use” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 47). The implied author, as a conceptual entity that allows us to center our interpretation in terms of the purposes uniting its many choices, *chooses* voice, making voice one of that implied author’s many resources in creating a particular reading experience. Voice, then, can be understood as an assumed position; to quote Jessamyn West, whom Booth engages in his discussion of the implied author, “Writing is a way of playing parts . . . of assuming roles” (qtd. by Booth, *Rhetoric* 71). The implied author, when choosing what structural levels the narrator should take, also has to choose what qualitative dimensions the voice should take on. These *may* become central to understanding how the story is told structurally, for instance in the case of a character narrator who is the one making structural choices for presenting her story: in this case our knowledge of that narrator’s voice and personal characteristics can be used to tell us something about the global structure and order of the discourse. But this is not necessarily the case. When I make claims about the overall nature of Wallace’s novels, then, I am using the inferences I’ve made about the voice to draw further conclusions

¹⁰ I share this conviction with Phelan, who writes, “wherever there is discourse there is voice. Just as there can be no utterance without style, there can be no utterance without voice—although, of course, just as some styles are more distinctive than others so too are some voices” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 44-5).

about the implied author and the overall purposes of the text—but what is important here is the way that attention to voice makes those conclusions possible.

Thinking about voice as local, finally, allows us to approach more openly multiple voices within most texts. Narrative voice can shift based on changing attitudes, can be affected delicately by free indirect discourse, or can cede the stage entirely to character voices. Susan Lanser has advocated for recognizing this plurality, writing, “If we forego the need for coherence that has dominated our discussions of implied authorship, if we read textual surfaces instead of attempting to resolve them into a noncontradictory deep structure, we might figure the implied author not as a body but as the clothes the body wears—clothes than can be altered, discarded, tried on, changed before or behind our eyes” (“Imply(ing) the Author” 158). Emphasizing plurality is useful, but by shifting to the passive voice, Lanser erases the agency of the implied author. *Someone* has to be there to change clothes—to don different fashions, different modes of address—and that someone is the implied author. I would propose a friendly revision: that we maintain a sense of coherence, and agency, in our idea of the implied author, and instead read the textual surfaces of *voice* as the various outfits that implied author chooses to wear.¹¹

Importantly, too, that emphasis on plurality connects to a tradition of thinking “voice” that I find immensely productive: the Bakhtinian one. Before I turn to the rhetorical definition of voice, let me comment briefly on its value and drawbacks. One

¹¹ The implied author, of course, is also a construction, our idea of an author who communicates in a certain way for certain purposes, inferred from the total set of clues across a text. Booth notes that the implied author can vary across multiple works by the same flesh-and-blood author, as the various novels of Fielding give us different images of his interests and values (*Rhetoric* 71). But in his appendix to the 2nd edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* he suggests that we also may construct an idea of the “career-author,” “who persists from work to work, a composite of the implied authors of all his or her works” (431). This might correspond to what Wallace calls the “statue”: “the version of myself . . . that I want others to mistake for the real me” (Lipsky 275).

immense value of Bakhtin's model of "dialogism" is that it highlights the multiplicity at the heart of language, showing the way that multiplicity is organized socially into registers, idiolects that can in fiction represent communities and entire ways of life (see *Dialogic Imagination*). As readers will see, my approach is fundamentally aligned with this Bakhtinian model: language is *lived* and its social use colors the way it feels to us. But one of the natural implications of Bakhtin's model is that ultimately, all fiction is more or less dialogic; if language itself carries these internal differentiations, any extended work of fiction could never be purely monologic. This does not dismiss the distinction, which is still useful for characterizing *degrees* of dialogism. But it does demonstrate that we can't simply stop there: literary voice criticism needs then to consider the actual voice or voices that are present in a text; to ask (rhetorically, of course) why the author has chosen to speak in this voice and have characters speak in these others; and to explore what communication between readers and author has been made possible by these particular interminglings or collisions of voice. That is, I suggest that we make Bakhtinian reading even more rhetorical than it already is.

A Rhetorical Approach to Voice

For rhetorical narratologists like Phelan, the term “voice” indicates a particular effect that that forms the backbone of the reader’s rhetorical and affective encounter with the text.

On a Bakhtinian note, he writes, “Voice is as much a social phenomenon as it is an individual one” (*Narrative as Rhetoric* 44). As both social and individual, it is the site of rhetorical positioning: for Wallace the self was always tangled in self-presentation. On this porous line of contact between the self and the social is voice; and Wallace’s referential voicing of other authors is as much a matter of purposeful citation as it is inadvertent absorption. Such mimicry, on the line between choice and instinct, is Wallace’s default position: overly sensitive to the rhythms and patterns in other authors’ voices, he tells David Lipsky he is a “weird kind of forger” (*Although* 258). Copying was Wallace’s method: in a 2005 interview he revealed that in his twenties “there was very little difference between my admiring some writer’s particular ability and my wishing to appropriate that ability for myself” (Jacob 156). He was hyper-aware of the psychodynamics of such imitation, too; drawing on Harold Bloom’s terms for anxiety of influence, Wallace writes to Steven Moore in a letter that “real reading is misprision anyway—if I can complete someone’s *tessera*, cool” (Ransom Center). By seeing his writing as deeply appreciative and imitative, but also (à la Bloom) fundamentally agonistic, Wallace reveals himself to be quite the conflicted ventriloquist.

Voice is created, Phelan defines, by a “synthesis of style (diction and syntax), tone (a speaker’s attitude toward an utterance) and values (ideological and ethical)” (“Voice, Tone” 49). I adopt Phelan’s excellent model, and I suggest a couple friendly

revisions that would make the model more capacious and better matched to my needs in approaching Wallace's prose. First I suggest integrating "register" into the definition of style. Second I suggest that we add, as a category of its own, prose rhythm. These elements will not only clarify the line of influence between Wallace and his precursors but are centrally important to Wallace's prose technique: Wallace's ear for the rhythmic timing of his prose is central to the distinctive impact of his sentences and paragraphs, and it's been noted by Stephen Burn and other scholars that Wallace's register shifting is part of his signature style, blending high and low to create an avant-pop charm or a casual lyricism.¹² Finally, I aim in my analyses of voice to show some of the ways that the patterns formed by each element of voice can interact, either enhancing, limiting, or coexisting with each other, so as to better model how "voice" operates as a complex synthesis.

An understanding of "style" needs to address not just diction and syntax, but also register and rhythm; neither register nor rhythm can be wholly reducible to diction or syntax, but rather they are phenomena that obtain through an interaction of the two. With respect to register, I find useful Bakhtin's approach to the integration of different sociolects in literary texts: a basic part of narrative voice is that it integrates different *types* of words and structures (of both syntax and the logic of progression) that signal different domains of socially particularized language. Halliday and Hasan's theory of register (*Cohesion; Language*) shares Bakhtin's functional commitments but offers a more systematic approach that I will find useful; they examine register as an interaction

¹² See Burn's *Reader's Guide*, 2nd edition, for a mention of Wallace's register shifts as connected to Philip Larkin (15-16). On "avant-pop," see McHale, "High and Low."

of “field of discourse,” “mode,” and “tenor.” One of the most distinctive qualities of Wallace’s fiction is the way register careens wildly between low and high, integrating language philosophy with fat jokes, or descriptions of cocaine use with neuropharmacology: since register is an important part of the way Wallace creates his effects, I want to foreground its role in narrative voice.

Rhythm is also central to the effects of Wallace’s prose; I suggest that each of the three central voices has distinct rhythmic effects. To better describe the workings of rhythm I develop an account of rhythm as it manifests, at a number of scales, in Wallace’s writing; following Ingarden’s analysis of the different strata of the literary work of art (*Literary Work of Art* 29ff), I divide prose into different strata: stresses, sounds, words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Each scale requires a slightly different type of attention and can interact in varying ways with the other levels. In doing this I engage with rhythm studies, a somewhat fragmentary but growing subfield that includes some work in narrative theory (Chatman, *A Theory of Meter*, and Caracciolo, “Tell Tale Rhythms” are two very distinct examples), from literature and music studies (see Kafalenos, “Overview”), and from prosodic and poetic investigations as well (for instance, Harshav, *Explorations*; Ingarden, *Literary*; Abraham, *Rhythms*; Attridge, *English Poetry, Poetic Rhythms*; Jarvis, “Prosody”). My goal is to use a scalar model of rhythm to show how patterns of progression at a variety of scales interact to contribute to a particular readerly experience—whether it’s the manic onrush of Wallace’s comedy, the sense of endlessness and complexity at the heart of his encyclopedic voice, or the stillness and gravity of his sincerity. These different effects are produced by different

rhythmic techniques and linked to the affective paradigms of each novel; by identifying these effects and their progressive change throughout Wallace's fictional production, I offer a model for understanding the career of a single author, while also developing tools for analyzing prose that can be used in many other settings.

In particular, I want to identify rhythm as a fundamental part of voice.

Rhythmicity is an important quality of Wallace's poetics; he expresses this in his writing about authors and his letters to Don DeLillo (where, for example, he writes "I think I'm about 100% aural [Don DeLillo Papers]), and rhythm itself is depicted and thematized throughout his fiction. When Wallace studies other authors to learn the secrets of their styles, part of what he wants to mimic—whether it is for negative (parodic or critical), neutral (pasted or adaptative), or positive (adulatory) purposes—is the way that their sentences and paragraphs organize time. In Wallace's aesthetic, time is not neutral or homogenous¹³: it is the substrate of fiction, and even though any experience is simply too much to depict in the linear mode of language (as he expresses in "Good Old Neon"), all expressions must be made in time and thus must be organized temporally to create the relations of anticipation, retrospection, and completion that underlie our experience of language. Wallace shapes the passage of time itself by the organization of sentences. His trademark lengthy sentences, then, even in their variations through each of his career developments, offer a particular way into the question of rhythm in prose and its relation to "voice"—voice as the synthesis of style, tone, and values but also voice as a major part of the experience of reading.

¹³ I take the concept of "homogeneous" time from Walter Benjamin, who uses it in "On the Concept of History" to denote time that is rationalized and subdivided, distinct from human experiential temporality.

A note on rhythm and sound: as I mentioned above, readers audiate texts while reading, simulating the sounds of the language in their minds. Some readers are more attuned to the sonic, and some writers as well guide us to attend to sonic phenomena—especially Wallace. He is aware of the sonority of his prose, and he speaks to a couple interviewers about the nature of silent reading, frequently using the term “brain voice” to articulate the quality of audiated language. To each he emphasizes the difference between the brain voice and the “larynx” sound:

SCHECHNER [I mention to Wallace that I respond to his verbal density, and that I get from his work a rare sentence-by-sentence pleasure that normally I get only from music.

He responds:] WALLACE: I think people write the way their brain voices sound to them.

SHECHNER: I’ve always thought of writing as a kind of artificial discipline, in which you write a sentence ten times before it sounds like your natural voice.

WALLACE: But very often that ten times is meant to serve a kind of mimesis. I don’t find that fiction is meant to be read out loud. Fiction is meant to be read inwardly, to march along with people’s mental circuitry, and the voice we hear in our heads is very different from our larynx sound. (Schechner 109)

WALLACE, TO DIDIER JACOB: The more I like someone’s work, the less I want personal acquaintance to pollute my experience of reading her. . . . each of these writers to me has a very distinctive “voice,” a kind of sound on the page, and it has nothing to do with their actual larynx or nasality or timbre. I do not want to be hearing their “real” voice in my head when I’m reading. I’m not sure whether this makes sense, but it’s the truth. (Jacob 156)

Once Wallace hears the “brain voice” of another author, the task becomes making it his own—learning to speak, or write, in that voice. As a writing exercise, Wallace advocated reading a text and then attempting to reproduce it from memory on the typewriter. As he tells Bryan Garner, “you don’t get any sense of the infinity of choices” an author makes “until you start trying to reproduce them” (Garner 2013, 28-9). From early on, Wallace learned not just to listen to but to reverse engineer the voices of others, taking them apart and then recombining their parts for his own purposes.

As it becomes clear when I talk about such elements as rhythm, by “voice” I mean to appeal to the very real experiential phenomena whereby even silently read language crosses over synesthetically into the realm of sound (see Phelan, “Voice, Tone,” on synesthesia). As Leech and Short write, “literature is normally encountered in the written medium,” where “graphology is an alternative system of realisation to phonology” (96). But, they continue,

it would be a mistake to suppose that a written sentence has no phonology. When we read a poem silently, we are still aware of its phonological structure of rhythm, rhyme, etc. In prose reading, this unvocalised realisation is normally less obvious, and no doubt varies in strength from writer to writer, from reader to reader, and from one situation to another. But the phonological potential is always there, and the exploitation of rhythmic, onomatopoeic and other auditory effects in prose bears witness to it. Some people, when they read a novel, claim to ‘hear’ it as well. Whether or not this is true of all of us, it is clear that we have the ability to react, when the situation demands it, to the unspoken sound of a written text.
(*Style in Fiction* 96)

Considering sound allows us to approach not just the rhetoric of voices, but the way that voice’s sonority can offer what feels like a presence: that it *feels* like an individual person is speaking to us. Further, the linguistic patterns that make up a text recur in consistent ways, making individual authors or characters recognizable and distinct. And the way that individual sentences unfold changes the way we think and feel, in small ways but whose iterative impact helps form the texture of a novel. As Richard Ohmann writes, “because the form of a sentence dictates a rudimentary mode of understanding, sentences have a good deal to do with the subliminal meaning (and form) of a literary work. They prepare and direct the reader’s attention in particular ways” (262). The shaping of attention is central to the impact of voice, and it is done through such a subtle way that we seldom notice its complexity and nuance. So, in the next two sections, I’d like to

elaborate how voice works to form the coherent synthesis that we experience, and to explain further how the relation to another person (at least imagined) in voice operates as the site of affective power.

Voice as a Synthesis of Complex Interactions

As each of my chapters shows, voice is produced by choices on multiple levels of the text that work together in complex dynamics to form a synthesis—a coherent gestalt. That is, “narrative voice” as experienced by a reader is a “textual effect”: the effect of multiple textual elements working together and organized coherently to produce the gestalt entity we understand as a narrator’s persona. Considered from a synthetic perspective, this entity is indeed an “illusion” as Fludernik puts it (‘*Natural*’ 344, qtd. by Jongeneel 24)—but on those grounds, all elements and entities of a narrative are illusions. Voice appears continuous precisely because authors typically use it to form a coherent narrator figure who can guide the reader (by either overt or more covert means) through the story and its significance. To some degree, my account follows a synthetic approach, as I aim to show how these various textual elements work together and impact each other across levels: for example, choices about register delimit not only diction and syntax, but also work upward to shape reader interpretations of tone, and thus further impact how a reader understands the narrator’s values. The use of a minimal style (e.g. low diction and simple syntax) might be used to create different tones—like naïveté, “toughness” (see Walker Gibson), irony, or others—depending, for instance, on the affective quality of the diction in question. Consider the two following selections:

He liked to sit near him at the fire, looking up at his dark fierce face. (Joyce, *Portrait* 35)

They sat looking into the fire and thinking of this profound truth. (Hemingway, “Three-Day Blow” 44)

The topic is very similar—two people sitting together near a fire. And while the diction

and syntax are both relatively simple, the tone—our sense of the narrator’s attitude toward the utterance—is slightly different, based on the different emotional worlds evoked by the adjectives “dark” and “fierce” versus “profound.” As I quoted from Molly Hite above, tonal cues are “textual markers that prompt readers to have one affective response rather than another” (249), and similar as these sentences may be, we will have distinct affective responses to each. Based on these sentences alone, we might find an exotic quality to the tone of the first, telling us that the narrator is interested in evoking a sense of wonder; but of the second we might be more uncertain, split between a tone of quiet insight and the possibility that this insight is being ironized. The only way to know is to look at the larger values that are implicit in the texts in question—Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Hemingway’s “The Three-Day Blow.” In each, we are meant to see how the perceptions of the youthful protagonists are limited (by innocence and by drunkenness), but our larger judgments about these characters lead us to different conclusions about the values implicit in these two moments. In the Joyce we are led more strongly to value the aesthetic perceptions of young Stephen, who matures but retains this capacity, whereas in the Hemingway we are led to feel a bittersweet quality about how profound insights like “It all evens up” (44) both mean more for the ethics of the story than Nick realizes and ultimately do little to assuage his own pain or the inequality of anguish in the world. Although these insights come from elements beyond the voice itself (namely, the implicit values in the broader story), they help us read how the elements of voice even on the level of a single sentence are balanced carefully to guide the attitudinal, affective, and aesthetic goals of each story.

I hope it is evident, then, that one of the advantages of considering voice is that the critic can—and must—look at larger swaths of text to determine its *norms*, both stylistic and ethical. A single sentence can certainly evoke a certain rhythm, style, tone, and even values, but a narrative voice emerges most clearly over larger textual stretches, of at least multiple sentences. This broadened scope of voice is distinct from studying style because it engages (1) techniques *in interaction* and (2) includes values, which are implicit but evident only in wider spans of text. Such a shift in scope, which permits voice studies to consider style both on its own and in context, allows the study of voice to avoid many of the pitfalls that stylistic and sonic analysis tends to fall into: instead of trying to stabilize the necessarily multiple possible effects of a certain technique, an analysis via voice shows that the relation of technique to effect stabilizes only in the larger complex interaction. The irony of Hemingway's tone could create many possible effects, but the way it combines with the values we infer otherwise creates a particular, and more singular, effect.

There are thus two larger payoffs to thinking voice in the way I've laid out: (1) as I've suggested above and will elaborate more in each chapter, it highlights the complex systemic interactions between textual elements whereby patterns established on each level (rhythm; style; tone; and value) interact across levels to shape the choices an author makes, and (2) it offers a methodologically rigorous and nuanced way to consider the subtleties of affect in narrative texts.

Voice and Affectivity

Narrative voice is a fundamentally affective construction. Even in narrative voices with reduced affect (consider *In Our Time* once more), the reduced affect itself is an important dimension, worthy of note. In the case of this project, Wallace's voices vary substantially with respect to affect: the movement from comic to encyclopedic to sincere is a movement of affects, a career-long exploration of the attitudes and feelings we can bring to the world, and into which has the most to offer our age. In thinking and performing voice, Wallace also thinks and performs affectivity, both with and in his texts.

By "affect" I mean the attitudinal dimension of experience that is more amorphous, more socially distributed, and more bodily than "emotion"; whereas affect has to do with "intensity" and is "irreducibly bodily and autonomic" (Massumi, *Parables* 28), emotion is the stabilization of that intensity into meaning: "emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional [. . . organization] into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning" (ibid.). As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg put it,

Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. . . . Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (1)

Affect as a pre-semiotic intensity, reactivity, or paralysis comes up incessantly in Wallace's fiction (and nonfiction), full as it is of characters in the midst of their own desires but scarcely able to self-consciously conceptualize what it is they are feeling, let

alone why or what to do about it.¹⁴ And even though it is pre-semiotic, it interacts with the semiotic; that is, language (a semiotic system) nevertheless evokes feeling:

language “does not express feeling” so much as it “does feeling.” For example, punctuation, vocabulary, and syntax, as well as ideological discourse, can all have a “formative as well as informative impulse” for a person’s emotional wranglings, for they each carry affect as part of their structure. Vocabulary alone provides a rich array of affective tones that I might adopt as what I feel . . . (Houen 217, quoting Riley)

By thinking voice in terms of affect, I’m building on the many ways that the elements of voice contribute to affective experience: rhythm is highly affective, creating patterns of anticipation and resolution on and beyond the level of the sentence. Style, of course, is shaped by rhythm in terms of syntax, and the evocation of whole realms of human life by diction and register brings with it the affective qualities of those realms (e.g. the register of psychopharmacology evokes the clinical energy of the medical establishment, but also evokes the corporate via its frequent use of brand names, meaning that medicines are seen not just as treatments but also as commercial products). Tone, of course, is fundamentally affective, insofar as it indexes attitudes to the narration that we are invited to assess and perhaps to share with the narrator. And finally, values, because of their larger ethical and attitudinal commitments, carry affective weight insofar as they organize the world of the text into judgments about what is right (ethically, intellectually), what is not, and why. In German, the word for voice (*Stimme*) is even closely related to that for mood (*Stimmung*), and both are formed from the verb *stimmen*,

¹⁴ In this project alone, many of the scenes I touch on have to do with affect. To cite one from each novel, the contagion of laughter in the opening to *Broom of the System*; the disturbance the young J.O.I. feels about both his father vomiting in the dust and the “minor-D shriek of the vacuum” (*IJ* 503); the meditation of Lane Dean just before his spiritual epiphany in *The Pale King*; etc. Each of these positions feeling at the bodily, pre-semiotic level, figuring the human self as the zone of crossing potentials, intensities, and reactions that may not be available to self-awareness.

which means “to express out loud,” to “voice,” “to be in tune,” and other similar senses (David 1061). The German etymology, which “rests on an analogy between the musical (tuning of instruments) and the psychological (a person’s way of being in agreement, his or her mood)” (ibid.) thus manifests the deep connection between voice, sound, and feeling.¹⁵

We can see, then, that voice contains immense affective potential. Imagine not just its parts but their effect: the sense of a person (or entity) speaking to us from the page. This encounter—an intimate one, as Booth’s epigraph from Harold Brodkey suggests¹⁶—is part of why Booth talks about books and implied authors as “friends” (*The Company We Keep* 171): stories are “friendship offerings” from implied authors who invite us to spend our time with them.

This is what motivates Booth’s title; he writes, “my main effort is to find ways of talking about the ethical quality of the experience of narrative in itself. What kind of company are we keeping as we read or listen? What kind of company have we kept?” (10). While I discuss in chapter 2 the negative side of the excessive gift, I think Booth is largely right in underscoring his idea of narrative not just as a communication but as a relationship between reader and (implied) author.¹⁷

¹⁵ Further, the way I here discuss voice as a local phenomenon, always there in its immanence, resonates with Heidegger’s statements about *Stimmung* in *Being and Time*: “The fact that moods can deteriorate and change over time means simply that in every case Dasein always has some mood. The pallid, even balanced lack of mood, which is often persistent and which is not to be mistaken for a bad mood, is far from nothing at all” (*Being and Time* paragraph 29, qtd. in David 1062).

¹⁶ Brodkey writes: “Reading is an intimate act, perhaps more intimate than any other human act. I say that because of the prolonged (or intense) exposure of one mind to another” (qtd. in Booth *Company* 168). Wallace would find this quite an appealing sentiment.

¹⁷ The relationship does not have to be a friendly one: an implied author might seem aloof or even unfriendly. To some readers (even, perhaps to his authorial audience), Wallace can create a hostile dimension to this relationship.

Michael Silverblatt has commented on how Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* appealed to its readers by treating them as people to be addressed and befriended: "The person talking to you [is] making friends with you, while making clear to you how different from you he believes he is—the book . . . was designed to make an entire generation turn up at Salinger's unwilling doorstep" ("Love of Reading"). And he further suggests that the intimate effect of Wallace's writing in *Infinite Jest*, and the appeal of Wallace as an author, is based on Salinger's technique: "running through that hard novel *Infinite Jest* is a voice that we know from a writer who also infiltrated most young writers who had read him at one point or another—who is J. D. Salinger. . . . David figured out [that] that style of direct address to the reader was the thing that bonded the reader to *Catcher in the Rye* more than anything else about it" (ibid.).

Silverblatt further argues that the intimacy of the style—and its distinctiveness—creates community and also transforms contemporary writing. He says, "at a time when community is such a problem . . . each of these writers [Wallace, Barthelme, Carver, Salinger] created a community of writing around themselves and their styles that changed a generation of writing" ("Love of Reading"). As with Salinger, a community of readers has sprung up around Wallace, following his pronouncements almost as if they were gospel. Readers and critics of Wallace colloquially call this phenomenon the worship of "Saint Dave"¹⁸ and Charles McGrath writes that "Wallace's following verges on the

¹⁸ The first use of the phrase is unknown, but searches of the Wallace-L listserv date it back to April 2013. The hagiography of Wallace came roughly at the same time his Kenyon commencement speech "This is Water" went viral online in a short video made by The Glossary (see Griner). The biopic *The End of the Tour* has only increased public perception of Wallace as "a sort of laical saint, a professor of gentle, sustaining wisdom to whom we can turn in moments of confusion" (Max, "Secular Saint"). See also Roiland, "Derivative" (78) for an overview of Wallace's broader public reception.

cultlike” (McGrath). (While the contemporary backlash against Wallace’s real-life misdeeds may diminish the larger cultural sense of Wallace-worship, it also causes “true believers” to dig in). What grounds these readers’ commitment to Wallace is the way he makes them feel: as Wallace himself avers in his interviews and essays, he aims to make the reader feel *less alone* (but of course he only succeeds with a portion of his real readers). Indeed, Wallace’s worship by readers has generated enough negative reaction by other authors to motivate an entire book—Marshall Boswell’s *The Wallace Effect*—that “registers a provocative pattern of *resistance* to Wallace’s literary dominance” (10). The “Wallace effect” on other authors is also the Wallace *affect*: both admiration and resentment, both acknowledgment and criticism.

Not only is affect one of Wallace’s central themes: it points us to its condition of possibility, which is porosity. Wallace was preoccupied with the question of the human subject’s access to the other, and he was famously obsessed with Wittgenstein because Wittgenstein offered a model of language that figured the human in language as fundamentally social. Porosity is the key concept here: the individual is *not* irreducibly separated off from others, but is instead distinguished from others by virtue of variably porous borders through which certain contents may pass: in the case of Wittgenstein, language. Remember too that Wallace titled three stories in *Brief Interviews* “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders,” specifying these as XI, VI, and XXIV to suggest yet another whole series alongside the series of interviews themselves. Wallace as a reader of systems theory (see my chapter 2 and LeClair’s account of systems novelists) was attuned to the central concept of the border as a distinction

between entities, and he frequently explored unstable borders: in terms of skin (e.g. sweat), nation/geography (the Great Concavity at the border of Canada and the US), sexuality (penetrative sex), identity (the family), and more (see my chapter 1). Voice in Wallace is just as much the mark of an individual speaker as it is something continuous across individuals, and the porosity of the individual with respect to language is finally what allows voice to be both identity, choice, and habit. It is something intimate: as Wallace says, “a lot of [art’s power] has to do with voice, and a feeling of intimacy between the writer and the reader” (Lipsky, *Although* 72). And finally, that porosity—that intimacy—makes possible Wallace’s evolution as a writer, teaching himself at each new stage how to write like someone different—to tune himself to a new paradigm.

(3) Wallace and Influence: Anxiety Squared

To distribute material possessions is to divide them; to distribute spiritual possessions is to multiply them.

—Josef Albers, “MMA-1, 1970”

One never writes alone. As Deleuze and Guattari say, one writing alone is already a crowd. Our words . . . are never without the echoes of the voices of those whose difference we chose to write with. . . . A veritable cacophony. Or better: an ecology.

—Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act*

As I argue across the chapters of this book, Wallace was an author constantly in flux, developing new voices to meet his changing purposes as a novelist. He began as a comic writer at first influenced by the visual media of his childhood—cartoons and comics, largely—before finding Pynchon, his primary influence for *Broom of the System*. He strove to become less silly as he worked to become the author of *Infinite Jest*, embracing emotionality amidst encyclopedic scope as he drew on authors including James Joyce. And finally, by apprenticing himself to John Updike during the writing of *The Pale King*, Wallace developed once more a new voice to add to his “quiver” (as he phrases it to Franzen, Max 124). This is a simplified account of Wallace’s career and of his myriad influences, of course, but what is significant here is that Wallace’s development is consistently enabled by his harnessing of influence. Rather than accept influence more passively, or reject it, Wallace embraced influence as inevitable and used it to his advantage.

But what does influence actually mean in this context? What does Wallace’s embrace of influence reveal—about him, or about voice more generally? How is influence mediated, processed, and even literalized in Wallace’s novels? And finally,

how does my approach to influence in Wallace advance Wallace studies, which has been preoccupied by influence since the initial reviews of *Broom of the System*? In this final section of the introduction I aim to explore these questions and showcase Wallace's "ghostpality" to influence through a reading of a strange moment in the *Infinite Jest*'s archives—a passage that was removed before the final drafts of the novel, in part because it was (I argue) too revealing of Wallace's hostile ambivalence to the obligation of engaging literary history.

Regarding influence, I would first like to highlight that Wallace not only *imitated* other authors; in some cases he fully *processed* them. He adopted some techniques wholly, rejected others, and reworked yet others for his own purposes. This reconfiguration of the elements of voice—not just stylistic choices but tone, values, and rhythms—means that the "sincere" voice, for instance, can only be called Updikean insofar as the echoes of Updike are legible in it. No one is going to mistake Wallace for Updike; but the impact of Updike is also unmistakable. This is because Wallace adopts Updike only partly: he takes on elements of his style and his tone, but that adoption is accompanied by a rejection of certain of Updike's values. Because of its sensitivity for registering the various dimensions of imitation, rejection, or revision, rhetorical narrative theory's model of voice is especially useful for assessing influence.

As I've said, Wallace studies has consistently investigated influence relations since early reviewers of *BotS* identified its parallels to Pynchon's *Lot 49*. Since then, scholars have situated Wallace in relation to American literature (Cohen, "To Wish"), Gaddis and Joyce (Burn, "After Gaddis," *Reader's Guide*, 1st ed.), John Barth (Harris,

“Anxiety”), and Pynchon (McHale, “The Pale King”), as well as linking him to the pragmatist tradition (Bolger), to Gerard Manley Hopkins and to Dostoevsky (Timothy Jacobs, “Idea of Order,” “Brothers Incandenza”), Wittgenstein (Hayes-Brady and many others), Kafka (Staes, “Only Artists”), Emerson and Thoreau (Giles), Kierkegaard (den Dulk), William James (Evans), Cormac McCarthy (Thompson, “Books are Made”), a wide range of world literature (Thompson, *Global*), and many others. Because Wallace was so forthcoming about the texts he read, and open about why he liked them, these analyses largely have followed Wallace’s own comments about texts he has liked or found influential. Lucas Thompson notes that this is a problem: scholars have “hewn closely to Wallace’s own conceptions of his work” (*Global* 4). As a result, even though these critics have done crucial work situating Wallace within a number of traditions, many of them have allowed Wallace too much guidance of his own reception.

I resist this tendency: taking Wallace’s comments about his work into consideration, I nevertheless treat those comments with varying degrees of skepticism. While I make use of interviews, letters, and the nonfiction essays to support my account of Wallace’s shifting approaches to his fiction, I also attune myself to the “repressed” or hidden dynamics motivating Wallace’s creative practice. This approach leads me to examine not only positive but negative dimensions of each voice: the resistance to emotionality in the comic voice of *Broom*; the hostility toward imagined readers evident in the voice of *Infinite Jest*; and the complex, frustrated filiation with Updike that shapes the sincere voice of *The Pale King*. By reconstructing an image of Wallace the person from the available biographical information, as well as a distinct understanding of

Wallace the implied author from the published and unpublished writings (including, importantly, drafts of Wallace's work held by the Harry Ransom Center), I am able to build a complex picture of Wallace's writing life and authorial purposes over time. Further, as I will show below, Wallace is not simply positive about his literary historical inheritance: he is deeply aggrieved by it as well, manifesting a deep hostility.

Critics have discussed Wallace's relation to his influence, following A. O. Scott's essay "The Panic of Influence" and Wallace's own name-drops of Harold Bloom in *Infinite Jest*. Scott writes elsewhere:

William Gaddis and John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut. These guys—and most were guys—pointed the way forward. But they also blocked the path. Mr. Wallace knew this very well. He regarded the lions of postmodernism as heroes, but also as obstacles. "If I have an enemy," he said in the early 1990s, "a patriarch for my patricide, it's probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon." That's a lot of fathers for one Oedipal struggle, and Wallace expended a lot of energy trying to assimilate and overcome their influences. ("The Best")

Indeed, it is not one Oedipal struggle, but a struggle with the problem of filiation itself. Even as Wallace identifies individual authors as "patriarch[s]" for his "patricide," on a deeper level he is not struggling with the influences of individual literary precursors; instead, he is anxious about the anxiety of influence itself, haunted by the idea of haunting itself, and he engaged and literalized this idea in his fiction. He repeatedly shows characters being controlled from without, for instance by conspiring grandmothers (*Broom*) or by controlling husbands ("My Appearance"). David Hering has named this as "absent controller" figure that populates Wallace's fiction (*Fiction and Form* 22ff), and he points also to the story "Here and There" for an articulation of this basic anxiety, where Wallace's character Bruce thinks:

I begin to feel as though my thoughts and voice here are in some way the creative products of something outside me, not in my control, and yet that this shaping, determining influence outside me is still me. I feel a division which the outside voice posits as the labor pains of a nascent emotional conscience. I am invested with an urge to “write it all out,” to confront the past and present as a community of signs, but this requires a special distance I seem to have left behind. (*GwCH* 165-66)

Here, Bruce (a name Wallace frequently uses as an avatar of himself) feels himself to be determined from without—that the things that most define him are somehow outside of him. The possibility of “writing it all out” suggests that the problem is linguistic: the only way to confront the outside of himself is as “a community of signs.” But what would that mean? Hering writes that “the implication that one must subsume one’s own voice within a larger dialogue in order to ameliorate anxiety remains ambiguously phrased here, oscillating between the possibility of harmonious amalgamation of voices or subjugation to a larger narrative authority and loss of one’s voice” (22). The question is: will writing allow Bruce to engage the community of signs as a distinct individual, or will writing simply reveal the extent to which language which is not his own controls him? As Marshall Boswell writes of the same scene, “Bruce holds out hope for a way out, namely by sharing this sense of a divided self with others” (“Constant Monologue” 155), but notes that this hope does not persist through Wallace’s career, suggesting that “for the Wallace of *Oblivion*, Wittgenstein’s solution might not be enough” (ibid.).

This is the same problem Lenore faced in *Broom of the System*: how to know that she wasn’t just a character in a novel, how to know whether there was something outside of language. Boswell is right: the solution is not enough, because it doesn’t save the individual from the fundamental problem of being constructed in language. But the

Wittgensteinian model *does* allow individuals to use language in whatever way works for them (that is, takes effect in interactions with others); it *does* allow the individual to take hold of language, in a sense, and form a community around it. What Bruce should do, then, is not write it *out*, but in a sense write it *in*: form a self by way of his own choices about language use. Or as Wayne Booth puts it, the author

creates not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’ that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works. To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote. As Jessamyn West says, it is sometimes “only by writing the story that the novelist can discover—not his story—but its writer, the official scribe, so to speak, for that narrative.” (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 70-71)

In this logic, writing is a form of enacting selves, generative not just in the story world but also in the author’s world. But the masks (or voices) one dons are never entirely one’s own, and the problem of distinguishing one’s own identity as an author remains.

Wallace’s solution is to act as a navigator in the sea of influence: to allow himself to become possessed by the voices of others in order to retain some control and choice over the inevitability of influence. As David Hering shows and as I will discuss in the next section, Wallace engages this problem by way of the figure of the ghost that is both friendly and threatening at once.

Ghostpitality: The Haunting of David Foster Wallace

Wallace was fixated on the ghost as a figure for his understanding of language. As I have argued, he was deeply stricken by the anxiety of influence, by an ongoing struggle to respond to the ghostly voices of his literary precursors. He literalized this anxiety by populating his fictions with ghosts, thematizing and dramatizing the troubling truths of spectrality—not just as they apply to fiction also to other issues important to Wallace: free will, creativity, and even mathematical logic.

Here I will focus on a very strange fragment in the *Infinite Jest* manuscript archives, unpacking the larger significance of “ghostpitality” in Wallace’s career to unpack his deeper feelings about influence as well as to elaborate the Derridian understanding of language that Wallace retained even as he claimed to celebrate Wittgenstein as an alternative. “Ghostpitality” is a portmanteau of “ghost” and the Derridian concept of “hostipitality,” itself a portmanteau of “hospitality” and “hostility.” In hostipitality, Derrida explores the instability of a guest/host relation such that hospitality always contains the threat of hostility (from either the guest or host): both host and guest are vulnerable and potentially threatening. Derrida warns that “[p]ure hospitality consists in leaving one’s house open to the unforeseeable arrival, which can be an intrusion, even a dangerous intrusion, liable eventually to cause harm” (Derrida and Roudinesco 59, qtd. in Coughlan 173). So David Coughlan, who coined “ghostpitality,” explores how the logic of hostipitality applies not only to other living persons but also to ghosts—and how this concept “names the haunting of every inside (every self, body, house, “present”) by the outside, every interior by the anterior and exterior” (172).

This haunting is possible because of the permeability—the openness—of the self, especially in language, and ghostpality also attends to the ethical obligation to remain so. As Coughlan quotes from Derrida:

Can one, in order to question it, address oneself to a ghost? . . . If he loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn . . . to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, specters, even if they [. . .] give us to rethink the “there.” (*Specters of Marx* 175-176, qtd. in Coughlan 22n14)

All in all, I argue that Wallace is a paradigmatic case of ghostpality, at once eager to absorb the energies and the aesthetics of his forebears whom he practically *invited* to haunt him, but at the same time intensely hostile to his perceived obligation to do so, his sense that he had no choice but to lift the weight of tradition. This weight, which he figures with the metaphor of water, a motif significant throughout his career, seems to become easier to bear later in his career because, I will show, of the ethical dimension he endows it with in *This is Water*.

David Hering has shown that the figure of the ghost, in Wallace’s fiction, marks the figure of the author. In *Infinite Jest*, for instance, a wraith appears near the end of the novel to communicate with the character Don Gately, inserting words in his head that he does not know in order to prove its otherness to his mind. This “lexical rape,” as the narrator calls it, is “not only creepy but somehow violating” (*IJ* 832). Because, as we learn, ghost time is much faster than human time,¹⁹ the ghost has trouble visibly appearing to Gately unless he stays incredibly still. It becomes clear, though, that he is

¹⁹ Coughlan notes that, “where specters are concerned, time is not straightforward” (3); the logic of spectrality changes how we must think about being in time.

the ghost of James Orin Incandenza. As I discuss in chapter 2, J.O.I. is, and is not, Wallace: Wallace uses him to parody avant-garde aesthetics but also to articulate central ethical purposes of the novel, like his desire to give voice to a democratic multitude of figures. And J.O.I. is also, as Stephen Burn has argued, a figure of James Joyce, based on their physical resemblance and the sonic connection between their names.

The scene with Gately marks the antagonism of the ghost's incursion, a literal father figure who populates Gately's mind with language using "ghastly intrusive force" (832). But this fantasy of telepathic total presence, both mediated by language and not by actual voices, is also—Gately reflects three days later—somewhat appealing. As Wallace writes, "The wraith . . . had been able to interface with Gately without aid of speech or gesture or Bic . . . he has to admit he'd kind of liked it. The dialogue. The give-and-take. The way the wraith could seem to get inside him" (923). Even though the border between self and other was violated without Gately's consent, a part of him appreciates this penetration of his atomized, solipsistic self. What Wallace seems to be considering here is the way we are radically vulnerable in language and the way that an author's language comes into us in a ghostly manner that threatens our sense of autonomy, free will, and individuality.

What kind of writing mind seeks endlessly for *being influenced* as a mode of self-fertilization? An anxious one, and a lonely one, perhaps. Of all the critics writing about Wallace during his lifetime, A.O. Scott was the one Wallace said "saw into my soul" with his 2000 essay "The Panic of Influence." Scott writes that Wallace "feels haunted by a feeling of belatedness," regards his literary fathers with "an envious, quasi-Oedipal

hostility,” and anxiously “scrambles to position himself on the cutting edge” even though he is “deeply suspicious of novelty.” Part of what’s at stake in understanding Wallace and influence is that influence indexes not just Wallace’s *choices* of influences but his relation to being influenced as such. Scott’s title, of course, refers to Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, a book that not only influenced Wallace but—as I’ll show here—offers the occasion for the very strange fragment I uncovered in the *Infinite Jest* archives. This fragment, composed early on, is highly unusual—nothing like it appears throughout Wallace’s archives, whether it’s drafts, letters, or diary entries, nor is there anything like this anywhere in Wallace’s published work.

ii. July 3, 1986. IT WAS A GREAT MARVEL THAT THEY WERE IN THE FATHER WITHOUT KNOWING HIM

EPIGRAPH: “The precursors flood us, and we can die by drowning in them, but no life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded. The first and foremost danger encountered by organisms which are genetically liquid-inhabiting is not that of inundation but of desiccation.”

--Ferenczi’s Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality

PROHIBITION OF EPIGRAPH:

there is no device so nauseous to the spirit & letter of good that is to say improper or willed writing whether fiction or false than this nauseous device of epigram I mean epigraph the false the heep-ish odor & impression of humility the genuflexion the hesitation of the leaper or better yet the diver on the high dive who looks down for just that moment of hesitation before casting himself up and out is in reality a rhetorical no-fault of high premium an attempt to attach oneself to the friable coattails of a kind of grinning yoricklike father-figure already inside and suffering at the hands of respectability & canon whose authority the ephebe or new writer hopes to lobby by attaching his utterance to a mocktradition in reality this is a type of self-serving selfnegation an if you will fellatio de se i mean if one or two lines by a dead man sums up the point of what proceeds them better than what proceeds them why bother? is what i say this point has never to my knowledge been pointed out before or since and i suspect it will be spurned or worse left by itself to dangle or drown by which i mean the sort of

--E.P.R. Wallace, adultery in a narrow bunk
(David Foster Wallace Papers, Container 15.7)

The sheer spleen that Wallace vents here regarding the double bind of literary stature is unlike any other moment in his extended corpus—including fiction, nonfiction, letters, and drafts. Judging from the typescripts in question, this is from a relatively early draft of *Infinite Jest*—perhaps not composed in 1986, as the section is dated, but probably no later than 1988.²⁰ This means Wallace has only just started to conceive of the novel.²¹ It already has ghosts, though—as D. T. Max documents, Wallace’s Yaddo application in September 1986 identifies a new project as “Infinite Jest,” and, as Max notes, “You can’t have *Hamlet* without a ghost” (160).

Multiple elements of this fragment come from Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*; first, the title “It was a great marvel that they were in the father without knowing him,” recurs throughout *Infinite Jest* and is likely drawn from Bloom’s Prologue (3). It is also a quotation there (though again unattributed), and it comes from the Gnostic Valentinian Gospel of Truth (22.27f), where its longer context is as follows:

It was a great marvel that they were in the father without knowing him, and that they were able to escape outside by their own will because they could not understand and know Him in whom they were . . . Since Deficiency came into being because they did not know the Father, therefore when they know the Father, Deficiency, at that same instant, will cease to exist. (qtd. in Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* 60)²²

²⁰ This might be the date of composition, but it could just as likely be the fictional date given to this section; on the page just before, as Wallace gives another fictional date as 1974.

²¹ He has dreamt up the Incandenza family, with its difficult relationship between father and sons, and he has already been experimenting with the character of Joelle.

²² The simplicity of this model, from early in the Gnostic tradition, is especially useful to both Bloom and Wallace for its basic gnostic emphasis on fullness or “Pleroma” in opposition to “Deficiency.” This wholeness comes to mean literary history for Bloom and perhaps language itself for Wallace. For useful commentary on the “Gospel of Truth,” see Schoedel and Wilson.

In Wallace's model of the psyche, individuals with a basic lack are always looking for a restored fullness—which they find, self-destructively, in the total absorption of the fatal *Infinite Jest* videotape or more briefly in drugs or sex. In this light it is clear why Wallace might be interested in the Gospel of Truth, for its model of knowledge as something that the individual can be *in*, applicable to a metaphysics of literary history. But Wallace typically regards the desire for absorption with intense suspicion: it is ultimately a desire for self-destruction.

Wallace lightly edits more of Bloom's material, in particular the first passage, which is attributed to Ferenczi—his changes create a higher intensity. This material is drawn from the second-to-last page of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, which itself offers a theory of literary ghostpality. Wallace, already in a psychologically defensive move, has tinkered with the passage—first of all, rather than Ferenczi's, half of it is actually *Bloom's* language Wallace quotes (even though the metaphor of flooding is developed later on that page with a block quotation from Ferenczi). And second of all, Wallace has adapted the language to increase its intensity: he has transformed “imaginative life” into simply life, and he has made the Ferenczi selection present rather than past tense, and genetic—essential—rather than historical.

If the play with the “epigraph” is telling, it is the “prohibition against epigraph” that is the most shocking. Nowhere in Wallace's corpus is a voice like this found: ranting, chaotic, hostile, irrational, even unpunctuated.²³ But it betrays such an unusual expressivity of hostility on Wallace's part that I suggest it forces us to reconfigure our accounts of Wallace's relation to his sources, to see him as much more deeply conflicted

²³ If there is any precursor for this voice, it is William Gass's Reverend Jethro Furber in *Omensetter's Luck*.

than critics currently acknowledge. Interestingly, Wallace locates the father-figure as “already inside” the respectable world of the canon, but even as the young “ephebe” (another nod to Bloom) wants to “attach himself” he sees the older one “suffering at the hands” of that canon—meaning Wallace’s ambivalence is not only toward the epigraph as a *gesture* of canonicity but to the inside/outside nature of canonicity as well. To enter the canon is a “self-negation,” then, but also a “self-serving” one—or, in Wallace’s sexualized pun, a “fellatio de se.” Here is Wallace, then, wrestling with spectrality itself: with the tradition of literature as spectral, an engagement with the dead whom one can channel into presence. On the one hand, this is a fundamental quality of literature—insofar as one engages literature, one engages spectrality. As Julian Wolfreys has written, “any text is spectral . . . the textual reconfigures, when thought through, the limit between the living and the dead, announcing that limit and every limit, border, or threshold, to be permeable” (639). On the other hand, though, this is especially the case for Wallace, whose self-conscious engagement with spectrality as a problematic makes him unable to repress—and thus defend himself against—the anxiety about other authors. For Wallace, too, it’s not just that one *can* channel the dead—it’s that one can’t help but to, as the traces of the dead constitute the medium of *language itself*.

This allows us to begin postulating a theory of language for Wallace beyond the current critical orthodoxy of Wallace-as-Wittgensteinian. In particular, I suggest that Wallace’s interest in language as medium, influence, and sound was deeply impacted by Gadamer,²⁴ whose *Truth and Method* brings these concepts together. Wallace was, as

²⁴ Max documents that Wallace, while at the University of Arizona, asked “his literary theory professor if he should reread Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*” (Max 56).

Gadamer puts it, “thinking out of the consequences of language as medium” (477), the place where Gadamer writes, “something happens” to readers, something that follows the structure not of seeing but of “hearing” (478). As Gadamer elaborates, “It is not just that he who hears is also addressed, but also that he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not” (478). Not just that, but in order to accept that unrefusable call, one must make a special effort, Gadamer writes, to “b[e] negative toward oneself” (481), to take texts of the past on their own terms as much as possible. Wallace, in the effort of writing, feels this as a double bind: he wants to write, to announce himself as a talent, but in order to join the medium of language he is already bound to submit himself to its chains.

It is this model of language that scares Wallace the most: what Vernon Cisney has called “the horror of language with no outside” (Conference panel 2015).²⁵ In college, Wallace says, he went “from [a] coldly cerebral take on analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory,” a transition that “shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct” (McCaffery 41). While eventually he embraced language as a medium he could shape even as it shapes him, he avers, “I’m *in* it. We’re *in* language. . . . inescapably, the same way we’re in like Kant’s space-time” (ibid. 45). In a similar vein, Coughlan writes, “where specters are concerned . . . my words are never mine alone but are always haunted by the other and open to being reworked by the other” (3). What Wallace’s anti-epigraph reveals, then, is how this lack

²⁵ This horror in some ways explains Wallace’s explanation of his first novel as “a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida” (Lipsky 35). These two radically different linguistic theories nevertheless offer totalizing models for how language not only connects to the world but *is* in some fundamental way *what the world is*.

of ownership over language feels to him not just like an alienating horror or an existential dread, but like a real and infuriating threat. He exists in a double bind whereby language that feels like his is also not his, where the freedom he desires is simply *not possible*.

This is why Wallace is drawn so much to Bloom—especially in his early formulations of influence theory, Bloom likewise figures the anxiety of influence as a life or death situation. He writes: “Threatened by the prospect of imaginative death, of being entirely possessed by a precursor, [poets] suffer a distinctively literary form of crisis. A strong poet seeks not simply to vanquish the rival but to assert the integrity of his or her own writing self” (*Anatomy* 8). The problem, though, is that Wallace is engaging not just *specters* but *spectrality itself*: he sees the literary past as a coalition of ghosts knit into the fabric of language, as Derrida puts it “the radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance” in which one must “filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles” (*Specters* 18). In this sifting, the very medium in which Wallace operates has become the scene of his agon.

