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Infinite Endnotes and Important Clichés

New Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract

In the past decades, a field of so-called Wallace Studies, i.e. academic studies dedicated to the investigation of David Foster Wallace's writings, has emerged and developed. These studies are often connected to the equally new literary concept of new sincerity. However, despite the number of articles published on the subject, the scholarly works going into any textual, exemplifying analysis of Wallace's literature are few. The result is a research field with vague definitions, generalizing conclusions and many ambiguities.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how the depiction of clichés and compassion as well as aspects of the narrative structure of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* relates to the concept of new sincerity. By a close reading, an examination of the ironic norm of the novel as well as examples illustrating deviations from this norm is performed. It is further argued that Wallace's novel portrays an alternative to the cynical default setting of postmodern culture. The thesis concludes with a discussion regarding how Wallace's use of endnotes affects the relationship between reader and writer.

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Introduction

In his foreword to the 2007 edition of *Infinite Jest*, Dave Eggers writes that Wallace's novel, contrary to almost all other contemporary fiction, is impossible to break down into smaller units. He argues that the novel is "like a spaceship, with no recognizable components, no rivets or bolts, no entry points, no way to take it apart", and concludes by stating that "[i]t simply *is*." (ix). What Eggers also claims is that, after the time spent reading this 1,079 page novel, you are "a better person" due to the intellectual exercise it has demanded of you (x). Eggers' explanation of how you become a better person is based on the fact that novel's "themes ... are big, and the emotions (guarded as they are) are very real" (x). Such a description suggests that *Infinite Jest* is an exception from the norm of mainstream fiction written in the America of the late 20th century, a suggestion that leads to the question of whether earlier literature has not dealt with emotions as "big" and "real" in the same way as this particular novel. As it turns out, many of the studies published about Wallace's fiction today suggest exactly this.

Infinite Jest, published in 1996, has often been hailed as an answer and a revolt against the all-pervading irony and self-conscious metafictional styles that can be said to be typical traits of postmodern literature. More recently, it has been categorized as a work belonging to the still evolving genre of new sincerity. There is also a smaller (but still rather vocal) group of critics who disagree and claim that Wallace's novel is yet another example of self-conscious and ironical prose that tries its best to convince the reader of its own smartness, and thus that it is everything but a step away from an all-consuming ironic attitude. The Wallace scholar Marshall Boswell once said that many of Wallace's critics seem "befuddled when it comes to describing what fiction from the 'other side' of postmodern fiction might look like, even though they all seem convinced that Wallace's work is an example of that kind of fiction" (15). However, and not depending on whether or not the critic in question hails or criticizes Wallace's achievements, few are the examples of scholarly work that goes into any textual detail regarding how Wallace's fiction either fails or succeeds in overcoming postmodern irony. The examples are often either too generalizing and sweeping, or focusing on what texts, most often of philosophical nature, have influenced Wallace's writing.

Aim and Method

Due to this void in the fast expanding field of Wallace Studies, I aim to do what Eggers claims to be the impossible. I aim to take the extensive novel apart in order to show how the bits and pieces fit together to create a sum that is greater than its parts. By doing so, my hypothesis is that the light will fall on the big themes and guarded emotions supposedly so central to the novel. These big themes so happen to be strongly connected to clichés and communication, sometimes argued to be typical traits of new sincerity. By analyzing Wallace's novel in detail, I aim to investigate not if he succeeds or not in overcoming postmodern irony, but in understanding how clichés and the narrative structure function within the novel and as important parts of the new sincerity Wallace's fiction is so often categorized as.

Since it is my conviction that much of earlier studies of Wallace's fiction has neglected to analyze specific examples from *Infinite Jest*, my focus will be on textual examples that might have been considered banal by earlier critics. By performing a close reading of the novel, I aim to investigate how clichés and compassion are portrayed throughout the novel as well as how the narrative structure relates to aspects connected to new sincerity today. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, only a small portion of the many narrative strategies used in the novel will be dealt with, and the focus will be on Wallace's use of endnotes. By investing these aspects, my hope is to explain how they relate to the concept of new sincerity and work in order to convey the importance of humility, sincerity and empathy to a supposed reader of the novel. Discussions about David Foster Wallace's commencement speech to the graduating students at Kenyon College in 2005 (*This Is Water*), his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" as well as interviews where Wallace elaborates upon his relationship to sincerity, irony and writing will be referred to and analyzed when relevant to the aspects mentioned.

Disposition

To take such a lengthy novel apart in such a limited form as a one year master's thesis, some structure is needed. I will begin with a definition of the concept of irony and an

outlining of the problem of the overuse of it, and then give a brief but problematizing history of the concept of new sincerity. The analysis of the actual novel will be focused on textual examples and set out in an outlining of the cynical milieu of the novel. The major part of the analysis will then focus on textual examples where naïveté and emotions do get to exist, with sections dedicated to clichés, possible problems of sincerity and character related examples. Lastly, there will be a section concerned with some aspects of the novel's narrative structure, with focus on Wallace's use of endnotes in *Infinite Jest*.

A Brief Discussion of the Problem of Irony

Due to the widespread use of the term, every analysis related to irony must necessarily begin with a definition of what one means when discussing the concept. As Wayne C. Booth claims in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, “[t]here is no agreement among critics about what irony is” (ix). Even though the term might not be as debated today as it was when Booth wrote his book in 1974, this statement still points to the fact that defining the term can be a complicated matter. For this reason, the definition I am going to use will be a rather general and basic one, since my analysis of Wallace's novel not is based on, or dependent upon, a theoretical and deep analysis of different types of irony. Rather, it needs the concept to have a starting-point for the rest of the discussion concerning how Wallace possibly revolts against an overuse of an ironic attitude. For the same reasons, I will not go into specific detail about different kinds of irony either. The definition that will serve as the basis of my analysis is taken from *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, where it is stated that irony is a “contradiction or incongruity between appearance or expectation and reality” (“Irony”). This definition explains both how the use of irony invokes a double entendre and the fact that irony is insincere in its essence, since one says one thing and means another, which is the basic and most important aspect of the literary trope for my forthcoming analysis.

As for the problem an overuse of irony can cause, a ground for it can also be found in *The Bedford Glossary*. Here, it is stated that, “[t]he ironist's approach to his or her subject may even seem unemotional, a wry illustration of his or her point”, a

quote illustrating the lack of emotion often needed for to the use of irony (“Irony”). An even more applicable definition is given by Booth, who argues that “irony is usually seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation” (ix). This distinction of an effect that either liberates or destroys is crucial for the discussion to follow, since I will argue that Wallace and other critics suggest that what separates the use of irony from the overuse of irony is the effect it has regarding sincerity and emotion.

This distinction is strongly connected to the literary period of postmodernism, possibly an even more complicated and debated term to define than irony itself. In the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, it is stated that “[n]othing about postmodernism is uncontroversial”, which is why I will keep this definition as brief and uncomplicated as possible too (“Postmodern narrative”). What I mean when discussing the idea of postmodernism is first and foremost the literary term and period. My discussion will be based on the crucial relationship between irony and postmodernism, simply because this is a pivotal point of intersection in *Infinite Jest* and in other critics’ arguments regarding what can be seen as irony’s problem. Required in order to discuss this phenomenon, then, is at least some common ground as to what postmodernism signifies. My definition here is taken from the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, where the era and trait is introductory defined by stating that “[t]he second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of what is called postmodernism, which in the novel is usually expressed by self-conscious narrative and *metafiction” (“The twentieth century: postmodernism”). Such a brief definition places the concept in time and points out an important aspect of postmodernism that will be a crucial touchstone for my discussion of how the problem of irony is treated in *Infinite Jest*, namely the self-consciousness connected to the literary era.

David Foster Wallace himself has expressed his thoughts regarding what he experienced as the problem of irony many times and in many forums. However, the most forthright text regarding this issue can be said to be his 1993 essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”¹. “E Unibus Pluram” is a discussion about

¹ From here on referred to as “E Unibus Pluram”.

television's influence on U.S. culture and fiction and the danger of a default attitude of weary cynicism, and the essay contains several points valid to mention in relation to irony and *Infinite Jest*. It was written in the same period as Wallace was working on *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, so that the two contain similar ideas and arguments might not come as a surprise. As to the argument that an author's word about his own work should never be regarded as true, the links here are simply too strong to neglect, not to mention the fact that Wallace presents the, to my knowledge, most condensed and understandable analysis of the problem available. In comparison to the extensive but, for logical reasons, evidently not all-encompassing material I have come across when writing this thesis, "E Unibus Pluram" is a strikingly concise depiction of the problem. Furthermore, it is widely referred to by critics concerned with new sincerity. Adam Kelly, for one, names it "that key early essay", and it can be said to have earned somewhat of a benchmark status for studies related to the subject (133). For these reasons, I will highlight a few of the arguments emphasized in "E Unibus Pluram" that will prove to be valuable for my subsequent analysis of Wallace's novel.

