

## David Foster Wallace and Millennial America\_\_\_\_\_

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In a 1993 interview, David Foster Wallace told Larry McCaffery, “there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctly hard to be a real human being” (McCaffery 131). Examining some of the “things” that Wallace found obstructive to being human reveals much about not only the historical conditions and cultural attitudes that inform his writing, but also Wallace’s own sense of how literature might function to ameliorate social problems and make people feel “less alone” (127). After all, for Wallace, fiction’s role was to convey “what it is to be a fucking human being” (131). Speaking at Wallace’s memorial event in New York, Don DeLillo emphasized the particularly American resonances of Wallace’s writing in his concluding words: “Youth and loss. This is Dave’s voice, American” (24). And while Wallace’s oeuvre is by no means myopic in its focus on American culture—indeed, Paul Giles and Lee Konstantinou have remarked upon the transnational consciousness that underlies Wallace’s dominantly American subjects<sup>1</sup>—Wallace’s novels, together with his short fiction and nonfiction works, provide specific insights into late twentieth and early twenty-first century America. In an effort to distill the author’s diverse themes to a core set of concerns, this essay will examine the bold contours of the millennial America that informed Wallace’s representation of a media-saturated, corporatized nation, where exceptionalist attitudes and consumer culture compromise the individual’s understanding of civic responsibility and intensify a sense of dislocation, described by one of Wallace’s characters as “[e]xistential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism” (*IJ* 113).

Born in the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), Wallace grew up in an America embroiled in a range of political and military conflicts. The Cold War between Eastern and Western Blocs (headed by Soviet and American “superpowers”) continued its expression in the Vietnam War (1959–75) and a nuclear arms race, designed

to deter nuclear conflict through the looming prospect of mutually assured destruction. The US and Soviet signing of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1968 and the era of détente, established with Nixon's presidency in 1969, failed to subdue conflicts among the superpowers' surrogates in the Middle East and South Asia. Public cynicism in the US increased with the institution of a draft lottery (1969–73), the invasion of Cambodia by America and the Republic of Vietnam (1970), the Kent State shootings of anti-war protesters (1970), the publication of *The Pentagon Papers* (1971), and the Watergate scandal (1972–73). Many historians and political scientists characterize this period of American history as one of growing skepticism and a disillusionment in democratic institutions;<sup>2</sup> in his analysis of the 1970s, Bruce Schulman asserts that “the seeming loss of U.S. global hegemony remained deeply unsettling” (25). A chief object of uncertainty was the ideological supremacy of America itself—or American exceptionalism, a cultural doctrine that positions America as qualitatively different from other Western nations because of “its origins, geography, religious heritage, and Enlightenment heritage” (McCartney 27). American exceptionalism holds the US to be “a beacon among nations” and “immune from the social ills and decadence that have beset all other republics” (Bell 51). While during the Cold War this ideology of supremacy and uniqueness “had legitimated America’s dominance within a dichotomized world order by supplying the rationale for America’s moral superiority to Russian communism” (Pease 20), its validity was compromised by the Vietnam War, which “violated the anti-imperialist norms that were embedded within the discourse of American exceptionalism” (19). Compounding the pessimistic atmosphere was a depressed US economy beset by “stagflation” (simultaneously increasing unemployment and inflation) and an energy crisis aggravated by the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. For Wallace, this atmosphere of disillusionment informed his developing aesthetic and political sensibilities: “For someone like me . . . whose consciousness was formed by, ‘we are the good guy and there’s one great looming dark enemy and that’s the Soviet Union,’ the idea of waking up to the

fact that in today's world very possibly we are the villain, we are the dark force, to begin to see ourselves a little bit through the eyes of people in other countries—you can imagine how difficult that is for Americans to do" ("Frightening Time" n.p.).