The turn to medium helps us understand the importance of the original quotation that Wallace takes from Bloom and Ferenczi, whose operative metaphor is with water and drowning, and to place this metaphorization within a larger arc of Wallace’s career. Wallace moves from an embrace of the sublime in which the “oceanic” threatens to obliterate (e.g. in *Westward*), to dramatizing maturation as a leap from a high dive (“Forever Overhead”), to his final ethical claims in *This is Water*, a text that was never meant to be published but which does seem to represent Wallace’s thinking about ethics and everyday life. There, Wallace tells the story of the fish (a story that recurs throughout

his fiction as well): “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’” (3-4). Wallace calls this a “didactic little parable-ish stor[y]” (5) that demonstrates “that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about” (8). Though he acknowledges that this is a “banal platitude,” it nevertheless has “a life-or-death importance” (9), insofar as it moves us to “simply pa[y] attention to what’s going on in front of” ourselves (48). Jeffrey Severs calls this Wallace’s treatment of the “problem of immanence—the problem of life in an immersive, invisible medium” (“We’ve been inside” 8).

If Wallace understands himself to be drowning, he at least conceives of a way to respond: become a fish, and as he says in *The Pale King*, “breathe without air.”²⁶ Rather than struggle against the overdeterminations of his ghosts, he reimagines them in this novel as “companions” (Hering, *Fiction and Form* 29) who appear not to control but to impart wisdom. In this transition, Wallace reimagines the relation between ethics and agency. Wallace was deeply committed to the ethical dimensions of thinking through a reduced autonomy, with what responsibility might look like for subjects that are always already permeable and vulnerable. This is not a special case of human: it is the human itself. Just as the fish is *of* the water such that it no longer exists to him, the reader is *of*

²⁶ The metaphor of drowning and of water also seems to evoke the first story of Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, “Night-Sea Journey,” in which an unnamed entity swims toward an unknown shore, thinking of the Heritage he carries and of the Father he does not know. (The entity, likely a sperm cell, manages to evoke a thoroughly Bloomian *agon* toward his task.)

language. Working through the same relational logic, Namwali Serpell comments that “reading as such troubles the boundary between subject and object. Poulet says of reading literature, ‘You are inside it, it is inside you; there is no longer inside or outside.’ This description of reading sounds sexy because it invokes an interpenetration, a slow dissolve, a loss of power that is itself a form of power” (4).

As he matures as a writer, rather than require a total freedom which is pre-empted by the precursors, Wallace finally accepts—to an extent—that not only is he conditioned inextricably by his surround, but that this is the only realm in which ethics can appear. Becoming a “good artist” on these terms may mean “staying inside and living through horrors,” as Severs describes the upshot of the late story “The Soul is Not a Smithy” (“We’ve been inside” 22); but by this late in his career it seems that Wallace has transitioned from drowning in, and hating, his ghosts, to embracing what Colin Davis calls the “structural openness” (13) of our lives to the voices of the past and future. In the same sense as Wallace wrote, “this is water,” we can say too, “this is haunting”: the realization that we are the spectral fish who must not only become aware of the water but of the many calls that echo through it.

In the following chapters, I will focus on Wallace’s individual novels and the way he changes—as a person, and as a writer—positioning himself against different literary traditions and changing his relation to his reader and to his understanding of literature’s purpose. Although the path I chart tells a narrative of growth (as I see it), I want to emphasize that the movement from comedy, to encyclopedism, to sincerity is as much a story of growth as a story of Wallace’s inability to be comfortable with one mode of

writing. He was always in search of new voices, and his progression as an author was never certain: he never knew if he would achieve what he set out to do, from novel to novel, and frequently he diminished his past achievements because they no longer fit the ideals he had at the time. The progression of Wallace's virtuosity and craft did not likely seem to him as unified or as clear a path as I may make of it here; and the unexpected shortness of his life means that we will never know where he might have gone from here. Nevertheless, his particular genius with voice, and the way it renewed the sense of an author-reader compact at the turn of the century, live on, and this book is dedicated to showcasing the place that voice takes in the exemplary, unified system of his work—a system that is at once conceptual, aesthetic, and ethical.

Chapter 2: The Comic Voice

Wit is the epigram upon the death of a feeling.

–Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human II* (86)

First and foremost, David Foster Wallace was a funny writer. In a 2004 interview with David Kipen, Wallace reflected that for “at least the first two books the primary thing was ‘can I make myself laugh so hard that I fall out of the chair?’” He identifies this as one of his “biggest weaknesses as a writer”: “I have a grossly sentimental affection for gags, for stuff that’s nothing but funny, and which I sometimes stick in for no other reason than funniness” (McCaffery 24). Even as his writing changed and developed throughout his career, humor always remained part of it. Reviews named him “the funniest writer of his generation” (Dee), but Wallace’s comedy has received curiously scant critical attention, as the majority of critics focus on the novel’s play with philosophical issues.²⁷ My goal in this chapter is to consider the comic in Wallace’s first novel, *Broom of the System* (1987), and in particular to answer three main questions about the comic voice that Wallace establishes in the novel. First, why does Wallace begin his career in this way? That is, what are Wallace’s rhetorical and affective purposes as he shapes this comic voice in the mid-1980s? Second, what is the voice like as an experiential phenomenon for the reader—that is, what kind of persona does Wallace

²⁷ For explorations of the philosophical dimensions of *Broom*, see Bolger and Korb, eds.; Boswell, *Understanding*; Fest, “Rubble”; O’Gara; Hayes-Brady, “Philosophical”; Foster, “Blasted”; Mulhall; Olsen; and Kelly, “Dialogue.”

create? And third, how does that voice come to be through a synthesis of particular values, tones, stylistic techniques, and rhythmic patterns, all of which combine to produce the reader's experience? I will situate the voice biographically and historically, consider its influences with a focus on Thomas Pynchon, and show how each of the elements of voice—values, tone, style, and rhythm—works as part of a complex synthesis to form the phenomenon we experience as the comic voice. I ultimately argue that the comic voice invites readers to laugh along at the absurd hijinks of its cartoonish storyworld, lightening Black Humor fiction's apocalyptic darkness and using a playful tone to invite readers's engagement with such issues as bodies, borders, vision, and language. The voice values amusement and perceptual flexibility, depicting slapstick events in a manic tone and revising scenes from *The Crying of Lot 49* to accentuate cartoonish moments of body humor that frequently examine the gendered body and the absurdity of male desire. Stylistically, it often uses cumulative sentences to remediate visual media, using concrete diction and taking on a rhythmic paradigm much like a joke that involves a lead-up and punch line. All of these elements work together to provide a remarkable comic and maximalist vision for a debut novel, let alone one composed during the high point of American minimalism.

While *Broom of the System* is the first of Wallace's novels, composed as one of two thesis projects he wrote at Amherst College in 1984/85, Wallace was not new to comedy. Through his young adulthood, Wallace had shown a gift for wit and parodic imitation, and at Amherst he and his friend Mark Costello resuscitated Amherst's humor magazine *Sabrina*, modeled on the *Harvard Lampoon*. In *Sabrina*, Wallace honed his

taste for gags and jokes that blended high and low domains of knowledge, playing with the comic potential of self-referential texts and textuality itself. Wallace's early adoption of humor writing shows him becoming comfortable with a form that accommodates his manic and intellectual, yet also childish, energy. It also reveals his discomfort with emotional immediacy: being funny is a relation to the world that gives Wallace a fairly masculine position of power and emotional guardedness. Further, Wallace's comic voice shows him entering the world of letters in a distinct manner, drawing on the tradition of black humor writing of the 1960s and positioning himself as an inheritor to authors like Barth, Barthelme, Vonnegut, Coover, and especially Pynchon. Wallace's engagement with humor was not just related to literary history, though; it also connects to his experience with popular genres and media. Wallace wanted to play with a cartoonish aesthetic, not just as it manifested in his favorite postmodernists, but as it appeared in popular media, from cartoons to comics to television. As an avid television viewer in the 1970s watching "grotesque amounts of TV" (McCaffery 24), Wallace felt that contemporary lived experience was too saturated with TV to avoid it: he embraced the "low" in both low culture and low comedy, in self-conscious opposition to the effete and sensitive "beret-wearing *artistes*" at Amherst (McCaffery 28). Wallace wanted to be wild, irreverent, shocking—but also well-liked and admired as an intellect. *Broom of the System* pursues these goals by blending the low with the high, mixing tasteless and juvenile gags with philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literary parody.²⁸

²⁸ With his sense for the pop cultural, and the intensely cinematic quality of the comic voice, it is no wonder that Wallace wrote a short précis of the novel to solicit interest in a film adaptation (Harry Ransom Center, Nadell collection Box 1.2).

Wallace's jokes and gags reveal a set of concerns that would last throughout his career: embodiment, causality, the impact of language, and the permeability of the self. Yet in *The Broom of the System* these interests are especially linked to humor. From the predominant physical humor to his parodic engagement with Nabokov and Updike,²⁹ to the ways in which Wallace plays with high philosophical concepts in low and even vulgar ways, Wallace wants to make his readers laugh.³⁰ And so even though *Broom* is largely considered the weakest book in Wallace's oeuvre—an apprentice effort from a very clever college student—its work with humor and voice is deeply revealing of Wallace's lifelong goals and challenges as a writer. Further, since comedy is something that Wallace *never* abandons throughout his career (even though he increasingly subordinates the comedy to other ends, and buries his jokes under other layers of meaning), any full account of Wallace's career and his interest in voice must address his irrepressible jokester side. After all, *The Broom of the System* is a book even whose *title* contains a punning reference to digestion: “Broom of the system” was a phrase used by Wallace's

²⁹ See Boswell, *Understanding*, and for an approach with more attention to genre, O'Donnell, “Almost.”

³⁰ The philosophical dimensions of the novel are largely outside of the scope of this project, but briefly, to exemplify: Dr. Jay's “hygiene theory” about the skin as a membrane—a permeable border between self and other—articulates problems of alterity and boundaries that are also present in Governor Zusatz's argument for the Great Ohio Desert (54) and Norman Bombardini's plot to consume the whole world. Wallace does not mean to undermine these ideas: in fact he plays with them in order to endorse their truth. But his treatment is intensely satirical, suggesting that even as he wants to explore these (essentially systems-theoretical) concepts he is more interested in the comic dynamics of casting them in such a zany fashion. As Kelly puts it, in Wallace's fiction ideas not only “wiel[d] formative dramatic power in the minds of principal characters,” but the very “fictional worlds in which Wallace's characters exist have themselves been constructed through the author's close engagement with abstract ideas—logical, political, historical—that are made concrete in the linguistic registers and plot dynamics of his novels” (“Dialogue” 267). Though I would suggest that the abstract realm does not impact the linguistic registers of *Broom* nearly as much as it does for *Jest*—which I address below in this chapter's section on style—I find Kelly's assessment of the fundamentally theoretical nature of Wallace's novels accurate.

great-grandmother to refer to apples, which would sweep one's digestive system (Max 47).³¹

Some initial comments on Wallace's comedy may be useful. First of all, I want to resist categorizing Wallace's comedy into one or more types, because I'm focused overall on its purpose(s): Wallace wants to make the reader laugh, and he wants to make himself laugh. His means to that end are remarkably varied, and while an exhaustive typology of comic elements might be interesting, it would take our attention away from those purposes and poetics that define his comic voice. This means that I am less interested here in theories of humor, because my project here is to show how Wallace's comic *voice* works, not how his comedy works. I will refer throughout to slapstick, the absurd, body humor, the Rabelaisian carnivalesque, and black humor, focusing on the ways these modes are evoked by Wallace's comedy and the way they help us understand his purposes.

Second, although I do not touch on the structure of the novel as a whole here, because voice does not extend to structural techniques, I want to suggest that Wallace's episodic poetics in *Broom* are in part a result of his comic purposes, which are embodied in many comic sketches that he joins together. As a "compendium of gags" (Boswell, *Understanding* 21), the novel somewhat resists the continuity of traditional plotting. Lisa Trahair, investigating the tension between slapstick (defined by its series of gags) and

³¹ As Max writes, Wallace's mother remembered that her grandmother would use the exact phrase to exhort children to eat an apple, saying, "Come on, it's the broom of the system" (47), which delighted Wallace for its Wittgensteinian resonance. Adding a literary gloss to the title, Stephen Burn suggests that the "broom" is a reference not just to Wittgenstein's example of meaning as use in *Philosophical Investigations* (an example that he notes is dramatized in *Broom of the System* [149-50]), but also to DeLillo's *Americana*, in which the broom is "the emblem of the system. . . . a product of different systems, carefully combined" ("Generational" 11).

narrative (with its increased cohesion), finds that (at least in Buster Keaton's historical moment) "the forces of comedy and those of narrative were opposed," creating "a duel between slapstick and narrative," between the "anarchy of pure pleasure" and "the desire for meaning" (Trahair "Short-Circuiting" 308). Wallace negotiates a similar tension, incorporating many nested narratives into a rather episodic poetics. This technique allows him the maximum comedic excess: he goes out of his way to amp up somewhat regular elements until they are downright absurd, creating scenarios and characters with intense comic energy. Ultimately, because of their modular nature (for instance, Rick's attempts at short fiction, or his dream narratives) Wallace is able to integrate these episodes into the progression of the novel so that they don't derail the progression of the plot.

Even as Wallace stitches his novel together from disparate materials and sketches, much as Pynchon does in his first novel *V.*, he is able to increase the cohesion of the novel further by maintaining a continuity of voice—perhaps even too much continuity. Wallace tells Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, "I think at the beginning I had two voices I could do well; one was [Lenore's] and the other was this hypersensitive, really intellectual voice. One of the weaknesses in the book is that a lot of the characters seem to have the same voice: Rick Vigorous sort of sounds like David Bloemker who sort of sounds like Norman Bombardini and even Lenore's father. A lot of that is a parody of intellectual prose" (13). The narrative overall aligns with Lenore, whose path brings her into conflict with these various figures of uncertain authority—men who often use intellectual, obfuscatory language to protect themselves.

Fortunately, though, the *narrative* voice—distinct from those of the characters—is drawn neither into her straight-talk nor into intellectual parody, instead navigating these conflicts of character voice with a light, comic approach. Wallace has a third voice that he doesn't acknowledge: that of visual media, namely cartoons, television, and movies. I will discuss visuality throughout the chapter, but here I want to emphasize my finding that the way the narrator *sees* impacts the way it *speaks* at a most fundamental level. This does not mean that we need to reject Genette's classic distinction between "who sees" and "who speaks"—the focalizer and the narrator—but it does mean that Wallace's comic voice gives us an excellent case for exploring the ways that these two categories can become intertwined and mutually constituting, especially in the media ecology of its moment, and for an author who watches such "grotesque" (McCaffery 24) amounts.

Biographical Moment: Young, Clever, Showy

Even as a senior college student writing *The Broom of the System*, Wallace was already a highly self-conscious writer. Critics have suggested that Wallace was in thrall to his influences at this time—not only Pynchon, but also Barth and Barthelme—and that he had not yet figured out what kind of writer he wanted to be. Counter to these suggestions, while admitting that Wallace was still an apprentice, I argue that we should take *Broom* more seriously as a novel and as part of Wallace's overall career arc. Even though his writing to come in the stories of *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) still contains plenty of stylistic and generic experimentation, such variety is not evidence of Wallace's lack of writerly identity because (1) Wallace's entire career is defined by experimentation and (2) Wallace had already (in his college years) played with different kinds of storytelling before settling on the comic voice that he uses in *Broom*.

Wallace's earliest published fiction, in fact, bears little resemblance to *Broom of the System* in its voice, genre, or topic. "The Planet Trillaphon as It Stands in Relation to the Bad Thing," published in 1984 in the *Amherst Review*, shows Wallace exploring a dissociative narrator's experience with severe depression, documenting his attempt to sew up a hallucinated hole in the skin of his cheek and discussing the feeling, produced by his antidepressant medication, of living on another planet. The story reads at first like Vonnegut or Pynchon, in part because of a psychiatrist named "Dr. Kablumbus," but its first-person narrator is disturbingly detailed regarding his severe depression and the "hilariously stupid business" (28) of his suicide attempt, "a really highly ridiculous incident involving electrical appliances in the bathtub about which I really don't wish to

say a whole lot” (26). The narrator survives because “in [his] irrational state” (31) he has forgotten to plug in most of the appliances; crudely, he adds that “what got shocked really the worst were my reproductive organs. I guess they were sort of out of the water part-way and formed a sort of bridge for the electricity between the water and my body and the air” (31). Wallace’s writing about mental illness is vulnerable in its darkness, but even as it is vulnerable there is a kind of juvenile grotesquerie in the insistence on the penis being mutilated—especially with the image of the penis lifting up out of the water with a line of electricity shooting through it, cartoon-style.³² In *Broom of the System* Wallace likewise refuses pain with cartoonish moments but it seems crucial to me that Wallace *does* engage in “Trillaphon” with the anguish of the mental illness he had already suffered, badly enough to take not one but two leaves from college—in spring 1982 and Fall 1983—for suicidal depression.

I begin with this anecdote not excessively to biographize Wallace’s writing, but rather to contextualize Wallace’s discovery of his interest in fiction, to show him actively choosing—even as an early apprentice—“what sort of writer he [was] going to be” (Luter 67): his comedy was a literary choice. Still it was a mode he found comfortable: as a child, “he had a fondness for parody, puns, and satires” (Max 4-5), and since junior high, Max writes, Wallace played the “clown, someone good at imitations, at times a teaser

³² While I do not discuss the nonfiction in this project, it is worth noting that Wallace’s essays also frequently make recourse to the cartoonish, especially his “Ticket to the Fair.” Whereas the cartoon quality of various scenes is generally made obvious through their use of various cartoon tropes, Wallace occasionally makes it explicit, as he does at the end of “Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes.” There, after Wallace and his tennis partner Antitoy have been lifted and blown into a fence by a surprise tornado, “the fence had two body-shaped indentations *like in cartoons* where the guy’s face leaves an imprint in the skillet that hit him” (78, my emphasis). Given that Wallace’s journalism frequently includes exaggerated elements that depart from factual report (but only when those cannot be fact-checked), the use of the cartoon image here seems especially marked as a pursuit of comic vision regardless of truth-value. See Roiland on Wallace’s journalism and fabrication.

who would lash out with his wit” (Max 7). Comedy, jokes, and poking fun gave Wallace a position of social power, the quick-witted young man with a love for gags. At Amherst out of his Midwestern element, Wallace relied on jokes to connect with people and to impress them, and with Mark Costello in Fall 1982 he revived the campus humor magazine *Sabrina*, modeled on the *Harvard Lampoon* (Max 26). During that leave and after, Wallace experimented with styles, admitting that his earliest attempts were a series of stories that were “just really bad imitations of JD Salinger without my being aware that they were imitations of JD Salinger” (Kipen). But as he progressed, he learned to respond more carefully to his influences and to navigate between admiration, rejection, and revision. Serious, dark, ironic, funny . . . Wallace played with the options and finally settled on the mask of comedy, especially after he saw what it could do in Pynchon’s hands.

As Wallace and Costello gained increasing fame and notoriety on campus they attracted a larger group of friends, including Charlie McLagan, an edgier young man with whom Wallace would get high and debate suicide (Max 33). In the spring of 1983, in a scene that sounds almost fated, McLagan “had run into Wallace and Costello discussing *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and tossed them his copy of *Lot 49*, which they promptly read” (Max 31).³³ The timing could not have been better; Wallace was beginning to think of himself as a fiction writer, telling Costello that he wanted to write fiction that would

³³ Wallace maintained publicly at many points in his career that he had not read *Crying* before he wrote *Broom*, but Max’s account counters this. I asked Charles B. Harris, with whom Wallace worked closely at Illinois State University and with whom he often discussed Pynchon and Barth, whether he thought that Wallace had been lying; Harris said yes (Personal communication 2015). For an outline of some of the ways that Wallace’s novel follows the same broad strokes as *Lot 49*—an account that deeply distressed Wallace—see Kakutani, “Life in Cleveland” and Max 47; but as I discuss below, O’Donnell, “Almost” notably distinguishes the two novels in terms of their differences in tone.

still be read “100 years from now” (Max 23). Now he saw a different kind of ambitious, interesting writing—much different from the Updike of his high school years—that captured his unmoored feeling but treated it with the generic energy of the quest plot. “*The Crying of Lot 49* “caught Wallace’s eye” for its picture of America as “a world . . . where meaning was refracted and distorted, especially by the media that engulf and reconfigure every gesture” (Max 31). Pynchon also showed Wallace that “pop songs, TV shows, and thrillers” “could sit alongside serious issues in fiction” (Max 31)—a lesson he took to heart for the rest of his career but especially in *Broom*, which features scenes set in a bar modeled on *Gilligan’s Island*, characters named for lisped rock bands (Judith Prieth), antic televangelists, and a city shaped like Jayne Mansfield in profile.

Wallace finding Pynchon, Mark Costello remembers, was “like Bob Dylan finding Woodie Guthrie” (Max 31). Plus, it allowed Wallace to see that the math logic he had embraced earlier on was not entirely antithetical to fiction, grounding his sense of purpose as he transitioned from doing philosophy to literature. Wallace himself says it best in conversation with Larry McCaffery:

Think of *The Broom of the System* as the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who’s just had this mid-life crisis that’s moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory, which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6° calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct. This WASP’s written a lot of straight humor, and loves gags, so he decides to write a coded autobio that’s also a funny little poststructural gag: so you get Lenore, a character in a story who’s terribly afraid that she’s really nothing more than a character in a story. And, sufficiently hidden under the sex-change and the gags and theoretical allusions, I got to write my sensitive little self-obsessed bildungsroman. (41)

Wallace understands himself in terms of the cerebral: he's gone from math logic to literary theory, and he mocks the self-expressive dimension of his fiction as "sensitive" and "self-obsessed." It is unsurprising, then, that many of those who taught Wallace then considered his main work the philosophy thesis on fatalism and semantics and *Broom* as "a sideline . . . the hobby of a man clearly destined, as his father had been, for philosophy" (Durantaye 22). Further, Wallace might not have written *Broom* at all if not for Mark Costello, who graduating a year prior had submitted two theses as well, one on the New Deal and the other a novel. Wallace, ever-competitive and by this time protective of his award-winning status as one of the best students ever to attend Amherst (he won more awards than any other student ever had), wanted to match Costello. He realized then that his restless and agitated mind was more absorbed by fiction than logic: "writing *Broom of the System* felt like it was using 97 percent of me, whereas the philosophy thesis was using 50 percent of me" (Lipsky 165).

Fortunately, in Pynchon Wallace had found a model for how fiction, philosophy, and humor could intersect—one that contrasted with the confining realist norms of his first creative writing class at Amherst, taught by the visiting writer Alan Lelchuk, who was a realist novelist "in the style of Philip Roth" (Max 39). Lelchuk insisted that Wallace learn to write fiction that was more than "philosophy with zingers" (39), and though he infuriated Wallace he was partly right—Wallace's clever comedy needed to be balanced against character formation and the management of plot, elements of what Gerald Howard would later call "the physics of reading." In Wallace's words, he needed to take into account "a whole set of readers' values and tolerances and capacities and

patience-levels . . . when the gritty business of writing stuff for others to read is undertaken” (Max 69). But Wallace was never going to become a realist in the conventional sense, and as Neyfakh notes of Wallace’s particular historical moment in the mid-1980s, “American literary fiction was ripe for upheaval, as Raymond Carver’s influence was fading and the ‘Brat Pack’—Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis—was sliding from dominance” (Neyfakh). In addition to the myriad ways that Wallace “reverse-engineers” Pynchon (Max 47), the Pynchonian voice and more largely the Black Humorist voice offered him a set of resources for changing the face of American fiction.

Black Humor and Postmodernism: The Historical Frame

As I have shown, Wallace's desire to be funny developed as part of his persona as a young man at Amherst, doing parodic imitations around the lunch table and poking fun at anything and everything in *Sabrina*. It also allowed him the emotional distance he needed from his own depressive crises. But this impulse also has a place within the larger literary-historical moment: in the midst of post-Carverian realism and the recent boom of "Brat Pack" fiction,³⁴ readers were looking for something new on the scene.

Mark McGurl outlines the history of the "Program Era" as the growing differentiation between three distinct (but still overlapping) "aesthetic formations": "technomodernism," "high cultural pluralism," and "lower-middle-class modernism" (*Program* 32). As McGurl writes, "the citizens of Carver Country"—the realists working in a tradition of lower-middle-class modernism—"rose to collective and individual prominence in the late 1970s and 1980s under the banner of the ordinary, the modest, the minimal, and the real" (279-80). In this paradigm, "the desperate tackiness and dailiness of American lower-middle-class life is meant to be retained but somehow, against all odds, dignified, aestheticized" (281). The 1970s and early '80s, then, offered fiction about as far from Wallace's comedy as one could get: serious, dignified, and overall somewhat melancholic. This style dominated not only publishing³⁵ but also teaching, because the "shortness of the short forms" put "a solid sense of completion within visible reach of the student" (294).

³⁴ Wallace would later call these tendencies "hermetic" and "catatonic," respectively, in his essay "Fictional Futures and the Improbably Young."

³⁵ In Wallace's college years (1980-1985), for instance, Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* won both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award; Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* took the National Book Award; Carver's *Cathedral* was a finalist; and so on.

In this light, Wallace's maximalist instincts and slapstick antics were just right for the moment. His first editor, Gerald Howard, was elated to discover Wallace's work: "Here at the high tide of American minimalism, and in distinct contrast to the louche novels of Ellis and McInerney and Janowitz, was a big brainy throwback to . . . Barth and Coover and Gaddis and DeLillo and especially Pynchon, all writers I had cut my teeth on" (Howard, "I know why"). *Broom* offered a refreshing renewal of "late '60s, early/mid-70s type fiction"; but in particular Howard remembers Wallace for his humor: despite being horrifically nervous at his first public reading, he read "with complete command and kind of headlong enthusiasm, and people were literally rolling in the aisles" (Neyfakh). Wallace's debut efforts recalled the heyday of literary postmodernism and black humor, texts full of manic energy as well as anxiety about the nature of communication, order, and sense in the world. Wallace drew on Black Humor fiction, but he also innovated upon its model, and the voice of *Broom* is defined by that literary-historical context.

What defines Black Humor? It distinguished itself by its darkness, such that critical response focused more on the "black" than on the "humor." Concerned with an embrace of meaninglessness—the lack of fundamental grounding for purpose or meaning in the world—postwar black humorists took a particularly cynical orientation, facing the despair and vertigo of a world that appears both absurd and alienating.³⁶ Not only Barth, Barthelme, Vonnegut, Pynchon, and Gaddis, but also Terry Southern, William

³⁶ Sartre and Heidegger, of course, but centrally Camus figures in many analyses of Black Humor's "absurd" bent. One of the earliest commentators to link the two was Richard Kostelanetz in "The Absurd American Novel" (1965). See also Joanna Gavins's *Reading the Absurd* for a thorough overview of such critical accounts linking absurdism and 20th century literature.

Burroughs, Joseph Heller, J. P. Donleavy, Bruce Jay Friedman, John Hawkes, James Purdy, and even Vladimir Nabokov are counted among them. In such a multifarious collection, what links them, and how do they help us understand Wallace?

One of the earliest commentators on Black Humor, Conrad Knickerbocker, took pains to emphasize the “bitter, perverse, sadistic, and *sick*” nature of this writing that, as opposed to giving a nice “good laugh,” offered instead “tormented laughter” and the “gall of truth” (299). Stephen Weisenberger describes such fiction as fundamentally driven by satire, pointing out that these “novelists hailed as vital to the postmodern turn” shared a “general reception . . . as satirists” (2), but satirists “with a difference” (2): their writing “functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning” (3) and ultimately does not offer any normative correction except that of “unrelieved suspicion” (137). Other commentators on Black Humor fiction link its satirical energies to midcentury existentialism: what Elaine Safer, looking specifically to Camus, calls the Sisyphean quality of a modern existence in which man’s relation to himself, his world, and his search for meaning have all been reconfigured. The Black Humorist, Douglas Davis writes, “laughs at the absurd tragedy which has trapped us all” (14), creating a so-called “new mood” (Knickerbocker, qtd. in Davis 14) that was especially “savage” and “ribald” (Davis 14, 16). Even though “the absurd sensibility is not particular to our own time” (15), Black Humor fiction is different, Davis argues, because of its manifestation of *rage*. Pointing to illustrative selections from Purdy, Burroughs, Warhol, and Donleavy, Davis describes this affect as “rage that erupts,

searing everyone near it. Rage that holds itself in behind a deadpan, rage that rarely reveals itself. Rage as well that loves what it hates” (17).³⁷

Such an affective profile helps us to situate Wallace’s humor in relation to these direct comic precursors. Even as *Broom* channels these precursors in terms of character, plot, and orientation—emphasizing with a satiric approach the lack of transcendent meaning, the wanderings of an existentially lost protagonist, the fundamentally grotesque and vulnerable existence of the human body—it departs from the tendencies of Black Humor as well, refusing its searing rage. Wallace lightens its blackness and intensifies its humor, thus altering both its tone and partially its values. Wallace in *Broom* treats Black Humor’s themes—including existential anxiety and fear of apocalypse—with a more energetic and even manic treatment, lending his narrative a silly, childish cartoonlike quality. This too is a consequence of Wallace’s saturation in television media, cartoons and sitcoms, whose generic codes he brought to his otherwise quite serious debut novel.

Wallace’s humor is not savage, his satire not especially scathing. Rather than rage at the world, the negative affect of Wallace’s humor writing is more a combination of fear and anxiety. The young Wallace, a senior at an elite liberal arts college, was materially comfortable and largely shielded from pressing social and political issues of

³⁷ Though he does not discuss Pynchon, one scene that Wallace had read and nevertheless refused to emulate in *Broom* is the nose job scene in *V*. Savage, absurd, and horrifyingly detailed, the scene is further satirically humorous because Esther actually enjoys it, is so aroused by her passivity in surgery that she “roamed the East Side in fugue, scaring people with her white beak and a certain shock about the eyes. She was sexually turned on, was all” (109). The rage that Davis describes focuses on the materialism, decadence, and bourgeois superficiality of American life, so Pynchon’s embrace of the “inanimate,” especially in terms of plastic surgery, seems an apt example of rage that “loves what it hates.” As Hendin writes, Pynchon has “the quickest eye for what makes this an age of rapacity and sexual hate” (76).

the moment, as well as distanced by time from the historical traumas of midcentury.³⁸

Lenore, his model for himself, is unable to choose her own life path except to refuse the of her family, landing her at the chaotic switchboard of Frequent and Vigorous switchboard where she manifests blank bewilderment in the face of innumerable streams of communication.³⁹ Rather than turned outward in satiric rage at the world, then, Wallace's gaze looks inward, where the subject finds that its crisis—of perspective, of knowledge, of meaning—comes from within, that in Kafka's words, "the sickness was life itself."⁴⁰ This sentiment, combined with a real lack of certainty about what exactly *was* life itself for a human subject so formed by social, biological, and physical forces, makes Wallace's Black Humor decidedly post-Existentialist⁴¹ in contrast to the Black Humorists' overall Existentialist tendencies.⁴² Still even if Wallace's humor differs tonally from the first-generation Black Humorists, it shares the values of Black Humor

³⁸ Wallace, ever-aware of his own historical positioning and privilege, would later write a short story that effectively dramatizes his historical distance from the Holocaust. His narrator, citing Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* as a personal touchstone, ends up comparing his own personal trauma to the Holocaust as a way of articulating how something good (Frankl's book; personal growth) can come from something bad (the Holocaust; horrific physical and sexual violence) (B.I. #46).

³⁹ As O'Donnell writes, the "switchboard . . . acts as a comic metaphor for the disconnect between call and response, intention and act, and cause and effect that pervades the novel" ("Almost" 9).

⁴⁰ Though subsequent commentators have called into question D. T. Max's assertion (*Love Story* 12) that Wallace posted this quotation on his dorm room wall, the image of a young Wallace in thrall to its sentiment was widely accepted because it seems so plausible.

⁴¹ By post-Existentialist I mean simply to gesture toward its distinctive decentering of the human individual in relation to the world—its Posthumanism. Timothy Morton has considered the position of the individual in this kind of ecological paradigm in terms of "the end of the world," where "world" points to a Heideggerian horizon of access and embeddedness between human and environment (*Hyperobjects*). Put differently, for the human subject the abyss of ecological thinking is not the same abyss as that of existentialism.

⁴² The link between Black Humor fiction and existentialism is perhaps self-evident but is summed up well by Davis's commentary: "Only in a comic vein . . . can we treat serious, existential themes without pretension, that greatest of all postwar sins. Black Humor has grasped that feeling, brutally and greedily, perhaps" (Davis 23). For a contrary position see Schulz, who argues that the Existentialist ultimately chooses, and affirms life, whereas "with Black Humor, choice poses the primary difficulty" for "dissociated" heroes who "cooly" navigate "bewildering trackless choices" (Schulz 7). But even if we take Schulz's point, it still stands that Black Humor fiction reacts to existential concerns differently than does Wallace.

fiction—engaging “the permutability of urban existence and the paralysis of human indifference” (Schulz 8)—if ultimately it suggests that one’s own indifference might be overcome.

In counterbalance to Black Humor’s negativity, then, *Broom* offers a positive look at the world. Even as Wallace’s satire allows him to deflate (poking fun e.g. at the absurd psychiatrist character typical in black humor fiction), when Wallace invents and parodies psychoanalytic theories he takes his own parody semi-seriously. As Marshall Boswell shows regarding Wallace’s parody of Lacan, there is at once a negative *and* a positive valence: Wallace makes fun of these ridiculous psychoanalytic frameworks, but at the same time he affirms that there is something true to them.⁴³ We are intended to feel grossed out by Dr. Jay’s invented hygiene theory—that “hygiene anxiety is identity anxiety” (120) because cleanliness is essentially an effort to maintain the distinction between the inside (clean) and the outside (dirty), Self and Other (see also 136ff), and he does so by talking about sweat and drool and membranes, disgusting not just the reader but his own patients. At the same time, we are meant to understand that Dr. Jay’s theory is not wholly wrong:⁴⁴ the skin *does* act as a barrier that demarcates the self from the world, and its porosity—in terms of sweat, especially—presents a problem for self-conceptions that rely on such cleanly separated boundaries. I will touch on the issue of boundaries and contagion in the chapter’s conclusion, but here it will suffice to say that

⁴³ Boswell writes: “though clearly a parody of psychological master-theories in general, the Blentner hygiene theory is also, in some ways, the novel’s own master-key” (*Understanding* 54).

⁴⁴ Responding to Gerald Howard’s criticism of the membrane theory, that it was “disgusting and far too strange for the book’s good” (Max 68), Wallace replied that “while potentially disgusting,” the membrane theory “is deeply important to what I perceive as a big subplot of the book,” a debate about whether the self/other distinction is primarily “historical and cultural,” or “linguistic, literary, aesthetic, and fundamentally super or metacultural” (69).

the duality of Wallace's satire thus replaces the love/hate relation of the Black Humorists with two binaries of its own—belief/disbelief and grotesquerie/insight—each of which connects to his ongoing preoccupation with frames of perception, a topic that is key to the novel's negotiation of values.

Values: Visuality, Form, and the City from Above

I have already sketched a picture of some of the novel's larger concerns: contingency and the body are not only typical elements of comedy (especially slapstick), they are central to Wallace's project in *Broom of the System*. But as my analysis of the following scene will show, to appreciate the values in *Broom*'s narrative voice we must consider how it engages with perception, for *Broom* operates frequently in a highly visualized mode that seems to remediate television and cinema. That is, *Broom*'s humor is often based on visual gags. It's not just that the novel uses visual comedy to advance its purposes; it's that the narrator's *very way of speaking* is structured by this visuality, and many of the voice's values have to do with sight and looking. A camera-narrator allows Wallace to provide, as I will show in this section, scenes of vision-from-above that reveal some of the novel's values: its emphasis on visuality, its ideas about form, and its destabilizing play with human and nonhuman scales.

The example in question takes place near the beginning of the novel, when the main character Lenore is leaving the nursing home from which her grandmother has recently gone missing. Lenore gets on the highway to drive to her job as a receptionist for Frequent and Vigorous Publishing, and the narrative perspective quickly zooms out to describe the city's overall shape, which forms the buxom profile of Jayne Mansfield:

Lenore took the Inner Belt south and west from Shaker Heights, preparatory to her being flung by I-271 northward into the city itself, which meant that she was for a while with her car tracing the outline of the city of East Corinth, Ohio, [...] which determined the luxuriant and not unpopular shape of the Inner Belt Section of I-271. . . . [her grandfather Stonecipher Beadsman II] had been a really fanatical moviegoer, as well as an amateur urban planner, and he had been particularly rabid in his attachment to a film star named Jayne Mansfield. East Corinth lay in the shape of a profile of Jayne Mansfield: leading down from

Shaker Heights in a nimbus of winding road-networks, through delicate features of homes and small businesses, a button nose of a park and a full half-smiling section of rotary, through a sinuous swan-like curve of a highway extension and tract housing, before jutting precipitously westward in a huge, swollen development of factories and industrial parks, mammoth and bustling, the Belt curving back no less immoderately a couple miles south into a trim lower border of homes and stores and apartment buildings and some boarding houses, including that in which Lenore Beadsman herself lived and from which she had driven up over Jayne Mansfield to the Shaker Heights Home this morning. Families and firms owning property along the critical western boundary of the suburb were required by zoning code to paint their facilities in the most realistic colors possible, a condition to which property owners in the far westward section near Garfield Heights (where the industrial swelling was most pronounced) particularly objected, and as one can imagine the whole East Corinth area was immensely popular with airline pilots, who all tended to demand landing patterns into Cleveland-Hopkins Airport over East Corinth, and who made a constant racket, flying low and blinking their lights on and off and wagging their wings. The people of East Corinth, many of them unaware of the shape their town really lay in, a knowledge not exactly public, crawled and drove and walked over the form of Jayne Mansfield, shaking their fists at the bellies of planes. (45-6)

In this section, we learn that the town is shaped as Jayne Mansfield, an American film and TV actress and a major Hollywood sex symbol in the '50s and '60s; and this image, no less, is the cover of one edition of the novel (which excludes the “precipitous” swelling of bosom):

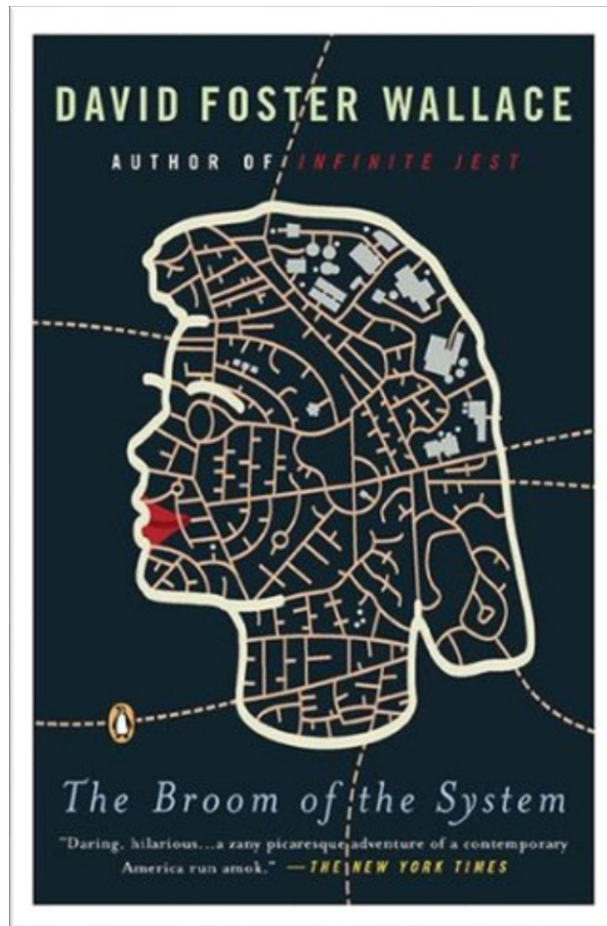


Figure 1. East Corinth, or Jayne Mansfield

By detailing the shape of this city formed by the obsessive planning of Stonecipher Beadsman II, Wallace evokes some of the central values of *Broom*: an emphasis on visibility and perception, an investigation of the role of borders and boundaries, and a satirical critique of the excesses of male desire. Only through changing the position and scale of perception—seeing from above, from a position not normally taken—can one perceive the whole shape of Jayne Mansfield; Wallace implicitly suggests that a different, more capacious view may sometimes be necessary to view

patterns that are imperceptible otherwise. Thinking in the other direction, Wallace also suggests that what might manifest as boundaries from a higher view, or at a larger scale, do not exist experientially for humans at their own scale, on the ground—the citizens are mostly “unaware of the shape their town really lay in” and therefore perplexed and annoyed by the antics of the planes flying low and erratically overhead.

These revelations of scale and perspective tell us that *Broom* values thinking structurally about human life, about patterns that manifest at different scales and about the everyday forms that shape our lives. In this vision, though, lies the admission that many of those forms are both insidious and ever-present, like men’s sexual objectification of women. Wallace invites us to engage critically the sexism and male-oriented reason for the city’s shape, such that a single man could so massively inconvenience, through the use of zoning code, the families and firms owning property along the “critical western boundary”—all to turn the cityscape into a woman who is already objectified by her status as a sex symbol, and now is literally objectified by the roads, homes, and parks of East Corinth. At the same time, though, Wallace laughs along with his conceit that a man would design a city to look like an attractive celebrity, partially reinforcing the sexism of Stonecipher Beadsman by reinforcing its perspective with suggestive phrases like “critical western boundary”; he invites the viewer to be amused at these antics rather than unilaterally critical.

The values of the passage come into clearer relief when we consider it in contrast to its textual precursor, the moment in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* when Oedipa Maas looks down at San Narciso and sees the city as if it was a “printed circuit,” carrying

a “hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate” (24). Some critics (Max, and Boswell, *Effect*) have mentioned the connection between these two scenes. But even as “Pynchon saturates the book’s DNA,” both the novel and this specific scene “diffe[r] from Pynchon in delicate but pervasive ways” (Max 48). If we consider the way both writers treat this moment of view-from-above, we can see some of the important ways that the two authors explore the relation of meaning and form to landscape—a realm that contains meaning but does not signify in the same way as language. To facilitate the comparison, I’ll quote the scene from Pynchon at length:

She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There’d seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As of, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken. She suspected that much. (24-5)

The most determining difference between the Jayne Mansfield scene and the printed circuit scene is their differing use of focalization: in *Lot 49*, the passage is entirely focalized through Oedipa, whose sight, memory, and interpretation are central to the scene. Contrariwise, the scene in *Broom* uses none of Lenore’s perceptions and remains with her only to the extent that she briefly drives along the Inner Belt that describes the

profile of Mansfield. The narrator of *Broom* traces the landscape from an aerial camera eye, relatively neutral in its assessment and even working to *obscure* the overall obviousness of the landscape's shape in its description, for instance through the excess of paratactic phrases detailing the "homes and stores and apartment buildings and some boarding houses." Here, even though there *is* a form that structures the city, and that form is even *intended* by Stonecipher II's careful planning, the landscape is still presented as the inanimate collection of factories, industrial parks, highway extensions, and boarding houses.

By contrast, the scene with Oedipa Maas is dominated by a sense of the mystery of the city's order in a way that seems nearly animate, despite the decidedly inanimate nature of a circuit. Pynchon describes the sprawl of houses "like a well-tended crop" that offer an "astonishing clarity" in their "ordered swirl." And although the houses, of course, do not intend to communicate anything, both the "outward patterns" of the circuit and the neighborhood offer her "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning." Even though there is no communicator in Pynchon, there is the sense of communication; but in Wallace there is a communicator (or at least a planner) but no sense of communication, for the figures who inhabit the neighborhood "crawled and drove and walked over the form of Jayne Mansfield" without knowing the form they were in. It is only perceivable to those prurient pilots who fly overhead and respond with immature delight.

In his analysis of *The Pale King*, McHale locates a number of scenes where Wallace "torque[s] or trop[es] on" elements from Pynchon's work in order to defend himself against Pynchon's influence ("The Pale King" 200). He links the beginning of

The Pale King, in which the narrator tells readers to “Read” the tracks left by worms, to a moment in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when raindrops “splat into giant asterisks” that also invite reading. Despite the echo of Pynchon in Wallace’s scene of reading the natural world, McHale acknowledges “a telling difference”: “In Pynchon’s [text], the world is typically poised on the brink of legibility, but the act of reading doesn’t actually happen, or is outright refused,” whereas Wallace “seems, by contrast, to affect a certain confidence that the world can be read” (192). Intriguingly, this distinction holds true also for the pairing of scenes between *Broom* and *Lot 49*: the profile of Jayne Mansfield shows a confidence that the world can be read—indeed that it is a meaningful form meant to be seen (at least from some elevated perspective). The circuit of San Narciso, though, offers only the brief feeling of a “revelation” just out of reach, an “odd, religious instant” that dissipates as easily as it arrived, creating an “oscillation” between meaning and nonmeaning that informs our understanding of the novel’s ambiguities in a more global sense (Serpell 60). McHale writes that “Perhaps Wallace is bluffing, or being ironic; or perhaps he is rebutting his postmodern precursor” (192). It seems likely to me that Wallace is rebutting, or at least revising—even as early as *Broom* Wallace is not so entirely saturated with Pynchon that he cannot exert some self-protective revisionary gestures. McHale elaborates further on three techniques of resistance in the Wallace-Pynchon relation: reversed direction, amplification/hypertrophy, and displacement (198), each of which also takes place between *Lot 49* and *Broom*, helping us understand the way Wallace produces his values in the text and in response to Pynchon.

By rewriting this scene of city-perception, Wallace displaces insight from Oedipa to his camera-eye narrator, keeping even his protagonist ignorant of the shape along which she drives. In this revision, too, there is a reversal of direction: while Oedipa looks *down into* San Narciso, seeking in the intricacies of the urban layout a meaning to its order, Wallace's narrator *zooms out* from the landscape and away from Lenore, actually finding a sensible form in the city, but one that lacks any significant meaning. The city has been *designed* by Stonecipher Beadsman II, and so Wallace also amplifies its sense of authorship-as-ordering while diminishing the sense of religious significance that momentarily strikes Oedipa: Beadsman ordered the city such that it would have this form, but not for any transcendent purposes—only because he is so obsessed with Jayne Mansfield. Even though there *is* ultimately a controlling figure whose machinations are so immanent to this world that they are invisible to its inhabitants—the ultimate paranoid reality in which everything really is connected—that revelation is deflated, made banal as the annoying whimsy of a rich businessman.⁴⁵

When details in *Broom* refuse to add up or when—like the elements of the landscape—they add up to something absurd and puerile like the profile of a bosomy sex symbol, the novel becomes “post-paranoid” in its relation to Pynchon (O'Donnell,

⁴⁵ Severs calls this a “mockery of the social body” that “sets up a joking Wittgensteinian allegory of language awareness” (*Balancing* 42). He recalls Wallace's comments to Larry McCaffery about language: “If I were separate from language, if I could somehow detach from it and climb up and look down on it, get the lay of the land so to speak, I could study it ‘objectively,’ take it apart, deconstruct it, know its operations and boundaries and deficiencies. But that's not how things are. I'm *in* it. We're *in* language” (45). Given that one of the great motifs of Wallace's corpus is immanence—from *Broom* to *This is Water*—it seems notable that Wallace here at the beginning of his career treats the revelation of immanent structures with such satiric force. Unfortunately, the history of Wallace's treatment of immanence and transcendence is outside the scope of this project; for more, see Severs “We've been inside.”

“Almost” 21).⁴⁶ Rather than vacillating between paranoia and anti-paranoia as Pynchon does, in *Broom* Wallace acknowledges the possibility of conspiracy, of plotted orders just out of perceptual reach, but he questions what kind of attitude we might take toward it. Sometimes—often?—the conspiracies that shape our world are notable only for their inanity. Because of its excess of pattern, Wallace’s image of the city refuses the “portentous significance” that Pynchon’s “tenuous phenomena” gain through their mysterious uncertainty (Serpell 60).