Wallace argues that television influences the fiction written in the America of his time in deep and complex ways. First of all, he articulates the easiness of watching television, how little it requires from its audience in terms of intellectual work. "Television's biggest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving", he declares and goes on to give examples of how television culture has adopted irony, once a means for rebellion used for the overthrowing of hypocritical authority, and transformed it into a mass culture ("E Unibus Pluram" 163). Or, as he puts it, "[w]hat do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution?" ("E Unibus Pluram" 184). The problem is thus not irony per se, but the fact that irony is now used as the standard point of view, the default setting of the millions of millions of Americans who, according to a report of the time, watch television for six hours a day ("E Unibus Pluram" 151). Irony is unquestionably good at unveiling lies and hypocrisies, but it is "singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks", due to irony's "exclusively negative function" ("E Unibus Pluram" 183). This, in turn, leads to a great fear among the audience of "missing the joke"; the constant (over-)use of irony builds up an environment where the standard attitude of the

average American television viewer becomes weary cynicism, because “the most frightening prospect for the well-conditioned viewer becomes leaving oneself open to others’ ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion or vulnerability. Other people become judges: the crime is naïveté” (“E Unibus Pluram” 180-181). *Infinite Jest* is full of examples where this default attitude of weary cynicism proves itself ineligible if one wants to construct anything, and some of these examples will be dealt with in detail below.

How this influences the literature of the time is illustrated by the fact that much of the dominant American fiction written in this era is a reaction to the television culture, called “image-fiction” by Wallace (“E Unibus Pluram” 171). The writers creating this fiction fail to rebel because they “render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context” (“E Unibus Pluram” 173). Because, as Wallace describes, “TV has been homogenizing postmodernism’s cynical aesthetic that once was the alternative to low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative”, irony has in effect become the standard for the “mass-marketed narrative” that television is, and to rebel against this one cannot use irony because “real rebels ... risk things” (“E Unibus Pluram” 173-193). One simply cannot rebel against the standardized attitude of the time by using that same attitude. When it comes to television and irony in America’s culture around the 1990s, this becomes painfully clear when regarding how hard it is to rebel against an aura that “promotes and attenuates all rebellion” (“E Unibus Pluram” 192). According to Wallace, this image-fiction thus fails in its attempt to revolt against the standard approach of the time, which historically is what progressive art revolts against.

In his essay “Post-postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World”, published in 2004, Robert L. McLaughlin recognizes this problem of irony in postmodern literature, but he also senses a sea change in contemporary fiction. He sets out by painting a bleak picture of his current culture, where nobody but “pointy-headed English professors in ivory towers” seems to have any interest in reading “serious literature”, and where the conglomeration of publishing houses leads to the fact that less and less of this “serious literature” is being published (53-55). McLaughlin

blames this declining interest in literature not on postmodernism and an ironic attitude per se, but on the abundance of entertainment possibilities today. He argues that when “the popular public consciousness” is concentrated on entertainment media, such as TV, DVD’s and the “infinite expanse of the World Wide Web ... Print media of any kind, much less literature that aspires to serious intent, seems pretty dull in comparison” (54). Where Wallace blames the default ironical mindset he argues the television culture of the 90’s America has resulted in on deeper structures, McLaughlin seems to blame modern technology itself in what can be called a more conservative manner. McLaughlin states that “[s]elf-referentiality by itself collaborates with the culture of consumer technology to create a society of style without substance, of language without meaning, of cynicism without belief, of virtual communities without human connection, of rebellion without change”, and thus identifies what can be seen as the problem of irony in his contemporary society (66). However, as mentioned, McLaughlin also senses a sea change in the fiction written in his time, a sea change that will be introduced and discussed below.

A Brief History of the Concept of New Sincerity

This sea change is today often discussed using the fairly vague critical term new sincerity, a term generally said to have its beginnings in the field of film studies with an essay written by Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity”, published 1993. Collins sees a trend in the film scene of his time, and claims that there was a wave of new sincerity as a reaction to the “media-saturated landscape of contemporary American culture” (243). This wave co-exists with another genre that typically makes ironic references to earlier genres and their conventions, whereas the films in the new sincerity category more honestly allude to them. New sincerity film, Collins claims, “epitomizes a ‘new sincerity’ that rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity”, and as examples of this he lists *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Dances With Wolves* (1990) and *Hook* (1991) (243). Collins argues that these movies and their like try to evade the media-saturated and self-conscious culture in search of an “almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism” (257). The methods used to achieve this lost

purity varies according to Collins, but a common trait is the step back to earlier times and what seems to be a purer culture, as well as attempts to “recapture the elemental simplicity of childhood delight in a magical state that yields its perfect resolutions of the otherwise impossible conflict” (261-262). This is described as a reaction to the postmodern society but should not, according to Collins, be regarded as post-postmodernism, but rather a later phase of postmodernism (262).

Collins’ article gives some clues as to what to look for in Wallace’s work, but his certainty that works of new sincerity avoids irony altogether is a generalization far too simple to apply on such a complex work as *Infinite Jest*. As Warren Buckland argues in an article concerning Wes Anderson as a director, Collins misses the “new” in new sincerity:

The new of new sincerity signifies it as a response to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a dialectical move, new sincerity incorporates postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony. (2)

This is strongly connected to the by now widespread regard that much of Wallace’s fiction not only includes both irony and sincerity, but that Wallace’s critique of irony strongly relies on the inclusion of both. As Marshall Boswell claims in *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, when explaining how Wallace moves beyond traditional postmodernism, “Wallace uses irony to show what irony has been hiding. He does not merely join cynicism and naïveté: rather, he employs cynicism ... to recover a learned form of heartfelt naïveté” (17). This is an important point to emphasize, not only because it might be called a leitmotif of Wallace’s fiction in general and *Infinite Jest* in particular, but because there is no way to pretend that postmodernism and irony did not happen. Collins seems to suggest that a solution to the problem of irony would be a move back to bygone times and to act as if a major cultural and literary period (i.e. the all-pervading irony of postmodernism) did not happen. This solution is an impossibility, since there is no way of escaping a history that has in fact occurred. When analyzing Kierkegaard’s influence on Wallace, Allard den Dulk illustrates why Wallace’s fiction is not a move back from postmodernism when he explains that:

The ethical life-view portrayed by *Infinite Jest* should not be considered as a way ‘back’... The ethical attitude *is* a breakthrough, a leap forward, for it does not mean simply ignoring the difficulties of contemporary Western existence, such as excessive self-reflection and irony, but living (and writing) with these aspects and finding meaning nonetheless. (342, emphasis in the original)

As seen by this quote, and as will be illustrated with examples further on in this thesis, Wallace does not ignore the cynical difficulties surrounding him. Collin’s explanation of new sincerity is thus only partly applicable when discussing *Infinite Jest*.

More valid as help for a definition of new sincerity, then, is what Adam Kelly writes in “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, where he emphasizes that a crucial element of new sincerity is the “dialogical dimension of the reading experience” and concludes that, “[t]his call for a two-way conversation characterizes not only Wallace’s work, but all the fiction of the New Sincerity” (145). The relation between reader and writer is thus seen as a characteristic trait of this recent and most likely still developing literary period, a characteristic of great importance in *Infinite Jest* and one that I will have reason to come back to during the following pages. However, Kelly’s title suggests an article that is of greater help for my analysis than it actually is. Kelly’s text is concerned with a detailed dissection of the concept of sincerity and argues for how Wallace has influenced later writers. As a result, there is little room left for a satisfactory amount of specific examples from *Infinite Jest*, which is what I aim for with this thesis.