Thus we see in much of Wallace's writing how "Americans are slowly waking up out of a kind of dream of special exemption and special privilege in the world" ("Frightening Time" n.p.). This awakening is depicted as both painful and necessary. In his encyclopedic novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), Wallace hypothesizes a post-millennial America where the US, Canada, and Mexico have merged to form the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.); under President Johnny Gentle's campaign for a "Tighter, Tidier Nation" (382), a vast region in the northeastern states is transformed into "uninhabitable and probably barb-wired landfills and fly-shrouded dumps and saprogenic magenta-fogged toxic-disposal sites" (*Infinite Jest*, 402) and gifted to Canada. Monumental in its toxicity, the "Great Concavity" (or, as the Canadians deem it, the "Great Convexity") is an indictment of exceptionalist attitudes that legitimize the unrestrained production and exportation of industrial and household waste; as Heather Houser observes, in *Infinite Jest* "environmental manipulation and contamination disrupt ecologies and produce sick bodies through which readers become conscious of the injustices of experialism" (128). *Infinite Jest* demonstrates how experialist injustices themselves jeopardize geopolitical stability: In an overheard conversation, self-proclaimed "prosthetic film scholar" Alain tells a fellow party guest: "What goes around, it comes back around. This your nation refuses to learn . . . You cannot give away your filth and prevent all creepage" (233). The apparently unilateral acts of an empowered nation, manifest here by the transfer of "filth" from the home territory to another that is unable to resist, inevitably cycles back to affect the originator: agents of the Québécois separatist group Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents (A.F.R.) seek to acquire and deploy against O.N.A.N. the lethal "Infinite Jest" cartridge—one of the many patterns of recursion in a novel that, Katherine Hayles asserts, "creates cycles within cycles within cycles" (684). Evinced by the feedback loops

of aggression among nation states—keenly dramatized in the E.T.A. game Eschaton, an epic permutation of tennis involving “400 dead tennis balls [that each represent] a 5-megaton thermonuclear warhead” (322)—*Infinite Jest* illustrates that “actions against others have consequences for those who perform them . . . [in] a world where interdependence is not just a corrupt political slogan but a description of the complex interconnections tying together virtual Entertainments, political realities, and real ecologies” (Hayles 695).

The world of *Infinite Jest* may be understood as a satirical extrapolation of the sociopolitical conditions of 1990s America, when the neoliberal economic philosophy propounded in the 1980s by President Reagan and his economic advisor, Milton Friedman, had become maximally entrenched in the culture. Though the term has a long history and has been variously interpreted,<sup>3</sup> neoliberalism as a late-capitalist phenomenon is defined by David Harvey as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2). The signs of a deregulated, privatized America permeate *Infinite Jest*, from the corporate sponsorship of years (Subsidized Time, “a revenue-response to the heady costs of the U.S.’s Reconfigurative giveaway” (438)) to the convergence of media companies into the monolithic InterLace TelEntertainment. Residing within this consumer-driven landscape are Wallace’s characters, whose very private struggles identify the psychological and spiritual effects of a culture governed by neoliberal principles; Ralph Clare registers “the result of this kind of consumer capitalist utopia: sadness, waste, and addiction, emptiness in a world full of things” (196). Wallace’s treatment of neoliberalism and its emotionally stultifying effects extends to his short fiction: amid the stream-of-conscious market research jargon of “Mister Squishy,” in Wallace’s short-story collection *Oblivion* (2004), Reesemeyer Shannon Belt’s Focus Group facilitator, Terry Schmidt, is driven by workplace alienation to manufacture ricin and plots to inject it into the “dark and exceptionally moist-looking snack cakes” (5) his company is marketing; in *Girl with*

*Curious Hair* (1989), “Westward The Course of Empire Makes Its Way” details the “Reunion of Everyone Who’s Ever Appeared in a McDonald’s Commercial” (272) commercial, designed to “capture a crowded and final transfiguration that will represent, and so transmit, a pan-global desire for meat, a collective erection of the world community’s true and total restaurant” (272). For Wallace, corporate America and the commodification of everything reduce individual experience to a drone-like or narcissistic compliance that wobbles on the brink of violence toward the self or others: as he told Ostap Karmodi, “corporations have so much influence and so much control and are doing so much damage that’s obvious to everybody that there may be a backlash, a kind of spasmodic reaction against it” (“Frightening Time” n.p.).