Wallace’s revision of Pynchon also tells us something about the values of *Broom*’s voice with respect to the human subject. Just after this moment in *Lot 49*, Oedipa’s “religious instant” is broken, and she drives into San Narciso, on a road, “she fancied,” that was like a “hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner L.A., keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain” (26). In *Lot 49* the city is subjectivized, cast as an entity that experiences pain and needs injections of people to drug away its anguish. What looks like a city is actually, in some metaphorical manner, also a subject. But the reverse is true in *Broom*: what looks like a subject (Jayne Mansfield) is actually a city, made up of myriad discrete buildings all zoned like a paint-

⁴⁶ While *Broom* dwells not just on designed landscapes but on the danger of plots that shape our very existence—Lenore worries that she is just a character in a novel—both landscapes and plots are ultimately rather banal. The machinations of Lenore Sr. (whose disappearance drives the novel’s quest plot) are ultimately motivated by unclear purposes, seemingly to allow Lenore the occasion for psychological and emotional development; and the various parts of the novel come together as more of a “farrago of forms” (Max 47) and sketches, linked tenuously. Wallace himself seems anxious about the novel as a unified form, using “contingency and coincidence” to “bin[d] many of these fragmentary narratives together” (O’Donnell 14). As a result, O’Donnell argues that “there is no singular system . . . no overriding graph or chart of the novel’s plots and subplots that could . . . bear the potential for paranoid connection, as in Pynchon” (14). This may be true, but I think in Wallace that narrative space offers a substrate for these overlapping plots to intersect and to generate a paranoia-inducing order.

by-number such that the appearance of borders and features emerges to form the gestalt appearance of a woman's profile. As Stephen Burn has noted on this section and many others, "Bodily gestalts are a recurring feature in Wallace's fiction" and that they "partly serve a comedic function: they are a kind of cosmic joke about our failure to realize (in Richard Powers's words) that 'the world isn't simply taking place at eye-level view, there's lots going on above us and below us'" (Burn, "Webs" 64). To this I would add: these bodily gestalts prompt us to view the body, and the human subject, as a collection of multiplicities that only *appears* by manner of its form to be a singular entity. Such a realization makes the novel not just post-paranoid but even more paranoid than Pynchon, as it increases the sense that Lenore's worry—that she is not an autonomous human subject in control of her own choices—might actually be in some way accurate, that she too could be a city not of her own making, and it is a realization that Wallace takes up with more biochemical and pharmaceutical fervor in *Infinite Jest*. In the comic voice, though, Wallace's interest in the body is persistently engaged via slapstick, which allows him to problematize borders, and the subjects those borders define. As I will show in the next section, the work of tone is crucial to reinforce the *attitudes* that the comic voice invites us to take with respect to these potentially unsettling truths.

Tone: Manic Slapstick and Cartoon Projectiles

Wallace works to complicate our perceptions of form as gestalt, to face us with the excesses of heterosexual male desire, to challenge our knowledge of what structures the world around us, and to unsettle our sense of the unity and borderedness of our own bodies. All of these values might be presented as deeply unsettling, and in the hands of another novelist—or announced in another voice—they would be appropriate for a much more darkly existential novel. For Wallace, though, these issues are treated comically, with a lighthearted tone that takes delight in the absurdity of the world it presents (and that it invents—for Wallace frequently foregrounds and thematizes the novel's fictionality). The Jayne Mansfield scene is, in a sense, body humor, and it contributes to the often manic tone of the novel's comic voice.

More body humor takes place with an even more manic tone when Lenore, whose grandmother has gone missing from the nursing home, drops into the local bar “Gilligan's Isle.” The bar is (as you might guess) themed after the television show *Gilligan's Island*, and it's decorated in island theme with palm trees and with tabletops physically supported by life-size models of characters from the show. The bartenders even enact the accident-prone slapstick of the character Gilligan:

Once an hour the bartender would be required to do something blatantly cloddish and stupid—a standard favorite had the bartender slipping on a bit of spilled banana daiquiri and falling and acting as if he had driven his thumb into his eye—and the patrons would, if they were hip and in the know, say with one voice, ‘Aww, Gilligan,’ and laugh, and clap. (139)

This is slapstick, but with a self-aware and self-referential twist: the banana peel of cartoon tradition becomes a banana daiquiri, and the slipping by accident becomes a “required” performance for the bar customers, who also—if they are “hip and in the know”—perform the requisite response, speaking “with one voice.” Already the scene dramatizes, then, the collectivity of laughter that we saw in the novel’s introduction; but it couples that with an amusement at faux injury and a mediatized self-awareness (not just of *Gilligan’s Island* but of the tradition of physical comedy that the show depends on).

Walking by, Lenore by chance has seen Mr. Bloemker, the nursing home administrator, in the window; she goes in to see if he has any new information about the whereabouts of the group of missing elderly residents. In the bar, she finds him slightly drunk, sitting next to “a very beautiful woman in a shiny dress who stared blankly straight in front of her” (139), both of them with Hawaiian Punch and gin “Twizzler” cocktails in “plastic jugs shaped like pineapples” (139) in front of them. While Mr. Bloemker rants to Lenore about the conflicted position of the Midwest in relation to the larger cultural and economic “system” of American life and history, a monologue which develops some of the novel’s themes with respect to the inside/outside binary, boundaries, and self-presence, Lenore begins to notice that Brenda still hasn’t moved. Looking closer, she sees that Brenda has an air valve on her neck. Mr. Bloemker denies that Brenda is a doll—he even asks Brenda to “show Ms. Beadsman you’re a person” (144)—but Lenore lifts Brenda up by the thigh to show that “she weighs about one pound” (144).⁴⁷ Lenore’s grip must not be very good, because “Brenda suddenly fell out

⁴⁷ Severs identifies this line as one of many significant references to weight and weightlessness in Wallace’s oeuvre, suggesting that this is a “mirroring moment” for Lenore that “reinforce[s] her own

of Lenore's hand and her head got wedged between the bench and Mary-Ann's hand, and she was upside down. Her dress fell up" (144). Brenda, it is revealed, is an *anatomically correct* doll, and in horror Mr. Bloemker tries to grab her and run out of the bar, except he doesn't get very far. The scene ends in an especially cartoonish, slapstick manner, underscoring the antic tone of amusement throughout:

Mr. Bloemker covered Brenda as best he could with his sportcoat and made for the door. There were whistles and claps. Bloemker broke into a run and ran suddenly into the bartender, who was coming around the side of the bar with a tray of creamy White Russians. There was an enormous crash and tinkle, and the bartender flipped over backwards and drove his thumb into his eye, and White Russian went everywhere, and a shard of broken White-Russian glass hit Brenda and punctured her and she flew out of Mr. Bloemker's arms and went whizzing around the room, twirling, losing air, finally to land limply but beautifully in a palm-tree pot, with one leg wrapped around her neck. Mr. Bloemker flew out the door. Lenore sniffed at his Twizzler. The patrons laughed and clapped, 'Aww, Gilligan.' (145)

Bloemker has already been established as a satiric target because of his absurd officialese at the nursing home (see 32ff), but here he becomes even more absurd as a model of wayward sexuality. Even though Lenore expresses disgust, commenting, "One of *those* dolls. That's just sick" (144), other patrons whistle and clap, and the overall tone toward the event is one of amusement. Like the scenes about the city as Jayne Mansfield, the values continue to poke fun at male desire; but the narrator refuses any pathos, underscoring the absurd physicality and motion of the scene in a manner much in keeping with the slapstick genre.

weightiness and groundedness"; Lenore is "born a second time herself through the negative recognition that Brenda 'isn't even a person'" (*Balancing* 52). The larger thematic value to this negotiation, according to Severs, involves "embracing knowledge of oneself not as a constant," which is the view from an outsider, "but as a contingent variable" (53) within larger fluctuating systems. The possibility and ethics of finding balance in such a world of flux—between constantly changing, porous and integrated systems, one of which is the human self—will be a constant throughout Wallace's career, whether it is engaged comically, conceptually, or in a more sentimental fashion.

The tone is defined most by the way that Brenda's mid-air movement is proceeds as an ongoing cascade of slapstick causality that is fundamentally repetitive, both in its physical and linguistic dimensions, and yet also over the top in a fundamentally cartoonish physics.⁴⁸ The bartender's "creamy" White Russians are broken in the same "crash and tinkle" as elsewhere in the scene; the bartender falls and drives his thumb into his eye just like earlier in the scene; and the motions of Brenda and Mr. Bloemker are even described in the same language, as Brenda "flew out of Mr. Bloemker's arms" and he in turn "flew out the door" (145). The space of Gilligan's Isle is, as Brian McHale calls it, a "genre-world" (*Constructing* 135) that showcases the way that television worlds—here, the world of cartoons—"insinuate themselves" (129) and their world of simulacra such that reality is "evacuate[ed]" "by its mass media simulation" (129). McHale elaborates: "Each genre-world posits different character types and psychologies, and obeys different reality-norms, even to an extent different physical laws: pratfalls, for instance, do not hurt in sitcoms as they would if they occurred in soaps" (135). In the genre-world of Gilligan's Isle, none of the pratfalls seem to hurt: injury is not within with generic codes of this narrative space. And it's not just Gilligan's Isle that is a cartoon zone: the entire novel, in varying degrees, offers us a "cartoonish 1990s America" (Boswell, "Trickle Down" 464).⁴⁹ The bar is, by and large, a microcosm of the genre-world of the novel.

⁴⁸ The laws of cartoon physics have been formalized by Mark O'Donnell, in his 1980 "O'Donnell's Laws of Cartoon Motion." Although they have been added to over the years, they don't address the movement of projectiles that I consider here and below. Nevertheless, I suggest that these unrealistic revisions of projectile physics for comic effects belong under the heading of "cartoon physics."

⁴⁹ While this is true, certain scenes in the novel seem to hold out threat and injury as more viscerally possible for the characters; those scenes, which serve to deepen our emotional engagement with the characters, also have a more realist tone and style. The novel's first scene, for instance, opens into a world

The Baudrillardian effect of mass media that McHale describes is often sinister or destabilizing in the hands of earlier postmodernists like Pynchon: “when cartoon-modeled episodes are juxtaposed with verisimilar episodes, the effect is one of extreme ontological incongruity and disjuncture” (136). But for Wallace in *Broom*, the use of a genre-world is less destabilizing and serves to lighten the mood. Here, the generic force of the comic is turned all the way up into irrationalism, as Brenda’s wild deflation—“whizzing around the room, twirling” (145)—reflects the internal pressure of a balloon more than a blow-up doll.⁵⁰ The absurd tone of the scene comes not just from its events and entities (TV-themed bar, blow-up doll), but from the way Brenda’s deflation “do[es] not conform to realist norms” (McHale, *Constructing* 135). Wallace cannot resist the final sexual twist to her landing, either: Brenda lands “limply but beautifully . . . with one leg wrapped around her neck” (145). She is folded over onto herself such that she evokes both the sexual narcissism of auto-cunnilingus and the closed loop of self-consciousness that Wallace sought to dramatize and ultimately to escape. These are serious topics that pervade Wallace’s work, but what’s most important is the way he buries them under the absurd sexual image and uses a ridiculous, manic tone to shape the serious elements with a comic touch.

of potential sexual assault in which the comic and the traumatic are balanced on a knife edge, wrestling for the generic possibilities of the novel at large; unfortunately, a larger consideration of that tension is outside the scope of this chapter.

⁵⁰ In a later essay, “A Series of Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness From Which Not Enough Has Been Removed,” Wallace uses the release of pressure to discuss the effect of comedy. He writes that both “great short stories and great jokes have a lot in common,” like causing an “explosion of associative connections within the recipient. This is probably why the effect of both . . . often feels sudden and percussive, like the venting of a long-stuck valve. . . . both the pressure and the release are already inside the reader” (61). As is typical, Wallace literalizes the metaphor of pressure in the figure of the blow-up doll.

The genre of the cartoon, as I've said, is one in which death is no threat and injuries do not really hurt.⁵¹ The impact of Wallace's cartoonish tone here is *distance*: the action is unrealistic and silly, and as readers we do not feel that anyone in this scene could actually be injured. According to Werner Wolf, "comedy and laughter imply emotional distance," for "comedy frequently suspends illusion" ("Illusion"). But Wayne Booth explains, "distance is never an end in itself; distance along one axis is sought for the sake of increasing the reader's involvement on some other axis" (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 123). So, why does Wallace create distance in this way, that is, what are his purposes in producing a manic, cartoonish, and irrealist tone, and how does that loop back into our understanding of the novel's values? Wallace seeks to produce emotional distance because he wants to enhance the reader's engagement on the thematic level, and further he simply wants the reader to laugh, to be comforted by the lack of danger. By increasing the reader's emotional distance from the scene, Wallace brings the reader closer to the critique of male sexuality and emphasizes too the issue of fictionality that undergirds the novel (whereby Lenore worries that she is just a character in a story). Brenda acts as a foil for her, as a doll—literally a plaything—in the hands of another. Lenore is indeed a character in the hands of the author David Foster Wallace, and in the storyworld Lenore's movements are shaped by the controlling influence of her grandma, who manipulates the Beadsman family as well as Dr. Jay to unknown ends (making her the original "absent possessor" of Wallace's fiction [see Hering, *Fiction*]).

⁵¹ Of the imagined death scene in which Lenore Sr. is pictured "flat as a wet Saltine" with "a tire track in her forehead" (*Broom* 31), O'Donnell writes, "we are inhabitants of a mediated world in which we more readily comprehend death or accident in cartoonish terms" ("Almost" 19).

The tone and distance of the scene can be measured too by its difference from yet another displaced precursor from *Lot 49*: the scene in which Oedipa Maas, in the hotel room with Metzger, goes in the bathroom to put on all the clothes she can for “Strip Botticelli.” This scene starts out antic but becomes darker and more threatening, and we should read Wallace’s revised version in the light of his refusal to take a Pynchonian tone. Drunk, when she looks at herself in the mirror, Oedipa sees

a beach ball with feet, and laughed so violently she fell over, taking a can of hair spray on the sink with her. The can hit the floor, something broke, and with a great outsurge of pressure the stuff commenced atomizing, propelling the can swiftly about the bathroom. Metzger rushed in to find Oedipa rolling around, trying to get back on her feet, amid a great sticky miasma of fragrant lacquer . . . The can, hissing malignantly, bounced off the toilet and whizzed by Metzger’s right ear, missing by maybe a quarter of an inch. Metzger hit the deck and cowered with Oedipa as the can continued its high-speed caroming; from the other room came a slow, deep crescendo of naval bombardment, machine-gun, howitzer and small-arms fire, screams and chopped-off prayers of dying infantry. She looked up past his eyelids, into the staring ceiling light, her field of vision cut across by wild, flashing overflights of the can, whose pressure seemed inexhaustible. She was scared but nowhere near sober. The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel; but she wasn’t fast enough, and knew only that it might hit them at any moment, at whatever clip it was doing, a hundred miles an hour . . . Everything smelled like hair spray. The can collided with a mirror and bounced away, leaving a silvery, reticulated bloom of glass to hang a second before it all fell jingling into the sink; zoomed over to the enclosed shower, where it crashed into and totally destroyed a panel of frosted glass; thence around the three tile walls, up to the ceiling, past the light, over the two prostrate bodies, amid its own whoosh and the buzzing, distorted uproar from the TV set. She could imagine no end to it; yet presently the can did give up in midflight and fall to the floor, about a foot from Oedipa’s nose. She lay watching it. (36-8)

In this scene, the projectile is not a blow-up doll whose trajectory is a “twirling” path around the room; it’s a dangerous can of hair spray, an item whose intense pressure is

more within realist physical laws.⁵² Even though Pynchon's scene begins with laughter, that laughter is violent and destabilizing (Sherard associates it with the shattering power of Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa," 69), and a moment of comedy devolves quickly into a moment of chaos. Metzger's ear is missed by "maybe a quarter of an inch" and the two listen to the "screams and chopped-off prayers" of the movie in the other room—a movie that Oedipa mistakenly expected to have a happy ending. Just as the generic valence of that movie is unclear, the generic valence of the scene is also ambiguous, seeming to oscillate between the object world and the subject world, between chaos and some faith in order, between slapstick and real danger. Once again, Pynchon moves us much deeper into Oedipa than Wallace into Lenore: we focalize closely, such that we look up past Metzger's eyelids with her, immersed in the intense immediacy of being "scared but nowhere near sober." The scene shifts solidly into real threat when the can, which she "knew only that it might hit them at any moment," actually begins to break things. It becomes not a threatening abstraction but a narrated pile-up of destruction, shattering the mirror and the shower wall, filling the room with broken glass (glass that remarkably does not cut either Oedipa or Metzger).

With its actual threat, the scene in *Lot 49* is considerably darker than that in *Broom*. Despite Pynchon's complaints in the 1984 introduction to *Slow Learner* that his own early fiction lacked seriousness—by which he meant "an attitude toward death" that

⁵² While the pressure of the can means that explosions are very dangerous, a dropped can breaking and then spraying around the room is seems unlikely (but possible). While the majority of aerosol can explosions are the result of heat, at least one report online tells of a ruptured can of whipped cream bursting through a sealed carton and striking a worker in the face, breaking several bones and detaching his retina (Ingles). Many other safety recommendations comment that aerosol cans may become projectiles when accidentally ruptured. Finally, after a can of carbonated water recently fell from the top of my refrigerator, bursting and then propelling itself around the floor, I feel confident that the physics of Pynchon's scene are much more plausible than those of Wallace's.

was not “eva[sive],” “euphemis[tic],” or overly jokey (*Slow Learner* 5)—this scene in *Lot 49* seems tentatively to face the threat of death. Its tone momentarily takes on the seriousness of Oedipa’s physical, or metaphysical, contemplation, as she considers whether can’s path might be predictable by some capacity superior to her own. But as soon as the scene’s darkness establishes itself with Oedipa’s awareness that the can “might hit them at any moment,” the cartoon physics take over once more, as the can “give[s] up in midflight and fall[s] to the floor, about a foot from Oedipa’s nose.” Although this kind of motion isn’t addressed in O’Donnell’s rules of cartoon physics, it follows the general manipulation of motion whereby horizontal and vertical movement are separated, as when Daffy Duck or Wile E. Coyote run (horizontally) off a cliff and only seconds later begin to fall (see Mark O’Donnell’s first law). And the suddenness of the shift in status—from threat to nonthreat—helps produce a destabilizing and comic effect; as Linda Wagner argues of *Lot 49*, the “comic effect of the unrelieved alienation . . . stems largely from the rapidity with which the story is presented” (155).

The quick movement between realist and irrealist genre-norms—between the presence of threat and its sudden dissolution—constitutes part of the unsettling effect of both Pynchon’s and Wallace’s worlds. But whereas Pynchon dabbles in darkness, Wallace’s scene in *Gilligan’s Isle* (representative of the novel’s dominant tone) manifests more of a manic effect, oriented to the genre norms of comic television rather than drawing on—as Pynchon does—the unsettling screams and violent deaths emanating from Metzger’s movie. The tone of Wallace’s scene in fact depends on his familiarity with televisual genre worlds and his desire both to mimic and to parody the parameters of

sitcom slapstick.⁵³ As someone who has spent too long in television's comforting and analgesic glow, Wallace has found slapstick comedy and its cartoonish tone both enabling of his fictional practice, but also—in the ease with which its generic norms expunge injury and pain—a potential impediment to developing character.

Working through the influence of Pynchon, Wallace is torn in two different directions: toward character development and toward silliness. He wants to make himself, and readers, laugh: he wants to out-slapstick even Pynchon. But he also wants to offer a slightly more realistic and emotionally accessible story world, with characters who offer an affective anchor in the text (we might see notes of Salinger's influence here). O'Donnell locates the difference between the two in terms of their different "depth of affect" ("Almost" 2) and investment in exploring "personhood existentially and affectively" (8). Max elaborates further, situating the difference even more explicitly in tone and affect: "There is an ache in *Broom*. If on the surface even lighter than the Pynchon novel, just a bit below it exudes discomfort and yearning" and "anxiety," a "fear of a world in which nothing is rooted" and a difficulty understanding women (Max 48). Wallace's solution, in a way, is to make polar the affective energies of his book; he wants to engage more in the troubles of everyday affect and the difficulty between men and women, but at the same time he increases the silliness of the novel far beyond Pynchonian levels, creating a world with much less darkness than any of Pynchon's first

⁵³ Wallace's addiction to television was no secret: he spoke frankly in interviews about the numerous hours per day that he would sit "slack-jawed" watching the "malignantly addictive" shows one after another (McCaffery 25, 38, Donahue 71); one of his most famous essays—"E Unibus Pluram"—ostensibly examines television critically (though the essay dwells more on Wallace's pronouncements for fictional practice).

three novels (all of which he has read). Not despairing but rather silly and optimistic, Wallace highlights laughable absurdities in the world of *Broom* in order to investigate some of the problems created by a mediatized world, but ultimately to make light of—and perhaps to remedy—some of those problems as well.

Style: The Cumulative Sentence, Cinematics, and Bird Shit

In the two scenes I've examined so far, the narration focuses on visual description, with very little overtly evaluative language, except for instance to note that Brenda lands "limply but beautifully" (145) in the palm-tree pot. Much of Wallace's comic effect depends on describing events in process, especially when his excessive detail seems to burlesque the events at hand by treating them with such close attention. I have already commented on these visual effects, and in this section I'll give a more fine-grained account of Wallace's remediation of visual media, showing how a "visual style" impacts on a deep structural level the novel's syntax, diction, and register. In particular, Wallace uses paratactic syntax to emphasize the ongoing quality of narrative time; gerunds to create a sense of active, present happening; and concrete diction with a surprisingly even everyday register to maintain the centrality of the physical world.

At the beginning of chapter 3 we get an exemplary instance of this style. Lenore is arriving at the nursing home, summoned by Mr. Bloemker, and she is not yet aware that her grandmother has gone missing. The narration sets the scene just before her arrival, with a single sentence offering a series of events that climax with Lenore's entry at Shaker Heights Nursing Home:

A nurse's aid threw the contents of a patient's water glass out a window, the mass of water hitting the ground dislodging a pebble, which rolled across the angled pavement and fell with a click on a stone culvert in the ditch below, startling a squirrel having at some sort of nut right there on the concrete pipe, causing the squirrel to run up the nearest tree, in doing which it disturbed a slender brittle branch and surprised a few nervous morning birds, one of which, preparatory to flight, released a black-and-white glob of droppings, which glob fell neatly on the windshield of the tiny car of one Lenore Beadsman, just as she pulled into a parking space. (28)

With this silly, and seemingly narratively extraneous moment, Wallace wants to amuse his readers, as well as to stimulate them visually with this natural Rube Goldberg machine. There's something unavoidably cinematic in the way the passage unfolds, with the precision of the chain of events, the detailed construction of space, and the details about materials—a *stone* culvert, a *slender brittle* branch.

Importantly, Wallace wants us to *see*. As David Herman has put it, the “vantage-points on situations and events in the storyworld are encoded in narrative discourse” (Herman 122) such that the typical distinction between voice and vision (or narrator and focalizer) is not always useful when interpreting perspective. In Wallace's case, this is because the narrator is also the focalizer. Phelan argues that even when the narrator does not enter story space—for instance a heterodiegetic extradiegetic narrator like Wallace's in *Broom*—it can “perform acts of perception that ought to be called ‘focalization’” (“Why” 52).⁵⁴ He elaborates: “any path marked by the narrator's perspective . . . will be not only a report on the story world but also a reflection of how the narrator perceives that world. In other words, as the narrator reports, the narrator cannot help but simultaneously function as a set of lenses through which the audience perceives the story world” (57). Dispensing with the terminological and theoretical disputes around reporting vs. perceiving, we can say simply that Wallace, in attempting to give a particularly cinematic treatment of this scene, gives us both cinematic perception (i.e. a moving

⁵⁴ Phelan points out that accounts maintaining a rigid distinction between narrators and focalizers ground this by treating the story/discourse distinction as an ontological rule rather than a heuristic. Given that Wallace enjoys breaking the ontological assumptions of narrative (for one prominent example, see the narration of “Good Old Neon” in *Oblivion*), it's safe to say that the narrator/focalizer and story/discourse distinctions are not safe in his hands. For a more recent overview of the debate, see Margolin, “Focalization: Where Do We Go from Here?”

camera eye) and visually descriptive report, and that the perception influences the language fundamentally.

The language is most significant here, so if we work backward from the textual phenomena themselves we will see how vision and voice have an “analytic interdependence” (Dawson 183). Most notable in this passage is the cumulative syntax whereby the sentence is grammatically complete rather early, and everything after builds in chunks. This structure is typically of a lower register than the periodic sentence, whose more Latinate structure delays the verb (and thus grammatical completion) until the end. The comic voice has a very casual and unplanned feel, as if the narrator is narrating the event as it unfolds—watching the chain reaction that ultimately results in the unceremonious *plop*. In this the sentence builds stepwise, in accordance with the order of events—first the water hits the pebble, the pebble startles the squirrel, the squirrel surprises the birds, and so on—and creates the cinematic effect of watching a chain reaction in a movie. If Wallace had structured the sentence otherwise, for instance by telling us up front what was going to happen, he would have destroyed both the comic effect (the suspense, and then the laugh of surprise) and the visual effect (via the sense of time unfolding in a linear fashion).

The diction, too, works in a relatively basic descriptive and concrete manner. The adjectives Wallace uses tend to specify physical matters, at least at first: “angled,” “stone,” “concrete.” As the sentence continues, though, we get more detail and more evaluative tinges, perhaps to induce readerly interest over time—“with a click” produces sonic immediacy, and the “slender brittle branch” trembles, broken even before we see it.

The squirrel “having at some sort of nut right there on the concrete pipe” is the most notable divergence from straight description here; the intense visual, spatial, and sonic precision dissolve suddenly into uncertainty with “some sort of nut.” The aggressive, archaic, and sexual overtones of the construction “having at” continue to color the diction—it could have been “eating,” or “nibbling at”—and with this moment the narrator takes on a more personalized and oral quality. The sense of a vaguely personalized narrator speaking to a narratee is further created by the use of the deictic: “**right there** on the concrete pipe.” Finally, the birds are not just birds, but “nervous morning birds” (does he mean mourning doves?), and the droppings don’t just fall onto Lenore’s windshield—they fall *neatly, just as* she pulls in. At this point, we can practically hear a jovial tone in the narrator’s playful unfolding of this absurd Rube Goldberg machine, which is increased in its sense of presentness by the predominance of the participles “hitting,” “dislodging,” “startling,” and “causing” (instead of casting the entire passage in the past tense).

As for register, the modulations of diction’s evaluatory component keep register low and relatively consistent. There are a few distinct choices that Wallace makes, which again allow the passage to establish its cinematic neutrality before diverging ever-so-slightly into a more comedic banality. “Mass,” “dislodging,” and “angled” all evoke a slightly higher register, moving close to a scientific description, but the language is made less specific by the squirrel “having at” and by denying the “morning birds” any explicit species designation. “Preparatory to flight” briefly raises the register,⁵⁵ but the

⁵⁵ Intriguingly, this is the same phrase we saw used to describe Lenore as she gets on the interstate, at the beginning of the Jayne Mansfield scene (which is 17 pages earlier in the novel): “Lenore took the Inner

euphemism in “blob of droppings” drops down to a slightly crude everyday register, at the same time evoking the literal dropping of the glob on the windshield. And finally, “one Lenore Beadsman” has a generically dramatic intensity, evoking mock-literary cinematic voice-overs that introduce a character. In this it further reinforces the dramatic quality of the passage and—through its use of this convention that is both literary and cinematic—naturalizes the merger of vision and voice that has become a dominant effect.

If we consider elements of style retrospectively, then, the cinematic effect is distributed throughout each of them: the sentence as a whole offers an establishing shot on the Shaker Heights Nursing Home, and the cumulative sentence structure mimics the ongoing movement of a camera’s eye that watches closely the workings of both human and animal. The minimal evaluation backgrounds the narrator as not much more than a perceiver, and the diction and register maintain the general neutrality of that perception.⁵⁶ The comic style, then, is defined by the way it remediates visual media like cinema and television, as well as cartoons and comics like the Rube Goldberg machine. It is permeated by the representational logic of film, from the cinematic convention of opening a scene with an extraneous event, to the various qualities of its narration: covert and depersonalized heterodiegetic narrator, emphasis on the visual, and a clear sense of what the camera would do. We can even imagine the camera panning up to follow as the birds take flight, and then cutting to a shot looking downwards to set up the punch line of the glob’s oncoming, inevitable, *splat*.

Belt south and west . . . preparatory to her being flung by I-271 northward.” The phrase does not occur elsewhere besides in these two contexts.

⁵⁶ This backgrounding has been considered throughout scholarship on narration in cinema: Wilson calls it the “effaced” quality of film narrators, Bordwell the “invisible observer,” and Schlickers names its presence in fiction the “heterodiegetic ‘camera’.” See also Kuhn and Schmidt.

Federica Ivaldi calls this the “rebound effect” of visual media on literature, taking the term from Genette in her analysis of the “interference between the two linguistic and narrative codes” (165) of cinema and literature. In this formal-historical feedback loop, if once “movies took inspiration from literary stories” (165), cinema now also impacts the formal logics available to fiction, “provid[ing] writers with a number of new techniques and, more importantly, readers with a new kind of sensibility, a new collective imagination, and a new set of interpretative skills” (166).⁵⁷ As she quotes from Genette’s *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, “Unlike the filmmaker, the novelist does not have to put the camera anywhere: he has no camera. It is also true that today, because of a rebound effect of one medium on another, he can pretend to have one” (Genette 49, qtd. in Ivaldi 165). Writers impacted by the prevalence of visual media tend to “imagine, visualize, and describe all aspects of the story in terms of visibility” (166), creating a “formal and structural influence that radically changes the way one can imagine and therefore also tell a story” (166). Wallace’s style in this scene, describing the chain reaction that leads to Lenore’s windshield being defecated upon, is intensely visual, and relies on the visual to produce its comic effect.

The passage’s excess of description comes from the refinement of its specificity, but Wallace means the passage’s events to remain everyday, even though they are treated with such an excited, dramatic, and performative fashion. This is no great significant moment, just another act of noticing that registers the interconnectivity of events even when they are not organized by a central agency. In registering this connectivity the scene manifests a post-paranoid effect because it shows a progress that seems as though it

⁵⁷ This process is, in a more general sense, called “remediation.” See Bolter and Grusin.

ought to be organized, even though we know it is not (an inversion of the Jayne Mansfield scene but with a similar effect). And because of the banality of consequences—just a dirty windshield—we are comforted and accommodated to its diminishment of human agency against the complex and unpredictable events of the material and animal worlds. In this way the stylistic choices of the section are intricately connected to the establishment of tone (amused, energetic), which has further ramifying effects regarding the implicit values of the section.

While there is much more to say regarding the values of this section and how they emerge from Wallace's set of stylistic choices, I will end by commenting on the larger significance of this scene. The high detail and low evaluation, with the normality of the event, would seem to suggest that it's just another sentence among many others: an establishing shot and little more. But by driving directly into the path of that innocently falling goblet, Lenore enters a world in which she is not really in control of her environment. What seemed like a narrative extraneous moment becomes clearly quite relevant to our ongoing perceptions of narrative possibility: as readers, we recognize that Lenore may well be at the mercy of further chain reactions. And we don't know what the chain reactions will be, or what will set them in motion: as the shift to a physical and animal world shows us, we can't even be sure that the source of these potential threats will be human.

Further, if we read on, we realize that the wad on the windshield is meaningless, a red herring: it returns a couple scenes later for the last time, when an ant on the windshield "nibble[s] at something" in it before Lenore pulls onto the highway and the

ant is “torn off the windshield by the wind when Lenore . . . started going seriously fast” (44). Our attention as readers is drawn to something that *could* be part of a larger causal chain—we can imagine a further causal arc of a crash caused by reduced windshield visibility, for instance—but it doesn’t manifest, and we’re left feeling that the uncertainty in the narrative *world* is replicated at the level of its *discourse*. As readers, we are—like Lenore—at the whims of something or someone unpredictable. As Wallace himself writes in his film treatment of the novel, this is a novel about control: “The basic theme here is that of control versus independence. . . . The film, besides aiming to be funny, should finally resolve itself around the central theme of the inevitability of control versus the inevitability of the drive toward independence, self-control” (Harry Ransom Center, Bonnie Nadell collection, Box 1.2). As I argued in the section on tone, this all sounds remarkably serious—but the way in which it is delivered by the comic voice changes substantially how Wallace’s authorial audience will respond.

Rhythm: The Lead-Up and the Punch Line

In the bird scene I addressed above, the stylistic effects, and the way they are shaped by a cinematic “rebound effect,” are further integrated with the passage’s temporal and rhythmic effects. The “rebound effect” of cinema on literature not only affects narrative space—because authors write as if they were manipulating a camera through the story world—but also affects narrative time. Film, as a medium, modifies the relation between story time and discourse time, tending to have a tighter relation of pace. Techniques like expanded thought report or narratorial evaluation—those that impact pace substantially—are challenging to mediate into film, which typically conveys information through dialogue or by showing events; as a result, the tendency in film is toward a steady pace, as narrating events requires (for the most part) showing them on screen. Putting the point more strongly, Ivaldi writes of screenplays that “the story time and narration time must perfectly coincide: what happens in the diegetic world has exactly the same duration of its representation on the stage (or on the screen)” (166-7). While Ivaldi’s claim does not allow for the many ways that film can manipulate discourse time, her point highlights the representational tendency of the medium. Further, in Wallace’s most cinematic moments—which correlate with his most comic moments—the decreased divergence between story time and discourse time holds true.

Following Genette’s claim that there is no way to measure equality between story duration and discourse duration in language (because discourse duration is an incoherent measure, *Narrative Discourse* 87), I approach Wallace’s time management in terms of his “steadiness in speed” (ibid.)—between the diegetic duration taking place in the story and

textual length. Yes, Wallace still manipulates time with very small modulations of description, and the rhythmic effects of his language (as opposed to what is being described by it) further impact the temporal flow of his cinematic passages. But if—as Genette acknowledges—a narrative “does not exist” in which “the relationship duration-of-story/length-of-narrative would remain always steady,” then we can examine only the minute, or less-than minute, variations of textual and narrative speed that constitute unavoidable “anisochronies”: what Genette names more colloquially “effects of *rhythm*” (88). While Genette writes that such analysis would be “relevant . . . only at the macroscopic level” because “diegetic time is almost never indicated (or inferable) with the precision that would be necessary” (88), I suggest that sometimes these effects of rhythm *are* relevant on the microscopic level—especially in moments like the bird scene in *Broom*, when the microscopic progression of events is narrated in such close detail.

To consider Wallace’s approach to rhythm in the comic voice of *Broom*, I’d like to revisit the bird example I examined above. The dominant rhythm of Wallace’s comic voice follows a distinctly even tempo, but a fairly fast one; just as the voice mediates visual media in terms of moving perspective and description, it mediates the temporality of visual media,⁵⁸ which tends toward an even pace that is affected only by small variations on the discourse level. In this mediation the comic voice follows what Umberto Eco has written about the cinematic novel: that it uses “a treatment of temporality as an

⁵⁸ Acknowledging the many ways that pace is affected by editing and camera techniques, I underscore that this applies only to visual media whose goals are broadly realist or mimetic. Experimental film, like that of Stan Brakhage, Gregory Markopoulos, Shirley Clarke, and many others, experiments abundantly with cinematic temporality.

accumulation of presents,” forming “a new way of understanding both the sequence and the contemporaneity of events” (Eco 208, qtd. by Ivaldi 169).

The temporal effects of the bird scene produce a remarkably even, continuous effect with a wind-up conclusion, much like a punch line. Here I’d like to focus on the unfolding of events and the way that phrase length, shaped by Wallace’s use of punctuation, modulates the temporal progression of the passage. Leech and Short briefly address rhythm in their *Style and Fiction*, remarking that “written prose has an implicit, ‘unspoken’ intonation, of which punctuation marks are written indicators. This certainly seems to be what many writers on prose style have in mind when they discuss the ‘rhythm of prose’” (173). They link consistent phrase length to readerly effects: “when the length of graphic units follows a regular pattern, the text seems to progress with a measured dynamic movement” (173). Following their phrasal analysis of a passage from *Dombey and Son*, I’ve separated Wallace’s sentence into the phrases demarcated by commas in order to visualize the sentence’s punctuated progression (though I note that a finer phrasal analysis could segment the sentence further to explore how Wallace’s nested phrases build up the sentence as a whole, and other modes of analysis would likely reveal different components of the sentence’s relation between temporality and structure).

A nurse’s aid threw the contents of a patient’s water glass out a window,
the mass of water hitting the ground dislodging a pebble,
which rolled across the angled pavement and fell with a click on a stone culvert in
the ditch below,
startling a squirrel having at some sort of nut right there on the concrete pipe,
causing the squirrel to run up the nearest tree,
in doing which it disturbed a slender brittle branch and surprised a few nervous
morning birds,
one of which,
preparatory to flight,

released a black-and-white glob of droppings,
which glob **fell neatly** on the windshield of the tiny car of one Lenore Beadsman,
just as she pulled into a parking space.

The passage's segmentation, both into phrases demarcated by punctuation and into a series of events, reveals how Wallace's comma use contributes to the sentence's patterned rhythmic building toward its punch line. Wallace makes delicate choices about where to insert a comma and where to run contiguous phrases together; and his stylistic choices—both of diction and syntax—influence where he needs commas and where they are optional. For instance, he chooses to compose the first two phrases such that he needs a comma after “window” in the first phrase. To show how important commas are to Wallace's micro-temporal and stylistic effects, in order to make clear why this kind of phrasal analysis based on punctuation is especially valuable, I'll first consider two re-writings of the beginning of the sentence.

Wallace could have written the beginning of the sentence in any number of different ways, but here is one rewrite of the beginning that avoids comma use (in which I preserve the participle “hitting the ground,” since Wallace's use of participles is often central to his effects).

Instead of:

A nurse's aid threw the contents of a patient's water glass out a window, the mass of water hitting the ground dislodging a pebble, which rolled across the angled pavement . . .

Consider:

The nurse's aid threw the contents of a patient's water glass out a window so that the mass of water hitting the ground dislodging a pebble caused that pebble to roll across the angled pavement . . .

Without commas, the segmentation is less evident, and an awkward forward momentum obtains in the sentence. It is harder to read and makes the interrelation of phrases harder to follow for the reader, who will likely have to double back while reading in order to parse the grammatical relations of the phrases. (Those grammatical relations are already ambiguous: are the two participles “hitting the ground” and “dislodging a pebble” on the same level, with a missing conjunction, or are the participles nested, such that it is “the mass of water hitting the ground” [as a noun phrase] that dislodges the pebble? The lack of a comma here is precisely what confuses the relation.) In terms of the temporal experience of the reader, then, omitting commas may actually slow the reading and make its temporal processing more irregular.

This does not mean that increased segmentation is Wallace’s central goal in using punctuation to create rhythmic progression; the “weight” of punctuation (Leech and Short 175) also has distinct effects. Wallace could have written the passage as well using periods instead of commas:

A nurse’s aid threw the contents of a patient’s water glass out a window. The mass of water hit the ground and dislodged a pebble. The pebble rolled across the angled pavement . . .

The period, Leech and Short write, “has the greatest separative force; hence the effect of using full stops . . . is to emphasise the autonomy of each piece of information” (174).

Punctuating this sentence with periods could create eight sentences instead of one, separating them and making them more autonomous with respect to each other (removing subordination). But this would completely transform the rhythm and pacing of the

passage at the same time, losing the match between the movement of the action and the movement of the sentence.

The above discussion shows us that punctuation—specifically Wallace’s purposeful use of commas, and the shaping of his phrases to enable comma use in certain places—is central to the temporal and rhythmic effects of Wallace’s sentence. If we zoom out to a more global view of the sentence, then, we can consider the flow of the sentence as it is divided. The phrasal progression of the sentence, defined by its segmentation with commas, follows a pattern of small shifts in phrase length that sets the reader up for certain expectations about the delivery of information. Returning to the phrasal breakdown I gave above, we can see that the phrase length follows a fairly regular pattern, measured in terms of the number of syllables:⁵⁹

- (1) Middle [19] / (2) short [15] / (3) long [24] /
- (4) middle [19] / (5) short [12] / (6) long [23] //
- (7) very short [3] / (8) very short [7] /
- (9) short [10] / (10) middle [20] / (11) short [10].

⁵⁹ Because of the way that stresses in polysyllabics are often demoted, such that there is a higher syllable per beat ratio, measuring with syllables might not always be the best way to determine phrase length. Here, though, because of the (1) ill-defined beat scansion of certain phrases, and (2) minimal number of polysyllabics in the sentence, I’ve used syllables for simplicity. I note that the general pattern is pronounced enough to show up even when measured with beats or with words.

Phrase	Number of syllables
(1) A nurse's aid threw the contents of a patient's water glass out a window,	19
(2) the mass of water hitting the ground dislodging a pebble,	15
(3) which rolled across the angled pavement and fell with a click on a stone culvert in the ditch below,	24
(4) startling a squirrel having at some sort of nut right there on the concrete pipe,	19
(5) causing the squirrel to run up the nearest tree,	12
(6) in doing which it disturbed a slender brittle branch and surprised a few nervous morning birds,	23
(7) one of which,	3
(8) preparatory to flight,	7
(9) released a black-and-white glob of droppings,	10
(10) which glob fell neatly on the windshield of the tiny car of one Lenore Beadsman,	20
(11) just as she pulled into a parking space.	10

Figure 2. Syllables per Phrase

I mentioned before that the sentence could be re-punctuated with periods to create eight sentences; but there are eleven phrases here. This tells us something about Wallace's phrases—most of them could be rewritten as complete clauses, for instance by turning a participle into a verb, as in “the mass of water **hit** the ground dislodging a pebble” or additionally by replacing a relative pronoun with its noun, as in, “the pebble rolled across the angled pavement and fell with a click . . .” The only phrases that could not be reconfigured in this fashion are (7), (8), and (11), telling us something about Wallace's phrasal practice here—he likes to add information in unified chunks, and when he segments elements that do not contain the kernels of basic syntax—elements like “preparatory to flight”—we should take note. According to Leech and Short, “segmentation interacts with salience” (174); these segments are being marked as more salient, more important for a reader's attention, than others.

We can see, then, how the temporal progression of the sentence works to guide a reader's attention in uniform ways, because of Wallace's chosen parts of speech and with the sentence's conceptual development. Wallace begins with a doubled pattern of middle/short/long, a pattern which works in each triplicate chunk first to introduce, then to provide a single effect, and then to elaborate two further and more detailed ramifying effects of the initial action. Phrases 1-3 do this for the water/pebble interaction, and phrases 4-6 do this for the squirrel/birds interaction. They thus set us up for the action of the birds, which is the climax of the sequence and accordingly marked with its short phrases. As I've suggested before, the relatively consistent temporal patterning of the first half of the sentence works to regularize the tempo of the reader's experience. This timing sets up the reader for the slowing and attention drawing of the punch line—the comic effect whereby the startled bird, “preparatory to flight,” releases its “glob,” and *in perfect timing* does this exactly as Lenore is pulling into the parking space. The shortness of phrases (7), (8), and (9) effectively slows the sentence down,⁶⁰ making the reader wait with suspense. And slowed down as the reader is, the timing loops back into the cinematic effects I discussed in the previous section: it's as if we focused on the bird and time seemed to slow down as we watch the bird's excreta fall, with perfect coordination, “neatly,” onto Lenore's arriving car. The punch line is this unexpected collision, produced as a surprise because the sentence has hidden the temporality of Lenore driving

⁶⁰ The first phrase gets one beat, and the second gets two (on the beat and beat scansion, see Attridge, *Rhythms* and *Poetic*). As a result, the number of syllables per beat is the highest in the sentence, causing the beat to be delayed by the (audiated) articulation of a higher number of syllables. That the phrases are set off individually by commas, that they are distinct syntactically from the other phrases in the sentence, and that they manifest this distinct beat/syllable ratio are all signals of salience, contributing to the reader's processing of the sentence.

into the space; it's only when the droppings fall that this other movement, much more important to our involvement in the scene, is disclosed. It is this convergence of explicit and covert temporality that contributes to the punch of the sentence's ending.

While I lack the space to give a detailed analysis of the scene in Gilligan's Isle—when Mr. Bloemker's date Brenda turns out to be an anatomically correct blow-up doll—I note that a sentence in that passage manages prose timing in a very similar manner.

Here is the sentence, broken up into its constituent phrases:

- (1) There was an enormous crash and tinkle,
- (2) and the bartender flipped over backwards and drove his thumb into his eye,
- (3) and White Russian went everywhere,
- (4) and a shard of broken White-Russian glass hit Brenda and punctured her and she flew out of Mr. Bloemker's arms and went whizzing around the room,
- (5) twirling,
- (6) losing air,
- (7) finally to land limply but beautifully in a palm-tree pot,
- (8) with one leg wrapped around her neck.

Here, we have a similar playing out of slapstick causal ramifications, but with a slightly less involved chain of events. What's important to note is again the pattern of having longer phrases suddenly punctuated by the two very short ones—(5) twirling, and (6) losing air—whereby the comic momentum is suddenly slowed in preparation for the final comedic ending of this path of motion. In the same way as the bird scene, the phrases in the beginning of the sentence all contain the elements of a complete sentence, and it is only once the passage is slowed by the two very short phrases that the salience-indicating commas begin to split information into smaller syntactic units.

Timing has often been mentioned as central to comic effect, but as Attardo and Pickering notes (2011), “very little has been written about it,” either to identify its effects

or even to define what constitutes “timing” in the first place (233). They survey accounts of comic timing, which generally suggest that it is created with a pause before the punch line but also by broader distribution of material that is structured to produce “the buildup of rhythm to a climax” (Goodridge 48; qtd. in Attardo and Pickering 234). While nearly all of the studies of humor and prosody or humor and rhythm (e.g. Attardo et al., “Prosody,” and Gironzetti, “Prosodic”) focus on voiced performance contexts,⁶¹ their conclusions may cross over to our consideration of the timing of Wallace’s comic passages. For instance, Pickering et al. find that verbalized punch lines are performed at a “slower speech rate than the text preceding the punch line” (517). The rhythmic slowing of Wallace’s passages, then, helps support their empirical findings in its contribution to his comic effect.

Finally, there is something mechanical to the bird example: the humor in it is not just scatological, but the confrontation of the human world with the mechanical world (in addition to the natural world), what Bergson identifies as the heart of comedy. Bergson’s emphasis on the “*rigidity*” (21) at the heart of the comedic helps us see how Wallace’s

⁶¹ There are a handful of exceptions, in which critics link comic effects and textual (as opposed to vocalized) prosody and rhythms. Laura Salisbury’s *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (2012) claims up front that the most “critically significant aspects of Beckett’s work inhere in its formal rhythms, recursions and interruptions—in what might be thought of in another way as its particular comic timing” (3). This fascinating claim carries rich promise for a rhythmic analysis of Beckett’s prose, but Salisbury’s analysis regrettably lacks specificity with respect to Beckett’s language, using interchangeably terms like “rhythm,” “oscillation,” “repetition,” to describe the temporality of Beckett’s texts and text worlds. David Gervais, in his article “Dickens’s Comic Speech,” takes as its starting point the “creative interaction between comic speech and the underlying prose rhythms of the novel in which it occurs” (129), connecting the rhythms of character speech to the rhythm of the narrative as a whole: “The great comic characters are always passages in some larger rhythm . . . Their speech grows out of the narrative as a whole and feeds back into it” (130). The relation itself has comedic potential, as Gervais argues that character voices often “seem to echo, even parody, something in the narrator’s own voice” (130). Finally, Greg Sevik’s “Poetry, Prosody, Parody: Mark Twain’s Rhythmic Thought” concludes by examining how “Twain employs the rhythms of language in his humor” (130), arguing that “Twain employed prosody . . . as an integral component of his humor” (145).

prose is comic both in what it represents and in how it works. Its precision, and its rhythmic progression toward an ultimately deflating moment—both in Gilligan’s Isle and outside the nursing home—are defined by a relative rigidity. The sentences unfold as discrete units of description, following the inevitability of the causal chains they recount. And the comedy of the Jayne Mansfield scene also depends on the rigidity of Stonecipher II in enforcing and regulating his vision for the shape of East Corinth, suggesting that the enforcement of a perfect form may not be the best ultimate goal. Instead, an openness to form’s deformations is the best way to embrace the vitality of language—as will be evident in Wallace’s evolving style and rhythms in *Infinite Jest*.

Conclusion: Sympathy, Form, Mediation

This chapter has attempted to show that Wallace, in writing *The Broom of the System*, is much more than a “Pynchon wannabe” (O’Donnell, “Almost” 2): instead, he has written a self-conscious novel in which he makes innumerable choices—from the micro level of word and sentence to the macro level of values and thematics—that intertwine to create a distinct voice with a distinct vision. While the novel is still an apprentice effort, what Wallace in 1989 disclaimed as the efforts of “a very smart fourteen-year-old” (Max 48), he is by no means in thrall to his influences to the extent that has been assumed by critics. Yes, the novel resembles Pynchon’s early work in a number of ways—but these are ways that Wallace has *chosen* as he crafts his first novel, and moreover “voice” is not one of them. The young Wallace is working from a tradition of humor writing stretching back at least to Rabelais, but he is just as concerned with making his writing ageless as he is with making it contemporary, and so it is no surprise that he draws in so many ways from the elements of black humor fiction of the 60s and 70s.