Of similar importance to the understanding of the elements of new sincerity in *Infinite Jest* is the already mentioned Marshall Boswell. Boswell writes that:

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

Unfortunately, Boswell’s analysis of *Infinite Jest* does not discuss enough textual examples since it, just as Kelly’s, is too brief. The lack of textual evidence results in the fact that Boswell’s arguments, albeit often valid, lack in strength. Despite the fact that

the explanation might seem a bit too simple when not backed up by examples, the “gooey sentimentality” can be seen as a pivotal part of understanding new sincerity. It is also clearly linked to what Wallace himself has discussed about the problem and possible solution of irony in the already mentioned “E Unibus Pluram”. Together with the strong emphasis on a relationship between reader and writer, between work of art and consumer of art, it constitutes what can be said to be the ground for an understanding of how the new sincerity aspect works in Wallace’s *magnus opum*. Of further relevance for my analysis is McLaughlin’s definition of what he calls the post-postmodern fiction, which he explains as being:

inspired by a desire to reconnect language to the social sphere or, to put it another way, to reenergize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives (55).

Together with Boswell’s emphasis on the co-existence of cynicism and naïveté and Kelly’s insistence on the communication between reader and writer, this focus on fiction’s ability “to have an impact on actual people” will serve as a ground for a definition of the elusive and complicated concept of new sincerity in my analysis.

Irony as Depicted in *Infinite Jest*

To understand how the interplay between irony and sincerity works in *Infinite Jest*, it is necessary to first of all sort through how the problem, i.e. irony, cynicism and a fear of naïveté and emotions, is depicted in the novel. To have something to “rebel against”, Wallace first of all has to paint a picture of an environment where the problem he possibly rebels against is clear. This might not appear especially clear at a first glance, due to the novel’s convoluted structure and earlier statements regarding the impossibility of taking it apart, but when systematically and thoroughly analyzed, a rather clear picture actually emerges. A ridiculing attitude towards naïveté and the act of showing emotions is illustrated throughout the novel, both through characters, overall comments and structural elements. This ridiculing attitude indicates a deeper fear of displaying vulnerability through emotions already discussed and further developed

during the following pages. When analyzed, the ironic milieu depicted in the novel exposes something about the relationship between irony and emotions in *Infinite Jest*.

A vivid example of the novel's ironic climate is the fact that even the "Continental Independence Day" of the fictional Organization of North American Nations Wallace has created is celebrated ironically. "It's part of the gala but rather ironic annual celebration of I.-Day" we are told about the yearly showing of Mario Incandenza's "first halfway-coherent film cartridge" (380). Since the U.S. Independence Day is everything but an ironic laughing matter in the non-fictional America of today, Wallace underscores how all-pervading the irony in *Infinite Jest* is, even in comparison to the real U.S. he saw as deeply troubled by an irony pervading everyday life. A second example is to be found earlier on in the novel, when the drug addict Poor Tony has snatched a lady's purse, unknowing of the fact that it contains the woman's artificial heart and that she will die without her handbag. As the robbed lady runs after Poor Tony and screams for her heart, we are told that "misunderstanding shoppers and passers by merely shook their heads at one another, smiling knowingly at what they ignorantly presumed to be yet another lifestyle's relationship gone sour" (143). In this quote, "knowingly", "ignorantly" and "presumed" are all key words that, together with the rather bizarre and exaggerated anecdote, help us understand what fatal consequences hip cynicism and an ignorant attitude can have. When regarding the commencement speech Wallace gave to the graduating students at Kenyon College in 2005, where he emphasized the importance of understanding how much we *do not* understand and the importance of an open mind free from default set preconceptions, this scene indicates exactly how bad the general mind set of the everyday character in *Infinite Jest* is.

When it comes to the characters in the novel, the danger of cynicism is most clearly shown through the depressed characters, who are always addicted to alcohol or drugs. "[S]arcasm and jokes were often the bottle in which clinical depressives sent out their most plangent screams for someone to care and help them" it is said on the psych ward where the depressed Kate Gompert is hospitalized after one of her suicide attempts (71). This example hints at what will be more fully developed later in the novel, namely the fact that sarcasm and jokes can be effective but dangerous ways to hide one's real emotions. Yet another example, also connected to suicides, is

portrayed when Joelle is preparing the overdose she hopes will lead to her death and mulls over the people she will never see again if everything goes as planned. She states that “[t]he idea that she’ll never see ... her poor personal Daddy again is sentimental and banal”, and that “[t]he idea of what she’s about in here contains all other ideas and makes them banal” (239). The disavowal of every thought connected to sentimentality is a telling example not only for the addicted characters of the novel, but also for the ones so self-conscious that every thought of showing emotions scares them to the degree that they have to sneer at it. The simple fact that “naïve” is used as an invective by several characters, as when Pemulis tells Hal not to be “so fucking naïve”, is rather illustrative (1064). Another telling example is expressed in what perhaps is the novel’s most direct critique of the all-pervading cynicism of the 1990s America. In connection to the declaration that “weary cynicism” can save one from “gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté”, it is stated that “[s]entiment equals naïveté on this continent” and the problem of cynicism in Wallace’s world is evident (694). The use of irony and the fear of appearing naïve are depicted as influential structures of contemporary culture that have severe consequences both for individual characters and larger communities in *Infinite Jest*, and Wallace has effectively depicted a problematic climate to rebel against.

Clichés as Depicted in *Infinite Jest*

A cliché is defined by *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* as:

[a]n expression used so often (and so often out of context) that it has become hackneyed and has lost its original impact. Many clichés were once hailed as striking metaphors, only to become denigrated over time due to over- and misuse. (“Cliché”)

The modifiers used in this definition do not sound like a description that calls quality fiction into mind, but what is important to focus on here is the denigration. The cliché is an expression that has *lost* its impact, a definition that postulates that these expressions actually had an impact once. As I will exemplify in detail below, clichés are given a substantial amount of space in *Infinite Jest* and, more importantly, they are described as valuable guidance to try to live by instead of sneer knowingly at. As Wallace says in the earlier mentioned commencement speech, when talking about the old cliché that the

mind is an excellent servant but a terrible master, “[t]his, like many clichés, so lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses a great and terrible truth” (*This Is Water* 57). The honest appreciation of clichés, which the postmodern culture has come to disregard as lame and unexciting according to Wallace, is a reoccurring motif of *Infinite Jest*. As I will go on to argue, clichés are also strongly connected to the question of how to handle both irony and sincere emotions throughout the novel, and thus connected to aspects of new sincerity.

In a 1999 interview on the KCRW radio program *Bookworm* hosted by Michael Silverblatt², Wallace eloquently recounts both his interest in and his fear of clichés, naïveté and emotions. He describes how he, as he gets older, gets less interested in the “intellectual stuff” and gets more interested in “precisely the kind of stuff that I have a horror of, that I have been trained to have a horror of, and that is sentimentality, and that is strong emotions, and that is didacticism, pretentiousness” (“David Foster Wallace” minute 13:07). He then explains how his own work in the last years had been the work of someone who “reaches out for and recoils from something at the same time”, and how he does want to write fiction that is “moving, and that feels important” but that he at the same time is “scared poopless of it” (“David Foster Wallace” minute 15:05).

This can again be seen as not only a personal problem for Wallace, but a problem shared by large parts of postmodern American culture. What Wallace seems to reach out for in *Infinite Jest* is often the truth behind seemingly banal clichés, since the way they are used in postmodern culture is often connected too much to sentimentality and emotions to be treated seriously. As Boswell argues:

[i]nasmuch as postmodern self-consciousness teaches us to be wary of clichés and to detect and decode ideologically interested metanarratives that pass themselves off as essentially present, it also blinds us to the positive and simple truths that often lie behind those clichés and metanarratives, however constructed and contingent they may be ... Wallace’s method again and again is to embrace that cynicism – for it is the very air we breathe – and turn it on itself in order to recover those naïve yet solid truths that are worth preserving. (138-139)

² There is to my knowledge no transcription available of this interview, originally broadcasted by the public radio station KCRW on August 12, 1999, which is why the quotations here are transcribed by me.

Boswell's argument here is valid, but just as in the earlier mentioned case of his analysis it lacks examples. There is no explanation of how Wallace embraces cynicism in *Infinite Jest*, or of how this results in the recovery of the truth behind clichés. As I will go on to argue, this complex attitude towards cynicism and naïveté is in several ways the heart of the matter in *Infinite Jest*. However, in order to understand the effect of the embracing of clichés, and their relation to new sincerity, the clichés need to be exemplified and analyzed in textual detail. Despite their seemingly banal nature, these clichés have to be taken seriously, which Boswell has neglected to do in his too short analysis of their function.

A vivid example of the complexity of the question, and an important illustration of what difficulties the writer faces in order to even talk about subjects connected to sentimentality or emotions in a sincere way, can again be found in Wallace's 2005 commencement speech. This speech is undoubtedly amongst the most straight-forward examples of Wallace's attempts at sincerity, but at the same time it is full of examples where he "recoils" from the truisms he has just uttered. The majority of the speech has to do with clichés, which, as mentioned, not coincidentally is a major theme in *Infinite Jest* as well. In the speech, Wallace spends over 20 minutes with what almost seems like preaching to his audience about the importance of choosing what to pay attention to, and he describes a number of clichés that actually turn out to be true according to him. The most striking example of this habit of reaching out for and recoiling from something at the same time appears when Wallace tries to explain how it is in the hands of the now graduating students to experience a long checkout lane in an afternoon supermarket as something beautiful, and says that:

It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars – love, compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things. (*This Is Water* 93)

To speak about "the subsurface unity" of things and forces that light stars cannot be described as anything other than spiritual and sentimental, and it is certainly easy to make fun of if one wants to exercise some cynical ridiculing. And, in a perfect example of recoiling from the sincere sentiments he has just reached out for, Wallace

immediately adds “[n]ot that that mystical stuff is necessarily true”, undermining the sentimentality and part of the importance of what he has just said (*This Is Water* 93).

Another telling example of Wallace’s difficulty of discussing such subjects (which, again, is not only a personal problem but rather a problem of our cultural environment according to Wallace and earlier discussed critics) is the fact that he, when writing the speech, constantly made fun of the clichés and his preachy style with his wife, Karen Green. As D.T. Max describes in his Wallace biography *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, “[a]s he worked on the speech, he and Green joked that she should do a little soft-shoe behind him while he read it from the podium” (286). This constant need of ridiculing and undercutting banal but true statements or, as Max calls it, the fact that “the truth behind banalities always excited and embarrassed Wallace” is also of major importance in *Infinite Jest*, and it illustrates Wallace’s complex approach to clichés and sentimentality (286). Furthermore, Wallace’s complex approach towards these subjects indicates that they are themes that can only be fully understood when analyzing in detail exactly how they are used in the novel.

The most striking milieu where clichés turn out to express great and terrible truths in *Infinite Jest* is in the Boston community of Alcoholics Anonymous. An organization completely built up around clichés, this community seems to be the perfect place to draw examples from cliché-wise, and *Infinite Jest* sure is full of them. As Marshall Boswell describes, “Alcoholics Anonymous ... serves as Wallace’s tentative antidote to all this paralyzing psychological concealment” (143). When the former Demerol addict Don Gately starts to remember his childhood traumas, the “quilted-sampler type cliché” Getting In Touch With Your Inner Feelings is brought up and it is soon stated that “[i]t starts to turn out that the vapid the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers” (446), a telling example of the weight clichés and platitudes are bestowed in the novel. It is also relevant to note here that clichés always are capitalized in the novel, a rhetorical means that draws extra attention to them.

A further example when clichés actually turn out helpful is to be found when what unites newly recovered addicts is stated and described as:

something like hope, this grudging move toward maybe acknowledging that this unromantic, unhip, clichéd AA thing – so

unlikely and unpromising, so much the inverse of what they'd come too much to love – might really be able to keep the lover's toothy maw at bay. (350)

This, again, shows the power of clichés when you actually live by them. A similar cliché of importance displaying focus on AA's credibility is actually related in a passage dedicated to Orin and how he ended up with a career in NFL punting instead of tennis. Here, we are told that:

What metro Boston AAs are trite but correct about is that both destiny's kisses and its dope-slaps illustrate an individual person's basic personal powerlessness over the really meaningful events in his life: i.e. almost nothing important that ever happens to you happens because you engineer it. (291)

The placement of a trite saying similar to clichés usually used by AA members in a chapter dedicated to Orin relates the banality to a character who is not a former drug addict, which shows the overall utilizing and trueness of these platitudes outside of AA as well. The statement that something can be both trite and correct is also of great importance, since it is a statement that rebels against postmodernism's cynical disregard of everything banal as basically hypocritical – the cynical disregard Wallace had come to think of as no longer revolutionary but a default attitude. Here, and in many more instances in the novel, something trite is actually regarded as true instead of sneeringly and quickly disregarded as hackneyed.

The great walking example of the power of clichés and naïveté is the novel's potential hero, Don Gately. A burglar since young age and earlier driven completely by the needs connected to his addiction, Gately is the character whose development is easiest to trace and whose acceptance of the truth behind banal platitudes makes the strongest argument for an honest appreciation of clichés. When most of the novel's action takes place, Gately is a live-in staffer at the Ennet House. He has what must, in Wallace's world, be called a rather utopian way of living by the rules and clichés of AA, even though (or because of the fact that) he many times does not fully understand them. Gately's former cynical attitude towards life can be noticed when he lets a prank made by a couple of residents at the Ennet House go unpunished after a decision to not put that much effort into finding the guilty persons. This decision is seemingly made simply because Gately thinks back to himself when he was "new and

cynical” and remembers how he himself could have done the exact same thing (196). This passage shows Gately’s cynical default setting before entering AA as well as his compassion and ability for empathy, and it connects the ability to show empathy with trying to appreciate clichés honestly.

Later on, Gately’s deep understanding of the power of clichés is underscored when he listens to Geoffrey Day’s typical newcomer talk about the banality of AA clichés. “Simple advice like this does seem like a lot of clichés – Day’s right about how it seems” Gately first thinks (273). But after only a couple of sentences we are told that, if Day decides not to live by the clichés and goes “Out There” again, when he comes back to the Ennet House “Gately’ll get to tell Day the thing is that clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do*. To try and live by instead of just say” (273). This passage is illustrative not only because it juxtaposes Gately’s more emotional and thus, in the novel, wiser attitude towards clichés with Day’s intellectual and cynical reaction to them, but also because the next sentence tells us about Gately’s own humility towards his brave embracing of a clichéd lifestyle. Here, Gately catches himself being judgmental and the narrator³ reminds us that “[e]xcept who is Gately to judge who’ll end up getting the Gift of the program v. who won’t, he needs to remember” (273). The passage goes on to describe how Gately struggles with himself in order to find the tolerance to have patience with the annoying Day, which shows Gately’s great awareness of his own limited understanding as well as his constant and, more importantly, active work with controlling his default reactions.

Another character with an interesting development regarding clichés is Joelle, also known as Madame Psychosis or by the nick name Orin has given her: The Prettiest Girl of All Times. Just as Geoffrey Day, Joelle is one of the “newcomers with some education” and therefore one of “the worst” at the Ennet House, because of the educated residents’ habit to over-intellectualize reasoning and their unwillingness to regard trite clichés at face value (273). The relationship between Gately and Joelle is characterized by Joelle’s over-analysis and Gately’s problems understanding her intellectual lingua. The turning point, however, comes when Joelle visits Gately at the hospital after he has been shot, telling him about the first time she spoke at an AA

³ The narration in *Infinite Jest* varies and can be quite complicated, but most often and in this particular case, the narrator is of the third person omniscient kind.

meeting and that “[she] hadn’t realized til [she] found [herself] telling them that [she’d] stopped seeing the “One Day at a Time” and “Keep It in the Day” as trite clichés”⁴ (858). The fact that Gately soon afterwards notices that “she still talks about Recovery-issues in a stiff proper intellectualish way she doesn’t talk about other stuff with” shows that Joelle has not come as far as Gately in her work with honestly appreciating clichés, but that she at least is on her way (858).

The Ambiguity of Sincerity

However, not every character’s relationship to sincerity and clichés is as uncomplicated and progressing as Donald Gately’s. The most troubled and likewise the most articulated problematic relationship to naïve sincerity is to be found in the character of Hal Incandenza. A tennis genius and lexical prodigy who has memorized great parts of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Hal has a near parodical tendency to over-intellectualize whatever he happens to be thinking about. His complicated relationship to sincerity is most clearly shown at times when he actually attempts to express true beliefs or emotions, but fails. When trying to explain E.T.A.’s⁵ strategy of uniting by suffering to his schoolmates in the locker room after a particularly tough P.M. training session, Hal talks about something as goeey as “togetherness” and the importance of a community feeling (110). Here, Hal is replied by the younger Evan Ingersoll who cynically asks “[s]houldn’t there be violas for this part, Hal, if this is the point?” (111). Hal’s inability to reply to this comment is a trenchant example of exactly how afraid he is to be seen as expressing even the most remotely sentimental thought, a fear familiar from Wallace’s own relationship to naïveté. Hal reaches out for something that can be seen as true and banal, but recoils as soon as he meets the slightest resistance. It is also relevant to point out the fact that Hal’s dislike for Ingersoll, a reoccurring fact mentioned several times in the novel, is very much due to the similarities between Ingersoll and Hal himself. “[T]he kid so repels Hal because Hal sees in the kid certain parts of himself he can’t or won’t accept”, according to Lyle (114).