If we doubted that Wallace had thought about the range of comic techniques, we can turn to his essay on Kafka’s funniness where he details the wide variety of “forms and codes of contemporary U.S. amusement,” like “recursive wordplay,” “verbal stunt-piloting,” and “wisecracks or mordant lampoon” (62)—all of which Kafka avoids. He continues:

There is no body-function humor in Kafka, nor sexual entendre, nor stylized attempts to rebel by offending convention. No Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rapacious adenoids. No Rothish satyriasis or Barthish metaparody or arch Woody-Allenish kvetching. There are none of the ba-bing ba-bang reversals of modern sit-coms; nor are there precocious children or profane grandparents or cynically insurgent co-workers. Perhaps most alien of all, Kafka’s authority

figures are never *just* hollow buffoons to be ridiculed, but are always absurd and scary and sad all at once. (62-3)

Here Wallace seems to articulate the full range of humor he has attempted in *Broom*, and more, as well as suggesting the both-and logic that he aims to reach with his satires. One reviewer called Wallace's humor "sophomoric" (Orson Scott Card), and another called it "vulgar comedy" (Rucker). While Wallace's humor *is* often potty and body humor, it's also so much more. Wallace's comedy ultimately pursues his project of communication with the reader: testing its conditions of possibility, its methods, and its potentials for failure.

Those conditions of possibility center on the concept of openness: the ability to be impacted affectively from without, in *Broom* to be made to laugh, an idea Wallace dramatizes in the opening scene to the novel. I'd like to look at this scene as a way of zooming out to consider Wallace's larger goals and methods for his humor: how does his humor work and what does he want it to do? In this scene (or prologue), Lenore is just a 15-year-old on a college visit with her older sister Clarice at Mount Holyoke. In the dorm room, Clarice and her two roommates are smoking a joint and listening to music, when one girl mispronounces "blasphemous" as "blaphemous"; the foolery that ensues devolves into a half-page word-play session with multisyllabic B-words: "Blissphemous, Blossphemus, Blousesphemous, Bluesphemous . . . Bucephalus, Barney Rubble, Baba Yaga, Bolshevik" (5). When the girls collapse into laughter, "They're dying, doubled over, and Lenore's laughing that weird sympathetic laugh you laugh when everybody else is laughing so hard they make you laugh too" (5). A couple of pages later, the same thing happens, with the same phrase; they're joking about two female peers who

showered together that morning, and they start laughing: “Sue’s going to die, Mindy starts to laugh too, that *weird sympathetic laugh*, looking around them” (7, my emphasis). They’re laughing, but not necessarily because (or *just* because) they think something’s funny; rather, the environment of laughter is infectious. Plus, everyone except for Lenore is high.

Importantly, the laughter is *sympathetic*, environmental. The communal atmosphere makes Lenore laugh even though she’s neither high nor especially amused, highlighting the importance of the social and the ambient in *Broom* (both topics that are implicated in the novel’s theory of language). Similarly, at the Shaker Heights Nursing Home, the ambient noise was “loud and incomprehensible, rising and falling, notched by nodes of *laughter at nothing* and cries of rage over who knew what” (29, my emphasis). In both instances laughter is not attached to an intention to mean; instead it appears semi-autonomous, non-signifying. Lenore’s body operates outside of her own power, evoking her existential fear “that her own personal perceptions and actions and volitions were not under her control” (66).⁶² The embodied contagiousness of laughter allows Wallace to begin exploring the limits of agency and communication, topics that are central to his career. It’s no surprise that one of the most repeated words in the novel is “spasm,” used by multiple characters to describe any excessive sudden reaction to a situation.

Laughter, too, is a spasm, a “convulsive behavior.” Gregory Bateson writes, “One of the rather curious things about *homo sapiens* is laughter, one of the three common

⁶² As part of Wallace’s project to “Wak[e] readers up to agency” (Kelly, “Death”), Lenore’s anxiety about her self-determination fits into Wallace’s literalizing technique, what O’Donnell describes as “exaggerat[ing] to the point of absurdity to make visible the grotesqueness of agency or identity conceived in certain ways” (“Almost” 5). On literalization, Wallace comments in his Kafka essay that “Kafka’s funniness depends on some kind of radical *literalization* of truths we tend to treat as *metaphorical*” (63).

convulsive behaviors of people in daily life, the others being grief and orgasm. . . .

Because they are involuntary, or partially so, one tends to think of these phenomena as lower functions, animal functions” (161). The human is figured as an animal, an entity regulated by factors beyond its control. Bateson suggests, however, that these are not “lower functions” (162) but rather “characteristically human” (161-2); they are developed because of, and in relationship with, the higher cognitive functions. And so spasmodic laughter—the uncontrolled reaction to comedy—is actually a quite sophisticated response that’s deeply integrated with human experience. We laugh despite ourselves, even at things we might not find entirely funny (like prurient city designers) and this despiteneess can be a social phenomenon: “sympathetic” laughter. One shouldn’t suppress one’s spasms; rather one should embrace them, and as readers we find ourselves laughing along *sympathetically* with Lenore and her fellows (as well as with Wallace). For, if Wallace finds humor to provide a protective emotional distance, joining him in laughter may afford readers that protection as well. The rhetoric of the comic voice, then, is based on Wallace’s invitation, as implied author, for the reader to laugh along with him at the hijinks he has devised and with Lenore at the absurd world she inhabits.

The sympathetic laughter of the audience with Lenore and about the absurdities of her world involves the reader in a communicative situation that short-circuits the semiotic challenges basic to communication. Instead of requiring readers to figure out what things mean—for instance, where is the meaning or sense in the list of Blaphemous wordplay?—the comic voice invites the reader to laugh *along* sympathetically, meaning the humor may work for different sets of actual readers in different ways: most will get

the body jokes, and some will further get the philosophy and language ones layered on top of them. In laughing along we address the extralinguistic nature of the humorous—its embodied spasmodic pleasure—and in so doing we are reminded of and reconciled to Wallace’s understanding of the world, balanced between human and inhuman, ordered and chaotic, wretched and hilarious.

In the light of this model of laughter, then, we must not buy in to Wallace’s disavowal of the novel. He called the novel “written by a very smart fourteen-year-old” (Max 48), potentially in response to reviews that he was “a puerile Pynchon” (Kirkus, “Broom”) and his own insecurity about how much he loved his “gags.” It is, yes, marked by “Wallace’s own not untypical young writer’s desire to be clever” (Cohen, “To Wish” 69), but this cleverness motivates a distinct model of novelistic form: the conceptual mosaic. Both Pynchon and Wallace privilege the thematic dimension at the expense of the mimetic, the idea at the expense of character, and expansion of world over straightforward progression. Like Pynchon’s *V.*, *Broom* is made up of many different fragments that do not all follow the same characters, location, time period, or style, leading O’Donnell to call *Broom* “almost a novel”: “an assemblage of half-finished stories, intentions gone awry, and discursive trajectories . . . an ode to incompleteness” (6) that takes as an “open question” the “relation of part to whole” (4).

Wallace, in all his inventive capacity, showcases his storytelling ability “in a case of manic impressiveness” (Kirkus, “Broom”). If sometimes we follow the heterodiegetic narrator as he tracks Lenore through this “slapstick bildungsroman” (Boswell, *Understanding* 21), we also receive sections of pure dialogue, nested narratives by Rick

Vigorous, and selections from his journal. The patchwork quality of *Broom* produces an aggregate tale of Lenore's world—after all, it is still her bildungsroman—but the mosaic effect also works against the development of narrative momentum, as readers need to link up for themselves the many events and characters in order to plot the workings of the central conspiracy (which never fully comes into view). Even as the narrative eye typically follows Lenore as she traverses the story world in search of her grandmother, that eye considers too the dynamics of the world around her. *Broom* is both a “novel of motion,” in that it showcases a world dominated by moving objects, as well as a “novel in motion.” It moves the reader not just in the story world but through the “dislocations of the narrative medium” (Pearce xiii), whereby the reader shuttles between “shifting points of view, changing frames of reference, and unpredictable transformation” (xii). Ultimately, despite these shifts and the fragmented nature of the novel, the novel remains coherent because of the voice's consistent values and persistent visuality.

While in much of Wallace's fiction “watching or looking is generally presented as uncommunicative, solipsistic and narcissistic,” David Hering argues that Wallace “desire[s] to reframe looking and watching as a communicative, dialogic gesture” (87)—to refigure watching and visuality positively. Such a framework helps us understand Wallace's goals in making *Broom* so visual: he aims to transform the (solitary) passivity of watching into the (social) activity of communicating. So too Wallace wants to underscore the gendered dynamic of watching and to satirize the repeated objectifying tendencies whereby men view women. In both existential and ethical ways, then, Wallace does not want to produce a slack-jawed viewer: using the visual dimensions of his comic

voice, as well as the fragmentation of the novel's form, he foregrounds mediation such that the visual perception involved in reading *Broom* becomes an active task for the reader to take on.

Foregrounding mediation, then, is part of Wallace's purposes in making the novel balance between vision and voice, realism and cartoon, critique and amusement. Wallace wants to make "the reader . . . fight *through* the mediated voice presenting the material to you" (33), to "antagonize the reader's intuition that she is a self" by increasing "the reader's sense that what she's experiencing as she reads is mediated through a human consciousness, one with an agenda not necessarily coincident with her own" (McCaffery 34): he wants to produce *resistant readers*, or at least active, suspicious, and canny ones. A clear narrative voice enables this because, as Wallace elaborates, "the complete suppression of narrative consciousness, with its own agenda, is why TV is such a powerful selling tool" (33)—TV, Wallace worries, represses its own status as media, naturalizing itself in order to seduce its viewers.

By contrast, Wallace desires to write fiction that actually connects with a reader, by *antagonizing* her understanding of the larger rhetorical situation that involves both a narrator and an (implied) author as agents of communication. He admits, then, that his fiction—with its "flash-cuts" and "distortion of linearity" might appear to be "mimicking TV's own pace and phospenic flutter" (34). But—as literature remediating these televisual effects in language—his work is "trying to do . . . just the *opposite* of TV—it's trying to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own" (34).

When Wallace uses televisual techniques and cartoonish aesthetics, then, he doesn't do it naively; he does it first to amuse, but finally to point to, and perhaps to denaturalize, the formal qualities of visual media that we regularly accept without question. In this emphasis on media—on discourse—the virtues of the novel are less to be found in the traditional criteria of character and plot and more in the comic voice itself.

Chapter 3: *Infinite Jest* and the Encyclopedic Voice

Most of the modern writing I like the best is both sophisticated and colloquial—that is, high-level and complicated but at the same time intimate, sort of like a smart person is sitting right there talking to you—and I think I do little more than try to achieve this same high-low blend.

—Wallace, “Brief Interview with a Five-Draft Man”

You have left your readers with a very special gift: a headache. By which I mean a problem: what in the world to do with it all. That’s their problem. That’s where their experimentation begins. Then the openness of the system will spread. If they have found what they have read compelling. Creative contagion.

—Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*

With *Infinite Jest* in 1996 Wallace burst onto the literary scene in a major way, showing the world that he was determined to be a serious artist, to have a place not only in contemporary literature but in the history of letters as well. *Infinite Jest* offered the world a voice and a vision that would rapidly transform the style of contemporary fiction and online writing, as Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn have shown.⁶³ This new Wallace had clearly matured beyond the youthful cleverness of *The Broom of the System*; now he aimed to offer his readers more sustained cognitive pleasures joined with deeper feeling, “mak[ing] the head throb heartlike,” as he promised Michael Pietsch (Max 172).

⁶³ See Boswell’s *The Wallace Effect* (2019) for an in-depth study of Wallace’s impact on such contemporary novelists as Jeffrey Eugenides, Claire Messud, and Jonathan Franzen. See also Burn’s *Reader’s Guide*, 2nd ed., 1-12 for a briefer discussion of how the “post-Wallace novel” registers his influence in both “thematic and aesthetic” domains (3). Andrew Hoberek similarly treats “The Novel after David Foster Wallace” as part of “a major shift not in experimental fiction but in realism,” away from minimalism and towards a “revival of the large-scale, sprawling, multicharacter novel” (224).

Wallace began *Infinite Jest* as early as 1986, wrestling with material that only came “alive” around 1991 (Max 318n15)⁶⁴ but which grew speedily after that. His personal life, though, was significantly disordered, and much of Wallace’s growth from a sophomoric comedian into an encyclopedic and ethically committed writer comes from the challenges he experienced in the late ’80s and early ’90s. In the time between *Broom of the System*’s release and the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace completed an MFA program at the University of Arizona (Spring 1987), begun—and the same semester left—a philosophy graduate program at Harvard (Fall 1989), done two stints at Yaddo, worked as an adjunct professor at Emerson College and at Amherst, been hospitalized multiple times for suicide attempts and ideation, lived in the halfway house that was the model for *IJ*’s Ennet House, and finally entered Alcoholics Anonymous to combat his problems with addiction.

Wallace’s productivity was nevertheless remarkable: he published the collection *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989) and a series of increasingly well-regarded nonfiction essays, two in *Harper’s* and three in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, including his most famous “E Unibus Pluram” where he announces his program for the future of fiction.⁶⁵ Despite his proclamation that fiction should cast off the stranglehold of irony and embrace the “single entendre,” though, he struggled to put that program into practice,

⁶⁴ According to Max, Wallace wrote the critic Marshall Boswell to say, “I started *IJ* or somethin’ like it several times. ’86, ’88, ’89. None of it worked or was alive. And then in ’91-’92 all of a sudden it did” (Max 318n15).

⁶⁵ In *Harper’s*, these are “Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes: A Midwestern Boyhood” (1991) and “Ticket to the Fair” (1994), collected respectively as “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley” and “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1997). In *Review*, these are “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (1988), “The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s Wittgenstein’s Mistress” (1990), and “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (1993), the latter of which was also included in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*.

frequently expressing embarrassment at the earnestness of his pronouncements.

Interviewed by Larry McCaffery for a special issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*,⁶⁶

Wallace says

It seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art's heart's purpose . . . [in being] 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 to actually do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don't seem to have yet. ("Expanded Interview" 50-1)

Developing *IJ* required Wallace to learn a new kind of voice; he wrote to Franzen in May 1989 that the book was "so big and complicated and requires a voice I don't seem to have in the old quiver" (Max 124). But in April 1991 he was "slowly trying some fictional stuff, which so far is not very good, and almost completely unrecognizable vis a vis the stuff I was doing before" (letter to Forrest Ashby, Max 155). In recovery, he was finding the voice he would bring to life in *Infinite Jest*: smart, dynamic, roving in its intellection, and yet finding ways to offer the reader more emotional intimacy than *Broom*'s comic voice, in response to criticisms from Jonathan Franzen and Mary Karr⁶⁷ among others. Having imagined the Incandenza family early on, now he began to develop the character of Don Gately,⁶⁸ and the novel's shape and balance started to come together. That balance, Burn notes, echoes *Ulysses* in its basic character structure; both

⁶⁶ The interview wasn't published until Summer 1993, but it took place in April 1991 (Max 155).

⁶⁷ As Max documents, Franzen said that *Girl with Curious Hair* was "half of a great book" and that in "Westward" Wallace was "too impatient and too proud to do the stoop-work of creating character, suspense and emotional involvement" (Max 130). Karr, too, told Wallace that it was "not a great book," recalling to Max, "his interest in cleverness was preventing him from saying things" (Max 148). These criticisms weighed heavily on Wallace.

⁶⁸ Max places the conception of the Incandenzas as early as 1986, when Wallace wrote the title *Infinite Jest* on his Yaddo application; he writes, "without the Incandenzas the title . . . makes little sense. You can't have *Hamlet* without a ghost." By the fall of 1986 Wallace had also begun the geopolitical plot involving Marathe and Steeply (Max 160, 159). But the Gately storyline was inspired by his housemate Big Craig at Granada House (Ennet House's real life equivalent), and as a result it "could not have been begun before early 1990" (Max 160).

novels follow two overarching narratives that present a youthful prodigy who has problematic relations with his father, opposite an older man who is less educated but more humane. In both books, the author begins by showcasing the prodigy but ultimately moves toward the older figure, leaving at book's end the young man isolated in the loneliness of his own talent (*Reader's Guide* 2nd ed. 25).⁶⁹ As I will argue, Wallace uses Joyce as a model for the encyclopedic voice, realizing as Joyce did that "Reality . . . does not answer to the 'point of view,' the monocular vision, the single ascertainable tone" (Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* 83). That focus on shifting perspectives applies not just to *IJ*'s structure but to its voice as well.

As Wallace's composition of *Infinite Jest* began to prioritize the story of Don Gately against that of Hal Incandenza, so too does Wallace begin to shift "from clever to mindful" (Max 190). By April 15, 1992, a partial manuscript left Gerald Howard "amazed by the changes . . . from a clever writer to a profound one" (Max 171). Wallace did retain some of that cleverness—*Infinite Jest* is studded with "gags"—but his commitment to sharing (potentially excessive) knowledge and giving it ethical meaning was emerging as dominant in his new fiction. Little, Brown's promotional campaign correspondingly focused on the book's maximalism and encyclopedic scope, and the publisher mailed a series of six mysterious postcards to 4,000 industry insiders, heralding the book as an event. At first they said simply "It's coming," and later cards promised "Infinite pleasure" or "Infinite style" (Andersen, "Judging" 276n20), offering blurbs and enticing details in order to play up *Jest*'s "undeniability" (Bruni). Rather than ask

⁶⁹ This distributed protagonist structure is, according to Franco Moretti, a central part of the "modern epic": he quotes Blanchot that "the split hero is 'a device that characterizes the epic genre from its beginnings'" (Moretti 33).

themselves, “how dare we ask readers to buy a 1,000+ page book?” the marketing team said, “we dare you to meet this challenge” (ibid.).

In this way the book’s reputation—for immensity, difficulty, and enjoyability—preceded itself, and responses were varied: Wallace was called “self-indulgent” in the *New York Times* by Michiko Kakutani and was savaged by Dale Peck in the *London Review of Books*, who wrote that the novel, “proof that the Great American Hype Machine can still work wonders,” was nevertheless “not worth the paper it’s written on” in “an ecological sense.” Because of its length Ercolino sees *Infinite Jest* as a fetish object whose size “endow[s it] with its own sex appeal” (24). But against this psychoanalytical reading Wallace explains to Charlie Rose that the length came gradually from his desire to have multiple main characters: “*Infinite Jest* did not start out to be this long. It started out to be a fractured, multiple narrative with a number of main characters and it became—perhaps I was just in denial that this was going to require great length” (Rose). The fractured aesthetic allows Wallace to develop techniques he had begun in *Broom*, and to expand the character dyad of Lenore / Rick into a broader set of main characters. But as Wallace populated his expanding story world with more people and more perspectives, he needed to counteract the “centrifugal” effect of that multiplicity with the “centripetal” effect of voice.

This shift shows Wallace giving serious thought to his compact with the reader, whose presence he had previously ignored, believing in 1989 that “[f]iction for me is a conversation for me between me and something that May Not Be Named—God, the Cosmos, the Unified Field, my own psychoanalytic cathexes, Roqoq’oqu, whomever. I do

not feel even the hint of an obligation to an entity called READER” (letter to Franzen, Max 145). But as he struggled to balance the “real experimental and very strange” with the “*fun*” he wanted to produce (Lipsky 36), he began to consider the “physics of reading” that his editor Gerald Howard had invoked back in 1986 (Max 70). This rhetorical shift, toward accepting the reader as a co-creator and even the “God, for all textual purposes,” in the reception of his work (McCaffery 40), allowed Wallace to place his own spin on the big postmodern novel: one centered by a conversational, friendly narrator whose increased presence gave the novel a communicative feeling Wallace felt was missing in the avant-garde tradition.

Encyclopedism, Wallace, and 20th Century Fiction

This significant shift in Wallace's purposes, insofar as it showed him embracing a much stronger rhetorical pact with the reader, allowed him to intervene in the postmodern encyclopedic tradition, which was known more for its distant and unsentimental narrators. Wallace wrote to Sven Birkerts about his desire and difficulty to transform his novel's tone: "I wanted to make a kind of contemporary Jamesian melodrama, real edge-of-sentimentality stuff, and instead I find it buried . . . in Po-Mo formalities, the sort of manic patina over emotional catatonia that seems to inflict the very culture the novel's supposed to be about . . . I have never felt so much a failure" (Max 191). Wallace wanted to engage the reader not just as the solver of the text's puzzles but as a fellow human with whom he (or his gregarious narrator) was engaged empathetically. The failure that Wallace feels, then, was actually a success: while he did not write a straightforward melodrama, in *Infinite Jest* he did manage to integrate the intellectual with the emotional, and experimental form with a garrulous, overt and emotionalized narrator.

The "emotional catatonia" that Wallace wanted to reject was in part inherited from Pynchon and Coover, artists who could depict horrific moments while resisting sentimentality in their treatment of them (consider the sad but muted dismantling of "V" in *V* or the almost euphoric electrocution of the Rosenbergs in *The Public Burning*). But it was also inherited from the dominant culture of minimalism that Wallace had been resisting since his college days. Andrew Hoberek places Wallace at the "tipping point" away from such a minimalism, in a shift toward an older tradition of maximalism that valued inclusion and casual oralism (224). Wallace himself linked this catatonia to the

tradition of Carver-esque realism in his essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” where he named “Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a. Bad Carver” as one of “three dreary camps” dominating “contemporary young writing” (“Fictional Futures” 37).

Although in that “Fictional Futures” essay Wallace ultimately aligns himself with the “Conspicuously Young” authors he by turns criticizes and defends, he has little in common with any of the three stereotyped camps he presents: he is no more “catatonic realist” than he is “Neiman-Marcus nihilis[t]” or “workshop hermeticis[t]” (37). Instead, he implies a fourth camp: those who understand that language is anything but a “neutral medium” and who embrace the lessons of theory and philosophy in pushing literature forward. As Wallace puts it, the “contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as divorced from his own concerns,” reeling off a crowded list that includes Heidegger, Lacan, and de Man among others (50). The self-conscious writer, whose “loss of innocence about the language” becomes his “breath and bread,” moves beyond *both* minimalism and metafiction (51) into—what? Encyclopedism.

Such a jump might seem surprising, but Wallace’s emphasis on theory and its relation to fiction led directly to an encyclopedic tendency—one that is embodied not only by Wallace but by an entire contemporary milieu. Besides resisting the pared-down sensibility of Carverian minimalism that dominated the 1980s and “seemed destined to last indefinitely” (Ercolino 9), he was unsatisfied with the self-referential quality of metafiction. This dual frustration was not Wallace’s alone. Commenting on Tom Wolfe’s

1989 “Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,” Sven Birkerts remarks that Wolfe “was hardly alone in his impatience with the evasions of minimalism and with the more self-consciously formalized metafictional experiments of writers such as Robert Coover, John Hawkes, and John Barth, in which the artifice of fiction becomes in some sense the subject” (“The Soul” 71). But while Wolfe’s call is for the social novel—a realm associated now more with Jonathan Franzen than with Wallace—what Wolfe describes sounds more like an absurd maximalist realism made to match an absurd world.⁷⁰ He writes, “By the mid-1960s the conviction was not merely that the realistic novel was no longer possible but that American life itself no longer deserved the term *real*. American life was chaotic, fragmented, random, discontinuous; in a word, *absurd*” (“Literary” 49). The novel, he said, must show not just the individual but a number of individuals shaping and shaped by their world, “in intimate and inextricable relation to the society” around them (50); this novel would refuse to capitulate in the face of such multiplicity and instead “wrestle the beast” of American absurdity and “bring it to terms” (55). A task like that invites not just documentation but, potentially, encyclopedic excess.

Wolfe’s diagnosis—that “wrestling the beast” of an increasingly complex global world would be the most important challenge for novelists going forward—seems accurate in retrospect, but the efforts of novelists like Wallace to embrace a “chaotic, random, and discontinuous” world (Wolfe 56) have not been met with unanimous appreciation. Consider, for instance, the criticisms James Wood levels against a contemporary strand of fiction (or, as he prefers, a genre) that he dubs “hysterical

⁷⁰ Wolfe has identified himself as a maximalist, in fact, stating, “that’s what I am, a putter-inner” (Macdonald 92, qtd. in Kallan).

realism.” The “big, ambitious novel” of our time—Wood lists *Infinite Jest*, *White Teeth*, *Underworld*, and *Mason & Dixon* as exemplars—is a “perpetual motion machine” that “want[s] to abolish stillness” (178), “overwork[ing]” “the conventions of realism” while “evasive of reality” (179). Hysterical realist novels, with their incessant storytelling, seem to Wood too *forced*: characters who “are not really alive, not fully human” (182) are moved through implausibly cohesive storyworlds. In Wood’s words, these novels are “excessively centripetal,” too paranoid in their excess of interconnections (181). And further, the connections are so implausible as to lack the vital force he desires: “these novels find themselves in the paradoxical position of enforcing connections which are finally merely conceptual rather than human. The forms of these novels *tell* us that we are all connected . . . but it is a formal lesson rather than an actual enactment” (182). To Wood, the cohesion that novelists like Wallace and Smith create to unify their expansive storyworlds is too much, especially when it comes at the cost of character.

Still, Wood acknowledges that these qualities are linked to the information age: the “obsession with connecting characters with each other,” he writes, is like the way “information is connected in the World Wide Web” (181). In this age, “it has become hard to create character” as anything more than a node in a network, and thus fiction has become devoid of “strong feelings.” While the affective dimension of fiction has suffered, “Information has become the new character” (185). Wood does not pursue this further; to do so would reveal his elision of these authors’ rhetorical purposes in an information and media age. For it is not that “hysterical realists” have *failed* as authors through neglect or inadequacy; rather, they have set their sights on fiction with a different

scale, in which information is a character, and with this shift in purposes comes a shift in their priorities regarding world, character, and plot. Wood judges “hysterical realists” from the outside in, applying his own aesthetic criteria, while I suggest instead that we judge them from the inside out, in terms of the implicit aesthetic criteria and purposes that such authors find appropriate for their historical situations.

Such a shift in authorial purposes—toward documenting the world and its systemic complexity, and away from an exclusive focus on the interiority of individual characters—is Tom LeClair’s central concern in his book *The Art of Excess* (1989), which examines a corpus of what he calls “systems novels.” Though he does not discuss *Infinite Jest*—which would not be released for seven more years—it’s clear that *Infinite Jest* (1996) is dominated by a systems sensibility. The novels LeClair examines, beginning with *Gravity’s Rainbow*, embrace a paradigm shift across soft and hard sciences that asks us to conceive of the world as an “open system” characterized by complexity, flux, and recursivity. In this view, the world is constituted by “dynamic processes” that can interact and develop in uncertain and unpredictable ways; because of the interaction between various elements of the system, and the recursivity of its processes, “systems are not separable into parts but must be considered as wholes” (8). LeClair argues that the systems paradigm has influenced the authors he examines, and “that only within this new paradigm can these books be fully appreciated as works of mastery, novels that represent and intellectually master the power systems they exist within and are about” (6).

As a result, the scale of the systems novel is fundamentally different from the traditional realist novel; the personal scale is less “relevan[t]” when one considers the “size and number of [man’s] relations” to a larger whole. As Zadie Smith sees it, as a novelist, “It’s not just your job to tell us how somebody felt about something, it’s to tell how the world works” (Featherstone).⁷¹ Systems novelists want to show the reader the hidden “relations between the microscopic and the macroscopic, the local and the global” (LeClair, *Excess* 11), and they want to embody those relations in their texts. As a result, LeClair writes, they “flexibly employ postmodern methods to displace the priority of the individual and to deform the conventions of realism which encode an ideology of the local” (2). It is this displacement—and its consequences for the fundamental elements of narrative—to which Wood objects.

Nevertheless, in LeClair’s account the systems novel actually works quite hard to be, in Wood’s terms, “really human.” Even if systems novels displace the bourgeois individual’s centrality, and even if information has become in some way a “character,” LeClair argues that these novels are “highly rhetorical” as well as deeply affective: “Just because some novels do not have characters who correspond to the canons of bourgeois substantiality, individuality, and refinement does not mean that character has been destroyed, and feelings with it” (27). In fact, LeClair identifies a set of “primal, emotionally compelling” subjects that systems novels consistently engage—“home, children, and the future” (27)—and suggests that “the greatest challenge to the systems

⁷¹ As if hungry to flatten Smith’s emphasis on the multiplicity of the novelist’s responsibilities, James Wood misrepresents her statement by removing the word “just,” changing “not just your job” to a misleading paraphrase: “It is not the writer’s job, she says, ‘to tell us how somebody felt . . .’” (*Irresponsible* 186).

novelist and to the reader is learning how to distribute feeling states, how to respond emotionally all along the large spectrum of systems, how to move beyond private sentiments to caring about—and not just recognizing—the multiple wholes the self exists within” (28). Further, in order to “overcome[e] reader suspicion and resistance,” systems novels work generally within the comic mode and have a narrator who presents himself as “a collector rather than a creator . . . a large-minded bricoleur,” shaping a persona that “diminishes the reader’s sense of artistic manipulation” (23); this persona invites the reader to take part by presenting the narrative discourse as predominantly oral (15). *Infinite Jest* fulfills all these qualities—it concerns children, it is deeply affective (more so than many of LeClair’s models, even), and it is tragicomic, unable to let go of satire, gags, and situational humor even as it concerns itself largely with depressive and addictive patterns of self-destruction. The novel’s balance of humor, pathos, and information is managed by the unifying—and often quite oral—effect of the encyclopedic voice, which offers more emotional guidance to the reader than Wallace’s more “catatonic” precursors.

Beginning his career later in the 20th century than those priors, Wallace is impacted not only by systems theory⁷² but also by these particular systems novelists, making him a second-generation systems novelist. He was acutely aware of systems theory, information theory, and quantum physics both as models for understanding everyday life, and as metaphors for the future of the novel. LeClair affirms in a later

⁷² Wallace was a reader of the work of Douglas Hofstadter, as well as Gregory Bateson and R. D. Laing (who studied with Bateson). He was also at home with the non-Euclidean mathematics of paradox and infinity that is one of the origins of the systems paradigm. Finally, the systems paradigm also has connections to poststructuralist literary theory, which Wallace knew quite well.

essay (1996) that Wallace (along with Richard Powers and William Vollmann) follow their predecessors in “exemplif[y]ing a new kind of learning in fiction” (“Prodigious” 13); but “unlike [their] literary elders,” they “were educated in the Age of Information” and thus “acquired an expertise nowhere evident in the work of the previous generation” (13). As a result they “more thoroughly conceive their fictions as information systems” than do earlier systems novelists, as well as focusing more on the life sciences and biology (14). One might extend LeClair’s argument to show that these authors actually *merge* the life sciences with information, forming e.g. Wallace’s conception of the “machine language of the muscles.”⁷³

In addition to absorbing the systems paradigm via his reading of Pynchon, Gaddis, Coover, Barth—some of the authors whom LeClair examines—Wallace also studied and comprehensively annotated LeClair’s other book, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987), during his composition of *Infinite Jest*. His annotations suggest an interest in style and voice, as well as mathematical structure: looking for ways to organize his novel, he studied the underlying logic of similar technoscientific mega-novels, placing his local stylistic strategies in direct connection to his global structuring ones. For instance, in the heavily marked introduction to *In the Loop*, one of the passages Wallace underlines is as follows:

[Systems novelists] pursue innovative and often demanding stylistic strategies in order to imitate living systems, to be both spatial paradigm and temporal process, to give the medium of the text the illusion of reciprocal simultaneity [. . .] One sees a whole but listens to process, and the page-to-page experience of these books is the illusion of listening rather than Viewing. Systems novels are primarily composed of the representation of talk, of public oral discourse. (18)

⁷³ See Burn’s “The Machine Language of the Muscles” for an account of (among other topics) the bodily logic of *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace is certainly very oral in his style, as I will discuss in depth later in this chapter, but (as a reader of Gaddis's *JR*, for instance) he is also leery of the impenetrable cacophony that a plenitude of voices can produce. Giving, as LeClair discusses, small clues and models for his reader to follow, Wallace touches with a lightly satiric hand on the potential of noise when the author attempts simply to capture all voices at once: among J.O.I.'s innovations in film is the use of unhierarchized sound in his "radical realism" (836), such that all voices have the same volume—except, as the reader realizes, this means none can be heard. As J.O.I.'s wraith explains to Don Gately, "he goddamn bloody well made sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were . . . it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's real egalitarian babble" (835). Here Wallace thematizes both the desirability of oral presence while acknowledging the difficulties it presents. To index the world in an encyclopedic fashion is a valuable goal—but one that presents the danger of losing any coherent "signal" in the midst of so much "noise."

"Radical realism" has been discussed by a handful of Wallace critics, mostly following LeClair's initial claim—reading Wallace straight—that J.O.I.'s "'radical realism' . . . accurately names Wallace's method," which helps "press *Infinite Jest* to its prodigious size" ("Prodigious" 35).⁷⁴ Certainly Wallace desires to characterize an

⁷⁴ Nichols is the first to reproduce this naïvely uncritical connection of Incandenza's filmic technique to the novel overall, oddly interpreting the background "figurants" to mean the main characters of the novel: "Hal and Don . . . begin expressing themselves as vocal 'figurants' whose incoherent voices may eventually coalesce into an audible, collective human hum capable of restoring dialogue to a decidedly monologic culture" (Nichols, "Dialogizing" 15). Jacobs simply links it to Wallace's "call for a return to mimetic

extreme position on mimesis and to evoke his desire for a decentralized and significantly complex storyworld; but true “radical realism” (in a novel) seems at the most practically impossible and at the least unpleasant and pointless. Nevertheless, among many critics Warren and Hering alone question the unproblematic link between Incandenza and Wallace. Regarding its possibility, Warren suggests that “radical realism” comes up against the fundamental limits of the “character-system” where characters “jostle for limited space within the same fictional universe” (406, quoting Woloch 13). Regarding its aesthetics, Hering more explicitly counters LeClair, writing that although the novel is focused on a “polyphonic approach to narrative” (14), “the wraith’s iteration of radical realism is not identical to Wallace’s approach as it is framed within the narrative of *Jest* as the work of a failed artist” (17). Since most of Incandenza’s filmography reads as a gleeful parody of conceptual film (such that it is frequently unfilmed or even unfilmable [see *IJ* 985n24]), I think we should consider this one of the many ways Wallace “both embodies and parodies” the ideas he puts forth (Boswell 130), casting “radical realism” as a solution that “exacerbates the very problems it seeks to overcome” (Boswell 160). In this way, “radical realism” theoretically announces a desire to resist prioritizing some characters at the expense of others, but in practice it comes at the expense of *all* characters when it creates total noise, total chaos.

representation” (225); Benzon links it to Wallace’s “literary chaotics” (101). Timmer argues that it is “exactly what is effectuated in *Infinite Jest*” (171), and Holland says that it “resemble[s]” the project of *IJ* (*Succeeding* 88n54). Most recently, Ercolino similarly writes that the description of radical realism is “an effective mise en abyme of the compositional procedures and of the guiding mimetic criterion adopted by Wallace” (162), motivated by a “peremptory aesthetic and ethical urgency” (163). Despite this remark, he admits earlier that in the maximalist novel “polyphony never degenerates into chaos . . . There will always be ordering criteria to the story . . . which serve to contain the rich maximalist polyphony within sustainable and ‘audible’ limits” (62). I find that these interpretations largely miss the parodic energy of “radical realism” by ignoring the very different purposes of Wallace and his character.

The encyclopedic novel, Ercolino writes, showcases a dialectic tension between chaos (noise) and cosmos (signal),⁷⁵ but each novel does this differently, and once again Wallace’s intervention makes *IJ* more accessible—and perhaps more applicable—to readers’ lives by offering a stronger signal. While other encyclopedic novels tend more toward chaos (e.g., the sense of dispersion in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is greater than in *IJ*), Wallace’s interest in systems draws *IJ* more toward overarching order. For instance, one of Wallace’s most exuberant annotations in LeClair’s *In the Loop* is an all-caps and underlined “NICE” in response to a passage that includes the following:

large ‘mastering’ works would both explain and register uncertainty, in contrast to the media’s simplification of ideas into commodities . . . and the postmodernists’ certainty about uncertainty; they would transform the reader’s understanding of wholes, rather than please his engineered appetite for parts. (12, Harry Ransom Center)

Indeed, LeClair argues earlier in the introduction that the systems theory paradigm shift involves (among others) the following transformations, all of which privilege unity and wholeness as part of an evolving, open system:

<u>From</u>	<u>To</u>	
stasis	process	
entity	relationship	
atom	gestalt	
aggregate	whole	
heap	structure	
part	system	(<i>In the Loop</i> 7)

⁷⁵ Ercolino usefully shows how different defining traits of the genre help balance between these two poles. He writes: “length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, and diegetic exuberance . . . take the maximalist form toward complete dispersion and ungovernability,” and “acompleteness, narratorial omniscience, and paranoid imagination” work to counter that chaos with order (114).

Finally, Wallace underlines the following passage in LeClair, illuminating his approach to the chaos/cosmos dialectic of *Infinite Jest*: here, a multitude of voices make up a large whole rather than a chaotic mess:

Tipping a novel's conventional proportions toward a preponderance of dialogue, as the novelists do, also emphasizes reciprocal relationships. . . . Forsaking a unifying and assuring metalanguage—especially a traditional literary discourse—the systems novelist makes space in his novel for a multitude of linguistic subsystems, multiple, overlapping logospheres that the reader may ultimately understand as constituents of a large whole. (*In the Loop* 19)

Most importantly, we should note here the fundamental relation of voice, and voices, to the dialectic between noise and signal in the encyclopedic novel. Not only LeClair's account, but each of the analyses of encyclopedism and maximalism I have touched on here hinge quietly on voice: on the question of the narrator, his relative presence and tone, and the massive polyphony he integrates. LeClair calls the systems narrator very "oral," and Ercolino attends to polyphony, (building on Franco Moretti's analysis of the "modern epic"). For Moretti, the scope of the encyclopedic novel allows more space to experiment, resulting in wilder play with techniques (like voice) that, even if they do not appear as a total success, nevertheless do not "damage" the novel as a whole: "Even if things go as badly as can be (as in 'Scylla and Charybdis', or 'Sirens'), the catastrophe will have a limited effect, leaving the overall structure of the work intact" (Moretti 189). Because the scope of the encyclopedic novel is larger, the play of character voices is less risky and centrifugal with respect to the whole; a center of gravity has already been established, and so—in Wallace as in Joyce—the experimental use of other, decentering, voices and styles becomes more possible and less threatening to the novel's sense of unity or wholeness.

Nevertheless, *Infinite Jest* does contain a center of gravity: its narrative voice. Despite the representation of various voices throughout the novel—for instance, the stream of consciousness in the “Las Meninas” section (37ff), the pure dialogue in Mario’s puppet play (see 385), or the sections composed entirely of newspaper headlines (e.g. 391)—*Infinite Jest* is dominated by a well-established narrative voice that is both friendly and informative, if a bit “exuberant[t]” (Ercolino 114), or, as Dawson puts it, “pyrotechnic” (*Return* 111). But whereas diegetic exuberance for Ercolino is oriented toward the chaotic or centrifugal forces in the work (insofar as he defines it in terms of digressivity, see 72), in *Infinite Jest* the narrator is defined and grounded by this exuberance. Digression—when it takes place—is determined by the associative and explanatory logic at the heart of the encyclopedic voice, as it seeks to draw connections between disparate realms of experience and to present those connections energetically to the reader.

This exuberance is perhaps better understood through Dawson’s concept of the “pyrotechnic storyteller,” who is “typically humorous or satirical, employing a flourishing and expansive narrative voice, a garrulous conversational tone, to assert control over the events being narrated, eschewing the impersonality of analytic omniscience to the extent that the narrative voice often overshadows the characters being described or analyzed” (*Return* 111). Whereas in Ercolino’s account narratorial omniscience (centripetal) counters the “exuberance” of the narration (centrifugal), Dawson suggests that Wallace’s narrator manages to be omniscient, exuberant, and highly personalized at the same time. Even though Wallace’s narrator is exceedingly

digressive at times, the sheer force of his personality unifies “digressions” under the umbrella of an overall rhetorical and thematic purpose. The voice’s capaciousness only *appears* as digression, and the novel’s progression is actually quite finely structured to set up resonances between the various themes and characters (for instance, see Carlisle’s explication of the logic governing *Infinite Jest*’s exposition).

One might ask: how can a voice be encyclopedic? Typically the term “encyclopedic” has been used to describe the scope and capaciousness of a text as a whole—its global logic—rather than to characterize its narrator. The dominant voice of *Infinite Jest* is not just garrulous, expansive, and detail-oriented, like the maximalist narrators created by Nicholson Baker (see Levey); it is specifically encyclopedic, insofar as its values are oriented not just toward information, but also toward the systemic organization of that information, integrated with plot and character so that it may be useful and relevant to the reader, for whom the systems-oriented values may be disorienting. The narrator has a tendency to link information together, to explain complex phenomena not by simplifying it but by providing and discussing examples, offering a historical and cultural framework, and even—in a surprisingly generous gesture, given the vocabulary range of the novel—offering definitions of unfamiliar words.⁷⁶ Flipping open the book at random, the reader may find many instances of this sort, which move quickly between abstract and particular, science and culture, individual and collective.

⁷⁶ Consider pages 692–698, when the narrator offers a long explanation of depression’s various types, and those types’ impact on various characters: Kate Gompert, young tennis players at the academy, James Orin Incandenza, his son Hal, and even an unnamed psychotically depressed man whom Kate Gompert knows. In addition to this typology, the narrator comments on depression’s relation to motivation, critiquing American culture’s *Weltschmerz*, and—in a footnote—offers the meaning and history of the word “anhedonia”: “*Anhedonia* was apparently coined by Ribot, a Continental Frenchman, who in his 19th-century *Psychologie des Sentiments* says he means it to denote the psychoequivalent of *analgesia*, which is the neurologic suppression of pain” (1053n280).

Wallace, I argue, creates a distinct narrative voice that uses its omniscience and omnipotence to interact directly with the reader; as Dawson writes, this type of omniscient narrator is not just “all-knowing” but “addresses the reader directly, offers intrusive commentary on the events being narrated, ranges freely across space and time, provides access to the consciousness of characters, and generally asserts a palpable presence within the fictional world” (*Return* 1). It is a highly personalized omniscient narrator who, despite its rather unhuman access to knowledge about characters and events, manages to appear at the same time like a friendly interlocutor: as Wallace said in an interview, “sort of like a smart person is sitting right there talking to you” (“Interview with a Five-Draft Man” 59).

In the following readings of the four elements of Wallace’s encyclopedic voice—its values, tone, style, and rhythms—I will show how Wallace produces this smart, intimate voice that is the heart of *Infinite Jest*. While each of the instances I discuss varies in its use of techniques and often appears quite different from the others, I argue that each is recognizably “Wallace-y,” and each integrates information and affect in a way that characterizes the encyclopedic voice. My comments about values, tone, style, and rhythm are not intended to be exclusive to the examples in question; while certain stylistic elements may change, and while different values are implicit at different times, it is the synthesis of these elements both locally and over the novel’s whole that defines the dominant voice. Despite their differences, each example shows how Wallace integrates scientific and systems-theoretical data into ethically charged human situations; and each

hinges on rapid register switching and very nuanced diction to create the sense that the science is applicable, accessible, and deeply relevant to the situation at hand.

Values: Comprehensiveness, Nuance, Responsibility, Epiphany

In good faith and full measure . . . eschew the deletion of all parts of reality.

—Wallace, “Deciderization” xxiii

What then? Analysis then. The mind considers the object in whole and in part, in relation to itself and to other objects, examines the balance of its parts, contemplates the form of the object, traverses every cranny of its structure.

—James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (212); underlined by Wallace

Engaging as he does the tradition of encyclopedic novels, Wallace’s encyclopedic voice naturally values knowledge. Most obviously, this preoccupation with knowledge takes a scientific cast, and any reader who cracks the novel knows that it is studded with scientific information, drawn from a dizzying array of disciplines: neuroscience, medicine, pharmacology, biology; chemistry, ecology, technology; projectile physics and optical physics, and last but not least, speculative nuclear physics. While LeClair is correct to suggest that Wallace and his peers emphasize the life sciences and biology more than do their forebears (consider the dominance of physics and ballistics in *Gravity’s Rainbow*), Wallace seems to leave no community of knowledge behind, and Nichols notes that this “constant stream of jargon” comes also from “Alcoholics Anonymous, academia, commercial culture, professional sports, teenage slang” and more (6). The sciences are not (just) a metaphor for other concerns—for instance, the dangers of desire and its gratification—rather they are, in Peter Rabinowitz’s phrasing, its “key subject” (206), so fundamental to the novel’s logic that to change or remove them would radically alter the novel itself.

This is to say that the science and information that fill Wallace’s novel are not just there to thematize the novel’s grappling with information; and they are not just, as

LeClair suggests, exemplary evidence for the millennial systems novel's self-conception "as information systems . . . long running programs of data" ("Prodigious" 14). Given the vast amount of sheer data in *Infinite Jest*'s body text and footnotes, dramatizing information systems is certainly a part of Wallace's purposes, and as I will show, a capacious but careful approach to information is central to his values. But his use of science and information in *Infinite Jest* is fundamentally rhetorical: the encyclopedic voice expresses Wallace's aesthetic and ethical purposes in shaping the reader's experience, seducing the reader with his approachable and friendly tone in order to train the reader in how to enjoy the novel's pleasures and convince her that the novel's payoffs are worth the work.

The first example I'll treat here comes from the second earliest moment⁷⁷ in the novel's fabula, though it appears at the exact middle of the book's *sjuzhet*.⁷⁸ It depicts a significant childhood event in the life of James Orin Incandenza (J.O.I.), who would later become the alcoholic and suicidal father of Hal, Orin, and Mario, and the creator of the novel's central, fatally entertaining video cartridge *Infinite Jest*, and it highlights the interaction of the novel's central values: the pursuit of knowledge and the assessment of responsibility. Here, the values center on responsibility over time, distributed responsibility, and the way that theoretical and technological progress will always have unexpected effects.

⁷⁷ The earliest takes place three years prior, when the young J.O.I. still lives in Tucson, AZ, and his father attempts to teach him the lessons of embodiment in their spider-ridden garage (157).

⁷⁸ The archival materials for the novel indicate that Wallace may have been purposeful in placing this scene at such a central position (page 502 out of 981 total pages of body text). In the first lengthy typescript of the novel that Wallace sent for review, the scene begins on page 81A out of just over 600; while editing, Wallace moved it back considerably.

In this scene, a 13-year-old J.O.I. helps his father explore the source of a squeak in his parents' bed. After they've investigated the mattress and the bed frame, J.O.I. watches as his father throws up his alcoholic drink and passes out drunk in a muddle of thick dust and his own vomit. Disturbed and avoiding the sound of his mother vacuuming, J.O.I. goes back to his room and accidentally sets off a causal chain ending with his doorknob rolling on the floor. In its movement he sees the germ of his later invention: the pattern for annulation, a horrifically toxic recursive nuclear process that consumes waste to produce energy, with a waste byproduct that can be fed back into the original process. (Annulation, by J.O.I.'s adulthood, has completely transformed the fictional world; it is linked to each of the storyworld's interconnecting strands and is also the key word and unifying motif of the novel.) Here is the scene, which I'll quote at length:

I took several running strides in from the doorway, past my shelves' collection of prisms and lenses and tennis trophies and my scale-model magneto, past my bookcase, the wall's still-posters from Powell's *Peeping Tom* and the closet door and my bedside's high-intensity standing lamp, and jumped, doing a full swan dive up onto my bed. I landed with my weight on my chest with my arms and legs out from my body . . . I was trying to make my bed produce a loud squeak, which in the case of my bed I knew was caused by any lateral friction between the wooden slats and the frame's interior's shelf-like slat-support.

But in the course of the leap and the dive, my overlong arm hit the heavy iron pole of the high-intensity standing lamp that stood next to the bed. The lamp teetered violently and began to fall over sideways, away from the bed. It fell with a kind of majestic slowness, resembling a felled tree. As the lamp fell, its heavy iron pole struck the brass knob on the door to my closet, shearing the knob off completely. The round knob and half its interior hex bolt fell off and hit my room's wooden floor with a loud noise and began then to roll around in a remarkable way, the sheared end of the hex bolt stationary and the round knob, rolling on its circumference, circling it in a spherical orbit, describing two perfectly circular motions on two distinct axes, a non-Euclidian figure on a planar surface, i.e., a cycloid on a sphere:

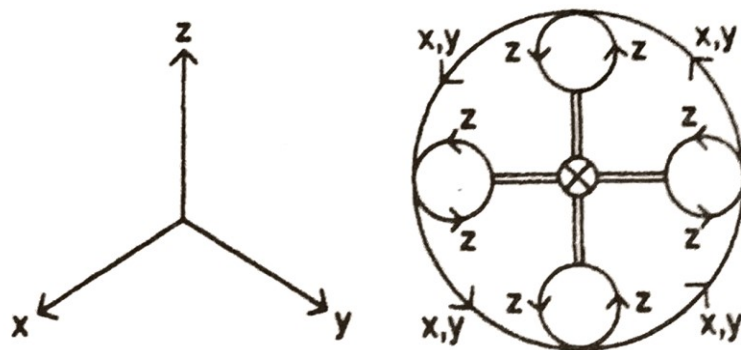


Figure 3. J.O.I.'s Cycloid, or Epiphany on a Doorknob

The closest conventional analogue I could derive for this figure was a cycloid, L'Hôpital's solution to Bernoulli's famous Brachistochrone Problem, the curve traced by a fixed point on the circumference of a circle rolling along a continuous plane. But since here, on the bedroom's floor, a circle was rolling around what was itself the circumference of a circle, the cycloid's standard parametric equations were no longer apposite, those equations' trigonometric expressions here becoming themselves first-order differential equations.