⁴ Due to the consequently irregular use of single and double quotation marks in the novel, I will not apply the MLA standard use of single quotation marks inside quotations whenever quoting *Infinite Jest*. I will instead quote the original text exactly as it appears and not change any punctuation.

⁵ The Enfield Tennis Academy.

Hal also has a problem with Ingersoll because he “can’t tell whether Ingersoll’s being insolent”, and this inability of telling whether something is sincere or not is a reoccurring and crucial problem that not only Hal struggles with throughout the novel (114). There are many illustrative examples from different parts of the novel that show how different characters struggle to decide whether or not something is sincere, of which three will be mentioned here: Pemulis cannot tell whether an applause is “sardonic” or “sincerely for K.D. Coyle on Court 3, who’s just smashed a sucker-lob so hard it’s bounced up and racked 3’s tray of hanging lights” (266); when Kate Gompert is at the hospital after one of several suicide attempts the doctor in charge is confused when Gompert goes “through a series of expressions that made it clinically impossible for the doctor to determine whether or not she was entirely sincere” (76); and when Lucien Antitoui is about to be murdered, his assassin’s appearance is described as “perhaps it is sincere” (488). These examples emphasize the fact that there can be a hidden agenda behind sincerity. They also point to the fact that the act of deciding whether or not something is sincere is not an objective matter, an important problem I will come back to.

The relationship between the two secret agents Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply is another relationship where the question of sincerity is central. It is most often the Canadian Marathe who has trouble understanding whether or not Steeply is sincere, and this is connected to their moral argument regarding freedom of choice that continues throughout the novel. Marathe’s dissatisfaction when he is not able to determine if Steeply is sincere or not is clearly shown towards the end of their discussion, when we get to know that “Marathe felt more uncomfortable not knowing whether Steeply believed a thing than if Steeply’s emotion of face showed he did not believe” (475). The fact that it is Marathe and not Steeply who regards it as a problem to not know if his conversation partner is sincere is telling, since Steeply in many ways is used to depict the stereotypical American: too cool to express what he believes and too insecure to show true emotion.

However, it is not always the case that something simply is sincere or insincere. There is also the question of if one’s judgment of the sincerity is true or not, a problem that becomes even more complex when regarding the fact that people can have

agendas of their own. This can be argued to be most clear when it comes to Orin, whose “sincerity with a motive” is described almost like a scientific theory (see for example *Infinite Jest* 1048). The most illustrative example here, though, is again to be drawn from Hal. In one of his many conversations with Mario, Hal pinpoints the problem and explains that:

‘Boo, I think I no longer believe in monsters as faces in the floor or feral infants or vampires or whatever. I think at seventeen now I believe the only real monster might be the type of liar where there’s simply no way to tell. The ones who give nothing away. (774)

The fact that Hal is having this sincere conversation with Mario, “the least cynical person in the history of Enfield, MA” is important to recognize in relation to Hal’s earlier mentioned fear of appearing sentimental or naïve (184). In fact, the only person he ever has the courage to relate anything even remotely sincere to is his deformed older brother. This is an example of what I call “the Mario effect”, which will be discussed below.

The Mario Effect

The inability to communicate one’s true and honest emotions with other people is connected both to the character’s fear of expressing emotions and to the overuse of irony in the culture they live in. Irony has become what one can hide behind, and extreme self-consciousness prevents many characters from real communication, since real communication presupposes that the involved characters express true values and emotions, i.e. not only hip cynicism. As it turns out, Hal is not the only character who tends to express his inner thoughts exclusively to Mario, and this is a pattern connected to the overall relationship between sincerity and irony in the novel. The reason why characters dare to express their inner feelings to Mario when they are, to say the least, reserved towards everyone else, is given when it is explained why the coach Gerhardt Schtitt so enjoys Mario’s company:

One of the positives to being visibly damaged is that people can sometimes forget you’re there, even when they’re interfacing with you. You almost get to eavesdrop. It’s almost like they’re like: If nobody’s really in there, there’s nothing to be shy about. That’s why

bullshit often tends to drop away around damaged listeners, deep beliefs revealed, diary-type private reveries indulged out loud. (80)

In a milieu where the characters keep their inner thoughts guarded out of fear of seeming naïve, “diary-type private reveries indulged out loud” must be considered as somewhat of a miracle (80). That these instances only occur when the character listening is either too damaged to answer and/or Mario Incandenza (and therefore an exception from the rule of the characters’ fear of showing emotions) is further proof of the compact fear of expressing something personal and perhaps emotional in the world of the novel. An earlier passage developing Schtitt’s enjoyment of Mario’s company describes how “Mario I. ... is the one kid at E.T.A. whose company Schtitt seeks out, is in fact pretty much the one person with whom Schtitt speaks candidly” (79). This quote, again, shows a character that not only enjoys the company of Mario Incandenza, but a character who does not communicate openly with anyone else at all.

However, Schtitt and Hal are not the only characters who happen to relate personal business to Mario Incandenza. James Incandenza, when still alive, tended to keep Mario around for reasons we are never told but can make an educated guess about. Mario is the chosen son who gets to follow his father around, and even though Mario’s sole task in their relationship seems to be to carry James Incandenza’s film equipment and supply his father with ice for his Wild Turkey, he at least has a relationship with his dad. When Mario’s status as the only physically challenged character at the Enfield Tennis Academy is discussed, it is mentioned that “he and his late father had been, no pun intended, inseparable”, a comment underscoring the closeness between James, a severely reserved character, and Mario Incandenza (314). A fourth character revealing personal and possibly secret stories to Mario is Millicent Kent, in the chapter titled “MARIO INCANDENZA’S FIRST AND ONLY EVEN REMOTELY ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE, THUS FAR” (121). Millicent Kent lures Mario into a thicket, takes his hand and tells him about when she discovered that her dad liked to dress up in his female relatives’ clothes and practice ballet when no one was around (124). Mario seems to elicit both the sincerity and the courage needed to share personal anecdotes and show emotions in characters that otherwise do not dare do this at all. A final example of how Mario brings forth the courage for characters to show emotions is given when it is explained why so few E.T.A. students go to Dolores Rusk, the academy’s

official psych-counselor, with their problems. Here, it is stated that Mario, together with Lyle, one of the kitchen staff and Avril Incandenza, “take[s] up most of the psychic slack” among the students (437). This mentioning, together with the Millicent Kent episode, proves that it is not only Mario’s family members and closer friends who tend to relate intimate thoughts to him, but rather that Mario’s appearance seems to lure out sincerity and courage in characters not personally close to him as well.

This exception of sharing thoughts and emotions occurs with other characters than Mario as well. When Gately is hospitalized after being shot and is unable to speak, the very same pattern repeats itself. It is explained how “[i]t seems like Don G.’s gotten way more popular as somebody to talk to since he’s become paralyzed and mute”, and during his time at the hospital several of the Ennet House residents come to confess inner thoughts and feelings to Gately (828). To mention only a few examples, Geoffrey Day tells Gately about his bad consciousness about emotionally abusing his “developmentally challenged” younger brother (828), and Tiny Ewell pours out his heart and tells a story about how he deceived working class children out of money as a kid (810-816).

That sharing personal anecdotes with Gately, or anybody else, is not the standard procedure is clear when it is stated that Gately “normally couldn’t get Ewell or Day to sit down for any kind of real or honest mutual sharing” (831). That these instances of personal anecdote-telling are not satisfying as communication is explained when we are told that:

now that he’s totally mute and inert and passive all of a sudden everybody seems to view him as a sympathetic ear, or not even a sympathetic *real* ear, more like a wooden carving or statue of an ear. An empty confessional booth. Don G. as huge empty confessional booth. (831, emphasis in the original)

According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, communication means “[t]he imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium” (“Communication”). The missing component in the communication with the hospitalized Gately as well as with the physically challenged Mario Incandenza is clearly the *exchange*. Gately is unable to exchange any information of his own since he is temporarily mute, and Mario Incandenza simply seldom does so. This kind of

communication is not satisfying because one part of the conversation is unable to contribute to it. However, these circumstances seem to be the only conditions characters in *Infinite Jest* dare to try to communicate at all under, even though they only manage to create a one-way communication this way.

The one exception from this rule regarding Gately is seen in the relationship between him and Joelle van Dyne. When at the hospital, Gately desperately wants a notebook to communicate through since he is unable to impart or exchange information by speech due to the tube stuck down in his throat. When a nurse then gives Gately a notebook, which he had earlier done his best to ask Joelle for, Gately's gratitude for the fact that Joelle had actually both listened to and understood him is explicitly expressed. It is stated that, "[i]t makes him feel good all over again that Joelle had understood what he'd meant. She hadn't just come to tell her troubles to somebody that couldn't make human judgment-noises", and the fact that this is an instance of real communication rather than a one-way confession to an "empty booth" is evident (884). This is the same pattern that exfoliated in the earlier discussed relationship between Gately and Joelle regarding clichés, where the characters' ability of living by clichés and truly communicating is perhaps not perfectly deployed, but where they both at least are working on it and honestly doing their best. What a juxtaposition of these two characters achieves is both an emphasizing of Gately's ability to take clichés at face value and appreciate true communication, but also that reaching Gately's state of mind is a process including hard work. Joelle clearly is not there yet, evident when regarding her too intellectual and critical approach, but she is on her way and a good example of the process of overcoming a cynical default setting.

Cleaning up After Others

One activity the few characters able to communicate sincere emotions and express vulnerability share is the unalluring exertion of cleaning up after others, and again Mario and Gately are the role models here. First of all, Gately's janitorial job consists of cleaning up other people's filth. In this case, it is not even people Gately knows, but an anonymous (and not very cleanly) crowd at a shelter for homeless men. The status of

the shower room Gately has to clean five mornings a week is described in details not necessary to retell in total here, but a poignant example of the degree of filth Gately has to scrub away on a daily basis can be seen in the description of the shower room's odor, with the words "[t]he whole place smells like death no matter what the fuck you do" (435). However, this activity is nothing new to Gately. He is in fact used to cleaning up after others since childhood, when he had to clean up after his alcoholic mother who passed out on vodka every night. "Gately'd done a fair amount of cleaning up after his mother", we are told when it is related how Gately's delusion about women being cleaner than men is destroyed when working at the Ennet House (594).

Mario's ability to clean up after people is ghoulishly described after the death of Eric Clipperton, the junior tennis player who played with a gun in one hand and threatened to blow his brains out if he lost a game. Mario is the only character who ever showed any kind of sympathy towards Clipperton, or even acknowledged his existence. He is also, tellingly, the one who shoulders the responsibility and cleans up the room where Clipperton has committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. In fact, Mario does not just happen to be the one to clean up this room, he actually requests it; "Incandenza did let Mario insist that no one else get to clean up the scene in Subdorm C", it is stated and thus made clear that the cleaning up of this horrific scene was an active choice from Mario's side (433). The touching scene when the physically challenged Mario makes an extensive effort to get the room clean is worth quoting in its total and heartrending length:

It took the bradykinetic Mario all night and two bottles of Ajax Plus to clean the room with his tiny contracted arms and square feet; the 18's girls in the rooms on either side could hear him falling around in there and picking himself up, again and again; and the finally spotless room in question had been locked ever since (433-434)

Such a moving retelling of someone sacrificing himself for the sake of somebody else, and doing so seemingly without a hidden motive, lacks a counterpart in the novel's 1,079 pages. It is a telling example of the humble nobility of Mario Incandenza's character, but it can also be regarded as a beautiful description of a character giving his own comfort up for someone else. In this case, the someone else will not even be able to return the sacrifice with a "thank you" since he is no longer alive. The brief description

of Mario's difficulties when cleaning the room leaves much of the imaginative work to the reader, who thus is invited to imagine the moving scene of sacrifice. The fact that the room eventually is "spotless" suggests the amount of work Mario has put into the task.

A third character who sacrifices himself and cleans up after others even though it causes him discomfort is Ted Schacht. When Pemulis is sick before a game, Schacht is there to hold the bucket, clean up and comfort Pemulis. The empathy with which Schacht does this is described as follows:

The plastic bucket is full of old bald Wilson tennis balls and Pemulis's breakfast. There is of course an odor. Schacht doesn't mind. He lightly strokes the sides of Pemulis's head as his mother had stroked his own big sick head, back in Philly. (262)

Schacht, just as Mario, shows an unselfishness unusual in the novel. Not only does he perform the task of helping Pemulis regurgitate, he does not mind it and shows honest empathy for another person, even though it brings him physical discomfort. Interestingly, Schacht is the one student at the Enfield Tennis Academy who shows most empathy and emotion and acts most as a mature grownup throughout the novel. Schacht is "historically tight" with Lyle and Mario, the two other characters able to show gooey sentiment and talk about feelings at E.T.A. (263), and also displays empathy towards Mario when he actively resists his urge to examine Mario's homodont teeth because "Schacht can well imagine [it] would hurt his feelings" (1022). This example illustrates how Ted Schacht actively gives something he very much wants to do up because he can imagine how it would feel to the person he wants to do it to, a crucial ingredient in empathy. Moreover, Schacht is the only character at E.T.A. who does not seem to care about his tennis career (doomed because of his digestive problems and a knee injury), and he "really doesn't care all that much whether he wins anymore" (266). Instead, Schacht is "already in his heart committed to a dental career", and for an adolescent of this novel to be committed to something other than fame or drugs is truly unique (267). The fact that Schacht is committed to something as ordinary as a dental career only makes his mature approach to life more telling.

Schacht's mature approach is also seen in his relation to drugs. He does not indulge in recreational drugs in the same destructive way as, for example, Pemulis

and Hal, and he does not have problems with addiction either. According to Pemulis, Schacht “ingests the occasional chemical that way grownups who sometimes forget to finish their cocktails drink liquor: to make a tense but fundamentally OK interior life interestingly different but no more, no element of relief; a kind of tourism” (267). This section emphasizes a mature and safe ability to handle substances, but it is also described in a way that almost makes Schacht sound boring. Schacht’s interior life is described as “OK”, and apparently he needs drugs to make it more interesting, whereas many of the other characters need drugs in order to relieve their troubled interior lives (267). This fact is interesting in connection to what Wallace himself has said about Schacht’s character, namely that Schacht is “supposed to be sort of the way a normal grown-up is” (Lipsky 146). Even more interesting is the way Wallace introduces Schacht, where he says “[t]here’s this guy named Schacht in the book who’s sort of – he’s kind of *sketchy*, because I didn’t understand his mentality very well” (146, emphasis in the original). Wallace clearly has trouble not only identifying with Ted Schacht, but with simply understanding his seemingly mature character. Although these statements could be disregarded with the argument that one should never trust an author’s word about his own work, they are relevant in relation to Wallace’s aforementioned complicated relation towards handling emotions he has a horror of, as expressed in the Silverblatt interview. Schacht seems to be a character created as an attempt at reaching out for compassion and empathy, qualities easily disregarded by any cynic set out for some ridiculing. When regarding this, it is of interest to note that one of the few characters who actually shows empathy is a character Wallace was not entirely comfortable with, even though his own statements should be contemplated with caution.

A final character who demonstrates the ability to sacrifice and clean up where he is not necessarily forced to clean up is the Ennet House resident Tiny Ewell. The Ewell case has an extra dimension to it, because Ewell’s act of cleaning up after others is an isolated event that clearly marks his personal development. Ewell’s emotional development is described in one single sentence, which goes as follows:

something deep in the previously hopelessly arrogant-seeming ‘Tiny’ Ewell seems like it’s broken and melted, spiritually speaking: the guy shaved off his Kentucky Chicken beard, was heard weeping in the 5-Man head, and was observed by Johnette taking out the

kitchen trash in secret even though his Chore this week was Office Windows. (825)

The emphasis here is on the fact that Ewell has changed; his former identity was characterized by arrogance and connected to hopelessness, but after his transformation, both physically and spiritually, he can show emotions and sacrifice himself for others. Just as in the case with Mario and Clipperton, nobody is meant to thank Ewell here since he takes out the trash in secret, and this is a crucial point as it suggests that Ewell does not have a secret agenda with his act of niceness.