Because of the lack of resistance or friction against the bare floor, the knob rolled this way for a long time as I watched over the edge of the comforter and mattress, holding my glasses in place, completely distracted from the minor-D shriek of the vacuum below. It occurred to me that the movement of the amputated knob perfectly schematized what it would look like for someone to try to turn somersaults with one hand nailed to the floor. This was how I first became interested in the possibilities of annulation. (503)

Unusually, this section is delivered in the 1st person, rather than in the 3rd person from the heterodiegetic narrator. The entire section is framed, though, by a note to its opening line, which reads, "I remember²⁰⁸ I was eating lunch and reading something dull by Bazin" (491). Endnote 208 then details the context—a published collection—of the remembrance: "From Ch. 16, 'The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems,' in *The Chill of Inspiration: Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion*, ed. Prof. Dr. Günther Sperber, Institut für Neutronenphysik und Reaktortechnik, Kernforschungszentrum Karlsruhe, U.R.G., available in English in

ferociously expensive hardcover only, © Y.T.M.P. from Springer-Verlag Wien NNY” (1034n208). The footnote pops the reader out of the immersive quality of J.O.I.’s story and identifies its context and supposed content in advance. So, before I discuss this epiphany scene that is labeled as a “spontaneous reminiscence,” I’d like to explore the frame offered by the endnote in terms of its values and tone.

First and foremost, the frame mediates the narration, forcing the reader out of an initially immersive reminiscence: by appending the footnote so early in the sentence, between the verb and its direct object, the narrator asks the reader to stop, notice the note, likely finish the sentence anyway, and only then stop again and go to read the note. This, already, presupposes a high amount of dedication on the part of the reader, as a reader must be willing to pause her curiosity about the unusual nature of this section—in the first person, and headed by a temporal marker that places it all the way back in 1963—in order to flip back for the note.

At first the note seems absurd, a parody of academic culture. But, even so, it also offers a rich swath of surprising clues for the reader about the epiphanic moment she is about to read. By asking the reader to pause at the beginning—and telling her what this story will be *about*, from the perspective of the year 2003 (Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad)—Wallace highlights the gap of time that intervenes, a span of forty years. The first surprise is that J.O.I. would have dreamt up annulation at such a young age; and the second is to realize that every element of the novel’s world from 2002 to 2010 is impact by J.O.I. and his inventions, from the urban background noise of the ATHSCME fans, to the life of his sons at ETA, to the geopolitical setup that motivates the search for the

Infinite Jest master cartridge. The Great Concavity was formed as a giant waste dump where annulation takes place, but annulation's hyper-efficiency means that the zone must be fed ever-more toxic waste simply to prevent the zone from growing larger, expanding into Canada and the Northeast as the process "sucks every last toxin and poison out of the surrounding ecosystem," resulting in "a surrounding environment so fertile lush it's practically unlivable" (573). As a result of these geographic changes, Boston has become a border town and all of the characters in that area hear the whirl of the ATHSCME fans and the whoosh of catapults sending trash far overhead; the US has effectively forced Canada and Mexico into ONAN (the Organization of North American Nations) in order to "give" this toxic territory to Canada; the Québécois separatists have been energized and enraged, forming the Wheelchair Assassins terrorist group; and thus Marathe and Steeply find themselves on a mountaintop discussing the ethical and geopolitical ramifications of a weapon of mass destruction, *The Entertainment* (the movie *Infinite Jest*) that was created by *the same man who invented annulation*.

Whatever happens in the missing space between Interdependence Day YDAU and Hal's interview the following year, it's big: the end of subsidized time (see 1022n114) at least suggests some kind of collapse, if not one large enough to prevent Hal, as prospective college athlete, going on a tour of interviews. And in the end, it's all J.O.I.'s fault. Or is it? One of the novel's chief concerns is with responsibility: what are we responsible for, in a world of uncontrollable addictions, unconscious predilections, unchosen obsessions and fetishes, and unpredictable causal chains? Can we even claim responsibility for the thoughts in our own heads when—as J.O.I.'s wraith tells Gately—

wraiths are all over the place, inserting ideas and words into what we only *think* are our very own minds? J.O.I.'s epiphany scene evokes these same conundrums, and the endnote works delicately on many levels to set up the novel's anxiety about responsibility. The title's reference to "The Chill of Inspiration" teasingly evokes mystical theories of genius that locate the creator as a simple scribe or Aeolian harp; but instead of the hot and frenzied energy of a Coleridge copying down Kubla Khan, *this* inspiration is chilly, more Apollonian than Dionysian. At once, it evokes the entropic world created by annulation—a world in which total efficiency has brought about total disorder—as well as the literal temperature of its process: annulation is a form of nuclear cold fusion, brought about in something close to room temperature instead of the exceptional environments inside of stars. The everydayness, then, of annulation's physical conditions loops back to the banality of J.O.I.'s moment of epiphany, which forms the central content of the scene. Hardly an epiphany, it appears first to him simply as the motion of a somersault with one hand nailed down, and only in the interim years—and only after J.O.I. becomes a star scientist in optics (63)—does he engage, develop, and enact the interest that has been awakened in this scene.

The reader can only imagine what happened in the interim forty years, but once she realizes the weight of all this on J.O.I.'s adult shoulders, his "spontaneous reminiscence" comes across less as a narcissistic exercise by an emotionally stunted alcoholic, and more as a sympathetic tale of a man wracked by guilt. For why would J.O.I. tell this story, if not to explain to the world the anguish of his childhood, an anguish that induced his retreat into intellection, and to evoke sympathy and forgiveness for his

actions? Upon reflection, we develop sympathy for J.O.I., who (as reminiscer) does not even treat his childhood misery with fanfare or sentimentality, and we further see the world of the novel cast in a new light when seen through this origin story.⁷⁹ Insofar as J.O.I. himself seems to underinterpret this moment, leaving the bulk of framing and integration to the reader, he is a bit of an unreliable narrator—but his unreliability is bonding, since readers ultimately feel sympathy for him (see Phelan, *Somebody Telling Somebody Else*, chapter 5). In terms of values, then, the inclusion of this scene *as framed* enacts a complex set of values and abilities in the reader: it trains her in the importance of framing and context for making ethical judgments; it requires dialectical thinking in order to integrate the complex causality of annulation's invention; and it elaborates the difficulty of assigning responsibility (all values we will see in other scenes as well). And, importantly, it situates expression in a published collection, suggesting that while J.O.I. could not express himself with his family, the written word offers him a venue where he can reveal himself (significantly, Wallace also believed that the mediated relationship between writer and reader was a more equalizing relation than those in person [McCaffery 34]).

While the context provided by the frame was already rich in enacting the values of the novel and its demands upon an ideal reader, the memoir scene itself also offers abundant communications of the novel's values and commitments. Insofar as it combines addiction (J.O.I.'s father's alcoholism), childhood trauma, a moment of important insight,

⁷⁹ Of course, as always with Wallace, there is a qualification: J.O.I. is not the sole inventor of annulation. As the book's title reminds us, there are *seventeen* pioneers of annular fusion whose stories are presented in this collection. Despite the individuality of epiphanic moments, the development of this scientific advance is decidedly a collective endeavor with distributed responsibility.

and annulation, this scene merges all the novel's key themes and its central motif. And further, its meditation on responsibility can be seen as an inverted investigation of its opposite, indebtedness. The question of responsibility and debt—two sides of the same coin—is especially important when thinking about Wallace's relation to his artistic influences, and as an epiphany scene this section is in direct conversation with James Joyce. Wallace, perpetual student, feels compelled to study and imitate those he admires most; he puts himself under the influence, so to speak, in order to transform his writing from without. In part this is to train himself as a writer, but it also stems from a desire—much like Joyce does in "Oxen of the Sun"—to index the history of language and literature, a practice that Edward Mendelson identifies as a central component of the encyclopedic narrative.

Cold fusion; or, epiphany at room temperature. Considered at a distance, the scene is almost a parody of traditional epiphany: a seemingly banal moment in the life of a character is transformed into one of extraordinary significance—but only in retrospect. This is a strange sort of epiphany, cutting off precisely where its meaning and effects would begin, requiring the reader to fill in the gaps—between the two final sentences, as well as between the scene in 1963 and the novel's resumption in the early 2000s. If, as Wallace suggests in his nonfiction, the epiphany has become "a predictable trope of painfully obvious MFA fiction" (Casey 484), why is epiphany not just a trope that attracts Wallace here but, as Casey suggests, "a trope present throughout . . . [his] oeuvre" (480)? Simply enough, because Wallace is interested in revelation—in moments of insight that afford spiritual or emotional growth—for its thematic value but also for its

narrative power. Despite all his dismissal of narrative formulae like the oft-referenced Freytag's triangle, Wallace admits that "human beings are narrative animals": "we need narrative like we need space-time; it's a built-in thing" ("Fictional" 44). And the epiphany—as a character-based climax rather than a plot-based one—offers him not only emotional power but a distinct place in literary history.⁸⁰

Wallace's study of epiphany is evinced by the archival materials in his library: Wallace's copy of *Stephen Hero* is annotated with a precise attention to epiphanic aesthetics, and J.O.I.'s epiphany scene even borrows a word from Joyce, marking the trace of his apprenticeship to this master of epiphany. The variety of pens and the slight changes in penmanship suggest that Wallace read *Stephen Hero* early on as a student, and then revisited it later, when he was writing *Infinite Jest*.⁸¹ An often obsessively attentive student, he followed the instructions in the book's introduction, where Theodore Spencer points the reader directly to the pages on Stephen's aesthetic theory. Spencer's introduction reads, "There is one aspect of Stephen's aesthetic theory which . . . is left out of the *Portrait* entirely . . . the passage describing it is the most interesting and revealing in the entire text," before continuing to the direct instruction, "I ask the reader to turn to this passage and read it" (*Stephen Hero* 16). On the page in question—211—Wallace has circled the page number and marked up the text, drawing a double bar in the margin and

⁸⁰ The epiphany further offers Wallace a resource for his encyclopedic poetics of infinity, for this scene ties him not just to Joyce's epiphany but also to Joyce's use of the gnomon as a model for textual totality. Unfortunately, though, the significance of the gnomon is out of the scope of a poetics of voice, and I cannot say more here.

⁸¹ Wallace's annotations are in five different writing utensils throughout the book—black and blue ballpoint, pencil, and black and green felt-tip pens. The pencil especially suggests an early engagement—Wallace was known in his later years for his predilection for felt-tip pens—as does the cramped hand of the blue pen and the youthful inscription "David Wallace."

writing “Epiphany.” As for the text itself, he has marked the following passages,⁸²

focusing on the suddenness and on the object itself:

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. . . . The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty. (211)

Two pages later, the marking continues, both in the margin and underline:

After the analysis which discovers the second quality the mind makes the only logically possible synthesis and discovers the third quality. This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a *thing* in fact; finally, when the relation of parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance . . . its object achieves its epiphany.” (213)

For Wallace, mathematics is beauty—and beauty mathematical. And both are epiphanic. As he told Larry McCaffery, in his study of both logic and writing he sought “a special moment that comes sometimes. One teacher called these moments ‘mathematical experiences.’ What I didn’t know then was that a mathematical experience was aesthetic in nature, an epiphany in Joyce’s original sense” (34-5). This version of epiphany emphasizes the mathematical moment when things click together into that “organized composite structure”: the sudden moment of insight in which the answer to one’s challenge (a proof, a story) seems simply to *appear*. The epiphany scene, then, evokes these Joycean/Aquinean values regarding whole/part relations that reveal the “radiance” (*Stephen Hero* 212) of the physical world with its systematic order.

⁸² The underlining of the initial passage (“By . . . capable of an epiphany”) is done in blue ballpoint ink, while the marginal notation is done in black ballpoint. In the second section, he makes a marginal line in blue ballpoint. It follows, then, that Wallace annotated this passage on two separate occasions.

Wallace, too, means to pay tribute to Joyce by writing this scene and by editing it to include a word from *Stephen Hero* that he liked: “appositeness.” When Stephen is late to school, he tells the bursar, “Fine morning,” and the man is unexpectedly delighted. “The beauty of the morning and the appositeness of the remark both struck him at the same time,” Joyce writes (24). Wallace has double-underlined the word and put a check mark in the margin; and, sure enough, the word “apposite” gets edited into J.O.I.’s epiphany scene from one version to the next. Initially, in the version Wallace published in *Harper’s* as “The Awakening of My Interest In Annular Systems,” the line reads as follows: “the cycloid’s standard parametric equations were no longer applicable” (72); but in the published *Infinite Jest*, the line reads “no longer apposite” (502). By lifting this word, Wallace marks his conversation with Joyce as linguistically appreciative—and “apposite” works better in this context, with its higher register.

Nevertheless, I also want to highlight Wallace’s revision of Joycean epiphany, for Wallace is also reacting against the hermeticism of the Joycean epiphany (which he might call solipsistic). Wallace seeks to make the content of the epiphany shareable, or legible, to others, rather than a “delicate” moment barely communicable to others, “refer[ring] to the world of emotions, art, intuition— . . . all that cannot be analyzed” (Beja 74). By contrast, Wallace empties J.O.I.’s epiphany of its incommunicable spiritual content, dodging the problem that Robert Scholes also identifies in Joyce, that “the spiritual values would actually be there” (140), somehow immanent to the epiphanized object. Whereas Scholes argues that this belief relies only on “faith” in Joyce, the cycloidal abstract pattern J.O.I. sees is *actually there* in the world, insofar as it exists as a

mathematical pattern that he can see and analyze—and that can be presented visually to the reader. Looking outward to the material world, rather than inward to the emotional one, Wallace increases the communicability and thus (potential) social and scientific use of the epiphanic insight.

We might ask, then, if this is an epiphany at all, if it lacks the emotional profile of awe and intensity whereby the commonplace “vulgarity of speech or gesture” (*SH* 211) “focuses emotion and perception in a fleeting, illuminated instant” (Nichols xi). I would suggest that the scene *is* quite emotionally involved, but in a different way than we expect: it dramatizes the epiphany’s emotional balm for the disturbed young J.O.I., whose moment of clarity enables him to tune out the “shriek” of the vacuum cleaner downstairs. This epiphany is not just aesthetic, then, but also *anaesthetic*, allowing J.O.I. momentarily to escape the chaos of his family life for the mathematical *quidditas* of geometric perfection. Whereas Joyce put “an emphasis on the role of man’s mind and imagination” over and above “the object that reveals itself” (Beja 77), Wallace elevates the object itself and the reflexive interplay between perceived and perceiver, emphasizing the importance to epiphany of “motions (patterns of movement that are independent of whatever it is that moves) and shapes or geometric figures (such as lines and circles)” (Bidney 354). By diagramming this cycloid figure visually on the page for readers, Wallace further engages Joyce—perhaps even surpassing him—by using what Kenner calls the “technological space” of the printed page (*Stoic Comedians* 35), a practice that LeClair attributes to Wallace’s generation of systems novelists, who “supplement . . .

print with . . . representations such as diagrams and drawings, the mapping of quantitative information in visual displays” (“Prodigious” 16).

The diagram further exemplifies Wallace’s multi-frame imperative, which is central to the ethics and values of *Infinite Jest*. As we will see, Wallace’s vertiginous shifts between linguistic registers activates an oscillation of perceptual positions, but here he presses readers to acknowledge the importance of multimodality in perception, the interplay between the linguistic and the visual. Just like character viewpoints, or the positions embodied in the social energies of Wallace’s language, *representational media themselves* have a perspectival quality that is not exhaustive. To see a whole, or to approach a whole, we must intercalate and shift between these positions, always in motion. And at the same time, we must shift in each perspective between the concrete and the abstract—the reality of a situation and the logic that it represents. In the doorknob we thus see a kind of vertigo of perception that investigates form itself: from the shape of the doorknob, to the patterned motion it takes, to the kind of process that pattern might represent, and ultimately to the most ideal form: mathematics itself. The encyclopedic voice, then, offers the reader both a set of values, and a larger meta-value: the ability not only to make judgments about what is happening, but also to judge the limits and affordances of any one perceptual frame in the first place.

Tone: Informative, Earnest, Silly

Fiction's job isn't just to list the information, but to show the information being used, to make it plausible, contextual. Then (the information has) a taste to it.

—Wallace, to Valerie Stivers

Whereas the epiphany scene is narrated in a very muted, detached tone—refusing, for instance, to describe the emotional experience of watching one's father fall over in a pile of his own vomit—Wallace does not usually adopt this approach; there it is due to his use of J.O.I. as a narrator of his own story. Similar instances of detached narration are sometimes present in passages focalizing through Hal (who occasionally also appears as first-person narrator), while Gately's scenes are more often polarized between extreme horror and “jolly,” or at least enthusiastic, “élan” (*IJ* 55). While Heather Houser reads detachment as the unifying aesthetic of the novel—an aesthetic that it embodies in order to critique—I find the tone of *Infinite Jest* to be dominated by a zany and earnestly informative attitude that becomes especially clear when Wallace's narrative voice is made distinct from those of his characters (that is, when the voice isn't subordinating its own qualities to free-indirect discourse or character narration).

This voice-differentiation becomes especially clear when Wallace uses a tonal shift to frame and thus re-formulate our understanding of part of the narrative, much like he did with the footnote frame informing us of the context of J.O.I.'s “spontaneous reminiscence.” To explore the work of tone in Wallace's encyclopedic voice, I want to consider another scene that uses a footnote to reframe the text; this footnote, though, uses tone—one that is engaged and immediate, casual and friendly—to guide the reader to revise her ethical judgment. In this scene (structurally important because it leads to a

linkage of the Gately and Antitoi plot lines), Don Gately is serving dinner to the other residents of the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House [sic], when the footnote pauses to offer the reader some background information. It begins when Gately has to accommodate some culinary requests from new arrivals, requests he feels are high maintenance:

Then tonight, at the prospect of boiled hot dogs, the two newest residents had pulled the typically standard new-resident princess-and-pea special-food-issue thing: the new-today girl Amy J. that just sits there on the vinyl couch shaking like an aspen and having people bring her coffee and light her gaspers and with just short of a like HELPLESS VICTIM: PLEASE CODDLE sign hung around her neck now claiming Red Dye #4 gives her ‘cluster migraines’ (Gately gives this girl like a week tops before she’s a vapor trail back to the Xanax¹⁹⁹; she has that look), and the weirdly-familiar-but-Southernish-sounding girl Joelle van D. with the past-believing bod and the linen face announcing she was a vegetarian and would ‘rather eat a bug’ than even get downwind of a boiled frank. And but in an incredible move Pat M. has asked Gately, at like 1800h., to blast down to the Purity Supreme down in Allston and pick up some eggs and peppers so the two new delicate-tummied newcomers can make themselves quiche or whatever. (475)

In this passage, we focalize through Gately, and much of his idiom comes through as FID to color the passage with his position: “special-food-issue-thing”; “gaspers”; “blast down.” This street-Boston argot stands out against the explicitly quoted phrases of the newcomers, who have not assimilated their lives and language to the AA world. Here, complaint and choice have no place; there’s no sympathy for “cluster migraines” or the “rather eat a bug” vegetarianism.

But even as Gately is critical of (what he perceives as) the newcomers’ preciousness, the passage has a casual, immediate tone that reduces the intensity of his judgment. The narrator does not want to foreclose Amy J.’s relapse into addiction, leaving the future open by noting that this is a “typically standard . . . thing” for new

residents and emphasizing Amy J. as not only new but “new-today,” freshly entering the AA world. (That designation also suggests that there are a lot of newcomers, and probably many who leave as well, underscoring the challenge of fighting addiction.) We are oriented to the present moment of Gately’s judgment, and the uncertainty of the future, by the shift of tense from “residents had pulled” (past perfect) to “Amy J. . . . just sits” (present continuous) to “now claiming” (progressive) and finally to “Gately gives” (simple present). We are oriented, too, to the location of narration by the many deictics that bring us into the lifeworld of Ennet House—“this girl”; “that look”; the use of “the” and not “a” for phrases describing Joelle; with these choices here and elsewhere Wallace produces the sense that the story is active speech between narrator and a narratee who shares this world. “That look”—*what* look? Well, it’s the one we all know if we’ve spent any time around newly recovering addicts—the one that suggests inevitable relapse, a lack of commitment.⁸³

Just when it seems we’ve entered a relatively conventional scene, relatively untouched by markers of the encyclopedic—e.g. the values regarding information, knowledge, causality, and responsibility in the childhood-J.O.I. scene—we must return to the superscript 199 appended to “Xanax.” Pause; flip back to your bookmark for notes.

#199 reads as follows:

⁸³ These deictics highlight the difference between the narratee, authorial audience, and actual audience in Wallace’s work. Positionally, the deictics suggest that the person receiving the discourse is within the story world, pointing to a narratee. And perspectively, the knowledge of “that look” is specialized such that Wallace’s authorial audience (those with some experience of addiction) will understand. But Wallace’s actual audience—who are more broadly middle-class, highly educated readers, and sometimes inexperienced with addiction—are much less likely to know what “that look” actually looks like. By highlighting the distinction, Wallace’s use of deictics and sharing of specialized knowledge works to bring the actual audience closer to the authorial audience, bridging the experiential gap by making it feel as if we actual readers are there at Ennet House sharing the addicts’ world.

Alprazolam, Upjohn Inc.'s big hat-throw into the benzodiazepine ring, only schedule C-IV but wickedly dependence-producing, w/ severe unpleasant abrupt-withdrawal penalties. (1034n199)

The tone of this note helps reinforce many of the qualities of the encyclopedic voice: its casual treatment of specialized knowledge, its humor, and its maximalist tendency to expand upon the text with extra information. In this example, as before, Wallace frames (or even multi-frames) his situations with information that changes our understanding of the annotated text. Not only has the voice become more information-driven, it also makes that information relevant and engaging. The information is in the service of our amended judgment—it gives us an abundance of knowledge about Xanax that ultimately reminds us of the difficulty of addiction while injecting some scientific humor and maintaining the presence of Gately's linguistic fingerprint as well. Here, Wallace's encyclopedic tone is formed by maintaining several different linguistic and conceptual frames, which ultimately fold back on our understanding of Amy J., causing us to revise our alignment with Gately. And even though it's highly technical, it's also lightly witty in its treatment of the larger frames that shape and impact Amy's addiction.

Because of its initially quite technical sense, this is the kind of note Letzler might call “cruft”—such notes offer scientific names, pharmaceutical brand names, even chemical formulae, data that (from Letzler's standpoint) seems relatively useless. But even though it does not advance the plotting of the novel, it shows off Wallace's “perfect pitch for all kinds of jargon” (Kirsch 200) by transforming data into multiple layers of meaningful communication with the reader. Rather than pedantically forcing scientific

information on the reader, it offers a tonally significant glimpse into pharmaceutical history and its social impact.

What begins as an aside about the drug's generic name—alprazolam—first transitions into a cynical origin story about the profit motives of drug companies: Xanax was developed because a company wanted a cut of the benzodiazepine market (that company, “Upjohn Inc.,” sounds farcical but is uninvented and now owned by Pfizer). Rather than maintain a dark or cynical tone, the levity of the passage keeps readers going with a pun on “ring”—both a metaphorical place to throw one’s hat in competition, as well as the chemical structure of benzodiazepine, which is composed of benzene and diazepine rings. In these ways, the reader is forced to oscillate between multiple levels and meanings, blurring the lines between them. The actual reader might ask: what is real or invented? The authorial audience, balancing the multiple dimensions evoked by the note, might wonder: is this note about science, commerce, or history? What kind of ring are we talking about? Wallace would say, lightheartedly, *it’s all of these at the same time*, using the double meaning of a pun to underscore the larger conceptual frame-shifting the reader is required to do. We might not see all of them at once, but Wallace’s fiction is “designed to constantly generate multiple meanings depending on which clues and interpretive layers the reader isolates,” creating a “layered aesthetic” (Burn, “Webs of Nerves” 65).

If we move on to the second half of the note, there are further negotiations of frame, these especially perspectival. That is, while the first half of the note inhabited the diction of a silly narrator—a Wallace-like figure whose knowledge encompasses the fine

points of pharmaceutical history—what follows begins to develop an even more conversational tone. We move from Boston-dialect “wicked” upward to medical “dependence-producing,” then through the parodically intense “severe unpleasant abrupt-withdrawal.” The phrase is intensified by its rhythmic stresses: it is a string of feet with consistent stress on the second syllable, but it terminates with the counter-rhythm of the dactylic “penalties,” a word that is prosodically demoted by its weakness against the established meter: much like any attempt to stop taking the drug would likely fall under the weight of a pre-established habit.⁸⁴ “Penalties” offers another register shift, evoking the register of criminal law that weighs on the minds of those at Ennet House, as well as the language-game of sports from the novel’s other world, the Tennis Academy that is located up the hill.

Returning to the original scene at Ennet House, we read Gately’s assessment of Amy J. in a different light after having learned some more relevant information. While it may be likely she’ll be gone in “a week tops” (she does not seem to reappear in the novel), the footnote brings readers a newly informed sympathy for her. For if we at first shared Gately’s judgment of Amy—that her whining refusal to give up her culinary preferences suggests she is too self-involved to beat her addiction—we now understand the larger forces in play. Not only is Xanax “wickedly dependence-producing,” but its addictive potential is inaccurately reflected by its drug class, Schedule 4, the second least dangerous. Further, its existence on the market is not just a product of its therapeutic potential but rather shaped by Upjohn, Inc.’s desire to enter a very profitable market.

⁸⁴ I offer this rhythmic analysis here not just to appreciate the careful patterning of Wallace’s prose style and its connection to content, but also to show how elements of rhythm can (in this case) amplify tonal effects.

Tonally, then, the encyclopedic voice is one of deliberation and good humor—but it’s also still grounded in the everyday lexicon of its characters. The narrator does not write that Xanax has “a high potential for abuse”; instead, he writes that it’s “wickedly dependence-producing,” blending the authorial voice with Gately’s lingo and thus qualifying Gately’s judgment with Gately’s own language. As a result, Wallace leads the reader to view Gately as a figure who may judge others, but who may revise his judgments on reflection (importantly, the scene resolves into Gately driving to the organic grocery store for their meal). Further, the reader learns through Gately to be both critical of and sympathetic toward Amy J. and the other addicts, whose difficulty getting clean is impacted by behavioral and chemical, as well as historical and economic forces. In a similar way that Wallace’s work with values underscores the distributed and ethically challenging nature of scientific responsibility, then, his work with the development of tone leads us to inhabit multiple perspectives, realizing that while Amy’s willpower may fail her, “willpower” as such remains an insufficient frame for evaluating addiction.

Contra many critics of Wallace’s notes, my argument shows that this note is not “a way of making more room for irrelevant digressions, the way a hoarder might build a second story on his house” (Kirsch 203), or “simply unreadable,” “pointless” “cruft” that “threatens to terminate any attention one might try to spend on it” (Letzler 86). True, nothing in the plot requires that we know these facts about Xanax; and readers are faced with the difficulty of addiction in many other scenes of the novel. But relevance is not exhausted by plot. Instead of understanding the perceived excess of Wallace’s footnotes

as *counter* to the development of the story, we should adopt LeClair's position: that these notes "overload" the story in part from a "too-earnest concern for readers and other living things" (16), creating a desire "to reflect the accessibility and relevance of technical information in the lives of the contemporary characters" (16). The footnote does just this—it demonstrates the relevance of Xanax's history and effects in a relatively earnest and gentle matter. The work with tone expressed here in miniature thus offers the reader a model for the kind of reflective attitude necessary to inhabit the ambivalent space of addiction, and to engage ethically with those who struggle with it.

Style: The Registers of Technology and the Body

And jumbly polysyllables out the ass. Whole thing gave me a migraine.
—Michael Pemulis, *Infinite Jest* (213)

Although the above sections have dealt with values and tone, each of them has already been engaging, in part, the work of style—especially with respect to changes in register and the shifts in perspective that those changes indicate. The casual friendliness of the narrator, too, is produced by careful choices of diction that make it obvious that a relatively immediate commenting voice is present. Not all of *Infinite Jest* makes this narratorial presence so explicit and accessible, though; much of the novel is constructed such that the reader must do some considerable work to enter the storyworld. In order to show how the encyclopedic voice is strongly rhetorical in its presence, even in those sections that appear to provide pure information, I would like to turn to one of the most technical sections in the novel, a passage I consider “technospeak,” to give a fine-grained reading of Wallace’s careful work with style:

Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment: InterLace Telentertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console, Pink₂, post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination, menus and icons, pixel-free Internet Fax, tri-and quad-modems w/ adjustable baud, Dissemination-Grids, screens so high-def you might as well be there, cost-effective videophonic conferencing, internal Froxx CD-ROM, electronic *couture*, all-in-one consoles, Yushityu nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media-cards, fiber-optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps; carpal neuralgia, phosphenic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae. (60)

Central to Wallace’s concerns are the sciences of body, brain, and mind, as well as what happens when these are impacted by leisure entertainment, drug abuse, familial conflict, and intense sport training. Contemporary technology also comes under close scrutiny, but nowhere so much as this list-paragraph that comes relatively early in the novel. Placed

right after the character Don Gately burgles and accidentally kills a French-Canadian diplomat, this list enumerates a number of technological advances present in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, the main year of the novel's action.

Even for the rather disjunctively organized *Infinite Jest*, which moves between places and through time in unpredictable patterns, the passage is especially weird. Many of the items in this list are explained elsewhere in the book, but some rely on the reader's knowledge of the real world: R.I.S.C. stands for "reduced instruction set computer"; Primestar was "a direct broadcast satellite network active in the 1990s" (according to the *Infinite Jest* Wikipedia). InterLace is an invented televisual distribution system, like Netflix before it existed, that readers learn about in detail later in the novel. "Pink₂" is an invented⁸⁵ post-Windows DOS used by students at the Enfield Tennis Academy, but it isn't explained until note 95 to a passage on page 284. And so on. If we look beyond the estranging effects of jargon and invented technologies, though, we notice that the register (along with tone) fluctuates almost from item to item. We move from technical numbers 932/1864⁸⁶ to Pink₂, a partially-invented operating system, and from Pink₂ to a real satellite network, Primestar. We move from the specificity of "D.S.S. dissemination" to the simple nouns "menus and icons," evoking the contexts of dining and religion, right back to tech-speak with "pixel-free Internet Fax." In the middle, the passage shifts register downward to the conversational "screens so high-def you might as well be there,"

⁸⁵ While Pink₂ never existed, a "Pink" project was pioneered by Apple in 1987, intended to be a new operating system. After some progress hampered by internal difficulties at Apple, the project became a collaborative effort between Apple and IBM under the new name Taligent. For more details, see Hormby.

⁸⁶ Perhaps a parody of the fact that technological numbers are usually powers of 2, this fraction simply reduces to 1/2.

with a tone suddenly of awe: this is not *pure* tech-speak, it's tech-speak filtered through an enthusiastically knowledgeable voice.

After this, the momentum changes, speeding us up through the positive cost-effective videophonics and into the glamour of electronic *couture*. Technology is fashion! But it's also globalized: Yushityu nanoproducts are Japanese, branded, and tiny. They are also so amazing that they suggest you'll-shit-you[rself]; despite subordinating his childish humor to the encyclopedic project of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace still throws in childish jokes like this. Eventually the passage makes way from objects to their underlying processes—"fiber-optic pulse" and "digital encoding" are relatively banal, and they shift the reader into more uninflected register. As a result of this shift toward neutral description, the next item, "killer apps," wobbles between its literal meaning—apps that kill—and the metaphorical meaning carried over from the earlier colloquial register. It is not accidental that we should be reminded of the "killer" potential of technology—the lethal video cartridge *Infinite Jest* is literally "killer," so awesome it kills you—so Wallace's careful development of the passage causes the reader to balance between the two registers and their ways of meaning. Rather than negate each other, the registers overlap and resonate, forming "complex interrelationships" (Bakhtin 276). And so the passage subtly makes the reader view each term through multiple frames at once as she perceives the shifting nuances of the passage's jargon.

After the semicolon, which provides a needed rest, the reader continues to just four more terms, "carpal neuralgia, phosphoric migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae." These at first appear more uniform in register: each term has two polysyllabic

words, an adjective and a noun, making them seem very specific; they're clearly medical and Latinate in origin (except for "phosphenic"); and they lack the colloquial and corporate qualities of the previous list. But if the reader has some basic medical knowledge or a dictionary, she'll realize that these technical-sounding phrases turn out to be quite banal: nerve pain in the hands, migraine with visual aura; fat ass; and achy back. The shift downward between the register of the words and their ordinary meaning effectively burlesques the medical language, generating another oscillating effect. The reader laughs at the arch scientific treatment of these basic maladies but also cringes at the critique of technology: we overuse our entertainment systems, and they make us achy and fat. "You might as well be there!" retroactively takes on an ironic cast as we imagine a couch-slumped figure, disengaged from a world rendered so realistically that the viewer can view it without a loss *and* remain comfortably immobile.

Wallace in this way balances multiple registers—techno-commercial, medical—that are shaped by different tones—enthusiastic, approachable, arch, and ironic. As a result he places the reader in a position of ambivalence and uncertainty about how to judge the implied subject of the passage, the passive TV-viewer. "The viewers themselves," Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes, "are not to be held wholly responsible for the damage these systems inflict on them"; "the teleputer becomes . . . not a threatening tool of subjection but a symptom of larger cultural and interpersonal damage" (214). The oscillation between perspectives operates both ethically and linguistically: our judgment of the viewer shifts between blame and understanding as our perception of the language takes into account the layered effects of the passage as a whole. This layering of

commercialized and descriptive, invented and real, figurative and literal, progress and regress characterizes Wallace's scientific voice in *Infinite Jest*. The scientific discourses address us in a certain way that we are then asked to question in engaging the situation's ethical uncertainty. And further we gain Wallace's systemic insight into the interlocking complexity of global capital, technology, cultural consumption, and the body: globalization has made possible the technology, which has made possible the delivery of entertainment; the desire for entertainment has made possible the couch-bound immobility of the collective viewers; and that immobility has led to a set of common, yet destructive, physical conditions. We're invited to judge the situation, but "Saying this is bad," Wallace writes after a repetition of the same passage,⁸⁷ "is like saying traffic is bad"—it's a reality "no one can imagine being without" (620). The ethics of the situation is activated but any final judgment has to be distributed across all the complex elements in play.

⁸⁷ Intriguingly, this passage actually repeats almost word-for-word on page 620, a repetition one reader attributes to a "fractal" structure for the novel (mjdemo). Whether or not this is the case (speculative claims about a fractal structure remain unsubstantiated), the passage's second iteration opens onto a larger development of the social ramifications of private entertainment, exploring a newly invigorated culture of the spectacle that leads into the depiction of a particular spectacle in metropolitan Boston. This duplication, and its expansion, deserves a much more detailed analysis than I am able to offer here.

Rhythm: Pattern and Its Negation

music that had the rhythm of long things swinging
—*Infinite Jest* (183)

In each of the previous sections I have shown how the voice of *Infinite Jest* is clearly preoccupied with distributed causality and distributed responsibility; it is also interested in the distributed nature of patterns and their relation to form, as in the cycloid figure J.O.I. sees in the movement of the doorknob. Forms are not just spatial, though; temporally, they manifest as rhythms, which important for the overall progression of *Infinite Jest* as well as for the shapes of its sentences. His writing plays with rhythm on a variety of scales: he admits to an interest “not just [in] sentence rhythms but narrative rhythms that occur with certain repetitions or when you stop and go back” (McCaffery 38).

Numerous reviewers have mentioned rhythm, but no critics have examined the importance of rhythm for an understanding of *IJ*. For even though rhythmic effects are important to Wallace throughout his entire career, the *concept* of rhythm is most important to him in *IJ*. While a full elaboration of rhythm’s conceptual and structural work in *IJ* is beyond my scope here, I hope to underscore with these remarks how important it is to understanding Wallace’s overall project, his pursuit of these unifying devices—voice, rhythm—that can cohere an encyclopedic novel’s multiplicity into some kind of whole. Regarding the rhythmic significance of Wallace’s voice, Paul Dawson writes that David Foster Wallace is one of the writers “whose maximalist prose has had the greatest influence on the syntactic rhythms of contemporary fiction,” forming the distinctive style of the “pyrotechnic storyteller” (114). While I have shown that the

friendliness of Wallace's tone and the flexibility of his registers help to create the persona and rhetoric of the encyclopedic voice, the management of temporal flow on the micro level no less impacts the reader's experience. To put this more concretely: if we rewrote Wallace's long, winding sentences to retain their values, tone, register, and diction, but chopped them up into discrete pieces that completely transformed their syntax and thus their rhythmic pulse, we would have something completely different (and it would might look a lot like George Saunders).

Dawson unfortunately does not follow up with an analysis of Wallace's rhythm. Nevertheless, he's right: the rhythm of Wallace's maximalist prose is not only innovative and distinctive, it's infectious. In the same way that Joyce was obsessed with the metrics of his prose, Wallace finds that the minute dimensions by which the reader is moved from the beginning to the end of the sentence are central to the effects he wants to produce. Further, Joyce also conceived this in terms of rhythm. As he told Frank Budgen, "I have the words already. What I am seeking is the perfect order of words in the sentence. There is an order in every way appropriate. . . . In Lestrygonians the stomach dominates and the rhythm of the episode is that of the peristaltic movement" (20-21).⁸⁸ While the rhythm of episodes and whole texts is a fascinating part of the project for both *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest*, in order to see how rhythm is part of *voice* (which is local rather than global), I will focus here on rhythm on a relatively small scale, across a few of Wallace's sentences.

Whereas the rhythms of Wallace's prose in *Broom of the System* often produced a kind of comedic timing, such that scenes would progress by setting up a slapstick

⁸⁸ While the interest in rhythm is shared between the two figures, further connecting their poetic commitments, Wallace works with rhythm in a different way than Joyce, both in terms of the sentence and the overall progression of *Infinite Jest*'s plot. I lack the space here to elaborate on this difference further.

moment, playing it out evenly in time, and then conclude like a punch line, the rhythms of writing in *Infinite Jest* are slowed and less predictable, balancing the centripetal effect of their orality with a centrifugal effect of expansion. When critics have discussed the Wallace sentence and its rhythms, *Infinite Jest* is their text of choice: in it, Wallace revealed himself to be a master prose stylist in absolute control of his prosodic timing. He also showed himself to be the master of lists, using the metrical beat built into the list form as a counterpoint against the metrically irregular polysyllabic terms he loved to use. The talkiness of *Infinite Jest* is based on the way that these sentences build cumulatively.

For Wallace, rhythm works to continuously engage the reader's position, continually establishing expectations and then revising or unsettling them. As opposed to TV art, which Wallace said "eases you from scene to scene in a way that drops you into certain kinds of easy cerebral rhythms" (McCaffery 33), eventually becoming soporific, Wallace's use of rhythms in *IJ* is supposed to be provoking. At the same time, though, he uses sentence rhythm to provide continuity through the sense of oral flow, making his extra-long sentences enhance the sense that someone is there "talking to you" ("Five-Draft Man"). As he told McCaffery, "One of my few strengths as a writer is that I think I have a good ear for rhythm and for speech and speech rhythms" (39). This means of course that Wallace is adept at capturing character voices, allowing him to present long dialogue-only passages with speakers identifiable through their individual styles, but also—and more importantly for understanding the narrative voice—that the oral effect of the encyclopedic voice comes from its manipulation of rhythm to approximate the patterns of speech. In *Infinite Jest*, the effect that makes many readers "feel less alone" is

created by this digressive, informative narrator who seems to expand on his descriptions spontaneously, adding information as it occurs to him and integrating it seamlessly into his cumulative sentences.

Not only is rhythm important to the effects of the encyclopedic voice; rhythm is also thematically important to *Infinite Jest*'s understanding of the world. *Jest* seeks to see into systems and to show the homologies between them; it seeks to understand ecological balance and also show the danger of imbalance; and it conceives of these concerns in terms of time. The body is a network of systems: all pulsing. The brain is a set of neurons, signaling in temporally intertwined patterns. Habit, too, is rhythmic, as when "Hal, Stice, Troeltsch, Struck, Rader, and Beak are all rhythmically squeezing tennis balls with their racquet-hands" (PP); this rhythm is the key to the automatic, for the players should "Squeeze the tennis ball rhythmically month after year until you feel it no more than your heart squeezing blood" (173).⁸⁹

Rhythm is the key to emptying words of meaning, which for the athlete is a charm: "By repeating this term over and over, perhaps in the same rhythm at which you squeeze a ball, you can reduce it to an empty series of phonemes, just formants and fricatives, trochaically stressed, signifying zip" (*IJ* 174). Rhythm doesn't necessarily signify—and to leave the domain of the linguistic for the purely calculative and muscular is the key to Hal's progression as a tennis player. But even as rhythm doesn't necessarily *signify*, it does *structure*: it offers a pattern to experience, if not cognitive then still phenomenological, as we learn from Madame Psychosis's radio show. She says, "He liked that sort of dreamy, dreaming music that had the rhythm of long things swinging,"

⁸⁹ Starting with "rhythmically," this line is incredibly rhythmic: it's a long string of dactyls.

and the student engineer, listening from the roof, thinks that “Madame’s themes are at once unpredictable and somehow rhythmic, more like probability-waves for subhadronics than anything else” (187). Mario, listening from the radio in his mother’s office, hears a similar long-wave pattern in the choices of music she makes: “the music she’s cued for this inflectionless reading is weirdly compelling. You can never predict what it will be, but over time some kind of pattern emerges, a trend or rhythm. Tonight’s background fits, somehow, as she reads. There’s not any real forwardness to it. You don’t sense it’s straining to get anywhere. The thing it makes you see as she reads is something heavy swinging slowly at the end of a long rope” (190).⁹⁰ The implication of all this is that rhythm, formed as a set of low-grade expectations based on ambient perceptions of the past and present, offers a perceptual unity even to sequences extended over a long duration. And the same truth holds for the sentence.

Let’s consider a long sentence that comes earlier in this scene, describing the MIT Student Union building, which is shaped mimetically like a giant brain. (Much like the IRS building in *The Pale King*, which has a façade shaped like a giant tax form, neither of these buildings really exists). The description here is motivated by the ascent of a “a work-study graduate student”⁹¹ who, after setting up the sound booth for Madame Psychosis’ show, sits on the roof and listens peacefully. Focalized perceptually through

⁹⁰ Stephen Burn, in the dissertation *At the edges of perception: William Gaddis and the Encyclopedic Novel from Joyce to David Foster Wallace*, suggests that Mario is being haunted by the wraith of J.O.I. as he listens to Madame Psychosis’s show. As Mario listens, “the word periodic pops into his head” (IJ 190) and then it occurs to him that it is appropriate: “The background music is both predictable, and, within that predictability, surprising: it’s periodic” (IJ 191). Finally, Mario, further unprompted, “thinks of the word haunting” (ibid.). It seems likely that the ghost, who is able similarly to insert words into Gately’s head at the end of the novel, is here doing the same with Mario (Burn *Edges* 196).

⁹¹ Note that this graduate student’s “research specialty is the carbonated translithium particles created and destroyed billions of times a second in the core of a cold-fusion ring” (185)—he works on annulation.

this student engineer, the sentence nevertheless offers a more capacious set of knowledge regarding the design and materials of the building than he is likely to have. I offer the sentence here with two shorter sentences before it, to show how these prepare the reader for its structural and rhythmic dynamics (the bracketed numbers are my own):

[1] The Union's soft latex-polymer roof is cerebrally domed and a cloudy pia-mater pink except in spots where it's eroded down to pasty gray, and everywhere textured, the bulging rooftop, with sulci and bulbous convolutions. [2] From the air it looks wrinkled; from the roof's fire door it's an almost nauseous system of serpentine trenches, like water-slides in hell. [3] The Union itself, the late A.Y. ('V.F.') Rickey's *summum opus*, is a great hollow brain-frame, an endowed memorial to the North American seat of Very High Tech, and is not as ghastly as out-of-towners suppose it must be, though the vitreally inflated balloon-eyes, deorbited and hung by twined blue cords from the second floor's optic chiasmae to flank the wheelchair-accessible front ramp, take a bit of getting used to, and some like the engineer never do get comfortable with them and use the less garish auditory side-doors; and the abundant sulcus-fissures and gyrus-bulges of the slick latex roof make rain-drainage complex and footing chancy at best, so there's not a whole lot of recreational strolling up here, although a kind of safety-balcony of skull-colored polybutylene resin, which curves around the midbrain from the inferior frontal sulcus to the parietooccipital sulcus—a halo-ish ring at the level of like eaves, demanded by the Cambridge Fire Dept. over the heated pro-mimetic protests of topological Rickeyites over in the Architecture Dept. (which the M.I.T. administration, trying to placate Rickeyites and C.F.D. Fire Marshal both, had had the pre-molded resin injected with dyes to render it the distinctively icky brown-shot off-white of living skull, so that the balcony resembles at once corporeal bone and numinous aura)—which balcony means that even the worst latex slip-and-slide off the steeply curved cerebrum's edge would mean a fall of only a few meters to the broad butylene platform, from which a venous-blue emergency ladder can be detached and lowered to extend down past the superior temporal gyrus and Pons and abducent to hook up with the polyurethane basilar-stem artery and allow a safe shimmy down to the good old oblongata just outside the rubberized meatus at ground zero. (186)

First, regarding the set-up: with sentence [1] Wallace uses one of his most typical techniques, clarifying a pronoun, which prepares the reader for an even more extreme instance in the very long sentence [3]. As Stephen Burn writes of this, “one of the novel's

signature sentence structures,” a “mildly unclear pronoun . . . introduce[s] a hint of ambiguity that’s dispelled when the sentence reaches its resolution and the final clause bends back to clarify the pronoun” (“Webs of Nerves” 61). Here, “**it’s** eroded down to pasty gray, and everywhere textured, **the bulging rooftop**, with sulci and bulbous convolutions” (PP) fits this model. In these cases, Burn writes, “the clarification . . . is both semantically unnecessary and so syntactically awkward that the sentence becomes more sclerotic than it would have been without the final clause” (61). While this technique can produce a rather tortuous syntax that produces the novel’s “anti-teleological spirit” on the small scale (i.e., a *mise-en-abyme*) (Burn 61), these clarifying phrases often do a bit more work on the rhetorical and sonic levels. In this case, the phrase “the bulging rooftop” in sentence [1] does three things: 1. prepares the reader for the internal looping of the longer sentence, making it easier to approach; 2. modulates the rhythm of the sentence (making it bumpier, a bit more conversational, and also mimetic with respect to the wrinkling texture of the brain-roof); and 3. enhances sonic patterns (**bulging rooftop**, with **sulci** and **bulbous convolutions**). Therefore, the short sentence already shows that while Burn’s assessments of this convoluted syntactical structure reflect sentences of many lengths, it should not necessarily be opposed (as he suggests) to Wallace’s work “creating carefully structured assonant sequences” (61).

The length of the long sentence makes it a better candidate for considering not just syntax but the impacts of syntax on rhythm, since its handling of so many internal parts requires rhythmic effects to help unify such a large whole, and those rhythmic effects—especially when made more palpable—feed back into our understanding of

Wallace’s encyclopedic style, tone, and values. On the global level, this sentence is divided in two by the semicolon after “side-doors”; its first section is made up of three independent clauses (two with a dependent clause attached), and its second contains three full clauses as well, though the grammatical subject phrase of the third is interrupted by a long dashed aside that itself contains a parenthetical. This means that, in a 291-word sentence, 174 words are used by the final of the six syntactic units that make it up. The sentence, we might say, expands exponentially.