What these acts of cleaning up after others have in common is their description as a deviation from the norm in Wallace's novel. Characters do not usually clean up after others, and similarly they do not weep or show empathy toward each other. This act of generosity, which is what it ultimately is, can also be found in Wallace's earlier mentioned commencement speech. When trying to define what sort of freedom the graduating students should aim for, Wallace explains that "[t]he 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, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day" (*This Is Water* 120). Caring about other people is thus connected to the act of sacrificing oneself on behalf of somebody else, and Wallace poignantly describes the alternative when he goes on to state that "[t]he alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting" (*This Is Water* 123). The norm in *Infinite Jest* is the default setting, the unconsciousness and lack of attention. Nonetheless, as illustrated by the characters I have mentioned and their, sometimes occasional, ability to sacrifice themselves for others in what sure can be called "petty little unsexy ways", deviations from the norm of not caring do exist. The generous behavior of Mario, Gately, Schacht and Ewell might not be the standard of the novel, but the behavior is there, and its existence is important in order to understand how the novel portrays empathy. These characters all display the ability to deviate from the default norm and, by doing so, to express care for other characters.

These examples have consequences not only for the characters in the novel, but also for how the novel itself relates to the standard, and sometimes default, norm it is a product of. The postmodern norm of an all-pervading irony Wallace experienced as so troublesome can be said to be rebelled against by the portrayal of

these divergences from the cynical standard. Because just as Mario “doesn’t seem to resemble much of anyone they know”, the parts of the novel relating to compassion and sincere communication do not seem to resemble much of the cynical attitude the majority of *Infinite Jest*’s characters apply as their default mindset (101).

Narrative Structure

In order to understand how any work may or may not overcome postmodern cynicism, the narrative strategies of the literature are relevant, partly because postmodernism is often connected to formal innovation. Wallace’s novel is no easy task to take on, and the challenges posed for any reader are many. First of all, there is the sheer amount of pages to thumb through. But, as Boswell puts it, “the book is not only incredibly long; it is also, in many ways, deliberately difficult” (118). Be that as it may, the difficulties are seldom there for the sake of it, they are not examples of what Wallace calls “cleveritis”, i.e. being clever for the sake of being clever (McCaffery 29). This activity is by Wallace connected to the problem of much of the American fiction of his time, which he sees as making use of too many typically postmodern, self-reflective, fictional traits for the pure sake of showing off their smartness. Conversely, the difficulties present in *Infinite Jest*, despite their formal and complicated appearance at first sight, all serve a purpose for the reader. However, some of them might need to be sorted through in order for the ends achieved by the means to appear. By investigating the formal and narrative strategies, how they function as well as how they influence the relationship between reader and writer and relate to new sincerity can be analyzed. After illuminating some of the examples of formal difficulties from the novel, I will discuss what purpose they can be said to serve and argue that they are not examples of “cleveritis”. There are an immense amount of aspects of the narrative and formal structure of *Infinite Jest* that could be relevant when discussing new sincerity⁶, but due to the limited space left in this thesis, only a small portion of them will be discussed here. The main focus will be on Wallace’s use of endnotes.

⁶ e.g. the reappearing interviews where the questions asked by the interviewer are left out, the several instances where the narrator addresses the reader directly, and the almost stream of consciousness-like sections of the novel.

The use of endnotes might be what strikes a reader of *Infinite Jest* first in terms of narrative strategies. The novel contains 388 notes at the end of the book, and they are all of very different nature. Some of them include vital information for the plot, but a substantive number of them are obvious digressions from the narrative, or even jokes on the reader. A striking example of such a joke is to be found in note number 216, which solely says “[n]o clue” at a place where a reader might have expected an explanation of an ambiguity in the main text (1036). Several notes contain information about subplots that most likely strike a reader as disconnected when first read, and which fit in the story only much later. Moreover, the notes themselves might even have subnotes, as is the case with the 18 pages long note number 110, which ends with 12 alphabetically named subnotes of its own.

The endnotes are indeed an intricate history, but what they achieve is the impossibility for the reader to become a mere spectator, as Wallace argues is one of the problems with television watching in the 1990s America in “E Unibus Pluram”. This effect is connected to the concept immersion. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* explains that “[i]n its most general sense, immersion refers to any state of absorption in some action, condition or interest”, and by making the reader leave the main narrative and thumb through the book to find the note, immersion is actively averted by Wallace (“Immersion”). In the same encyclopedic entry, it is also stated that “adopting a stance of immersion implies being absorbed in the mentally represented content in such a way as to treat it – up to a point – as if it were the actual object or situation” (“Immersion”). This way of treating *Infinite Jest* as an actual object or situation arguably becomes much more difficult when the use of notes constantly forces a reader to exit the main narrative and focus on the different stories (which at the time presented might not even fit into the main narrative) presented there. By forcing a reader to flip through the book to the back every now and then, the author makes it more difficult for whoever reads the novel to become too immersed in the main story. A reader is thus compelled to stay alert and be active, physically and mentally, at all times while reading.

The alert reading that *Infinite Jest* demands (if one wants to fit the pieces of the story together so it makes sense, that is) can be said to be related to what Wallace

mentions in his commencement speech – the importance of living “consciously, adultly, day in and day out”, which, according to Wallace, is “unimaginably hard” (*This Is Water* 135). By, among other things, his use of endnotes, Wallace forces the reader to *read* consciously, and the endnotes make it almost impossible to get immersed and lost in a more passive state of mind. David Hering outlines this effect when he discusses how Wallace is using the structure of the Sierpinski gasket (an equilateral triangle that contains a seemingly infinite number of smaller equilateral triangles) in the narrative, and talks about:

the inferential structure of *Infinite Jest*, and the manner in which the Sierpinski gasket narrative relies upon reader’s inference to complete or infer the convergence of particular narrative threads. A shared process between writer and reader (like the sharing of narratives in the ‘huge circle’ in AA) is the only way that one can ‘complete the circle’ and reach understanding. (58)

As this quote illustrates, the narrative of *Infinite Jest* is dependent on reader inference in order to merge the, at first sight quite confusing, different threads of the story together. This creates a kind of communication between reader and writer, where both components have to put in some work in order for the communication to function. If a reader is not willing to do her part to fit the pieces of *Infinite Jest* together, the novel does not come together and the communication between reader and writer consequently fails. However, if a reader does put in the amount of work asked for, the reward is great. This reader can then be said to be invited to a community, maybe not as close as AA, but still a relationship based on communication between writer and reader. The reader inference Hering discusses is also connected to the already mentioned phenomenon that Kelly calls “the dialogical dimension of the reading experience”, which he claims to be a trait of fiction belonging to the new sincerity category (143).

What the endnotes also accomplish is to question a reader’s capability of reading and understanding. As Iannis Goerlandt argues in his article “‘Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away’: Irony and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*”, the narrative flash-forwards often given in the endnotes “establish a textual void and a blind spot in the reader’s vision” (322). Goerlandt claims that this is due to the fact that they present narrative information the reader cannot understand at the point where they are given in the narrative, but need in order to construct a linear understanding of the story

later on (322). He explains how “[d]iscovering a blind spot questions our reading ability”, and this is a crucial effect achieved by Wallace’s use of endnotes (322). It confirms that the notes are there not in order to show the technical skills of the author, but rather to tell the reader something about herself. By reading the endnotes that do not make sense at the time when they are presented in the narrative, a reader is forced to accept the fact that she does not understand everything about the narrative. This is likewise connected to how the Alcoholic Anonymous program is described to work in the novel, but in a different way than Hering suggests. Time and again, it is repeated how the members of AA do not understand the mechanism of the community, but that they simply have to accept that it works anyway. When Gately ponders how the audience at an AA meeting works and what they appreciate in a speaker, the narrator concludes that “[p]art of finally getting comfortable in Boston AA is just finally running out of steam in terms of trying to figure stuff like this out. Because it literally makes no sense” (368). In the same way, the endnotes presenting information not understandable until later on in the narrative literally makes no sense. The point here might be to force the reader to give up the attempt to try to understand everything and instead apply some humility and understand what great parts they do *not* understand - not only in *Infinite Jest*, but in the world outside of the novel as well.