The rhythm of the passage feels at first quite irregular: it does not establish a clear pattern straightaway, and the long string of initials in the name “A. Y. (V. F.) Rickey” further prevents the settling in of a rhythmic flow, until we hit the phrase “great hollow brain-frame” that, with its sonorous vowels, initial syntactic closure, and strong triple beat, offers the reader a ground on which to build. The sentence as a whole is dominated by that triple beat, which recurs periodically and grounds the unfolding of the sentence. I’ve bolded the instances of this beat in the passage below, separating each of the six sub-sentences with a line break:

The Union itself, the late A.Y. (‘V.F.’) Rickey’s *summum opus*, **is a great hollow brain-frame**, an endowed memorial to the North American seat of **Very High Tech**, and is not as ghastly as out-of-towners suppose it must be, though the vitreally inflated balloon-eyes, deorbited and hung by **twined blue cords** from the second floor’s optic chiasmae to flank the wheelchair-accessible front ramp, take a bit of **getting used to**, and some like the engineer never do get comfortable with them and use the less garish auditory side-doors; and the abundant sulcus-fissures and gyrus-bulges of the **slick latex roof** make rain-drainage complex and footing chancy at best, so there’s not a whole lot of recreational **strolling up here**, although a kind of safety-balcony of skull-colored polybutylene resin, which curves around the midbrain from the inferior frontal sulcus to the parietooccipital sulcus—a halo-ish ring at the level of like eaves, demanded by the Cambridge

Fire Dept. over the heated pro-mimetic protests of topological Rickeyites over in the Architecture Dept. (which the M.I.T. administration, trying to placate Rickeyites and C.F.D. **Fire Marshal both**, had had the **pre-molded resin** injected with dyes to render it the distinctively icky brown-shot off-white of living skull, so that the balcony resembles at once corporeal bone and numinous aura)—which balcony means that even the worst latex slip-and-slide off the steeply curved cerebrum's edge would mean a fall of only a few meters to the **broad butylene platform**, from which a venous-blue emergency ladder can be detached and lowered to extend down past the superior temporal gyrus and Pons and abducent to hook up with the polyurethane basilar-stem artery and allow a **safe shimmy down** to the good old oblongata just outside the rubberized meatus at ground zero. (186)

Noticeably, the grammatical verbs of these sentences—marked with an underline above—are relatively weak, and their semantic weakness is reinforced by rhythmic weakness. Balancing against the weakness of the verbs, though, the recurrent triple beat helps to structure the progression and to mark the ends of phrases, assisting the reader in chunking the various pieces of the sentence. Even as the six internal sentences and their many component parts offer the reader a cognitive challenge in holding all this in working memory, then, the rhythmic emphasis works together with punctuation to focus readerly attention. Shaping attention, as Richard Ohmann has argued, is what sentences *do*: and Wallace's triple beat works to create the reader's temporal, cognitive, and syntactic expectations but resist at all times solidifying into predictable pattern. Even though the triple beat is irregular in its recurrence, therefore, it works somewhat like G. M. Hopkins's sprung rhythm, which is defined by irregular numbers of unstressed syllables (or, transposing to the level of the sentence, phrases).⁹²

⁹² Wallace loved the poetry of Hopkins, he tells Larry McCaffery, for its play within constraints: "it's . . . often valuable and brave to see what can be done within a set of rules—which is why formal poetry's so much more interesting to me than free verse. Maybe our touchstone now should be G. M. Hopkins, who made up his own set of formal constraints and then blew everyone's footwear off from inside them. There's something about free play within an ordered and disciplined structure that resonates for readers" (51-52).

Importantly, too, these triple beats ground the reader in relatively accessible language that balances against the rather overwhelming polysyllabic and scientific diction: even as the register shifts upward with “vitreally inflated” it shifts down to “balloon-eyes,” up again with “deorbited” and back down to “twined blue cords.” This shifting aesthetic enacts a similar balance of perspectives that I’ve shown to be present in the other parts of Wallace’s encyclopedic voice as well: we move between the Very High Tech perspective of science, seeing the brain from above and from within, to the human perspective of the student engineer who implicitly worries about falling off the slick latex roof. This rhythmic emphasis has further branching effects on our perception of tone: even as we follow the danger of a potential fall from the brain’s edge we are reassured by the narrator of the clear trajectory for a “safe shimmy down” to earth.

As we get into the final of the six sentences, Wallace’s increased use of polysyllabics makes his rhythms more irregular, and the syntax likewise expands—with a dashed apposite that contains a long parenthetical aside (which nevertheless begins with a careless “which” that mimics the conversational quality of addition here)—to create, as this sentence shifts into high gear, a sense of its tumbling out of control. This tumble is mimetic, evoking the scary tumble that the student engineer might take, but the designer

Timothy Jacobs explores Wallace’s interest in Hopkins, linking a number of their artistic commitments, and suggests that sprung rhythm “upholds” the “principle of the reader’s active participation with the poetry” (227) that Wallace also privileges. While Wallace does not adopt the actual poetics of sprung rhythm (see Kiparsky on sprung rhythm’s metrics), I suggest that the relevance of sprung rhythm for Wallace comes from (1) its incorporation of feet of variable length (see Kiparsky 308) within a poetically structured whole, and (2) the way these feet can create the rhythmic effect of spoken English while still remaining heavily structured toward poetic ends. The irregular number of unstressed elements means that sometimes a stressed syllable (or on the level of the sentence, a phrase) is very distant from that previous, but sometimes it is doubled up. On the level of the poetic foot, the double and triple beats that I examine here are in fact the origin of Hopkins’s name for “sprung rhythm”: Hopkins writes, “the word Sprung . . . means something like abrupt and applies by rights only where one stress follows another running, without syllable between” (Letter to Dixon, qtd. in Kiparsky 311).

of the brain building has built in a careful safety mechanism: the balcony. The tumbling reader will also be okay, but not without a disturbing moment in which the entities of the sentence hurtle past at bewildering speed: sulcus, Cambridge Fire Dept., Rickeyites, M.I.T. administration, and more.

It is to increase the reader's sense of uncertain footing as well that Wallace ends the passage in an anti-climactic fashion, both rhythmically and in its content (which is a hypothetical landing next to the rubberized meatus). The three-beat rhythmic pattern is at first reinforced by "safe shimmy down" and initially re-invoked by the double beat of "good old," which we expect to be followed by a one or two-syllable noun to create a strong triple beat (as in the title of a later Wallace story, "Good Old Neon"). But the delay of stress in "oblongata"—a *tertius paeon*—begins to undermine those expectations. This pattern-breaking gesture continues with the de-rhythmizing cascade of "just outside the rubberized meatus at ground zero." It diverges substantially from the triple-beat paradigm, and the sonic blurring of *s* and *t* with "just outside" causes these to be somewhat demoted in stress. In the refusal of the three-beat expectation, this terminus does nothing to establish an alternative pattern, and "at ground zero" is near-impossible to scan: if you tap the beat of "just outside the rubberized meatus at ground zero," "ground zero" refuses to fit into pattern and refuses to offer any sense of closure. The sentence feels awkward, unfinished. Are we really on solid ground?

Notably, this is the same rhythmic awkwardness (but enhanced) that I noted in my section on tone, when the discussion of addiction considers how Xanax is "wickedly dependence-producing, w/ severe unpleasant abrupt-withdrawal penalties." There, I noted

that the line was dominated by a repeated stress on second syllables, creating an iambic or amphibractic pattern; but when that pattern collides with “penalties,” the existing pattern founders on its dactyl and undermines any rhythmic sense of closure. Here, too, the non-closure of “rubberized meatus at ground zero” is created by a similar refusal to fit into established patterns. Listening to a couple of alternatives makes clear how the sentence could end in a much more rhythmic fashion:

(1) by ending with a triple beat that follows a double dactyl, that is, “just outside the rubberized meatus at **soft dark ground**” (: pronounced rhythmicity)

or (2) by reverting to an iambic foot to end the sentence, that is, “just outside the rubberized meatus at the ground” (: less pronounced but not overtly arrhythmic)

Either of these options would make the ending more natural, and while it is proving too complex to show precisely why “ground zero” is so irregular, I hope that these counter-examples at least demonstrate the significance of its disturbance to the rhythmic order of the sentence.

This denial of a rhythmic closure leads us to ask what purpose it might serve. Wallace is not simply being graceless for its own sake, or carelessly neglecting the patterning of his language: there are a number of lessons regarding the novel’s values wrapped up in this particular manipulation of (and momentary refusal of) rhythm. The sentence creates a rhythm, yes, but according to Zadie Smith “syntactically tortuous sentences” like this “are intended to make you aware, to break the rhythm that excludes thinking” (266); the rhythm allows us too easily to fall into a lazy flow whereby we are less conscious of the language itself, complacent rather than attentive and questioning

readers. The “anti-teleological spirit” that Burn argues “infects the entire novel” (“Web of Nerves” 61) is also evident, as it becomes increasingly clear by the time we reach the parenthetical about the M.I.T. administration that this sentence simply does not want to end. Just a few pages later, the narrator reflects on this same problem in terms of the music on Madame Psychosis’s radio show: “it leads up to the exact kind of inevitability it denies” (*IJ* 191).

Landing at ground zero, the sentence refuses to suggest that we have gotten anywhere—in fact, we’ve come right back where we started, since the Student Engineer prefers to enter the building through the “auditory side-doors” (where the ears connect to the brain), and the “meatus” is exactly that canal that channels auditory nerve stimuli into the brain. Not only is there an anti-teleological impulse here, there is also a circular one (linking it to the novel’s global structural circularity whereby the first scene is the latest in the plot, and the entire novel builds toward explaining what could possibly lead us there. Finally, if we consider the significance of “meatus” (a word I have to imagine Wallace sophomorically enjoyed here), we realize two final things central to the novel’s values. First, making the meatus “ground zero” underscores the importance of the ear: Wallace insists that if we are to do anything it should be listening. And second, focusing on the meatus here demonstrates the ultimately inextricable relation of the brain to its environment: the skull, the nerves, and ultimately what lies outside it. The meatus, as a canal in the skull that conducts the vestibulocochlear nerve, is not actually part of the brain but is nevertheless bound up in the brain’s perceptual function, in the structure of the brain’s openness. Here, then, the arrhythmic barrage of the “rubberized meatus at

ground zero” slows us down to pay more attention to this strange, awkward moment.

Pausing points our attention to the holistic ecological thinking offered by the novel, as the inability to wall off the brain dramatizes both the openness of all systems and (if the brain is the figure of the self) the logical impossibility of solipsism.

Conclusion: Difficulty and Excess

Unifying as it does a tremendously varied body of material—over 1,000 pages of text—the encyclopedic voice manages to do an enormous amount of work. Through its delicate interactions of values, tone, style, and rhythms, it aims to offer knowledge, to make that knowledge interesting and mostly accessible, to guide the reader through the complex plotting, and ultimately to provide enjoyment, amusement, and pathos that will reinforce the reader's desire to continue reading over and against a frustration with the novel's challenges and excesses. As Wallace said himself, "there has to be an accessible payoff for the reader if I don't want the reader to throw the book at the wall. But if it works right, the reader has to fight through the mediated voice presenting the material to you" (McCaffery 33). Those pleasures are balanced against the novel's frustrations, and in concluding I will provide an overview of the encyclopedic voice's interacting elements and close with a consideration of the voice's excessive dark side.

Wallace's comment above shows how much he has changed since his use of a dominant comic voice in *Broom of the System*; here, instead of being concerned with getting laughs as he moves his reader through a set of slapstick, philosophical, and parodic scenes, he is emphatically focused on the reader's work and the payoff of that work. As I have showed in the different sections of the chapter, Wallace's values first and foremost emphasize the importance of knowledge, but knowledge that must be integrated with the social world so that it is relevant and accessible—so that it has a "taste" (Stivers). In this way, because of the work of a single footnote, we realize that J.O.I.'s epiphany is not only a personal moment of formal insight but one which leads to the

ramifying effects of annulation, making it an integral contributor to the everyday texture of life across the entire novel. The distributed causality and distributed responsibility of scientific progress become part of the novel's display of systems thinking, which infiltrates every dimension of the novel. These values are presented by the work of one of Wallace's signature techniques, the footnote, which allows Wallace's encyclopedic voice to subordinate passages of character narration to its own set of values. And Wallace's values are further legible in the way the encyclopedic voice (and this scene in particular) critically engages with James Joyce through the writing of epiphany.

Systemic thinking is present equally in the scene from *Ennet House* that I examined to consider tone, when Gately judges—and then seems to tentatively revise his judgment of—the newly arrived addict Amy J. Whereas he sees her high-maintenance culinary requests as evidence of psychological weakness, the footnote points out with generous and thoughtful tone that Xanax is incredibly addictive and easily available, and that its presence in the national market is motivated by profit-incentives rather than a humanitarian desire to reduce human suffering. By placing Amy J. within this larger complex of social, biological, and corporate forces, Wallace shows her a posthuman sympathy, showing that she is not fully in control of herself and that her capacity to choose is impacted on every side by these various domains. Wallace uses tone to treat these weighty issues lightly and with good humor, integrating Gately's diction into even the footnote so as to further situate its ethical insights in the lived world of *Ennet House*.

This posthuman vision also comes up in the technoscientific passage I use to engage style and register: there, too, Wallace emphasizes the human as the site of

multiple forces, from the technological/corporate, to the biological, to the psychological. There, the style and register work to denaturalize the effects of technology on the body, but the humor of using high language to describe banal bodily effects works not only to counterpoint these worlds but to help shape the underlying tone of amusement. In this way, style and register clearly have “upward” effects on readers’ inferences about tone and values. I show how even this passage, which appears the least accessible of any in the novel, ultimately showcases its relevance regarding the novel’s thematics and ethics.

Finally, my examination of the long sentence at the M.I.T. radio station demonstrates the way that Wallace manages time on the granular level with the unfolding rhythms of his prose. The order of phrases, and the rhythmic and metrical patterns they establish, create expectations in readers whether those readers are wholly aware of it or not: this is Wallace’s mastery as a prose stylist, why he is capable of penning such long sentences that frequently come off as very “oral” sounding and which are entirely easy to read. When those sentences are not easy, though, Wallace intends to push against the reader’s desire for quick pleasures, emphasizing the mediacy of language itself in order to wake the reader up to the complexity of the rhetorical exchange that takes place in reading. Wallace creates this particular lengthy sentence to play with both the positive and negative impacts of rhythmicity, as he does set up a beat that recurs enough to structure time in the reader’s mind; but he also undermines that beat in the end of the sentence when the physical trajectory lands us imaginatively just outside the enormous brain’s ear. Rhythmic effects allow Wallace to refuse the easy processing of the sentence and instead to focus the reader’s attention on this exceptional moment navigating an

enormous human brain. In order to create those rhythmic effects, Wallace uses very particular diction (balancing polysyllabics and monosyllabics, and frequently shifting register as a result) and syntax (multiple clauses, with different levels of embedding): it is clear that the components of style and the dynamics of rhythm are tightly interwoven. The rhythmic effects cascade upward into tone as well, though, by virtue of the different effects of polysyllabic scientific diction, and Wallace also uses rhythm, as I have argued, to contribute to the voice's overall values: an emphasis on attentiveness; the integration of scientific and general knowledge; and the underscoring of important components of the passage (i.e. the meatus).

It is tremendously challenging to unpack the various dimensions of the encyclopedic voice, but I have aimed to show not only its central goals—communicative, affective, rhetorical—with respect to its audience, but also the way each dimension of voice contributes to the overall effect we experience when reading *Infinite Jest*: that of a generally benevolent intelligence “right there talking to you,” offering knowledge and wisdom. But there is another dimension of that experience that I have de-emphasized throughout: the novel's excess, which can frequently overwhelm or frustrate the reader. Of course, we can cast this negative dimension in positive terms, as I have, suggesting that *IJ* aims to create a complex world and that engaging with this complexity is part of our responsibility as readers and as citizens of the world. *IJ* makes visible an enormous multiplicity of forces and processes, from physics to psychodynamics and back, and shows how those forces' myriad interactions not only shape us but fundamentally *are* us. In giving us this systemic, post-human insight but returning its implications to the scale

of ethics in human life, Wallace offers us an enduring gift: he offers an example of how to integrate disparate perspectives in our search for a self-knowledge that could help us counter the cycles of dependency that he sees organizing our every waking moment.⁹³ But even as Wallace gives us this gift, we can't overlook the common readerly frustration with the novel's excess—excess that justifies itself *as* gift. To put it another way, the novel is both gift and burden, plenitude and excess.⁹⁴ This perspective illuminates some oppressive qualities that many readers experience when reading it: a sense of the novel's (or its implied author's) exhibitionism and sadism toward the reader.

Despite its enthusiastic effusion, there is something in the novel's heft, its "undeniability" (Bruni), that demands to be seen, to be wanted and appreciated: the novel is overgenerous with its knowledge and expertise. Wallace appears as something of a show-off, someone who clamors for the reader's awe and respect, and in this is the novel's exhibitionism. Charlie Rose tested Wallace on this point, asking the non-question "Respect means a lot to you," to which Wallace replied, "Well, show me somebody who doesn't like to be respected. . . . every writer dreams of having a lot of attention" (Rose). Many share this desire in degrees, but perhaps Wallace felt it more keenly, a near-dependence that drove him in his quest for self-understanding to study not just psychology and neuroscience but also Lacanian theories of the subject's fundamental lack.⁹⁵ Wallace was aware of his own psychopathology: he acknowledged that he was "an

⁹³ See A. O. Scott's "The Panic of Influence" on this "structuring psychopathology of everyday life" that prevents human flourishing.

⁹⁴ Wallace, of course, was aware of this duality: he was a close reader not only of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* but also of the many forms of Derridian aporias. On Wallace and the gift, see McAdams, "Gift Economy."

⁹⁵ Such theories were already being explored and ambivalently parodied in *Broom of the System*, and they persist clearly in *Infinite Jest*.

exhibitionist who wants to hide, but is unsuccessful at hiding; therefore, somehow I succeed” (McCaffery 43). He later elaborated, saying that writers have “a strong streak of egomania coupled with extreme shyness. Writing’s kind of like exhibitionism in private. And there’s also a strange loneliness, and a desire to have some kind of conversation with people, but not a real great ability to do it in person” (Donahue 70-71).

Along with this exhibitionism—this need to be seen—came a concomitant anger toward those who would choose whether to satisfy his fundamental need: his readers. If this sounds sexual, it is. Wallace called it the “familiar love-hate relation of seduction” and explained how this dynamic impacted him and the position of the contemporary artist in general:

There’s an unignorable line between demonstrating skill and charm to gain trust for the story vs. simple showing off. It can become an exercise in trying to get the reader to like and admire you instead of an exercise in creative art. I think TV promulgates the idea that good art is just that art which makes people like and depend on the vehicle that brings them the art. This seems like a poisonous lesson for a would-be artist to grow up with. And one consequence is that if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being *liked*, so that her true end isn’t in the work but in a certain audience’s good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. (McCaffery 25)

He continues in the same interview: “This dynamic isn’t exclusive to art. But I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader” (25). The novel’s encyclopedism is both a desire to amuse and entertain the reader—who may enjoy the frequent digressive elaborations, e.g., regarding the collapse of network television or the development of videophony. But in giving so much Wallace manifests too a hostility toward the reader’s desire for easy coherence.

Wallace's admissions only confirm what we already know: that the novel's rhetoric is defined by this bivalence (or ambivalence) to the reader, and that as a monumental work of art *Infinite Jest* was also a work willing and able to ask so much of its reader—so much that many found themselves throwing it down in frustration. But for someone who found being liked uncomfortable, Wallace saw this kind of author-reader antagonism the highest form of respect, a compliment and invitation to the reader to stretch her capacities and judge for herself the merit of the novel. When the kindness of giving easy pleasure has been co-opted by the commercial sphere, Wallace believed, the artist *had* to become a sort of sadist—but one who would make of that sadism a kind of joy at the same time. Says Wallace's character Mark Knechtr in *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, "It would take an architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetuate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict" (GwCH 332).

Although Wallace told McCaffery that this line sounded to him (in 1991) like "a covert digest of my biggest weaknesses as a writer" (24), it also informs and drives his deep commitment to the reader, a commitment that finally, Wallace suggests, is grounded in this love. Following his remark to McCaffery about "the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text," Wallace continues: "it's got something to do with love. 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 . . . It seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do . . . is *give* the reader something" (50). Such an urge to give is at the heart of *Infinite Jest*'s encyclopedic voice, perhaps naïve and over-enthused with its

overflowing fount of knowledge, but also for a nourishing generosity in which so many readers have found pleasure, solace, and hope.

Chapter 4: The Sincere Voice

Postmodernism, as we know it, is on the way out—so says Brian McHale, one of its foremost critics, who writes that its “peak years [are] behind us” (“Period, Break, Interregnum” 60). But what’s rising in its place, if anything? A number of theories have sprung up to describe the “new” moment, which seems to begin in the 1990s and picks up speed after the millennium—and David Foster Wallace is important to many of them.⁹⁶ But even among the irreducible variety of cultural productions, and the multitude of theories about them, there seems to be at least one clear strand: fiction has been getting decidedly *earnest*, especially viewed against some of the central figures of the 20th century, like Pynchon and Joyce, both of whom I have examined in the previous chapters. And earnestness is what characterizes the dominant voice of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*, a voice I will call the “sincere voice” in reference to Adam Kelly’s elaboration of the “New Sincerity.”

According to Gerald Howard, the editor of *Broom of the System*, Wallace “sounded the first notes of a quest for an irony-free sincerity that has become a ruling style of David’s generation and the ones that followed” (“I know why”). *Infinite Jest*

⁹⁶ These theories appeal to a variety of phenomena affecting changes in literary production and reception: the rise of computer technologies and the Internet; the increase in globalism in both culture and economics; a turn toward localisms; increased attention to posthumanism; an increase in affect; and more. See post-postmodernism (Nealon, Timmer), New Sincerity (Kelly), “literature of reconstruction” (Funk), metamodernism (Van den Akker and Vermeulen), performatism (Eshelman), cosmodernism (Moraru), late postmodernism (Green), “dirty realism” (Rebein), digimodernism (Kirby), exomodern (McGurl, “The New”), and neoliberal (see Huelhs and Greenwald Smith). For an overview of this critical “rethinking” of American Literature, see Gladstone, Hoberek, and Worden’s *Postmodern/Postwar and After*.

contains glimmers of that sincerity, and *The Pale King* is permeated with it. Though the novel was left unfinished at the time of Wallace's suicide in 2008, the most finished elements of the novel (and its purposes as a whole) fulfill the quest for sincerity that Wallace had been pursuing since 1991 when he announced them to McCaffery. But how, precisely, did he embody and energize this shift in his writing? What is "new sincerity" in Wallace's writing, and how does it work? That is, what narrative and poetic techniques does Wallace use to create the sincere voice in *The Pale King*, and what motivates him to change his writing in such a substantial way? This chapter aims to answer those questions, first by examining the significance of "new sincerity" to Wallace and to American literature more broadly, and then by offering an analysis of the sincere voice in *The Pale King*. To unpack the mechanics, purposes, and effects of Wallace's sincere voice, I'll focus on each of the elements of voice—familiar by now as values, tone, style, and rhythm—to show their role in the complex synthesis of voice. In my discussion of these elements, I'll highlight the ways they are shaped through imitation and reaction to John Updike, Wallace's most significant touchstone for the kind of voice he wanted to develop.

Because *The Pale King* was unfinished at the time of Wallace's death, it was pieced together for publication by Wallace's editor Michael Pietsch, who integrated the stack of finished pages Wallace had left on his desk with other draft material in his garage office. This makes it difficult to interpret the novel confidently, for as McHale writes, "How can one responsibly comment on an unfinished novel, posthumously published, pieced together by an editor from materials retrieved from the author's

workroom?” (“The Pale King” 191). There are two factors, though, that lead me to suggest an argument about voice is undamaged by the novel’s unfinished status: that voice is local, while the novel’s problems of assembly are global; and that many of the sections that Wallace left behind are more or less (on their own) complete.

First, as pertains to the global issues of plot: the novel’s sense of being unfinished largely comes from its lack of a clear order for the pieces, and from the lack of clear plotting that would unify the various suggested conflicts into a coherent whole. That is, the novel’s unfinished quality comes more from its structural disorganization than from the development of its prose. Wallace likely would have edited some of these fragments for style, but the primary work that remained to be done was structural, plot-oriented. And the evidence we have suggests that plot cohesion itself was not part of the novel’s goals: Pietsch provides some archival notes that suggest two “Broad arcs” to the novel, namely “1. Paying attention, boredom, ADD, Machines vs. people at performing mindless jobs” and “2. Being individual vs being part of larger things—paying taxes, being ‘lone gun’ in IRS vs. team player” (*TPK* 547).

Not only this, but Wallace’s goals continue to make explicit a resistance to plot: the novel was planned to be “a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens” (*TPK* 548). The central tension of the novel remains legible as a kind of institutional struggle between two paradigms: the new higher-ups in the IRS want to focus on profit, running it more like a business than a civic entity. As Wallace puts it in his notes, the “Old IRS guard” sees “tax payment as virtue,” while the “New IRS guard are not only good accountants but good strategic and business planners,” whose goal is to

“maximize revenue” and “disregard civic virtue” (*The Pale King* 548). The conflict is not just between these two ideologies, but also concerns the organization of labor; the new guard would automate many of the IRS examiner positions using new computerized methods. Could computers possibly supersede their human counterparts, Wallace asks—or could the human attention and intuition of the tax examiners offer some computational power as yet unknown? The examiners in question populate the novel, a group of mostly normal, everyday people who for one reason or another have found their skill sets appropriate to, and rewarded by, the intensely boring, repetitive IRS examiner work. They *seem* normal, at least—they’re not the overtly disfigured, addicted, neurotic, genius, or compulsive individuals of *Broom* and *Infinite Jest*.⁹⁷ But they do have an abundance of trauma and struggle in their pasts, somehow making them especially capable of the repetitive IRS work because of its requirement of absolute focus.

Attention is not just a theme for the characters but a goal for the reader, who must track the various potentials for plot unification but must also resist the urge for errant coherence; in one central example, an explosion at an IRS region seems as if it might be an attack with a bomb by a far-right group, but Wallace’s notes indicate that it was to have been, simply, a load of nitrate fertilizer (433; 546). Perhaps the structure of the novel was closer to completion than we realize, because, as Toon Staes notes, Wallace’s work consistently offers “disorganized plot strands and open endings” (“Work in

⁹⁷ It’s worth noting that Don Gately of *Infinite Jest* is the closest we get to a “normal” character in the previous novels; Gately’s purity of heart and devotion to accepting AA’s clichés show in him more than a glimmer of “single-entendre” principles, and Severs identifies him as the “exception to the novel’s ethos of addiction, despair, and disembodiment” (*Balancing Books* 89). But Gately’s self-destructive addictive past marks him as particularly damaged, and *IJ*’s overall scope (including not just Gately but the Incandenzas and the larger geopolitical plotline) prevents the sincere tendencies of *IJ* from becoming dominant.

Progress” 74-5), and Michael Pietsch affirms that the novel was to have “large portions of apparently unconnected information presented to the reader before a main story line begins to make sense” (“Editor’s Note” viii, qtd. in Staes 75n19).⁹⁸ By resisting his love of conspiracy plots, Wallace was attempting to find different elements by which to give *The Pale King* coherence. He found those in theme and in voice. The thematic emphasis on attention, boredom, and community led him to train his writing on the intense and sensuous detail of local description, as I will engage in the section on Lane Dean; and the intensity of voice in *The Pale King* works further to hold the novel together.

Further, the prose itself seems mostly finished (except for small infelicities, like a lamentable recurrence of “titty” and “titty-pinching,” see Pietsch xiii), meaning that a focus on voice is able to tap in to the values, tone, style, and rhythms of the novel regardless of its structural fragmentation. Herman and Staes note that in his editorial work Pietsch “barely edited the language” (3), and many of the sections had already been published in other venues beforehand, indicating that Wallace felt them to be finished.⁹⁹ Many other portions of the novel also seem quite polished and complete, and Pietsch remarks on the “astonishingly full novel” he found in the drafts, “gorgeously alive,” with “some pieces . . . neatly typed and revised through numerous versions,” and some “recently polished” (x). Nevertheless, I have decided to focus on just two of these completed sections in this chapter—“Good People” and “Peoria (4)” —in part to

⁹⁸ See Pietsch’s “Editor’s Note” for an overview of his editorial choices, and chapter 4 of David Hering’s *Fiction and Form* for a genetic analysis of *The Pale King*’s three distinct compositional stages.

⁹⁹ These are: “Peoria (4)” and “Peoria (9)” in *TriQuarterly*; “Good People” in *The New Yorker*; and “The Compliance Branch” in *Harper’s*. After Wallace’s death in 2008, the stories “Wiggle Room,” “All That,” “A New Examiner,” and “Backbone” were published in *The New Yorker* or *Harper’s*, and all except “All That” are selections from *The Pale King*. In this chapter I focus my discussions of values, tone, style, and rhythms on “Peoria (4)” and “Good People” as they appear in *The Pale King*.

circumvent any concern about the novel's incompleteness and in part because they are so finely crafted that they repay extra focus across different dimensions of voice. Further, I find that these sections offer the values, tone, style, and rhythms of the sincere voice, showcasing Wallace's immense change as a stylist.

The New Sincerity

The label “New Sincerity” was applied to literature initially by Adam Kelly in his 2010 essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”; before this, the term had been applied in popular criticism to music and film.¹⁰⁰ For any medium, though, the phrase denoted an embrace of emotionality and abandonment of ironic distance.

According to Balliro, Wallace’s “influence on the study of The New Sincerity cannot be understated” and for many critics he is its “epitome” (20). With his embrace of the truth behind cliché and his vocal rejection of irony, Wallace was a good figurehead, offering the essay “E Unibus Pluram” as his manifesto, with the clear-eyed treatment of struggle and addiction in *Infinite Jest* providing some exemplification of Wallace’s goals.¹⁰¹

Along these lines, Kelly’s essay on Wallace identifies sincerity as a consistent thread running through Wallace’s writing and its reception. Examining early reviews and current criticism, he notes the “widespread agreement” that Wallace “affirmed and embodied sincerity as a crucial value in his life and work” (131). He suggests that the agreement has been shaped by at least three things: “Wallace’s critique of irony,” “the regular thematic treatment of sincerity in *Infinite Jest*,” “or simply through the feeling one gets from the voice of Wallace’s prose in one’s own head” (131). Though I find the third suggestion the most intriguing, Kelly concerns himself instead with the first two

¹⁰⁰ Though “New Sincerity” seems linked to fiction produced around the turn of the 21st century, a Google Books search reveals the term also in use around the turn of the 20th century, to mean much the same thing: a dialectical shift toward emotionality in the wake of “impersonal” and excessively ironized writing. For further elaborations of its current use, see Burn, “Paradigm”; Iain Williams; Bartlett; Thompson, “Sincerity”; Doyle; and Ahn.

¹⁰¹ *The Pale King* was not published until 2012, meaning that initial explorations of Wallace’s sincerity were based on *Infinite Jest* or on short stories like “Octet.” I find, though, that *The Pale King* is the work where the sincere voice becomes dominant over Wallace’s other voices, and I base my account of Wallace’s “sincere” values and poetics in that novel.

elements, investigating the meaning of Wallace's sincerity with respect to literary and intellectual history, and inquiring into Wallace's innovation in "re-working [. . .] the concept [. . . in] response to contemporary conditions" (131).

Turning to Lionel Trilling's 1972 *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Kelly identifies traditional sincerity as an outward-facing relationship, a "congruence of avowal and actual feeling" in one's relations with others (Trilling 2, qtd. in Kelly 132). (It is thereby distinguished from authenticity, which Trilling understands as a truth to oneself, connected to the exploration of interiority in modernism.) Both sincerity and authenticity, on this account, rely on a stable distinction and division between the personal self and the social self. And precisely that distinction is problematized by Wallace, who knows that all expression of self is already socially situated, and further that individuals seldom know fully the complexity of their own motivations.

For Wallace, then, the problem of sincerity has to do with the interaction of the inner and outer selves, the danger that any expression avowing "inner self" is made in the service of selfishly oriented ends. As Kelly puts it, a "recursive and paranoid cycle" begins "when the anticipation of [. . .] reception [. . .] begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipating logic" (136). Behavior becomes performance (see Miley) and communication becomes manipulation (see Thompson, "Sincerity"). This is rhetoric with a sinister edge, an attitude toward reception that overpowers the original intent; and it is precisely the kind of double bind we see throughout Wallace's work, especially when (as

I chart in the introduction's account of Wallace's relation to his readers) Wallace initially struggles with his need to be liked by his imagined audience.

Kelly ultimately concludes that sincerity takes "the same structure as the gift" does in Derrida's analysis, namely that the gift may be a pure act of generosity or a pretense, expecting reciprocation even as it claims on the surface not to be transactional. It is impossible to know, and the instability is built into the structure of gift-giving. The "risk is fundamental" that the other will be insincere (Kelly 140), and there is no way ever to be certain. In a later essay, Kelly broadens his account to include other writers, arguing that sincerity's fundamental undecidability itself is "crucial for what it means to be a New Sincerity writer" ("The New Sincerity" 204). These writers stage "ethical experiments, in which affective power cannot be fully separated from [. . .] the appropriation of affect for manipulative ends (204). In all of these formulations, the site of exchange as such—of objects, language, or feeling—becomes the site of vulnerability, where we can never know with certainty about the true motives of the other.¹⁰²

By focusing his analysis of sincerity on the relationship between agents of communication—either author and reader, or two communicating characters—Kelly isolates the poles of the rhetorical situation and, like Derrida, neglects that which binds them: that which is exchanged, in this case the communication itself. Though he does ground his claim in a textual analysis of the short story "Octet," his treatment of the story is partial; he focuses on the narrator's direct appeals to the reader, but he neglects the overall context of those appeals as well as the affective tone of the story. Instead of

¹⁰² See Derrida, *Given Time*; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*; and Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, the annotated copy of which is in Wallace's archives.

exploring the way that sincerity, as an effect, is produced by the text, he ultimately concludes that “sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must break with representation” (143). Perhaps another’s “true” intent, sincere or not, will remain forever unknown—but if we adopt a rhetorical approach, as I suggest, we can examine textual choices and effects in order to reason backwards toward purposes. In this way we can draw inferences about individual communications that, while they will never solve the aporia at the heart of “sincerity,” will accept that aporia as a basic truth but move on to investigate the pragmatics and poetics—the rhetoric—of fictional communication.

Lee Konstantinou is one of the few scholars to engage stylistic change in *The Pale King*; he suggests that “Wallace’s struggle to complete the book was very much a struggle against himself and his own highly characteristic style of writing.” Despite this struggle, he sees in *The Pale King* “the germ of a powerful new literary style” (“Unfinished Form”). Wallace’s struggle is not just located in the double bind of sincerity/deceit at the heart of communication; more practically, as a fiction author, it is in the use of language to create a stronger sense of sincerity. This accords with Wallace’s private statements to author friends: to Richard Powers, he worries that his style has become like a “tic” he can’t shake off (Staes, personal communication), and to Franzen he writes, “I am tired of myself, it seems: tired of my thoughts, associations, syntax, various verbal habits that have gone from discovery to technique to tic” (letter to Franzen July 16, 2005, quoted in Max 281).¹⁰³ Even in 2005 when he has written much of the

¹⁰³ David Hering identifies June 2005 as “a crisis point in the life of *The Pale King*” (*Fiction* 124); ten years after finishing *Infinite Jest*, Wallace is trying to build another novel but has just published many parts of it as *Oblivion* instead. While I lack space to consider *Oblivion* here, it’s worth noting that the stories collected

material we know from *The Pale King*, Wallace is still struggling to resist his old stylistic ways. To better understand Wallace's goals and ideals for new fictional production—why is he resisting his signature style so much?—I will now turn to a discussion of Wallace's own statements in essays and interviews. He frequently voiced his opinions about the development of literary history and his place within it, dwelling on his hopes for a newly sincere, emotional, “single-entendre” fiction.

in *Oblivion* have a distinct (and relatively coherent) voice of their own, which I would call involuted and catatonic—a kind of dark side to *The Pale King*.

Wallace Speaks about Himself: Attitudes to Sincerity

The most significant and well-known of Wallace's statements of intent are two early texts: the essay "E Unibus Pluram" and the interview with Larry McCaffery, both published in the 1993 *Review of Contemporary Fiction* along with a selection of the in-progress *Infinite Jest*.¹⁰⁴ These pieces are so frequently cited by current Wallace criticism, my own included, that Adam Kelly has dubbed them the "essay-interview nexus" ("The Death of the Author"). Because my approach to sincerity differs from other critics, though, I hope to offer a new angle on them, and so I'll provide a sustained look here. I focus on Wallace's comments on emotionality and the writer's psyche, which tell us a lot about what "sincerity" means to him: in particular, I will pay attention to values Wallace espouses and the attitude he takes toward his writing. (Both of these will play a role in the sincere voice, which I analyze in detail below.)

"E Unibus Pluram" ostensibly addresses the connection between television and contemporary American fiction. Really, though, Wallace uses the essay to clear a path for himself and his fictional ideals, using self-conscious irony as a target with which to dispatch both postmodern fiction and TV. The general moves of his argument are as follows: (A) he establishes the similarity of contemporary fiction and television, because both make use of "self-conscious irony" and self-reference (35); and (B) he argues that these productions, by virtue of that "self-conscious irony" (35), are "agents of a great despair and stasis in US culture" (49). Therefore (C) he concludes that we need fiction that will offer not just an ironic, critical diagnosis but also a cure for the contemporary

¹⁰⁴ It's worth noting that the interview was actually held in April 1991 (Max 155), placing Wallace's comments solidly within the ongoing composition of *Infinite Jest* rather than during a period of editing and revision.

media-ridden malaise. This fiction will not be “shallow” in its sardonic replication of our shallow world, but will rather “risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama” (81)—anything to avoid the numb “indifference” of “cynicism” (64). On these grounds Wallace announces his famous claim about the next literary avant garde:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country [. . . will] have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. [. . .] These anti-rebels would be [. . .] Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. (81)

What matters most is that this mode of fiction takes a risk, ventures a way of writing that will seem “untrendy” and uncool, but which will feel more authentic.¹⁰⁵ Wallace also criticizes the manic “Image Fiction” of Mark Leyner (his chief example of contemporary catatonia), proclaiming against it despite privately being impressed by the book. For all the essay’s contortions, then, I find that its chief objective is to argue for increased emotionality in avant-garde fiction.

Though Wallace calls for fiction that might look naïve, he isn’t himself naïvely undialectical in suggesting sincerity as a goal, which is what Lee Konstantinou suggests, writing that Wallace “failed to see how his desire to move beyond irony might inadvertently serve the political economic order that he sought, in other ways, to resist” (xiii). Of course Wallace saw this risk, and he even addresses its dangers when he considers the possible lines of “literary protest” (69) that might be available, rejecting and mocking various forms of conservatism and all the while admitting that his own place within the culture might create for him a “lack of vision” (81) in critiquing it. Wallace is

¹⁰⁵ Notably, Wallace casts his description of the single-entendre in double-voiced terms, using the words “repressed,” “backward,” “quaint,” and “naïve” with a decidedly ironized tone.

explicitly aware that cultural history progresses dialectically, and he acknowledges that irony, with its powerful negative force, was not only useful but necessary for the “critical [. . .] ground-clearing” that would “explode” midcentury “hypocrisy” (66).

With the ground cleared, though, Wallace saw many of his contemporaries still playing in the rubble—and he figured himself a Descartes, ready to build again (though perhaps not on the firmest foundations). As Stephen Burn puts it, “E Unibus Pluram” offers “a strawman postmodernism as a shaky bedrock principle for a critical argument” (“Review of *Consider David Foster Wallace*” 467). I agree with Burn that Wallace’s argument is flawed, but it’s my sense that Wallace did not intend to make an airtight argument—rather, he executes a necessary misreading that allows him to move beyond his forebears. Though Wallace has read Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* and wittily tosses off comments about misprision, he is still subject to its logic, just as he acknowledges in “E Unibus Pluram” that he is always “within” the “aura” (i.e. the cultural system) of his cultural moment (54).

If Wallace displays only partial awareness of his misprision in the essay, when faced by a worthy interlocutor—Larry McCaffery—he is brought face to face with it. McCaffery, a longstanding exponent of postmodern literature, has only so much patience for Wallace’s youthful rebellion, and he eventually begins to defend such authors as Barthelme, Elkin, Barth, and Coover. Wallace’s response confirms my sense that his position is generated more by subjective self-defense than by objective, analytical historical diagnosis:

No question that some of the early postmodernists [. . .] did magnificent work, but you can’t pass the click from one generation to another like a baton. The

click's idiosyncratic, personal. The only stuff a writer can get from an artistic ancestor is a certain set of aesthetic values and beliefs, and maybe a set of formal techniques that might—just might—help the writer to chase his own click. The problem is that, however misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. ("Expanded Interview" 49)¹⁰⁶

Wallace, of course, inherited many of these supposedly postmodern techniques. But he wanted to put them in the service of different emotional ends: not cynicism but earnestness, not suspicion but trust and devotion. At the time of the interview he was still composing *Infinite Jest*, trying to imbue its the maximalist, encyclopedic voice with an increased sensitivity to emotion and to the "experience of suffering," which he tells McCaffery is "an ineluctable part of being a human self" (22).

At the time he did not succeed in establishing the sincere voice; there are glimmers of it in *Infinite Jest* but still too much of the encyclopedic and comic sensibilities to allow it to become dominant and thus to set the terms of the novel's overall purposes. He admits as much to McCaffery, saying that "Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something [. . . but] the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don't seem to have yet" (50-1). Wallace sees himself as a very "hidden" author, especially in his youth (McCaffery 41), and his

¹⁰⁶ With regard to the click, Wallace explained earlier in the interview that it's a reference to "what I think Yeats called 'the click of a well-made box.' Something like that. The word I always think of it as is 'click'" (35). What Yeats actually says is "The correction of prose, because it has no fixed laws, is endless, a poem comes right with a click like a closing box" (Letter 24, *Letters on Poetry*).

movement toward the sincere voice is thus also a movement toward the courage to reveal himself and his “inner sap.”¹⁰⁷

That courage he would develop over the years, especially in correspondence with Jonathan Franzen. In their friendship and correspondence, Franzen implored Wallace to think more about character and emotion; as early as July 1989, in comments on the galleys of *Girl with Curious Hair*, Franzen suggests that “you’re too impatient and too proud to do the stoop-work of creating character, suspense and emotional involvement” (Max 130). Wallace would write to Steven Moore of Franzen’s rants about “fiction as a moral exercise” (Max 131), but something was getting through, and as their friendship progressed, Max reports that Wallace was eager to show Franzen that he “had become a different person and a different writer” (164).¹⁰⁸ By 2005, deep into work on *The Pale King*, he writes to Franzen about his struggles to abandon his previous tendencies and develop these distinct values into a new narrative voice:

I sit in the garage [. . .] and work very poorly and haltingly. [. . .] I am tired of myself, it seems: tired of my thoughts, associations, syntax, various verbal habits that have gone from discovery to technique to tic. (Max 281)

Max asks, “How could you preach mindful calmness if you couldn’t replicate it in prose?” (281). But ultimately Wallace *does* replicate it in prose; despite the struggle to

¹⁰⁷ Wallace’s use of the word “sap” and “sappy” recurs repeatedly in his interviews. In 1991 he tells McCaffery anxiously, “Even now I’m scared about how sappy this’ll look in print” (50); by 2004, he casts “what my girlfriend calls the ‘inner sap’—the part of us that can really wholeheartedly weep at stuff” as a fundamental impulse, alongside and in conflict with irony, of his fiction (Paulson 134-5). Thinking of that “inner sap,” he titles a draft version of §6, with Lane Dean and Sheri Fisher, “Innersapco, Inc.” (Container 38.7, Harry Ransom Center).

¹⁰⁸ This was in 1992, when Wallace and Franzen visited Syracuse and then Swarthmore together (Max 164). At the time Wallace was working on *Infinite Jest*.

develop the sincere voice, from its early conception in 1991 through the 2000s, *The Pale King* offers decidedly successful instances of a sincere, reverent stillness.

I mentioned before that *Infinite Jest* contains glimmers of the sincere voice despite its encyclopedic dominant,¹⁰⁹ and *The Pale King*, too, contains a diversity of voices. As in my analysis of *Infinite Jest*, the dominant voice of *The Pale King* does not exhaust the range of narrative voices in the book. In *TPK*, like *IJ*, there are various first-person passages as well as dialogue-only passages that showcase character voice; but these are subordinated to the aims given by the authorial voice, and we interpret them according to the dominant values, as well as their stylistic proximity to, that voice. At other times in *TPK* Wallace employs his encyclopedic voice; and sometimes his comical tendencies persist, though they're usually a bit less wacky and sophomoric than in *Broom of the System*. These instances are certainly relevant (we might say that Wallace has become heteroglossic with respect to himself), but because the sincere voice predominates, we read those other voices in relation to its centrality. This dominant asks readers to match the attitudes and mood of the sincere voice and to adopt a particular hermeneutic stance, engaging the novel as a whole with Wallace's sincere purposes in mind. By starting with the values of this voice, then, we can begin to understand those purposes and how they become evident.

¹⁰⁹ These most often come when Wallace engages with serious suffering in some truly brutal scenes (e.g. the addict who births her stillborn baby while on a freebase cocaine binge). Too often, though, those scenes fall into a kind of grotesque bathos when Wallace cannot (or will not) sustain their intensity; the heightened emotional voicing returns to an encyclopedic or even comic tendency.

Values: Attention, Choice, Difficulty, Self-Sacrifice

Of the various modifications in Wallace's prose between the encyclopedic and sincere voices, *The Pale King's* changed values are the most notable. There are some continuities between the two voices: the sincere voice, like the encyclopedic voice, still emphasizes the importance of careful attention, but it increasingly suggests that that attention can productively be turned inward (that is, that inward attention will not just result in pathologically "inbent" solipsists). There are newly foregrounded values as well: the novel emphasizes the interconnected issues of civics and democracy, the relation between personal and professional worlds, the value of work, the role of commitment in everyday life, and the question of religious belief. In this it is more political and institutional (see Hogg, "Subjective Politics" and McGurl, "Institution"). The scene I will examine here, that of Lane Dean and Sheri at the pond contemplating abortion, is a rewriting of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" that showcases Wallace combining commitment with faith. Further, he transforms the epiphanic insight from a formal/scientific domain (as in *IJ*) into the realm of self-knowledge and ethics. Wallace's values, I will show, are not only formed from his increased desire to address issues of "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions," but out of a larger debate with John Updike about just how to treat those troubles especially when they concern gender, desire, and romantic commitment.

The section with Lane and Sheri was published first in *The New Yorker* on February 5, 2007, just in time for Valentine's Day. Its title there was "Good People," with the subtitle "Two young Christians and an unwanted pregnancy." Lane and his

girlfriend Sheri have met to talk over their situation: Sheri has been planning to abort, but ultimately she doesn't want to; Lane knows that he should marry her to make it legitimate, but he doesn't think he really loves her. Each feels pressure to do something that feels wrong. What are they to do? By the end Wallace has offered a strong example of his newly sincere voice, by treating a new topic (for him) in a distinctly non-ironic way. Even though the subtitle sets up grim expectations, this turns out to be something of a love story after all, as well as a meditation on ethical obligations and self-knowledge.

Because the *New Yorker* subtitle does not appear in the manuscript drafts or in the final book, the section's drama comes instead from the readerly dynamic of uncertainty and suspense about the situation, emphasizing the importance of readerly attention to detail. Neither the characters nor the narrator ever make things explicit with words like "pregnant," "abortion," or "baby." Instead the conflict is cast using language like "waiting room," "appointment," "sin," and "carry this and have it," introducing both medical and religious registers and leaving the reader to infer the context. Instead of making things explicit, Wallace offers us a deeply focalized look into Lane's mind, a place of fear and paralysis: "The worse he felt, the stiller he sat. The whole thing felt balanced on a knife or wire; if he moved to put his arm up or touch her the whole thing could tip over. He hated himself for sitting so frozen" (39). They were supposed to have the appointment this afternoon, but when "the doorbell rang so early and his mother'd called to him up the stairs, he had known, and a terrible kind of blankness had commenced falling through him" (41).

Lane knows that “if he was the salesman of it and forced it upon her that was awful and wrong,” but then says things (in indirect dialogue) like, “if he was wrong in believing they’d truly decided together when they decided to make the appointment she should please tell him” (41)—attempting to say just enough to pose his question but not willing actually to voice it directly: “do you not want to get an abortion?” Lane suggests “the appointment could get moved back” but he is really just “trying to say things that would get her to open up and say enough back that he could see her and read her heart and know what to say to get her to through with it” (41). And though he knows this to be true, he doesn’t admit it to himself, instead turning his thoughts to religious proscriptions: “He felt like he knew now why it was a true sin and not just a leftover rule from past society. He felt low by it and humbled and now did understand and believe that the rules were there for a reason. That the rules were concerned with him personally, as an individual” (42). Lane is fundamentally split: he wants Sheri to get the abortion, but he is unwilling to tell her that he doesn’t love her, even though he “knew” that “were he to look straight at her and tell her he didn’t she would keep the appointment and go” but “some terrible weakness or lack of values” keeps him from doing this (42). He is “Two hearted, a hypocrite to yourself either way” (43).¹¹⁰

Looking at the water in the lake, Lane somehow awakens to himself, realizing that he must choose that which he has most feared: commit himself to Sheri and take care of their child. In this, the final paragraph, Wallace finally makes things explicit, as Lane realizes “that she can neither do this thing today nor carry a child alone and shame her

¹¹⁰ Like many of the Hemingway allusions, the word “two hearted” here likely cites “Big Two-Hearted River” from *In Our Time*.

family” (44). And in this moment he also has an epiphanic “*moment of grace*,” as an insight “is given to him to feel in the form of a question”: “why is he so sure he doesn’t love her? Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do?” (45). It becomes clear to Lane that maybe his resistance is due to fear, rather than a lack of love, and he decides to face that fear and commit himself to Sheri as husband and father.

As I mentioned above, it’s clear that “Good People” is effectively a rewriting of Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” as Wouters has noted (175); while Hemingway’s language is slightly more cloaked than Wallace’s, they both deploy the same opaqueness of language about a potential abortion, requiring readers to attend carefully to what is and is not said. But Wallace does not just engage with Hemingway, critically rewriting the decision to abort in “Hills”; he grapples here with the larger tradition of the abortion narrative of which Hemingway is a part. Readers may think also of the horrific ending to John Barth’s *End of the Road*, in which the pregnant woman, under the doctor’s knife, vomits and chokes to death on the dinner her husband has cooked for her; or of Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, which threatens a double death when Rabbit’s wife drowns their baby daughter, and then his mistress threatens to abort if he leaves her.¹¹¹ The abortion narrative is, as Judith Wilt writes, often “grotesque and complicated” (4), a difficult subject matter from which “paradigms of choice emerge” (37) concerning “the whole vexed process of human sexuality and maternity” (32). For Wallace, too, Lane and Sheri’s is a story of choice, in which Lane suspends his self-

¹¹¹ Wallace knew both of these books, as well as Updike’s *Roger’s Version*, which also deals with the arrangements for an (unrepresented) abortion.

serving manipulative desire for her to abort and chooses instead the “honorable” position of commitment and marriage.

While Wallace clearly wants to put his own twist on the abortion narrative—he resists the complex ironies of Barth and the compounding disasters of Updike—he does follow Wilt’s “law of plot,” according to which stories of abortion work by resisting attempts at control: “if a man attempts to control a woman through pregnancy, the plot will resist with abortion . . . [and] if a man attempts to control a woman through abortion, or a woman attempts to control ‘nature’ with choice, the plot will resist with pregnancy” (4). In *The Pale King*, Lane resists his initial impulse to manipulate, but most significantly, he makes the choice to cede control to Sheri and even to join her in the consequences of that choice. Still, the control he cedes is one he never really had—it is clear in the story that Sheri’s choice is her own. Wallace’s abortion plot thus follows a newly sincere commitment to devotion, while placing Lane squarely in Wallace’s career-long exploration of passive protagonists, making him yet another of the “heroes of non-action” (*Infinite Jest* 142) that suffuse Wallace’s fiction. And while pregnancy is used here to “reward[] love” and “analogize[] growth,” two possibilities in Wilt’s analysis of potential narrative purposes (37), Wallace takes an ambivalent stance toward both: Lane doesn’t actually know if he “really” loves Sheri, and so his choice is made as much from desperate lack of alternative as from real emotional growth. The use of the pregnancy plot is about religious belief, yes, but more centrally it’s about the complexity of choice, and the necessity of a certain state of mind—thoughtful and open attention—for making the right choices.

With respect to attention, Wallace is formally quite a bit like Hemingway as well, engaging the relation of “surface” to “depth,” implicit to explicit, the tip of the iceberg to its body below the water: his fiction almost invariably plays with the ontological balance between what is stated and what is merely implied. The momentum in §6 derives from that movement between implicit and explicit, for both character and reader; Lane’s own mental processing leads to his sudden insight into both Sheri and himself, and the reader must track conversational and narrative clues to determine what’s going on, at some point developing a hunch and eventually having it confirmed. As Tore Rye Andersen has written, the “crucial theme of paying attention” is “at the centre of much of Wallace’s fiction,” identifying a point of continuity within Wallace’s career as well as with his forebears Nabokov and Pynchon (“Pay Attention!” 7). The movement from implicit to explicit takes the form of epiphany here once more, but this time it is one of faith, rather than the intellectual epiphany dramatized by *Infinite Jest*.

By focusing on attention leading not to knowledge but to ethical action, Wallace indicates in yet another way the shifting values of his fiction, toward commitment, choice, and self-sacrificial devotion. He makes this explicit in his Kenyon commencement speech, “This Is Water,” when he says that “the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them” (120). §6 embodies this clear ethical statement and follows up, too, his earlier calls for writing that risks being sappy and sentimental in its pursuit of genuine emotional struggle. The passage does not paint Lane as a “figure of fun” and derision, the typical role for “earnest Christians” in both pop

culture and literary fiction (Kirsch 211), and the role of Reverend Sykes in *Broom of the System*; rather, it is clear that §6 aligns readers almost completely with Lane's own values. The sincere voice takes Lane seriously, accepting his challenges without a sneer or eyeroll, nor with the hint of excess whereby Wallace tends to tip into the absurd or grotesque.¹¹² As a result the reader is made to feel Lane's struggle as a deeply serious and profound human experience, and the authorial audience will (1) accept the legitimacy of Sheri's reluctance to abort, on religious grounds, and (2) appreciate Lane's ethical commitment to honoring her choice, instead of manipulating her into aborting, or abandoning her and her newborn.

It is important that Lane does consider his other options—manipulation, abandonment—and that we glimpse him as a calculating “hideous man” when he reassures Sheri that they can move the appointment back. While other Wallace characters have fallen prey to akrasia, doing something they know is wrong out of apathy or weak will, Lane's religiosity helps him to bracket his own fears and to focus on Sheri's feelings. His attention to nature is also a central part of the sincere voice's values: through focus on light, water, and trees Lane is able to attune with the larger non-human world and with its cycles and patterns, drawing him out of his isolating self-relation. Mulling their situation, he focuses on the natural environment, especially on the tree nearby that has been downed by recent storms, and this focus turns out to have been

¹¹² Despite this seriousness, Kirsch sees Wallace as attempting to provoke the reader: “you can sense Wallace daring you to roll your eyes. . . . Such nostalgia for a vanished style of religious and patriarchal authority is a familiar part of conservative political discourse. . . . Wallace takes pleasure in rehearsing a number of conservative tropes, which he knows many readers will find provocative” (211). We might revise his insight to show how the tension highlights divisions between Wallace's authorial and actual audiences: Wallace's authorial audience will appreciate the seriousness and authentic courage that Lane's decision takes, but many in his actual audience will find the perceived conservative traditionalism of the section absurd and refuse to wholly affirm it.

prayer “all the while,” for Lane is “answered now with a type of vision, what he later would call within his own mind a vision or *moment of grace*” (TPK 44). In that moment he “almost see[s] them both as Jesus might see them” and he deeply empathizes with Sheri’s situation, in a realignment of perspective that takes him into her mind and then beyond it, into a vision of them from Jesus’s perspective.

In his movement from temptation to affirmation, the complexity of his emotional state is made more vibrant for the reader. His development makes his epiphany more meaningful because his trajectory moves through multiple inner states. First, Lane wants to figure out the best way to convince Sheri to keep the appointment; then, he begins to acknowledge (in a semi-conscious way) that he is afraid and frozen, hidden to himself; and finally, in a moment of self-knowledge *and* a conversion of intent, he embraces the choice he knew he had to make all along. If he had supported Sheri from the start, he would have been too simple: part of Wallace’s values here is the embrace of difficulty, transfigured from *Infinite Jest*’s conceptual difficulty to a newly emotional and moral difficulty. It is hard to do the right thing, but Lane does it, and for that we admire him. Here we can see the connection of ethics to labor that the novel offers, linking even Lane’s religious epiphany to the Protestant work ethic that Jeffrey Severs finds dramatized throughout Wallace’s career, whereby Wallace assigns a “positive value for the square values of discipline and work” (*Balancing* 91). Each of Wallace’s novels embraces work or struggle as the key to identity, community, and transcendence, but in different ways, making Lane’s commitment here a new twist on a consistent concern.

Considering such career-long reconfigurations makes *The Pale King* appear an example of Wallace finding his own stable ground, no longer working in another's shadow as he did with Pynchon and Joyce. But it is not so simple. Yes, Wallace's project in *The Pale King* takes *Infinite Jest* as a departure point for what fiction can think or do. But Wallace has not abandoned his position as an eternal student, and although Hemingway is a key touchstone for the "Good People" passage, I will show throughout that the most central influence on Wallace's sincere voice is John Updike. Even this late in his career, Wallace worked in relation to others, by imitating, absorbing and transmuting the voices of authors he liked. He also worked by repudiating other authors, scorning Bret Easton Ellis, Mark Leyner, an entire tradition of metafiction, and more in an attempt to clear space for himself. In the sincere voice, Wallace's love and hate are unified in one figure—Updike.

Because Wallace admired Updike as a master stylist but condemned the ethics of his fiction, Wallace's response to Updike structures the sincere voice differentially across all four levels: values, tone, style, and rhythm. A self-admitted "Updike fan," but a fan with grievances,¹¹³ Wallace repeatedly invoked Updike's prose as "pretty" in a way he wanted to mimic, but he was horrified by the narcissistic sexuality of his protagonists. Wallace's most critical statements come in his review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?", where he pens a brutal assessment of Updike's

¹¹³ Wallace engages with Updike throughout his whole career, from published parody to praise to criticism. In his archived library holdings, the number of Updike books (five) is second only to the number of DeLillo ones (twelve); and if we are to believe Wallace in his review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, by 1996 he had read twenty-five books by Updike—which means, most likely, all of Updike's novels, most of his short story collections, and a couple of volumes of Updike's nonfiction and/or poetry.

career, suggesting that Updike “celebrat[es]” “radical self-absorption” in his characters and even in himself (“Phallocrat”): a self-absorption driven by selfish, shortsighted sexual desire. In writing such unusually pious, reverent characters like Lane Dean Jr., Wallace is thus implicitly writing against Updike. I will say more about Updike in the following sections, but in terms of values, we must understand the piety and devotion of Lane Dean as a rejection of Updike’s male protagonists, who worship their own pleasure and seldom acknowledge or prioritize the feelings of others.

Tone: Reverent, Thoughtful, Serious

While Wallace's pious values are formed in opposition to Updike, his relation to Updike in terms of tone is a bit more complex. So while Wallace may object, for instance, to the reverent manner with which Updike's narrator Roger describes his romantic rival's penis in an exceedingly detailed, aestheticized way (in *Roger's Version*), or the way Ben Turnbull worshipfully describes the body of Deirdre, his prostitute lover (*Toward*), Wallace shares Updike's reverence and wonder with respect to the natural world.

Reverence, understood as a tone, illustrates how values and tone can interact: by taking a reverent attitude toward his utterance about Lane Dean, Wallace's narrator also commits himself to Lane's own reverential values. This isn't a necessary consequence, as a narrator could adopt a reverent tone while subtly ironizing or undermining it in context (so as to indicate divergent values), but without those counter-actions the tone of reverence has a strong influence on our assessment of values. Most important, then, is the relationship between the tone of a passage and the subject it treats; Wallace mimics Updike's reverent tone while redirecting it from sex to prayer and nature.

To better consider Wallace's reverential tone toward nature, we can return to Lane Dean, who while wrestling with his ethical conundrum also subconsciously perceives the natural world around him. The narrator describes these with sensuous detail, from the changing of the sunlight as they've sat at the pond to the different colors of the water. The section opens with the description of a downed tree: "They were up on a picnic table at that one park by the lake, by the edge of the lake with part of a downed tree in the shallows half hidden by the bank" (*TPK* 38). The narrator returns to the tree

repeatedly; on the margin of Lane's conscious perception, it is the possible incitement for his emotional epiphany, as well as a metaphorical source for developing the story's conflict. First we learn about the optics, the way "the angle of the sun made the water of the shallows look dark," and then the mimetic motivation for the trees: "there had been more storms that week, with some downed trees" (*TPK* 38). Already the downed tree in the shallows begins to take on thematic significance for the story's progression: we can't see the entire tree because of the angle of the sun, and so we're invited to think about the conditions of appearance and perception. And we realize that downed trees, with the violent storms that occasion them, are really not all that unusual, so perhaps sudden wrenching change in other domains—for instance if Lane were to commit himself to the young and pregnant Sheri—is a natural part of life as well. The attitude the narrator takes toward the tree is normalizing and soothing, and that tone helps stabilize the more uncertain human world, or at least generalize its fears into the broader natural surround.

The tree recurs twice more in the opening paragraph before disappearing until the end of the story. Sitting silently with Sheri, Lane was "looking past the bank at the downed tree in the shallows and its ball of exposed roots going all directions and the tree's cloud of branches all half in the water"; he's also "looking at the torn-up hole in the ground there where the tree had gone over" (38-9). The tree's ball of exposed roots is chaotic and intricate and inappropriately exposed; it mirrors the way Lane feels, wrenched out of his comfortable assumption that Sheri would get the abortion. Instead of feeling relief, he is now a complex mess of feelings, pulled "all directions" by his fears, desires, and uncertainties. So too the "torn-up hole" resonates with an implied but

repressed image of Sheri's womb, were she to abort; such a grotesque idea about the empty uterus borders on the cartoonishly simple imagery of Wallace's young writing, but here it is mostly repressed, relegated to implication. Instead, Wallace's simile considers more explicitly the baby as a future entity, as "the shallows lapped from different directions at the tree as if almost teething at it." The tree has shifted to being a mother, and the water teethes like a baby, insistent and undeniable. As Wallace shifts us among these metaphorical associations, it's clear that he wants to refuse any singular metaphorical equation—the tree is and is not each of these resonances. As a result, Wallace adds to the tone of natural reverence a sort of humility: we see the human alongside and as part of the natural world, and readers take on an interpretive humility as well, refraining from choosing a stable metaphorical reading.

The tree/water motif shifts into the background for the remainder of the story (apart from one reappearance in the middle, which simply maintains the strand in the reader's consciousness). But in the final paragraph of the section the tree and water return, and they become even more explicitly linked to Lane's emotional epiphany.

Consider:

When he moved his head, the part of the lake farther out flashed with sun; the water up close wasn't black now and you could see into the shallows and see that all the water was moving but gently, this way and that, **and in this same way he besought to return to himself** as Sheri moved her leg and started to turn beside him . . . In his moment or time at the lake now just to come, Lane Dean first felt he could take this all in whole; everything seemed distinctly lit, for the circle of the pin oak's shade had rotated off all the way and they sat now in the sun with their shadow a two-headed thing in the grass to the left before them. **He was looking or gazing again at where the downed tree's branches seemed to bend so sharply just under the shallows' surface when he was given then to know that through all this frozen silence he'd despised he had, in truth, been praying all the while,** or some little part of his heart he could not know or hear

had, for he was answered now with a type of vision, what he later would call within his own mind a vision or *moment of grace*. (TPK 43-4; bold mine)

The tone of natural reverence is sustained by this realization; Lane's revelation or epiphany ties together the external and internal, the subtle movement of the water and the subtle movement inside himself. The strange phrase "and in this same way" carries a serious and mysterious tone—the sentence does not make explicit exactly how these two movements are the same, but it asks the reader to consider the homology as well as the potential causation between the water and Lane. He has the movement of the sun to thank for his moment of grace: the sun has revealed the water to be transparent and liquid instead of solid black, and Lane realizes that he, too, is not frozen solid after all. In this way the tree and water play a large role in establishing the tone of the section as reverent, even evoking a religious mystery in the relation between world and man.¹¹⁴

It's a surprise to see the phrase "moment of grace" in the writing of Wallace, whose previous novels been dominated by either silly or scientific attitudes. One might suggest that the use of italics sets Lane's language apart from the narrator's, creating a distance that might have some irony in it. But rather the italics enhance the way the narration takes Lane seriously, giving weight to his experience: the narrator uses Lane's own word "vision," setting up the unironized synonymous phrase "moment of grace" and marking Lane's later reflection on this incident, since only "later" would he call it that. In this moment, though, Lane has no name for this euphoric rush of courage, certainty, and wholeness; he just knows that "he felt he could take this all in whole" and that in this

¹¹⁴ Although I'm not discussing style and rhythm in this section, note the use of archaic, Biblical-sounding "besought," which also contributes to the religious texture of the passage. Note further the rhythmic regularity, for instance "In his moment or time at the lake now just to come"; the three anapests and two iambs maintain a steady beat that is characteristic of Wallace's sincere voice.

moment time slows down, with Sheri only “start[ing] to turn” beside him. Calling the moment a moment of grace also emphasizes the importance of Lane’s own attitude to his experience: it was not just a moment of vision but a religious event for him, with long-term effects.

While there may remain an uncertain whiff of irony, the seriousness is further supported by the way Wallace treats Lane’s perceptions and memory. First the passage casts doubt on Lane’s sight, because of the way the clarity of the water is complicated by its distorting refraction: the branches “seemed to bend so sharply just under the shallows’ surface,” even though the physical truth is that they extend straight through the water. The water both reveals and distorts, and likewise we realize that Lane’s moment of grace both reveals and distorts his feelings toward Sheri (that is, the vision of them “as Jesus might see them” casts them as generic strugglers). Nevertheless, the weightiness of the tone is sustained by a subtle prolepsis—learning that Lane “later would” name this event “within his own mind” reassures the reader that Lane does not later reconsider his epiphanic afternoon at the lake with wry regret. Rather it is something he clearly returns to with wonder.

Because the episode’s plotting is minimal, we can understand the section as a hybrid of narrative and “portraiture,” a form that asks the audience “to apprehend the revelation of character” as central to the narrative progression (*Experiencing Fiction* 153). This effect of revelation is central to Wallace’s sincerity: his restriction of narrative momentum in the pursuit of stillness and observation. Lane struggles ethically, but he succeeds because he holds back on action; as readers we withhold judgment of his

struggle until we see what he will do, but the suspense in the passage is not the only thing that drives our interest in the story. Rather, it is our interest in Lane and in the judgments the narrator guides us to make about him. As we judge that Lane chooses the behavior that he deems most ethical, and we appreciate the difficulty of this choice for him, we also suspect that he will continue to struggle, for such moments of revelation are rare; Lane will call on this moment's clarity, we may suppose, many times in his future life.

The tonal quality shares much with Updike, whose breathless appreciation for natural beauty is pronounced throughout his work, with a focus on “the clarity of things” by which “objects shine unaided” (Dill 398, quoting Updike). Reflect again on the Wallace passage's lighting: “everything seemed distinctly lit, for the circle of the pin oak's shade had rotated off all the way and they sat now in the sun.” Wallace underlines lines about light, as well as moments of this kind of geometric perception, in all five of the Updike books held in the Ransom Center archive.¹¹⁵ This suggests that we should consider the attitude toward perception, and not just the attitude toward the utterance, when we assess a section's tone.

The attitude toward perception, and towards guiding the reader's perceptions of the storyworld, tells us a lot about tone because the attitude toward the narrative utterance includes preferences about which sensory details to share. Its perceptual tone is very subtle; we might say that the voice has a “reticent” quality because of the way it sets up resonances but resists making them explicit. In this, there is also something of a

¹¹⁵ These books are the following: *The Poorhouse Fair* (1958), *Of the Farm* (1965), *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Marry Me* (1976), and *Toward the End of Time* (1997). A sensitivity to light applies to Wallace's career overall—*Broom of the System* betrays a continued desire to depict shadows—but unique to the sincere voice is a sense of the *light* that Lane sees, in which everything is distinct and the sense of the world's totality presents itself.

minimalist, Carver-esque tone at work in the passage. The fact that Lane and Sheri are working class characters (though upwardly mobile) offers a social class as well as regional flavor to the reverent tone and to our sense of the sincere voice. Rather than examining the emptiness in the brilliant, strange characters of *Infinite Jest*'s tennis academy, *The Pale King*'s sincere voice affirms the human fullness of these simple "good people" of Middle America.¹¹⁶

While the influence of Carver is less significant than that of Updike, we can see Wallace turning to Carver for a balance between a more restrained tone and a friendly, oral one like that prevalent in *Infinite Jest*. Archival evidence shows that Wallace read Carver closely, annotating his stories heavily to address the use of detail and the creation of narrative voice (in the inside cover of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* Wallace writes "Narrative voice very oral") (Harry Ransom Center). Wallace teaches Carver to undergraduates paired with a reading on "Point of view," and his notes demonstrate his interest in a reliable heterodiegetic narrator who is nevertheless, as Wallace underlines in the textbook, a "a trusted confidant or close friend" (Kennedy and Gioia 54). Because Wallace's narrators are predominantly heterodiegetic, they have an immense amount of flexibility when it comes to shifting points of view and focalization; and in focalizing closely on Lane and using his own vocabulary to represent his cognition and emotion, Wallace brings us closer to the earnest attitude that his voice shares with Lane himself.

¹¹⁶ The *New Yorker* title bears an unmistakable echo of Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People," and evidence from the archive demonstrates that Wallace was a big admirer of her fiction. Some aspects of O'Connor's work resemble the topoi of Wallace's late fiction (rural characters, grotesque elements), and her fiction is frequently shaped by these epiphanic moments, though they are put more often to gothic ends. Wallace's interest in O'Connor is worth further study, though it is beyond my scope here.

As I suggested above, the depiction of Lane's perception plays a large role in our inferences about both tone and values; further, shifts in point of view are here accompanied by shifts in tone. As a result, despite being characterized by the seriousness and reverence I identified above, the passage begins very colloquially, easing the reader into her position in the narrative audience with familiar reference to "a picnic table at that one park" (*TPK* 38): the use of the deictic suggests a friendly homodiegetic narrator addressing a narratee. But as the section zooms in on Lane and Sheri, settling on Lane, and beginning to tell his thoughts, the narrator is established as clearly heterodiegetic; and at the same time the passage shifts quickly from a conversational tone to a tone of seriousness and quiet observation. Such shifts are accomplished by fine stylistic choices in diction, syntax, and register, and to those choices I will now turn.

Style: Descriptive, 'Pretty,' Lyrical

To develop an analysis of style and rhythm and their importance for voice, I want to shift to a different portion of *The Pale King*, section one, which foregrounds style and sound even more overtly than the Lane Dean section. The heavily stylized scene in question is the opening section of the novel; it is short and highly poetic, and it was even published by Wallace as prose poetry in the magazine *TriQuarterly*. It was published there as "Peoria (4)," alongside "Peoria (9) 'Whispering Pines'," which appears also in *The Pale King* as the beginning to section eight.¹¹⁷ "Peoria (4)" became (with some small revisions) the opening section of the novel, a compact two-paragraph passage.¹¹⁸ The

¹¹⁷ The numbers suggest a larger sequence from which these were taken, in the same vein as the numbered "Brief Interviews" in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, but archival evidence shows that there are no other "Peoria" prose poems. The fragmented series, as a technique, thematizes incompleteness and the implicit, issues central to Wallace's oeuvre.

¹¹⁸ Michael Pietsch is the one who chose to open the novel with this passage, and there is some critical debate about whether Wallace would have done the same (e.g. Matt Bucher disputes whether the section even belongs in the novel at all; see Hoffman, "Episode 48" at 47:00). Tim Groenland tracks Pietsch's revisions to his own introduction on this point: in the audiobook version of the introduction, made from an earlier version of the manuscript, Pietsch says that there was "no designated opening or closing point"—but in the published paperback, Groenland writes, "the word 'opening' is removed, suggesting that only the closing point was left unspecified" ("King" 227). Groenland continues, acknowledging that "at least one undated draft does suggest that the short chapter that opens the novel was considered by Wallace as a possible beginning, and the change here reflects this" (see DFW Papers 38.7, Log no. 147, cited in Groenland 227). In this way the "[d]ifferent editions, published a year apart, thus contain contrasting information about the extent of the novel's structural incompleteness" (227). In this way the "[d]ifferent editions, published a year apart, thus contain contrasting information about the extent of the novel's structural incompleteness" (227).

My own archival research has revealed five total instances where Wallace marks this section as an opening. On the first, handwritten draft of the passage he has written "Lyric Opening – Only ½ Bad" (Log no. 204, Box 39.3). The document cited by Groenland appears to be a second draft of the passage, because it is typed and also hand-edited. Finally, there are three other typed/printed versions: one of those typed versions is a third draft, making improvements upon the document cited by Groenland and titled "REPLY TO ALL THEORY" (Log no. 286, Box 40.4) the other two have the header "OPEN – JUXTAPOSED W/ ACCOUNTANTS COMING TO WORK?" (Log no. 142, Box 38.7 and Log no. 268, Box 40.3). Further, Wallace's personal journal from July 31, 1996 begins with a line that made its way, transformed, into this section, suggesting that this was especially important material that he had preserved for years and wanted to foreground. The line in his journal entry reads, "They passed foolscap and shattercane and pussywillows all nodding." (Container 31.14). For a broader genetic account of *The Pale King*, see Groenland, "Recipe for a Brick," Staes, "Work in Progress," and Hering, Chapter 4 of *Fiction and Form*.

passage is so intensely styled and crafted that the 2011 Pulitzer Prize judges found its first paragraph, on its own, “more powerful than any entire book [they’d] read so far”

(Cunningham, qtd. in Levey 76). I’ll reproduce the whole passage here:

Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lambs’-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping Charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother’s soft hand on your cheek. An arrow of starlings fired from the windbreak’s thatch. The glitter of dew that stays where it is and steams all day. A sunflower, four more, one bowed, and horses in the distance standing rigid and still as toys. All nodding. Electric sounds of insects at their business. Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers.

Some crows come ahead then, three or four, not a murder, on the wing, silent with intent, corn-bound for the pasture’s wire beyond which one horse smells at the other’s behind, the lead horse’s tail obligingly lifted. Your shoes’ brand incised in the dew. An alfalfa breeze. Socks’ burrs. Dry scratching inside a culvert. Rusted wire and tilted posts more a symbol of restraint than a fence per se. NO HUNTING. The shush of the interstate off past the windbreak. The pasture’s crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite touches tail. Read these.

Of this passage, Nick Levey writes, “This is Wallace trying out a new voice, perhaps grown tired of his old one: the litany of product names, pharmaceutical brands, acronyms, trilled conjunctions and other literary pyrotechnics typical of *Infinite Jest* are replaced by an agricultural vocabulary, the invocation of a pastoral sublime” (76). While there may have been glimmers of this close, detailed natural observation in *Infinite Jest* and some of

his short stories, nothing Wallace has written so far compares to the outright rich beauty of this pastoral scene.

Above I mentioned a few stylistic tendencies of the sincere voice: techniques that include simpler and often shorter sentences, lower register, and regular or semi-regular rhythms, all of which are central to the effects of §1. These are the “the germ of a powerful new literary style,” writes Konstantinou (“Unfinished Form”), different from previous styles because of its increased use of shorter sentences and its reduction of specialized language. We can begin by examining sentence length and syntax, since one of Wallace’s signature stylistic markers in the previous voices is the long (and cumulative) sentence, meaning that a divergence from that pattern is especially important. I’ll note that while the sincere voice uses shorter sentences, I don’t mean to imply that Wallace abandons his long sentences; in fact, preliminary digital analysis of sentence length shows that *The Pale King* contains an incredibly long sentence—1,166-words— while the longest sentence that I have found so far in *Infinite Jest* is 951 words.¹¹⁹ In *IJ*, though, this is not as much an anomaly as it is in *TPK*, where the novel’s prose overall tends toward shorter sentences, especially in those scenes where the dominant sincere voice is most pronounced. *The Pale King*, then, uses shorter sentences with greater frequency and, more importantly, to greater effect.

§1 above is an excellent example of that change. While it begins with a sentence that is fairly long (even though it is actually a fragment), the rest of the paragraph is full of quite short sentences (or fragments) and the following paragraph continues that trend.

¹¹⁹ In *TPK*, this sentence is in §2 with Claude Sylvanshine. In *IJ*, a 951-word sentence appears that begins on page 370 with the phrase “See e.g. the White Flag audience’s discomfort.”

This tendency changes the pace of the passage, slowing it down. Wallace tells David Kipen that a large part of his composition “has to do with speed and being a little bit of a control freak about . . . how fast the reader’s reading stuff”; he wants some material “to be read fairly slowly and to have a kind of echoey resonance to it”; and he achieves this pacing in large part by managing “how long the sentences are” (Kipen). §1, along with the other poeticized moments of *The Pale King*, focuses especially on that slow pacing, reading almost like a landscape painting.

This stillness can define the passage as tending toward lyric narrative, which Phelan writes is “invested not in character and event but in thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, specific conditions” (*Experiencing* 23). In lyric narrative, Phelan elaborates, “the authorial audience is less in the position of observer and judge and more in the position of participant,” much as the narrative audience is invited to “read these” worm marks in the dung. Further, “we move . . . toward fusion with the speaker. . . . This element of lyricality also depends on the absence of distance between the implied author and the ‘I’ of the poem” (22-23). In Wallace’s case, there is no “I,” only “you” (which stands in for the “I,” drawing the reader even more into the scene¹²⁰) and “we,” drawing the implied author, the speaker, and the authorial audience quite tightly together.

The stillness of the passage is also increased by the syntax Wallace deploys: the passage is dominated by participles (verb forms that function as adjectives) rather than full-fledged verbs, which diminishes the sense of activity and motion. Consider for instance the “river overhung with weeping trees” or “all nodding,” “the horizon

¹²⁰ On second-person narration, see Fludernik, “Narrative ‘You’ As Addressee And/Or Protagonist”; Fludernik, ed. “Second-Person Narrative”; and Mildorf, “Reconsidering.”

trembling,” and the “crows . . . turning up patties”: all present participles except for “overhung.” Even what verbs there are, like “simmer,” are in the present tense, slowing the narrative momentum and aligning the passage even more with the lyric, in which “the standard tense . . . is the present” (*Experiencing* 23). The participles do not produce a total scene of stasis, though: they create a sense of peaceful ongoing activity, repetitive and continuing motion. Given that Wallace’s larger thematic project in *The Pale King* is concerned with repetitive action—e.g. the tax examiners’ ability to do monotonous, never-ending analysis of tax forms—these syntactic techniques of stillness link the local style of the passage to the global purposes of *The Pale King*. They link further to Wallace’s resistance to narrative progression and cohesion, which takes place not just on the level of event and plot (as I noted in the section on values, regarding the conspiracy plots that Wallace refuses in the novel), but also on the level of the sentence and paragraph.

In this passage, Wallace writes in partial mimicry of Updike, whose early work he calls “sheer fucking beautiful writing” (Kennedy/Polk 20). Even though Wallace wrote his damning review of Updike’s *Toward the End of Time*, the initial drafts of that review have edited out enormous praise that Wallace penned about Updike, calling him a “Master,” the “graphomaniacal font of some of the most gorgeous descriptive prose ever written in English” (1-2, Container 28.8 Harry Ransom Center). Wallace wants to imitate Updike, whose highly poetic style makes extensive use of internal delays and periodic syntax; his sentences often pause halfway through and expand internally before coming to their grammatical conclusions. In Wallace’s favorite Updike novels, we can find many

examples, some of which Wallace even marked, that deliver information in this slow, deliberate manner much like Wallace does in §1. Consider the following by Updike, which Wallace underlined in his copy of *Of the Farm*: “The meadow wore a strip of mist where a little rivulet, hardly a creek, choked by weeds and watercress, trickled and breathed” (*Of the Farm* 14-15). The line stacks adjective phrases much like Wallace’s sentence in paragraph two about the crows: “Some crows come ahead then, three or four, not a murder, on the wing, silent with intent . . .” Each provides substantial delay, by small steps, of the conclusion of the sentence. Or, here’s a selection from *The Poorhouse Fair*, on a page where Wallace has written “Landscape” at the top margin:

In those days—it would have been in the first Roosevelt’s administration—when he had freshly come, direct from normal school, to teach at a building of then less than a hundred pupils, walking to work had taken him along a path from which, down the long bank through switches of sumac and sapling oak, glimpses of water had appeared as white and smooth as a plaster wall. (*Poorhouse* 7)

Here the periodic sentence structure makes the reader wait patiently for the whole scheme to fall together; in the same way, the long sentence that opens Wallace’s §1 keeps the reader waiting with the expectation of a final verb. This syntactic technique can underscore some of the values of the sincere voice: the narrator’s devotion and reverence toward the world lead to the slow, detailed descriptions and subordinate clauses that come between the subject and the main verb. Further, the periodic sentence structure is more traditional and a bit antiquated, evoking an older paradigm (appropriate for a historical novel, especially once that falls into biblical iambics on occasion).

Wallace further mirrors Updike not just in syntax but in diction, by naming so many plants.¹²¹ Updike is generally descriptive when it comes to flora, in the early books as well as *Toward the End of Time*, which contains such detailed descriptions of the protagonist's garden that Wallace writes in the inside cover there "must be 35 pp on flowers alone" (Harry Ransom Center). Nevertheless, Wallace turns those gardens into a fallow field by the highway, using plant-related diction to refuse the technological and scientific registers that dominated *Infinite Jest*. Instead, Wallace here works within a pastoral, highly nature-oriented register that's distinctly lower, while still a specialized discourse.¹²² And the diction overall of *The Pale King* (not just in this section) offers more of the ordinariness that Wallace called for in "E Unibus Pluram": other than the names of the plants, the passage is dominated by generic nouns and adjectives.

Besides naming the plants, Wallace uses particular diction to cultivate the nurturing, reverent tone of the passage. The fields are "untilled," free from human intervention, the dew "stays where it is," and the heads of the plants are "gently nodding" in the breeze that touches as lightly as "a mother's soft hand on your cheek." A sense of intimacy is created by this use of second-person, heightened immensely by the language of a mother's touch and by the repeated evocation of family in "we are all of us brothers."

Things are not *too* intimate or close, though, for the clouds are so high they cast no

¹²¹ While I argue that Updike is the key influence for Wallace's development of the sincere voice, one other significant source for this passage in particular is Cormac McCarthy. Nick Levey usefully points to the opening section of Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, which also has a style dominated by fragments, and which uses a number of the same words. Lucas Thompson ("Books") likewise finds the influence of McCarthy significant throughout Wallace's career, arguing that in parts of *The Pale King* Wallace resists McCarthy's influence through parody and amplification.

¹²² Some sections of *The Pale King* do contain the scientific/medical register, for instance §11, which lists the "syndromes/symptoms associated with Examinations postings in excess of 36 months," including "paracatonic fugues" and "formication" (the sensation of insects crawling on one's skin) (TPK 89). In sections like these we can see the lingering presence of the encyclopedic voice.

shadow, giving a sense of the wide expansive space, not crowded or claustrophobic. In this world all creatures are family, and no conflict presents itself, as each has its own place in the unity of things. All agree: all nodding.

The introduction of the crows momentarily destabilizes this stillness—crows, after all, are mobile, and the collective noun “murder” is vaguely threatening—but the passage’s gaze takes us past the crows to the horses, who are “obliging” in their interactions.¹²³ Slowly, the human world begins to intercede with the “pasture’s wire,” the “shoe’s brand,” the “no hunting” sign, and the “shush of the interstate,” but these are small enough reminders not to seem threatening; the word “shush” nearly transforms the interstate’s cars into a light wind, or a mother’s whisper. In this way the quietness of the scene is maintained, forming again a tone of reverence that, like the Lane Dean section, asks the reader to enter this world and “look around,” “read these” myriad signs incised on the world.

Word repetition throughout the passage creates lexical cohesion, linking the two paragraphs together even more intensely. Though the human world is foregrounded in the second paragraph, and there is a sense of change with the introduction of the crows, the second paragraph also restates much of the information of the first with a small variation. The morning breeze becomes an “alfalfa breeze,” the steaming dew receives the print of “your shoes’ brand,” the rigid horses of the first paragraph now sniff at each other in the second, and the sun through the trees also bakes the dung. The most-repeated non-function word is “all,” and we get a sense that the passage is attempting to take in the

¹²³ The description of the horses may show Wallace as either inexperienced with equine habits, or cloaking a comic scatological impulse when he writes that “one horse smells at the other’s behind.” As far as I’ve been able to tell, horses do not sniff each other in this way, which is common among dogs.

entirety of the scene; but rather than expanding outward with further significance about these items (as the encyclopedic voice might do by using a footnote), Wallace chooses to thicken the passage by repeatedly linking its elements to themselves, causing an “invagination” or an “inset curl” whereby the passage folds back onto itself. The result is a decreased volume of data, but an increased density of apparent significance, and the entities of the passage shimmer with a sort of elemental permanence. Rather than explain the *meaning* of their presence here, as he might in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace leaves the task of interpretation to the reader, who, after all, should be the one to “read these.”

Brian McHale has considered the readability of the worm-shapes at the end of the section, arguing that they are evidence of Wallace’s conflicted relation to Pynchon, an echo with a difference. In Pynchon, McHale writes, “the world is typically poised on the brink of legibility, but the act of reading doesn’t actually happen, or is outright refused” (“The Pale King” 192).¹²⁴ By contrast, Wallace’s appeal to the reader in §1 seems “to affect a certain confidence that the world can be read” (192). Wallace’s confidence might manifest a “rebutt[al of] his postmodern precursor” (192), a way of refusing the overwhelming influence of Pynchon that McHale sees structuring much of *The Pale King*. Such confidence that the world can be read constructs a different relation between human and world: rather than see the natural world as ontologically distinct, perhaps encoded but illegible, Wallace situates the natural world as something to be engaged as a matter of course, the site of difference that is still accessible, still family.

¹²⁴ I would note that moments of similar unreadability happen as well throughout Updike, for instance when light, “broken into code by the leaves and stems of the plants on the sills, spoke no language to [Conner]” (*Poorhouse* 12), or a Monday morning offers “sunlight broken into code by puffs and schooners of cumulus” (*Couples* 46). Viewing the physical world as the site of uncertain legibility does, of course, extend beyond both Pynchon or Updike, but Wallace responds to this tendency in both of their works.

We might also interpret the invocation to “read” the patterns of the worms as an invitation to consider the meaning of non-semantic patterning more generally. Wallace is persistently interested in situations that seem *meaningful* without having a clear, specific meaning: signs or traces that are significant without having a certain, or stable, signification. Wallace’s interest in such patterns as traces likely connects to his enduring engagement with the ideas of Derrida, but it also taps into larger questions about presence (and/or absence) and the nature of meaning. On this note, Roland Barthes’s “signifying” also comes to mind, that which seems meaningful but carries only meaning itself in the abstract (in its resistance to signification it is associated with the body (*Responsibility* 270) and with “voluptuous[ness]” (271)).¹²⁵

Here, the question is: what would it mean to “read” the worm-tracks; what reading practices and sensitivities would we need to develop?¹²⁶ Similar questions apply to any non-semantic dimensions of a literary work, which even though they *are* intended as communicative (unlike the tracks), lack a single definite meaning in themselves. Benjamin Harshav identifies sound, rhythm, and repetition among such non-semantic phenomena, patterns which “profusely appear in literary texts” and interact not only with each other but also with semantic patterns (12) to shape a text at its most basic levels. As we turn to the rhythms of Wallace’s sincere voice, we must keep in mind that such phenomena are ultimately inseparable from the rest of the text, engaged in complex and

¹²⁵ Also described by Barthes as the “third meaning,” it is that which “refer[s] to the field of the signifier” (43) but “appears ‘in excess,’ as a supplement my intellection cannot quite absorb, a meaning both persistent and fugitive, apparent and evasive” (44). There is something fundamentally aesthetic and formal about this “third meaning”: just as art is (for Kant) purposiveness without purpose, “signifying” is meaningfulness without meaning. The worm tracks, in this formulation, are “signifying” even though they do not actually signify: they are form itself.

¹²⁶ And does it transform our understanding of communication as such, much like Wallace’s posthumanism in *IJ* transformed our idea of a self?

recursive relations that allow them to become meaningful in the first place. The non-semantic is meaningful but indeterminate; as Luhmann writes in *Art as a Social System*, it is the dimension of art that “circumvent[s]” language’s usual referential capacity (22), instead acting as “the provocation of a search for meaning that is constrained by the work of art without necessarily being determined in its results” (24). With this in mind—that such elements as rhythm operate in a complex and unstable relation to meaning, constrained but not determined, let us examine the complex patterns they form in §1 and consider their interactions with the other elements of the sincere voice.

Rhythms: Regular, Soothing, Balanced

We might now ask: what does sincerity sound like? What rhythmic patterns does Wallace adopt or intensify at this point in his career? So far I have demonstrated the importance of reverence and stillness for the sincere voice; those effects are shaped by the various textual levels we've seen before, but they are also deeply shaped by sonic patterning. Sound helps create an affective space, what Gumbrecht would call a "*Stimmung*" of the text,¹²⁷ which creates potentials for certain kinds of literary experience: "'Reading for *Stimmung*' always means paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality—something that can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved" (5). Adam Kelly intuits this in his experience of Wallace's sincerity, acknowledging that it can come "simply through the feeling one gets from the voice of Wallace's prose in one's head" ("Wallace and the New Sincerity" 131). This "feeling" is created in large part by the way that Wallace manipulates rhythm, tone, and register.

In the case of the sincere voice in §1, the diction is relatively basic and immediate, allowing for more regular rhythms: the words are fairly simple, and words with fewer syllables are easier to string into metrical lines without too many stacked offbeats. Even a single polysyllabic word can change the rhythmic patterning of a line, because polysyllabics are often pronounced more quickly than a collection of words with

¹²⁷ Evoking "atmosphere" and "mood" as parallel terms to "*Stimmung*," Gumbrecht proposes that literary studies, caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of deconstruction and cultural studies, can turn to reading "with *Stimmung* in mind" (3), exploring how "texts affect the 'inner feelings' of readers in the way that weather and music do" (5) and thus pursuing a "new perspective on . . . the 'ontology of literature'" (5).

the same total number of syllables.¹²⁸ Just consider the difference between “invaginate” and “all heads gently”—each is four syllables, but “invaginate” moves much more swiftly because it is a single unit and has balanced internal stresses. In this way, the two four-syllable words in this section—“invaginate” and “obligingly”—create small rhythmic instabilities because they are so unusual: they introduce pairs of offbeats that must be packed slightly tighter than other offbeat-pairs in the sentence.¹²⁹ Notably too, “invaginate” is an odd choice in terms of diction, semantically distinct and evoking a different register and conceptual world.

The stress contour of the passage is very regular, setting up an almost incantatory rhythm in its progression. Although this first sentence is somewhat long,¹³⁰ it is made up of relatively simple parts, organized to set up a rhythm that emerges from patterns at different levels: syllables, phrases, and clauses. On a phrasal level, the noun phrases (“flannel plains,” “blacktop graphs,” etc.) are collected in parallel, linked by the polysyndeton of the repeated “and” that creates its own rhythmic echo. Further, the clause groups with their heads “past” “to” and “where” are set up to create an expectation—a kind of spatial progression—that moves the sentence onward; this propulsion works at a higher level than the meter, but likewise generates the momentum to get the reader through the long list:

¹²⁸ See Arnold, who examines stress patterns in polysyllabic words. According to R.W. Rieber et al., the increase in pacing within the polysyllabic word is called “intraverbal acceleration” by Luchsinger (1957) and “telescoping” by Weiss (1964).

¹²⁹ In this case “invaginate” is subjected to a quicker beat not just because it is one word, but because the previously established beat pattern is so strong; the word must be sped up internally to make way for the larger beat pulse of the sentence. By contrast, “all heads gently nodding” is slower not just because its syllables are spread among more words, but because “all heads gently” requires three stressed syllables in a row, forming in this situation an “implied offbeat” (Attridge, *Rhythms* 174).

¹³⁰ It’s long in context, but at 88 words it is relatively low on the Wallace-scale: nothing compared to the 291 words of the sentence I examined in the chapter on the encyclopedic voice.

Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and **past** the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, **to** the place beyond the windbreak, **where** untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lambs'-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping Charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek. An arrow of starlings fired from the windbreak's thatch. The glitter of dew that stays where it is and steams all day.

Further, after that sentence the short fragments create their own heavily punctuated beat; the variation in sentence length and organization forms patterns at the level of the sentence and the paragraph.

On the lower level, of syllable prosody, the first phrase has an insistent rhythm, and it scans evenly into alternating beats and offbeats, except for the double off-beat in "skylines of":¹³¹

past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust
 B o B o B o B O B o B -o- B o B

Despite its regularity, this type of line would "pose a problem" to the "classical prosodist," as Attridge notes (*Rhythms* 11); there are eight distinct beats, but is it a trochaic octameter (eight feet) with a missing final offbeat, or an iambic octameter with a missing initial offbeat? Ultimately that line of questioning doesn't matter, for the "foot" is only a conceptual tool; what matters is that "one does not experience [lines like this] as in any way metrically irregular or anomalous" (*Rhythms* 11). Cases like this allow Attridge to argue for a beat-based prosody, because a beat/offbeat system allows us to avoid debates about scansion when those debates have no bearing on how we actually

¹³¹ We may also note a double stress in "blacktop"; following Attridge's system, I've marked it with a capital O to signify a demoted stress in the position of an offbeat.

read and experience the line.¹³² What matters is that Wallace’s opening phrase is highly regular in its metrical progression, creating a rhythmic foundation on which the rest of the passage builds.

The beginning of the next phrase with “and past” starts us off on a slightly rising rhythm, which slows the insistent onward force established by the previous phrase; this second phrase is not clearly rising or falling. But as the pace of the phrase’s beat slows, the number of syllables per beat goes up, as “tobacco-brown” and “overhung” introduce more offbeats. The increased offbeats accelerate our experience of the line, as “tobacco-brown” fits four syllables into a single beat, and “overhung” forces a more unusual triple offbeat. Here is the beat-scansion of the phrase (using the figure -o- to denote a double offbeat and ǒ to denote a triple offbeat¹³³):

-s +s -s -s +s -s s +s -s -s -s +s -s +s -s +s
 and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees
 o B -o- B -o- B ǒ B o B o B

This is a purposeful quickening: the rhythm associated with the sincere voice is relatively slow, but it can’t become too monotonously repetitive or it will become boring. And since boredom and repetition are important thematics linked to Wallace’s sincere voice,

¹³² This said, the difference between “iambic” and “trochaic” does address something experiential, which in Attridge’s system is described as the difference between rising and falling rhythms (the descriptor can apply to feet of any length). As Attridge writes, “if there is a strong tendency to link the offbeats with the following beats, the rhythm will be perceived as rising, and if the offbeats are felt as completing the movement started by the beats which precede them, we will experience a falling rhythm” (108). Rather than inserting foot-divisions that may or may not match up with the way the language works in a line, the language of rising and falling rhythms appeals to the way that syllables are grouped internally, with respect to each other. Here, the offbeats clearly follow the beats, and each disyllable is structured B o : we have a very strong falling rhythm. Falling rhythms, or “beat-initial” patterns (*Rhythms* 109) are more unusual (111) and tend to feel more pronounced; Attridge cites other critics who argue that it is “dominating” and “more insistent” than rising rhythms (Chatman, *Meter* 141, Hascall 225, both qtd. in *Rhythms* 111).

¹³³ Though Attridge uses “ǒ” to denote a double offbeat in *Rhythms of English Poetry*, word processors do not have the character he uses there for a triple offbeat. Recently in the article “In Defence of the Dolnik” Attridge adopts “-o-” for the double offbeat, which I find more intuitive; I’ve adopted that standard and will repurpose the more unusual character “ǒ” for the triple offbeat.

the prose rhythm likewise keeps the reader on a careful knife's-edge balanced between boredom and stimulation.

As the sentence continues, we return to a simple falling rhythm with only a duple beat: “with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them” returns us to the rhythmic regularity of the first phrase. Quickly enough, though, the passage builds momentum toward the list, introducing first a series of double offbeats (“**on the water downriver, to the place**”), and continuing into the speedy, heavily percussive and heavily stressed phrase “where untitled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat.” While musical scansion has its own flaws, as Attridge notes (*Rhythms*), we might find such notation useful here to demonstrate the quickened speed created by “simmer shrilly,” which provides the momentum needed to get through a list of twenty plants (compare the beat-scansion below):



Figure 4. Musical Scansion

where untitled fields simmer shrilly in the A. M. heat
 o B o B -o- B ö B o B

Notwithstanding the problems with musical scansion, namely its foregrounding of timing patterns rather than stress patterns, this example shows that it can be useful alongside more traditional methods to visualize speed-changes like that showcased here, changes that are only barely legible in the other methods.

The list that follows is also exceedingly regular in rhythm; while the scansion of each entry in the list is varied, each item is beat-initial, creating the same heavily falling rhythm that rules the passage as a whole.¹³⁴ The speed is also generally consistent, with only very minute local speed-ups or slow-downs; most of the units have either two or three syllables. Because few readers will likely know what all of these plants are—and thus not have much of a visual or intellectual experience during the reading—what is most foregrounded is the sound and the rhythm of the passage that pulls the reader forward, plunging her into a botanical incantation. In this incantatory space, the reader is listening, a position that as Nancy puts it “is always on the edge of meaning” (*Listening* 7). The reader listens—and waits—as the passage proceeds.