Interestingly, this phenomenon of accepting what one does not understand is connected not only to AA, but also to the earlier discussed role model characters Mario Incandenza and Don Gately, the only two characters who accept that they do not understand everything. As several times before, Gately is a convincing character to draw examples from. When the “definite cultish, brainwash elements to the AA Program” are discussed, it is stated that:

Gately tries to be candid with his residents re this issue. But he also shrugs and tells them that by the end of his oral-narcotics and burglary careers he’d sort of decided the old brain needed a good scrub and soak anyway. He says he pretty much held his brain out and told Pat Montesian and Gene M. to go ahead and wash away. (369)

This attitude of Gately’s indicates an open attitude towards other ways of thinking, humility towards one’s own limited understanding and a willingness to change. The narrator even asks the reader of the novel to apply this humble approach to

understanding in a very straightforward way at one point. In a chapter where the reader is addressed directly by the narrator regarding what can be learned “[i]f, by virtue of charity or the circumstance of desperation, you ever chance to spend a little time around a Substance-recovery halfway facility like Enfield’s MA’s state-funded Ennet House”, we are told “[t]hat no matter how smart you thought you were, you are actually way less smart than that” (200-201). Here, the reader is straightforwardly told to accept what Goerlandt claims Wallace’s use of endnotes makes the reader discover, namely blind spots in our understanding. It can thus be argued that Wallace’s intricate formal strategies work in concordance with the character related examples in order to force a reader to understand that she is way less smart than she thought.

What signifies Gately’s relation to the humble appreciation of what he does not understand is that it is an active choice he has made. He has not always been of this conviction, but due to his experiences as a drug addict, he has apparently come to realize that his way of living might not be the best for him. He has also been forced to apprehend that he might need some help to “scrub” his brain in order to understand what he does not understand, and then change his way of living (369). Mario, on the other hand, is once again the exemplary example in the novel, in this aspect because he is always portrayed as completely content with not understanding everything. “Mario, like Lyle, tends to take data pretty much as it comes”, it is stated, and thus depicted how Mario *accepts* the fact that he does not understand everything (379). The opposite can be seen in the earlier discussed episode with Joelle and Geoffrey Day who, due to their (in this case) bad habit of over-thinking, fail to accept that there is no way of understanding how AA works in a logical and intellectual way. They simply cannot keep it simple and “just follow the directions on the side of the fucking box”, as Gene M. instructs Gately to do in a metaphorical description of how Gately should handle sobriety like baking a cake with a cake mix (467).

The most telling example of Mario’s ability to accept what he does not understand appears when it is juxtaposed with his mother’s immense difficulties with the same acceptance. When Mario asks his mother how you “can tell if someone’s sad” even though they do not act sad, but rather appear like “they’re almost like even *more* themselves than normal”, Avril first of all corrects her son on his grammar (763-768,

emphasis in the original). ““You mean whether someone’s sad””, Avril immediately and seemingly automatically replies when Mario insinuates the serious discussion, and her inability to focus on what Mario has actually asked her continues to shine through for the rest of their conversation (763). Instead of listening to Mario’s open question, Avril constantly tries to figure out who it is that Mario thinks is sad. ““Is this about Hal? Is Hal sad and for some reason not yet able to speak about it?””, she asks and goes on to guess ““Are we discussing your Uncle Charles?””, and finally concludes with ““Mario Love-o, are *you* sad? Are you trying to determine whether I’ve been sensing that *yourself* are sad?”” (764-768, emphasis in the original). These examples all indicate Avril’s inability to accept the fact that she does not know who Mario is talking about, and thus that she does not understand the whole situation. Her many questions create an almost parodic portrayal of a character unable to accept that she does not understand everything, and Mario’s complete acceptance of the same situation is elucidated through the juxtaposition. It becomes clear that the communication between Avril and Mario fails as a result of Avril being so preoccupied with asking questions of her own. She seemingly cannot stand not completely understanding everything, which results in the fact that she does not genuinely listen to the questions asked by Mario. Tellingly, she also tries to make the conversation circle around herself when she finally asks if the whole question is about whether *she* has sensed something in Mario or not. Hence, another example of how self-centeredness is connected the refusal to accept one’s limited knowledge and that this is a default setting (seen by Avril’s instinctive correcting of Mario’s grammar in the beginning of their conversation) is once again made. The result of this conversation is thus that Mario is depicted as one of very few characters in the novel who is able to “just follow the directions on the side of the fucking box” (467).

Avril’s difficulties with accepting her limited knowledge is an example of how not to think when reading Wallace’s novel. Just as Goerlandt claims, the endnotes make us “question our reading ability”, and the examples with characters that are able or unable to accept what they do not understand can be said to serve as guidelines to the reading of the novel (322). Any reader of *Infinite Jest* struggling to understand the narrative flash-forwards and non-linear strategies before enough information about how they fit in the narrative is given, can be regarded as not accepting that she is not able to

understand the structure and the content of the novel yet. Such a reading would logically only result in frustration and conclusions drawn on false ground. Rather, the endnotes' function in the narrative structure suggests that a reader has to accept the fact that not everything is clear in the beginning, much like Mario "take[s] data pretty much as it comes" (379).

It can thus be argued that Wallace intricate formal strategies averting immersion work in concordance with the character related examples in order to force a reader to understand that she is way less smart than she thought, much in the same way as the narrator explains what you understand about yourself when spending time at a halfway house. When discussing the effects of *Infinite Jest*'s open ending, D.T. Max claims that:

Infinite Jest, for all its putative difficulty, cares about the reader, and if it denies him or her a conventional ending, it doesn't do so out of malice; it does it out of concern, to provide a deeper palliative than realistic story-telling can, because, just as in *Ennet House*, you have to work to get better. The book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are (215).

Whether or not regarding this statement as true, it is certainly connected to what Eggers claimed in the foreword to Wallace's novel. In order to become the "better person" Egger states you do become after having read *Infinite Jest*, you have to put your brain through a "monthlong workout", which Eggers suggests also results in that "your heart is sturdier" (x). For this result to be achieved, a communication between reader and writer has to be established. In *Infinite Jest*, this is partly fulfilled by Wallace's use of endnotes, which averts the reader from being immersed in the fiction at the same time as it demands something from her. In a comparison of Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace, Timothy Jacobs argues that "[s]uccessful fiction forces a recognition of our mortality by communicating with the reader", and that "Wallace's aesthetic requires that fiction disturb our said existence and propel us into the common experience of human life" (219). By not letting a reader become too immersed in the fiction, Wallace forces the reader to contribute to the novel (if nothing else so at least by flipping through the book to find the endnotes all the time). These demands create a communication between reader and writer, which is sometimes argued to be a fundamental trait of new sincerity.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, to decide whether or not *Infinite Jest* overcomes postmodern irony lies outside of the scope of this text. However, two main traits possible to classify as typical for new sincerity have emerged when analyzing the novel in textual detail. First of all, Wallace does present an alternative to postmodern cynicism in *Infinite Jest*. The novel does by no means exclude cynicism and irony, but Wallace at least provides an alternative to the default ironic attitude of the novel. The possible overcoming of irony is hinted at in the many examples of naïve emotions, sentimentality and clichés present in the novel. The story is not singularly full of characters trapped in ironic cages, it also contains Mario and Gately, characters most strongly connected to naïveté and sincerity whose hardships and honest attempts at communication are depicted in detailed and sincere ways. They are the characters who, as Eggers argues, most evidently show “real” emotions, and by their existence a resistance to the norm of cynicism is present in the novel (x). Wallace seems to suggest that another approach than the postmodern standard, both towards literature and life, is possible, and perhaps it is here that the new sincerity aspects of his fiction are most vivid. By connecting the formal strategies of the novel with the cliché-based community of Alcoholics Anonymous, Wallace connects his fiction to the real world and, as McLaughlin argues, creates a possibility for the novel to have an impact on “actual people” (55).

A second part of *Infinite Jest* crucial to what critics have claimed make up new sincerity is the novel’s constant attempts to create a communication between reader and writer. Wallace’s novel inarguably demands much of the reader, but it also gives much in return. As contrary to much of postmodern literature, the formal difficulties of *Infinite Jest* can be argued to serve the reader rather than the writer, and by this altruism a communication between reader and writer is possible. In order to get through *Infinite Jest*, a reader has to put a bit of herself into the novel; she has to pay close attention to the book and thus to risk vulnerability when she does not completely understand everything. This could of course be said about any reader of any novel, but the difficulties in *Infinite Jest* appear as especially hard to neglect. When reading the novel,

a reader has to be able to risk “missing the joke” and appear naïve at moments when complete understanding of the plot is not possible.

Since *Infinite Jest* is a 1,079 page long novel, no 40 page thesis can provide the number of textual examples needed in the field of Wallace studies at the moment. Similarly, a text as short as this one cannot be detailed enough to define such a complicated literary term as new sincerity has proven to be. However, one has to start somewhere, and hopefully there are many blank pages of literary history and criticism waiting to be filled with detailed analyses of Wallace’s fiction out there.

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