The expectation created by the list is that one will learn something that all the elements have in common. Soon enough, it comes—all nodding—after the reader hits “invaginate volunteer beans,” which acts as a kind of musical break, a signal that the sentence will change. (Not only does “invaginate” delay the stress until the second syllable, but the phrase takes up two beats rather than just one, and it packs in a plenitude of unstressed syllables that offer a rather surprising rhythmic shift.) Finally, after waiting, patiently, becoming rhythmized in the process, the reader learns what these plants share: they are all nodding. By this time the reader is nodding too, along with the regular beat of the list; and she feels the onrush of returned sensory detail in the soft breeze so gently touching her cheek. That gentle caress enacts a nurturing tone as well as a tender relation to the reader’s “virtual body,” what Caracciolo calls “the counterpart of the real body the

¹³⁴ Cureton would call this a “phrasal rhythm,” a pattern that relies on the alignment of phrases rather than feet (*Rhythmic Phrasing* 431).

reader sends into fictional worlds” (117). Wallace’s use of the second person further enhances the sense of presence generated in the reader, who is not just looking at the moving, almost cinematically panning scene, but now with the advent of the word “you” is being invited into the scene itself. That invitation will continue, with the later suggestions to “Look around you” and see “Your shoes’ brand incised in the dew.”

The gentle sensory engagement of the reader’s body, through both diction and rhythm, is a further quality that sets apart Wallace’s sincere voice from the previous voices. While Wallace has used the second person in his previous novels, and the rhythmic effects of other voices are certainly somatic, the connections they foster with the reader have seldom been so emotional and soothing. Instead, uses of second-person in previous novels have addressed the reader’s cognition rather than emotion, and previous rhythms have evoked the “headlong” momentum that Wallace discussed with David Kipen.

Like any technique taken alone, rhythmic patterning can be used to create myriad effects; and any one rhythm can be put to a variety of uses. In each specific case, though, an author may use rhythm in interaction with other textual patterns to build and accentuate particular effects. In this case, I’ve pointed to ways that they rhythm helps the reader by building speed towards the list, which then levels the pace out into an even chantlike rhythmic space. When using the sincere voice, Wallace’s relation to the reader is somewhat more nurturing than it was in the past, building an association between these regular rhythms and the gentleness of “flannel plains” and the “mother’s soft hand,” the opening and closing moments of the sentence. By beginning with dependent clauses that

all precede the main bulk of the sentence, Wallace leads the sentence to climax with the most soothing element, “all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother’s soft hand on your cheek.”

After this climax, Wallace gives the reader time to breathe, letting the sentiment resound. As a result, he backs off into a series of short sentences that slow down significantly. Further, these short sentences share almost exactly the same rhythm, both on the most basic level (scansion) and on the second level (phrasal) (see Cureton, “Multilevel Analysis” 244-47). On the phrasal level, the beats here land on the most grammatically prominent words (and the stress scansion is duplicated except for the addition of “all day” in the second sentence:

-s	+s	-s	-s	+s	-s	+s	-s	-s	+s	-s	+s
An arrow of starlings fired from the windbreak’s thatch.											
B			B			B					

-s	+s	-s	-s	+s	-s	+s	-s	-s	+s	-s	+s	<u>s</u>	+s
The glitter of dew that stays where it is and steams all day.													
B			B			B							

This phrasal or beat-rhythm, the larger pulse of the sentences, comes through much more prominently to the reader than does the metrical scansion, as is often the case in prose rather than poetry. As a result, the slowing effect is enhanced because we attune to the higher level of hierarchy, feeling the three beats more distinctly than the five (and then six) metrical stresses.

Following long sentences with short ones (especially fragments) is a typical technique by which Wallace balances sentence rhythms; he even identifies this technique in a letter to *Infinite Jest*’s copyeditor, whom he warns not to mistakenly treat this

technique as an error (Max 120). But here, the technique is more pronounced, with so many fragments that the balance is shifted: it's not the short sentence that balance out the headlong energy of the long ones, but rather the long sentences that break up the stillness of the short ones. As this passage is in some ways an exercise in the sentence fragment, Wallace also plays with the length of the shorter sentences, lengthening and shortening them to create momentum and then stillness by turns. The shortest sentences become more prominent, punctuating the passage and regulating the temporal and conceptual rhythm of the paragraph.¹³⁵ "All nodding" offers a summative closure that applies backward to the entirety of what has come before; "Very old land" implies a timeless continuity to these processes; and "Look around you" addresses the narrative audience, centering the scene on a physically and phenomenologically located individual perspective. These short fragments are all important to the various dimensions of the sincere voice, and the rhythmic emphasis afforded by their duration and positioning brings them, and their effects, to the reader's perceptual foreground.

At the scale of the paragraph, the rhythmic progression is effected less by the audiation of the text's metrical progression; instead, our sense of a paragraph's rhythmic flow is based more on the logic of content progression, created through cohesive ties and other techniques of coherence. Michael Duncan has argued as much: at the "sentence and paragraph level," "written prose has its own set of perceptible patterns of balance or proportion . . . This non-auditory order, for which readers gain sensitivity through

¹³⁵ The paragraph is a relatively large dimension that Cureton's multi-level analysis (1985) does not address, since his system is based on verse poetry rather than prose. As a result, his system skews toward minute distinctions that are far more significant in poetic discourse. His most recent articles, a series of "Readings in Temporal Poetics," gesture toward more global logics of progression but remain focused on short lyric verse.

experience and genre familiarity, corresponds to the visual-mental process of text interpretation” (580). His analysis suggests that when we approach prose in terms of rhythm, an emphasis on sound can be restrictive and we can profitably consider various dimensions of a passage’s content as well.

At this scale, the patterns of lexical cohesion I considered earlier have a rhythmic logic in addition to their stylistic and world-building effects. The recurrence of the same word, phrase, or entity can set up more prolonged patterns that operate at nearly any of the content-oriented scales; with cohesion, we could track rhythmic progression on a much larger scale that could even approach the entire novel. Cohesion through recurrence of an entity or idea sets up patterns between distinct frames of reference (following Harshav). For example, in this passage, the progression of sentences follows both animate and inanimate domains almost equally, tending to alternate between them. For instance, at the end of the paragraph, beginning with “Electric sounds of insects,” the frames of reference are as follows:

Electric sounds of insects at their business.	–Animate
Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus . . .	–Inanimate
Insects all business all the time.	–Animate
Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs . . .	–Inanimate
Very old land.	–Inanimate
Look around you.	–Animate
The horizon trembling, shapeless.	–Inanimate
We are all of us brothers.	–Animate
Total sequence:	A I A I I A I A

By identifying the frames of reference (which, of course, we could have labeled differently: the critic’s choice is unlimited, but should be prompted by the text), we can become more explicitly aware of an evenly structured alternation that underlies the end of

the passage; the sequence is as follows: A I A I I A I A. Wallace moves back and forth between these realms, focusing first on the insects and then transitioning, in the realm of the animate, to addressing the reader. This rhythmic alternation of frames of reference sets up a pattern that links insect and human against the larger background of the inanimate world.

By itself, this alternating pattern might appear simply an aesthetic effect, the result of Wallace's delicate transition from describing the physical world to inviting the (human) reader into the pastoral scene. But the end of the second paragraph—the final suggestion that worms are capable of composing something readable—brings this pattern into further relief. There, too, the insect world is conflated with the human, a suggestion that might be more surprising had Wallace not prepared for it with the subtle association of the first paragraph. In this, the rhythmic effects of the paragraph as a whole work upward to have an impact on values: the temporal patterning of these two frames of reference causes the reader to hold both frames in mind concurrently, going back and forth until those frames are overlaid and become linked conceptually. The rhythm helps increase the sense that humans are in a way *like* insects, which suggests that we should integrate a further item in our account of the novel's values: the demotion of the human and the elevation of the animal into a shared physical and ethical space. Wallace's relation to nature at this phase in his career is no longer distanced and apocalyptic, as it was in *Infinite Jest*. Instead, it is immediate and appreciative: it has shifted from the horror of the sublime to the appreciation of the pastoral.

If we shift to view the passage as a whole, it is relevant that both of these

moments, with the insects and the worms, take place at a paragraph's end; both work as climaxes, building a consistent rhythm of paragraph-formation overall. Previously I found that rhythmic regularity, at the level of syllables, contributed to the profundity and poetic stillness of the sincere voice. Here is a similar regularity, at the level of the paragraph: each opens with a long sentence and then moves to short fragments before expanding again into the final image. The imagistic effects of this rhythmic profile are strong, helping to underscore the natural object-oriented position of the narrator, who waxes descriptive on the worm-hieroglyphs before ending with the short, pointed request: "read these." The narrator's brief, punctuated directness makes explicit the idea that these not only suggest readability but *could be read*. Such a move to the explicit recalls the Lane Dean section: Lane's epiphanic realization that Sheri cannot "carry a child alone and shame her family" (*TPK* 44) likewise makes Sheri's pregnancy a matter of fact and not suggestion. In both instances, Wallace uses voice to produce the impact of these climaxes, reinforcing our sense that voice is invested in the process of *revealing* something, making things *clear*, in addition to providing comfort about the possibility of action, showing us "rhythm as coping" (Freer). The religious implications of such a commitment are evident, especially in contrast to Wallace's earlier novels, where very little is revealed and the implicit stays that way more often than not.

Sonic Patterning: The Texture of Sound

The temporal patterning of this section is, like the rhythm of each voice, quite deliberate. But the rhythms of the sincere voice are more finely wrought, more “pretty,” than they have been in Wallace’s previous voices. With this increased emphasis on the prettiness of his writing, Wallace focuses his attention of sonic techniques like assonance and consonance, manipulating not just the metrical flow of his sentences but the dynamics of their sonic profile. For example, here Wallace uses the interaction of sound and meaning to associate /n/ and /p/ sounds with gentleness, and then he uses that association to invoke such a feeling later on (and as I will show this is just one of the sonic patterns present in this passage.) I have not treated this kind of sonic patterning in such detail in my chapters on *Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest* in part because those voices do not typically have the degree of poeticity that Wallace pursues in *The Pale King*.¹³⁶ But, since it appears to me as an important part of Wallace’s voice-work at this stage in his career, I find it useful to dig in a bit deeper with Wallace’s strategies with sound here, as it changes the way we read and further impacts the tone and values of the passage.

Sound is important for Wallace, especially in this very poetic section—but as Craig Dworkin writes, “the question, of course, is exactly *how* sound comes to be important” (11). Is it through an association of sound with sense, a connotation built up in

¹³⁶ Nevertheless, moments of nature description recur across most of Wallace’s texts, and those moments often display this highly poetic quality. Though an extended treatment of Wallace’s nature writing is out of the scope of my project, I will note that Wallace’s nature descriptions in earlier texts focus on the sublime (nature as excessive, threatening), and it is not until later in his career that he shifts to the pastoral mode that obtains in §1.

a particular language and culture? Does sound have its own inherent meaning?¹³⁷ The answer seems to be somewhere in the middle: sound is a medium with its own tendencies, but those tendencies can be put to various uses when sound-forms are brought into contact with other elements of the text. When sound patterns interact with other patterns in language (both nonsemantic and semantic), sound can become more invested with particular meaning-potentials latent within it.

Benjamin Harshav offers the best account of how sound takes on meaning, calling it an “interaction theory” by which sonic patterns, coordinated with semantic ones, become associated with particular topics or affects. Harshav understands the text as a dynamic system of overlapping patterns (sonic and otherwise) that can interact in multiple ways, through what Dworkin calls “a back-and-forth process of recursive feedback” (12). With sound, Harshav summarizes this “two-directional process” as follows: “first, a sound pattern is established, then, certain meanings in the same text are transferred to the sound pattern, and then the tone of this sound pattern, colored by such meanings, is transferred back to the level of meaning, reinforcing it” (Harshav 144). Though “no meaning can be imputed to the sounds themselves,” the “meanings of the words . . . make the sounds carriers of some expressive meaning, or shades of meaning” (143).

¹³⁷ In the introduction to his chapter on sound, Harshav identifies the two positions as well represented by M. Grammont (1967), who argued that sounds are inherently expressive, and P. Delbouille (1961), who criticized such arguments and considered sound “as merely a contextual matter” (Harshav 140). Since then, scholars in sound studies have been less interested in the question of sound’s meaning/signification, and more interested in investigating sound as a medium. Still, the historical constructionist critical orthodoxy currently in place would lean toward siding with Delbouille that sound’s meaning (along with sound-related forms like rhyme and meter) is determined entirely by historical and social context. See Meredith Martin for such an argument along the lines of metrical form. Some scholars in stylistics are more amenable to the suggestion that sounds may have inherent expressiveness; this relation is called *phonaesthesia* (Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics*).

Here I want to show how Wallace's introductory section uses sound in this way to contribute to the sincere voice: the coloring of certain sonic elements with a nurturing and soft affective weight allows those elements of the diction to resonate throughout the passage. Harshav classifies this type of association as "expressive sound patterns," whereby a group of sounds is made to express a particular "tone" or "*Stimmung*" (Harshav 152). Once I highlight that interaction through two particular patterns, I will turn to another mode of association that Harshav identifies, that of "focusing sound patterns," which may be more generally useful to prose studies because of its structural implications.

As is the case with all complex systems, the beginning of the passage is especially important, because of its "primacy effect" (Harshav 143). The first clause of the passage ("past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust") foregrounds the consonants /p/ and /n/: these are some of the first sounds we hear in the line, and further, the syllables containing them are stressed, increasing their centrality. We hear the resonance of /p/ in "past" and "plains," and slightly less so in "blacktop." Alongside the /p/ pattern, the /n/ pattern is set up by "flannel" and "plains," "canted" and lightly reinforced by "skylines."¹³⁸ These patterns do not stay the same throughout the entire passage (and it's probably intended that they do not; excessive alliteration is something that Wallace criticized in Updike), but their establishment and variation are part of the

¹³⁸ Simply tracking the incidence of a phoneme is not enough to demonstrate its foregrounding; differences in a phoneme's place with respect to the rhythm(s) of a passage can create differences in resonance, so the phonemes in "sky" are more prominent than those in "lines" because of the pronounced emphasis on "sky." There are other phenomena that affect sonic resonance, such as word-initial position, or proximity to vowels; but here I will gloss over these fine distinctions and focus on the more global effects of sound patterning in this passage.

complex set of sonic effects that contribute to the sincere voice.

By themselves these sounds are (relatively) meaningless, but situated in this line the sounds become linked to the meanings. /P/, from “past” and “plains,” begins to take on a slight association with an abstract distance and flatness, further emphasized by “blacktop” and “place.” Intriguingly, though, the recurrence of /p/ pattern backs off through most of the passage; after its initial prominence in the slow panning that sets up the scene, /p/ is replaced by other sounds that gain prominence until the very end. Still, its comparative strength is so strong at first that, as Harshav writes, it can “overshadow other groupings of sounds” (143) (for instance the /r/ pattern that begins with “rust” but doesn’t become evident until around “simmer shrilly”).

/P/ doesn’t disappear, though; it gains prominence again near the end, with the phrases “past the windbreak,” and “pasture’s crows . . . turning up patties” to reveal the “shapes” of worms. The recurrence of /p/ sounds near the end brings out again a sense of distance, flatness, and abstraction, because the sound has been “colored” and now “can return to color the meanings of words,” even when the later semantic reinforcement is weaker (Harshav 144). The abstraction initially associated with /p/, plus the passage’s final appeal to shapes, helps diminish the visceral fact of the patties’ *material*, instead foregrounding their shape,¹³⁹ and prepares readers to leave the purely sensorial field, preparing them for the hermeneutic, abstracting appeal of the request to “read these.”

Though /n/, like /p/, is established from the outset, it is patterned in a different

¹³⁹ Despite the anti-viscerality, Michael Pietsch points out that this passage, alongside *Oblivion*’s “The Suffering Channel,” is “preoccupied with shit, art, and death” (qtd. in Burn, “Paradigm” 386n4, and Burn maintains that the novel more broadly shows “fascination with bodily waste” (ibid. 387n17). The treatment of waste is not always so euphemistic as it is in §1.

way both in terms of meaning and structure. From the start, /n/ carries a sense of intimacy and softness through its interplay with “flannel,” which brings out the softness of the distant “plains” and the enclosed feeling of the river “overhung” by trees and “coins of sunlight.” /N/ also unites with the related sound /ŋ/ to form a consistent nasal backdrop to the passage, a pattern that is central to some of the passage’s most emotionally marked moments: the heads “gently nodding in the morning breeze” like a “soft hand” both evoke and reinforce the pattern that has already been established. The predominance of this sound throughout the passage, combined with its comforting and gentle associations, works to maintain that atmosphere overall. Finally, /n/ works at the climax of the section to humanize the “tiny vacant lines in rows and and inset curls,” coloring “vacant” so it appears intriguing rather than ominously empty. Again, but in a different way from /p/, the /n/ pattern works at beginning and end to support the delicate construction of meaning and to maintain the sincere voice’s qualities on the sonic level.

Of course, the two sound patterns I’ve identified are not the only active ones; the passage makes abundance use of sound in a variety of ways, for elegant variation and atmospheric effects as well as to structure meaning. Rather than consider individual patterns further, though, I’d like to show how their variation and progression structures the passage on a sonic level. Specifically, different sound patterns become prominent at different moments, as one set of sounds cedes textual ground to the next. Such variations in sound, or “focusing word patterns” (Harshav) can highlight differences in meaning, focusing our attention on differences in content.

These patterns work through the use of breaks and transitions (much like a song’s

change in key that may signify a transition in purpose or meaning), meaning they are potentially less recursive than the “expressive word patterns.” As I mentioned above, the /p/ pattern is most active at the very beginning and end of the passage—otherwise it’s not even present. In between, the list is set off from its introduction by a strong sonic shift to a sound cluster of /s/, /z/, /t/, /r/, and /k/¹⁴⁰ (shattercane, lamb’s quarter, cutgrass). While after the list, /n/ and /ŋ/ regain prominence in the moment I noted before, afterward the collection of /s/ (or /z/), /t/, and /r/ sounds becomes prominent again: “An arrow of starlings fired from the windbreak’s thatch. The glitter of dew that stays where it is and steams all day. A sunflower, four more, one bowed, and horses in the distance standing rigid and still as toys.”

Here sound takes on a structural dimension, whereby coherent patterning in one section distinguishes its content from other locations that are patterned differently. Such counterpointing of sound clusters becomes especially evident when we consider that the phrase that directly follows these lines (“All nodding”) shares nothing with this sonic cluster, instead momentarily reverting us to the associational context of the passage’s /n/-centric beginning. After the momentary break provided by “all nodding” we return to the cluster of /s/, /z/, and /t/ for four sentences, before shifting to that of /n/, /d/, and /l/ at the end of the paragraph: “Very old land. Look around you.”¹⁴¹ These shifting clusters

¹⁴⁰ /K/ is strongly present in this position, but later on it drops out of the cluster.

¹⁴¹ For simplicity, I’ve avoided addressing vowel sounds and the role of assonance in this section, but it’s clear that the local prominence of “o” sounds in “All nodding” and “Very old land. Look around you” helps these passages to gain an internal coherence and thus a stronger resonance. In general, vowel patterning in the passage seems regulated by local concerns for assonance and onomatopoeia, rather than global patterns of structuring contrast. Still, the intense variation of vowels becomes evident in phrases like “quartz and chert and schist and chondite iron scabs,” which runs the reader through an incredible vocalic sequence. This type of patterning deserves more attention than I can give it here.

structure the passage, signaling transitions and corresponding to differences in content.¹⁴² Further, distances in sound clusters invite the reader to examine the careful patterning of sound, an invitation that, if it is taken up, begins to create Wallace's ideal readers: those who are willing to pay very close attention to something that may or may not be significant in the final account.

While I do notice the presence of distinct sound clusters structuring the passage, I do not see any strong thematic "motifs" (Harshav 154) that correspond to that clustering. The variation of sounds is of course a valuable aesthetic technique; some variation is necessary to avoid the sense of overdone sound patterning (an excess that Wallace identified in Updike's later prose¹⁴³). Instead of attributing meaning to the organization of sound clusters, then, we might see sound as a special form of cohesion: I'll call it "sonic cohesion." Rather than operating through grammatical or lexical relations, though, sonic cohesion works by establishing links through sound repetition and then perpetuating those links into cohesive chains (see Hoey, *Patterns of Lexis in Text* for more on cohesive chains).¹⁴⁴ The patterning of sound establishes chains of continuity throughout the

¹⁴² Those differences may be hard to find, and we shouldn't force every text that offers focusing patterns to use them as a central resource. Since this type of structuring doesn't necessarily carry any meaning, its impact on meaning and on the reader's experience can be variable; sometimes, as Harshav writes, sound patterns are "autonomous" with respect to other patterns, and they can involve "words thematically not related to the central group" (153).

¹⁴³ He notes repeatedly in the margins of *Toward the End of Time* the heavy alliteration and assonance, for example when Updike writes, "the broad sea blares a blue I would not have thought obtainable" (296 in the book's advance proofs).

¹⁴⁴ When we think in these terms, it becomes evident that sound operates as a sort of infrastructure: a base level of organization that works to move the reader through the text and its sense relations. Usually invisible, infrastructure is nevertheless fundamentally important, and its organization is crucial to the normal processing of systems; it is not usually active in itself, but rather a basic enabler of human activity. While I lack the space to develop this here, it seems relevant to link sound to infrastructure because (1) it highlights the way that a stratum lacking in consistent hermeneutic value can operate significantly in a text and (2) Wallace demonstrates an interest in infrastructure throughout his career.

passage that give it a stronger poetic effect, turning language itself into the object of the sincere voice's reverence. Just as the rhythmic patterns had upward effects that refined our sense of the voice's values, so do the sonic patterns have an impact on our perception of both tone and values, reinforcing the sense of reverence and connecting the linguistic dimension to the thematic dimension of the novel.

Conclusion: Reading the Sincere Voice and Conscious Worship

Wallace's use of sound (and his image of the worm-tracks) asks readers to approach the text not just as the locus of communication, but also as a series of patterns in themselves, open to the reader's attentive eye and ear, if she is only willing to apply her open-minded attention and allow the text to guide her. The sincere voice, then, does not only enact its semi-religious values and reverent tone; with its style and sound, it actively invites and cultivates them in the reader. All of Wallace's voices have an overt interest in the reader, but the sincere voice focuses the reader on emotional openness, on feeling along with the undramatic struggles of the characters who struggle with the "placid hopelessness of adulthood" (*TPK* 255) and seek to find moments of meaning and transcendence within it.

The cultivation of these values, Wallace knows, might be an uphill battle; asking the reader to take seriously Lane Dean's religious struggle, his "moment of grace," and even Bible quotations—in a David Foster Wallace novel!—is a lot to ask. Overall, the sincere voice reveals a deep commitment to the value of worship, a topic Wallace addresses in depth in his 2005 Kenyon commencement speech "This is Water," where he warns graduates not to "over-intellectualize stuff" or "[get] hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head," but rather to work on "simply paying attention to what's going on right in front of [you]." That type of attention can help one break out of one's "unconscious" "default-settings" that block one from living intersubjectively in the world.

It's not just consciousness of those default settings that will improve life, though; the key is to choose one's own values in order to find a life worth living. To do this

requires embracing a purpose—finding something to which to devote oneself. As a result, Wallace avers, “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping” (*This is Water* 98-99), “[a]nd an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive” (102). The characters of *The Pale King*—not just Lane Dean, Jr., but also Stecyk, David Cusk, “Irrelevant” Ken Fogle, Toni Ware, Meredith Rand, “David Wallace,” Drinion, and the nameless boy who kisses every location on his body—are either devoting themselves to tasks and goals, or seeking the internal stillness and centeredness required for that devotion.

Through this focus on devotion, the values of the sincere voice extend across the entire novel, such that dissimilar moments are subordinated to the “sincere” purposes. When the character “David Wallace” appears and claims, saying “Author here,” that this is his memoir, we plausibly read these sections as Wallace parodying his old voice (as Kontantinou suggests, “‘Bad’ Influence” 59). Or when the style changes to appear encyclopedic (as with the short §11, a list of medical syndromes associated with lengthy Examinations postings [89]), we nevertheless read this in terms the values of devotion. As a result, readers can recognize that while the *form* of the scientific list does not offer many clues to its voice, its narrative purposes in context are to examine the immense challenge of the tax examiner job and the physical toll it can take on its willing, devoted workers. Rather than destabilizing the sincere voice, then, in this way even passages like §11 *reinforce* our larger understanding of the sincere voice.

In a proper recursive manner, though, readers will only read data-inflected

sections like §11 in this way if they have been paying attention to Wallace's changes so far in the book's voice. Devoted readers of Wallace, those who have enjoyed his hyper-intellectualized, restlessly informative and comic mind in *Broom of the System* and *Infinite Jest*, have to recalibrate their understanding of Wallace when they read *The Pale King*: a list of disorders no longer means the same thing, even though it looks the same as an *Infinite Jest*-style "data dump."¹⁴⁵ There is a danger that readers who already know his work will have reified the implied Wallace of *Broom* or *IJ*, and become incapable or unwilling to revise their previous conception of his fictional project. An attentive reader, though, will have picked up on the critiques of information offered in §2, when Claude Sylvanshine reflects, "Reynolds' dictum was that reality was a fact-pattern the bulk of which was entropic and random. The trick was homing in on which facts were important" (18); he then remembers that "As Dr. Lehl had explained it, entropy was a measure of a certain type of information that there was no point in knowing" (14). Wallace is still interested in facts, but he realizes now that they both illuminate *and* obscure lived human life. Some information is relevant, but as Sylvanshine knows all too well—he is a fact-psychic whose mind is flooded with intrusive data—much of the time information feels completely useless.

Broadly, then, the sincere voice reflects a substantial shift in Wallace's purposes as a novelist. While in *Broom* he was a playful comic, blending humor and philosophy, and while in *Infinite Jest* he plumbed the many levels of the world with a careful

¹⁴⁵ In this assessment I differ from Stephen Burn, who writes, "sometimes these miniature chapters are simply data, bureaucratic scraps irrupting into the novel" ("Paradigm" 381). These scraps of data are set into the text to demonstrate, more or less explicitly, the difficulty of the examiners' jobs and the corresponding magnitude of their dedication.

encyclopedic eye, in *The Pale King* he makes a sustained effort to obtain that quality most praised by the *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani, to write fiction that is “deeply felt”¹⁴⁶ (and she did name *The Pale King* “his most emotionally immediate work” [“Maximized”]). Its investigation into boredom is the flip side of *IJ*’s into entertainment: both are about attention, and the relation of attention to emotionally developed human life. As Wallace’s alter ego “David Wallace” writes in §9 of *The Pale King*, “Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that’s dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention” (87). *The Pale King*’s calls for attention ask us to aim not just for mindfulness, but also for an acceptance of sadness much richer than Hal’s catatonic withdrawal in *Infinite Jest*; and it suggests that a mental turn inward can be healthy as well as destructive. In this light, *Infinite Jest* offers a diagnosis, while *The Pale King* searches for a cure, offering the sincere voice in all its earnest reverence as part of that cure.

We should see the sincere voice in this way, as a synthetic whole: a constructed persona and mentality, a model for experiencing the world. It constructs an implied Wallace with a soft side, a sensitivity to regular human anguish that makes him less a friendly teacher and more a tender confidant. The Lane Dean section, with its focus on attention, ethics, and religion, offers a distilled expression of this newly worshipful

¹⁴⁶ On “deeply felt” becoming a cliché of Kakutani’s reviews, see Wickman and Goss, “40 Things Michiko Kakutani Has ‘Deeply Felt.’”

attitude, what Konstantinou calls Wallace's "postironic belief" ("No Bull" 85); Konstantinou writes, "What Wallace wants is not so much a religious correction to secular skepticism allegedly run amok as new forms of belief—the adoption of a kind of religious vocabulary (God, prayer, etc.) emptied out of specific content" (86). Lane's religiosity is one distinct presentation of the devotional attitude that suffuses the novel; when applied to the labor of the tax examiners, this attitude creates what Severs calls Wallace's "gospel of work," the sense that one's labor can offer transcendence rather than alienation (*Balancing Books* 89).

But as Konstantinou writes, this devotion lacks "specific content"; as an attitude rather than a belief system, it can apply to anything, from other people to one's work to the natural world. This means it operates quite effectively as tone, an attitude directed toward the storyworld and toward the telling about it. In §1 the voice adopts this worshipful orientation, diverging significantly from the signature stylistic techniques of past voices. That section's stylistic, rhythmic, and sonic techniques—which form the base level *how* of narrative communication—work to create, stabilize, and thicken our sense of the serious and reverent qualities of the voice. When applied to nature, these techniques lead us to draw connections between human and nonhuman, creating a sense that the nonhuman is somehow vibrantly alive and potentially friendly. This animism stands in distinct opposition to the alienated, deterministic sense of the world that informs *The Broom of the System*. The sincere, reverent voice thus works to maintain a mental stillness in contrast to a world (and a mind) that is otherwise overwhelmingly fast. Its stylistic elements produce this stillness as well, as the regular rhythmic patterning and the

sonic structuring create a sense of regularity and order, giving the reader the soothing predictability of language's temporal flow. At the same time, the passage maintains some degree of punctuated surprise by slowly revealing the ways that the world of the field is internally coherent. The overall effect is a lyrical pastoral radiance, nurturing the reader and harmonizing her with the fictional world and with the language that creates it.

These dimensions of the voice invite the reader to cultivate a perceptual and emotional openness that forms the ethical and affective foundation of the "sincere" attitude. Rather than adopt the visual emphasis of the comical voice, or the conceptual emphasis of the encyclopedic voice, Wallace aims here for *resonance*, an openness to the world that resists the preordained directionality of the eye and the pre-existing structures of the mind. That is, the visual emphasis of *Broom* fits into larger thematic concerns about looking, seeing, and objectification that figure the eye as directional, pointed; and the conceptual emphasis of *Infinite Jest* seeks to fit the world into a systemic synthesis of conceptual frameworks. In their antic and confident approach to the world, each of these struggles to manifest the vulnerability of *The Pale King*, whose turn to the sonic helps conceive a different relation between self and world. As Nancy writes, "the visual is tendentially mimetic, and the sonorous tendentially methexic (that is, having to do with participation, sharing, or contagion)" (10); Wallace wants his readers to participate in, but also to be infected by, their role in the narrative.

The sense of sonic "resonance," helps Wallace reconceive his idea of author-reader communication; rather than seduce and abuse the reader with knowledge, or (as he does in "Octet") neurotically prostrate himself before the reader, in *The Pale King* he

appeals to the reader as someone who can share in the world he has created. In this resonating sharing, the reader is asked to approach “being as resonance” (Nancy 21), entering a more neutral and even Buddhistic approach to the world that does not involve strong expectations or preconceived intentionality.¹⁴⁷ In Nancy’s terms, the reader shifts from being a “phenomenological subject, an intentional line of sight”—someone who has a perceptual direction and purpose—and becomes “a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo” (21). Such a resonance again animates the (textual) world, as it enacts a sense of intersubjectivity between reader and text (and, by implication, author). The sincere voice, then, enacts the “living transaction” (Severs 1) of the text as the transaction of a gift being circulated—a sharing of the given of the world—and asks the reader to take on this attentive and other-directed mentality as part of a larger ethical quest.

¹⁴⁷ Wallace’s fiction has been linked to Buddhist concepts by various scholars, but in print the most thorough engagements have been by Mary Holland in “David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet’ and the ‘Atthakavagga,’” and by Krzysztof Piekarski, whose dissertation examines *Buddhist Philosophy in the Work of David Foster Wallace*.

Epilogue

In the previous pages I have aimed to give as full an elaboration as possible of the narrative voices of David Foster Wallace, providing a detailed portrait of an entire career, deepening critical understanding of each novel individually, and showcasing the potential of a rhetorical narrative approach to voice. In each chapter I have situated Wallace both biographically and historically, as someone who was striving at once to be appreciated by friends, lovers, and reviewers, as well as to become someone who will be read “100 years from now” (Max 23). I argue that the careful shaping of voice is central to Wallace’s distinctive prose and its impact on contemporary American fiction, and that an approach to voice will advance our understanding of where fiction has been and where it will go.

Both highly influential and highly influenced, Wallace’s writing is deeply embedded in American literature. I have offered the first large-scale account of Wallace’s poetics, grounding his various effects in specific linguistic techniques and tying those effects to larger cultural and literary-historical trends, like the ascendant “new sincerity” in literature. Linking poetics to ethics, I show how Wallace’s voices, from comic to encyclopedic to sincere, index his changing relation to his imagined readers over time. By classifying Wallace’s voices I also identify a clear progression in his authorial purposes and values, tracing the career path leading to his influential “new sincerity” and

revealing significant influences for each novel, from Thomas Pynchon to James Joyce to John Updike.

As a budding novelist, Wallace writes the comedic *Broom of the System*; as a maturing artist, he composes the encyclopedic and informational *Infinite Jest*; and as an established author he devotes himself to the sincerity and reverence of *The Pale King*. Each of these has a dominant voice, which subordinates other voices—both narrator and character—to its ends. This dominant voice is a structuring force for each novel and shows us how to read its otherwise bewildering plurality; with voice, Wallace guides us to read in a particular way. Wallace’s comic voice, which I examine in chapter one, accommodates his intellectual, yet childish energy, but also his discomfort with emotional immediacy. While Wallace later disavowed his early work, he also takes pride in his “grossly sentimental affection for gags, for stuff that’s nothing but funny” (McCaffery 24), and the manic energy in *The Broom of the System* shows him poking fun at male desire, media culture, and philosophy often all at once. Its slapstick style adopts a cartoonish irrationalism and blends it with scenes from Pynchon, updating Black Humor in the direction of Avant-Pop. And his paragraphs contain steady, rhythmic buildups that often end with a twist and a quick cut, much like a punch line and a commercial break, revealing the way that Wallace remediates visual effects into his fiction.

As he composes *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wants to connect more deeply with readers but also to share his knowledge, testing and expanding our perceptual capacity. In chapter two I engage this 1,079 page encyclopedic novel, which transmits information in an exhaustive-yet-accessible manner, verging on excess with its hundreds of footnotes. Here

Wallace seeks to join the encyclopedic tradition of novelists like Joyce, Gaddis, and Pynchon, but he differs by emphasizing the ethical dimension of knowledge, transmuting the aesthetic epiphany from Joyce into a mathematical one that has immense ethical consequences across the entire novel. By layering different conceptual domains (for instance, he deftly intertwines neurochemical, psychological, sociological, and political perspectives) he leads his readers to make complex ethical judgments about addiction, emotion, and free will. Further, his sentences and paragraphs offer a slower and more delayed, irregular rhythm than the comic voice; here he develops the “rhythm of long things swinging” (*Infinite Jest* 183) in an attempt to stretch the reader’s attention and test the limits of temporal form.

Finally, Wallace’s work on *The Pale King* reflects his development of a newly sincere voice, earnest in tone and attentive to everyday life in middle America, following his realist antecedent John Updike. In chapter three I show how this sincere voice shifts Wallace’s tone toward reverence, pursuing a sense of stillness and space for emotional reflection among scenes of nature. Wallace uses a highly poetic style and slow, balanced rhythms drawn from Updike to make his prose more “pretty” and soothing for the reader, in contrast to the chaotic-looking cascade of *Infinite Jest*. That Wallace continues to evolve as a writer shows his remarkable commitment to change and fear of stagnation, and in *The Pale King* Wallace is at his most vulnerable as an author, engaging the discomfort of emotional depth and challenging topics like spirituality and abortion. Since early in his career, Wallace had avowed that the next new development in fiction would come from “anti-rebels” with “the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre

values,” treating “untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction” (“E Unibus” 81); with the sincere voice, he finally begins to attain that ideal.

Some elements of Wallace’s style are consistent across his body of work, and he is most known for the signature voice of *Infinite Jest*, with sentences that go on for pages and double back on themselves in intricate ways. Despite the abbreviated story I tell here, Wallace’s career is not a story of *total* reinvention, but rather a progression of shifting affects and purposes, reflected by changes in voice, that take place slowly over his entire life. Some techniques remain the same, while others change: with the sincere voice, Wallace the craftsman strives to reinvent himself and to create a new, distinct experience for the reader, and in particular, stylistic changes are a significant part of Wallace’s transformation of voice. Despite this, many of his themes and motifs return, treated in new ways, and across his entire career he values an emphasis on diligent attention and the ability not only to make acute judgments about what is happening, but also to judge the limits and affordances of any framework for judging in the first place.

“Make It New”?

Seeing his voices and purposes as part of an ongoing development makes him seem at once a highly traditional figure and a very unusual one: an author who grows up, moving from sophomoric to deep feeling, but also an author who is determined to change, even if it means fixing something—his encyclopedic voice—that already works incredibly well. His desire to change is at the root of his eternal student approach to writing; despite the critical sense that the Wallace of *The Pale King* was, as an author, finally his own man, his engagement with Updike in this period shows that he is still preoccupied with absorbing and transmuting the voices of other authors. For reasons of space I have had to abbreviate my insights about Wallace’s use of influences, but the archival records of his reading, combined with the many drafts upon drafts also held in the Harry Ransom Center, show that Wallace really labored to create, and that he used other authors’ language as the tools of his trade. In this light he appears, somehow, less original than we imagined—or at least, more embedded in his own literary history, more insecure about his ability, and driven less by call than by response.

This vision, I think, would be a mistake—a partial truth. Such a deflation should last only until the reader returns to Wallace’s language, which remains some of the most rewarding, intricately worked, playful and imaginative writing of our time. “It’s not what you lift, it’s where you carry it,” Wallace told a listener on David Kipen’s radio show, and even when Wallace’s influences are clearly legible they are evident not as groveling tribute but as conversation, citation, play. So even as I cast Wallace in this light—as imitator of voices, “weird” “forger” extraordinaire (Lipsky 258)—we should see voice-

work as Wallace's gift, what made it possible for him not only to learn from the masters but to transmute the babble of American life into insistently readable art.

The approach to voice that I adopt, drawn as it is from Phelan's rhetorical theory of narrative, helps bridge the gap between Wallace's imitation and creation. The multiple interacting dimensions of voice—values, tone, style, and rhythm—each have their own tendencies, their own investments whether ethical, affective, conceptual, generic, political, temporal, and so on. This means that Wallace can imitate another author but change one or more elements of the voice, integrating the influence while also making it his own. So while Wallace's worldbuilding in *Broom* is distinctly Pynchonian, for instance, his tone and values transform that influence to make it part of his own slapstick vision. This systemic approach to voice is immensely powerful: it helps me break down Wallace's changes over time, identifying what changes and what stays the same; it allows me to pinpoint what he adopts from whom, and why; and it allows me to separate the many threads that make up the texture of our readerly experience, illuminating the subtleties of Wallace's communication and what it asks of its readers. Further, this method offers a distinct take on the act of reading at a local level, reading with the grain of Wallace's purposes and attempting to sift the intricate set of forces—linguistic, aesthetic, intertextual, and social—that he balances in his prose. As such, I see Wallace's novels as nodes in a complex, groundbreaking career that, while cut short, is remarkable in its variety as well as its internal continuity and coherence.

Continuities and Further Avenues

Looking back over the project, with its emphasis on the differences between the voices, I'd like to discuss briefly some of the continuities in Wallace's project: themes that have come back from chapter to chapter, though typically on the periphery of my analysis. The voices change but certain preoccupations remain the same: the posthuman, gender, and communication; in each one of the novels, my analysis of Wallace's voice has led me to see how Wallace returns to these themes in each novel. Moreover, I'd like to speculatively assert here that these three thematics show Wallace's thorough rethinking of rhetoric and ethics, insofar as those thematics represent, respectively, Wallace's conception of the self, his understanding of the other, and the relation between them.

First, the posthuman:¹⁴⁸ in each novel Wallace offers a distinct vision of the human self as a position of attenuated freedom and agency (*Broom*), a subject shot through with psychological, social, and biological forces so completely at every level that to conceive of self-knowledge, let alone purposeful rational choice, seems almost impossible (*Infinite Jest*). Almost—because Wallace ultimately avers, in each case, that our only choice is choice, that we must shore up the fragments of the self and take action whether or not free will is what we think it is. Much of Wallace's posthuman vision comes from its lineage that “trace[s] to the Macy conferences on cybernetics . . . and the invention of systems theory,” when figures like Gregory Bateson, Norbert Wiener, and others “converged on a new theoretical model for biological, mechanical, and communicational processes that removed the human . . . from any particularly privileged

¹⁴⁸ I am not the first to consider Wallace an exemplary posthumanist. See Wilhelm, “David Foster Wallace and the Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism”; Giles, “Sentimental Posthumanism”; Dorson, “Critical Posthumanism”; and Hayles, “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity.”

position in relation to matters of meaning, information, and cognition” (Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* xii). Not only does this shift involve reconceiving the human / animal relation, but as Wallace investigates in §1 of *The Pale King*, the human / plant and human / rock relation as well. Throughout Wallace reconceives of the self as material, the material as *also* informational, and information as constructed only through difference, without the stability of a universal signified. Wallace’s intense fixation on questions of value and values, explored by Severs in *Balancing Books*, comes from this basic insight: that there is no solid ground, no fixed meaning, no certain foundation except that which we choose. “To be posthuman,” Wolfe writes, “means to participate in—and find a mode of thought adequate to—‘processes which can never be entirely reduced to patterns or standards, codes or information’” (xviii, quoting Rutsky, “Mutation”). Wallace’s use of voices is his way of “find[ing] a mode of thought adequate to” the mutually constituting relation between humans and language, in which language is created by humans but the human is also fundamentally structured by (and like) language. Despite Wallace’s decentering of the subject, though, one thing remains certain: the decentered subject is still the site of desires, and when those desires are selfish, we have a basic human problem—especially for the *ethical* posthumanism that Wallace is attempting to imagine.

Wallace’s investigation of gender, which often occurs on the periphery of my analyses, is also centered on the issue of desire. The penetrative ability of the male is central to *Broom*, which dramatizes Rick Vigorous’s sexual inability to enter his girlfriend Lenore as a fundamental crisis of the self / other relation (he has a micropenis). As Rick writes in his diary, “That I must in the final analysis remain part of the world

that is external to and other from Lenore Beadsman is to me a source of profound grief” (60). The scenes I examine in *Broom*, which I selected for their presentation of the comic voice, frequently turn on issues of outlandish behavior based on desire (Jayne Mansfield; the blow up doll). So too gendered desire is pathologized endlessly in *Infinite Jest*, which figures desire (both one’s own and that of others) as the central threat to personal autonomy.¹⁴⁹ The posthuman sympathy I find in Wallace’s treatment of the addict Amy J. is among few generous depictions of women in the entire novel, and in context she is also being judged as high maintenance, a judgment that is likely gendered (as is her choice of drug, Xanax). Mary K. Holland finds “a clear and sustained attention to . . . feminist concern with male domination of women throughout Wallace’s work,” but it is one in which “the careful balance of connection and distance needed between desiring selves and bodies and . . . their systems of signification” is often not achieved (“Hirsute” 1). In this light, we can see the story of Lane Dean and Sheri Fisher not just as a “provocative” rehearsal of anti-abortion religious values (Kirsch 211) but as a desire to explore Lane’s refusal to dominate and Sheri’s power to choose. Thinking about voice more broadly, although Holland argues that Wallace “consistently struggled . . . to avoid solipsistic assertions of authorial power over readers,” “expos[ing] beastly assertions of power over

¹⁴⁹ Insofar as sexual desire in Wallace’s work involves “the collapse of the boundary between Self and Other” (Hayes-Brady, “Language” 147), the integrity of the Self is threatened. Rando argues further that “lovelessness may be the major concern of Wallace’s work,” citing numerous instances of characters dealing with “their inability to love or even to understand what love is” (577). In another example of the conflict between autonomy and desire, Wallace writes a satirical sketch in which two male graduate students conclude, ultimately, that because women are so constrained by the “intolerable burden” of social, political, psychological, and biological forces acting upon them, that women need an “escape hatch” (230): male passion. “Deep down,” says one speaker, “they want a man who’s going to be so overwhelmingly passionate and powerful that they’ll feel they have no choice . . . that they can forget there’s even such a *thing* as postfeminist responsibilities” (*BI* 231). The posthuman implications of reduced choice are here turned sinister.

women” (11), his voices consistently register masculine tendencies, whether in topic—blow-up dolls, hard science, sport—or in alignment with character voice and perspective, even with the line “we are all of us brothers” in *The Pale King*’s otherwise neuter opening section. Gender, as the site of alterity, “the inviolable strangeness of the female to the male consciousness” (Hayes-Brady 131), shapes Wallace’s understanding of the other, and thus of his reader, whom he typically genders female in interviews and essays.¹⁵⁰

Finally, the theme or motif of communication and its relation to form has come up repeatedly in my chapters. Of these three topics, communication is the most commonly treated by Wallace critics, in part because Wallace himself worried over it the most vocally. Rather than idealize communication between individuals as he did, though, what my analyses have turned to is a more posthuman approach to communication. That is, the questions “Who communicates? How? Where does meaning come from?” are not so easily answered. For instance, the city of East Corinth / Jayne Mansfield is in some way a communication, as Stonecipher Beadsman uses the medium of a city itself to represent a woman, for an airborne audience. But even as the form of the woman becomes apparent to those elevated pilots, it’s undetectable to those on the ground, metaphorically modeling the way that “We’re *in* language” and cannot “get the lay of the land” (Wallace to McCaffery 45). So too do the scenes from *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* show us messages from no one: the squeak of the bed that signals a loose nut, the movement of the doorknob that induces a scientific epiphany, the worm-tracks we are asked to read,

¹⁵⁰ Hayes-Brady also notes Wallace’s “constant invocation of a feminine subject,” attributing it to “an almost-pathological consciousness of gender politics” (132).

and the movement of the water on the tree roots when Lane is “given then to know” that his prayers had been answered. Wallace is deeply concerned with “the nature of fiction as communication” (Dawson 73), but what are we to make of these images of something being communicated—something being a text—without our typical understanding of a communicating agent as its origin?

The answer is that Wallace offers us no less than a rhetoric based on trust despite radical alterity, a sort of posthuman rhetoric that retains ethics at its core. As I suggested, I see these three themes (the posthuman, gender, and communication) operating as figures of the self, the other, and the relation between them. To reimagine these three elements is to reimagine rhetoric and ethics themselves, in a space where the agents of communication are radically different from each other, separated by social, psychological, species, or even ontological/theological bounds. What Wallace does is first to argue that for the posthuman self, choice is still possible: we have the capacity to change ourselves.¹⁵¹ And it is then to see communication not as a matter of success or failure, but a matter of attempt: a matter of choice to bridge an unbridgeable distance. Even looking at worms Wallace argues that *communication is still possible*, and further that form and mediation are all we have to be present to each other. (In this he shows himself to be a true thinker of systems theory.)

Zooming out even further, Wallace understands communication’s fundamental distance historically, an insight he had in college when reading Rabelais. Literary history is a system of communication, a community over the ages in which Wallace realizes that

¹⁵¹ Admittedly, he’s not the first to have this insight, though it may have been original to him. See Parks, “Impossible Choices.”

“Death is not the end”: even though his fiction grapples repeatedly with the misery of loneliness elevated to a metaphysical principle, Wallace also returns again and again to the idea that communication—through fiction—is there “to afford easements across borders, to help readers leap over the walls of self and locale and show us unseen or - dreamed-of people and cultures and ways to be” (“E Unibus” 51). Writing a college paper on Rabelais, Wallace finds “some hope,” including “links between past, present and future through procreation, links that might help to dispel the awful sense of ‘aloneness’ that haunts Villon” (page 2, “Only a Curtain,” Container 31.6, Harry Ransom Center). He continues: “Rabelais establishes links, weaves important webs between himself and the world around him, between himself and time, in other ways”: particularly, knowledge and wisdom, “anatomical, natural, physical, mathematical, literary and philosophical knowledge” that persist in time even though their creators “have been dead for thousands of years” (3). In knowledge, in text, in mediation Rabelais and his community persist into Wallace’s own world, making him less alone. By contrast, Wallace notes the overwhelming sadness he finds in François Villon’s poetry about “the awful terror of physical death, of the end of life on earth and the enjoyment of earthly pleasures, of the horrible pain and ugliness of death, of stink and putrefication [sic] and maggots” (2). As Rabelais rejects death, Wallace rejects the life-in-death of solipsism that he chose as his own *bête noire*.

Wallace’s comments on Rabelais could easily be his own about himself:

“Rabelais is not really ‘alone’: he has intellectual, philosophical and artistic links with people of all times. He does not feel that he is an isolated island, with the currents of time

rushing around him, eroding and weakening him; he is a part of time, has been shaped as a writer and as a man by the contributions of the past and will in turn help shape the future with his own contributions. In the world of knowledge and intellectual progress there is no real 'death,' and there is no real individuality; one simply becomes a building block, resting on some blocks as others rest on him, in a structure that grows and grows and grows" (page 3). To understand Wallace on Rabelais is to understand how Wallace sees himself as embedded in a historical moment, making his own "declaration[s] of independence" with his work (Boswell, *Understanding* 5) while at the same time "hearkening back" (Cohen, "To Wish" 69) to those authors he loved. By placing himself within the larger tradition of letters, Wallace begins to create a place for himself in literary history. Ever-sensitive to the challenges and paradoxes of family dynamics in *Broom* and *Infinite Jest*, Wallace nevertheless made himself a son in the family of American fiction, as he learned to sing with its voices.

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