*The Pale King* (2011), Wallace’s unfinished and posthumously published novel, is perhaps the author’s most explicit critique of a culture governed by neoliberal principles.<sup>4</sup> An Internal Revenue Center in Peoria, Illinois, in the mid-1980s provides the context for the novel’s assessment of the Reagan Tax Revolt and reveals, as revenue agent Chris Fogle says, “how the implementation of tax policy can actually affect people’s lives” (*Pale King* 194). In narrating how he came to his career at the IRS, Fogle makes explicit the novel’s historicity, recalling the “high inflation, high deficits” (194) of the 1970s, “everyone despising Gerald Ford” (157) and his “father openly predicting a Ronald Reagan presidency” (159). Fogle’s hazy characterization of himself as an amphetamine-addicted “wastoid” captures the cultural mood: “pretty much every red-blooded American in [the] late-Vietnam and Watergate era felt desolate and disillusioned and unmotivated and directionless and lost” (213). Pledging to resuscitate American optimism by restoring its lethargic economy, Reagan became president in 1981 and set about implementing a supply-side economic strategy,<sup>5</sup> which called for cuts to corporate and high marginal tax rates and increases to lower income taxes as a means of combating unemployment and amplifying overall tax revenue. Modification of the tax laws under Reagan, represented in *The Pale King* by the Spackman Initiative, replaced the notion of tax enforcement as an ethics of

civic responsibility with the free-market motive of profit increase. As interviewee 951458221 (a.k.a. Kenneth Hindle) explains in §14, Spackman argued that the “three elements of the tax gap [nonfiling, underreporting, and underpayment] could be ameliorated by increasing the efficiency of the IRS respecting compliance. . . . [T] here was compelling reason to conceive, constitute, and operate the IRS as a business—a going, for-profit concern type of thing” (112). The “classically free-market” model of the IRS, furthermore, was attractive to the “conservatives of the current administration” in “an era of business deregulation” (113). The “trickle-down” effects of Reagan’s tax policies emerge as ideological conflict within the IRS: David Wallace (character in and self-identified “author” of the “nonfiction memoir” [73]) observes how the “fundamental changes to the Service’s operational mandate” divided the culture at the center by “officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue, on the one hand, and those more progressive, ‘pragmatic’ policymakers who prized the market model, efficiency, and maximum return on the investment of the Service’s annual budget” (82–83).

These discordant attitudes within the IRS come to reflect frustration within the US citizenry at large. Trapped in a stalled elevator at the Center, four agents theorize the country’s transition from “producing citizens” to “consuming citizens” (*Pale King* 146) and whether “post-production capitalism has something to do with the death of civics” (144).<sup>6</sup> Where according to Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762) citizenship entails each individual “put[ting] his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will” (173), one agent in the elevator deems this perspective void in 1980s America: “We don’t think of ourselves as citizens-parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities. We think of ourselves as citizens when it comes to our rights and privileges, but not our responsibilities” (*Pale King* 130). Drawing on political thought from Rousseau to de Tocqueville, the elevator discussion is described by Adam Kelly as “Wallace’s depiction of what an informed and open conversation about American political and intellectual history might look like”

(“Development” 277). In this sense, Wallace here revisits subject matter and a narrative style he used in *Infinite Jest*, where clandestine exchanges between A.F.R. member Rémy Marathe and U.S.O.U.S. (United States Office of Unspecified Services) agent Hugh Steeply provide the context for sociopolitical debate: while Steeply contends that the US is “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice” and that the “individual’s right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain [is] utterly sacrosanct” (424), Marathe cautions against the view of liberty as “freedom from constraint and forced duress” and asks “How to choose any but a child’s greedy choices if there is no loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person how to choose?” (320). Narrativized dialogue thus becomes a space for Wallace to show in action the kind of “complex, messy, community-wide argument (or ‘dialogue’)” he found lacking in government, the news media, and the public sphere; as he told Dave Eggers,

political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one’s own choir and demonizing the opposition. Everything’s relentlessly black and whitened. . . . it’s childish, and totally uncondusive to hard thought, give and take, compromise, or the ability of grown-ups to function as any kind of community. (“David Foster Wallace” n.p.)

While Wallace’s characters attempt to understand the nature of citizenship and the possibility of freedom without selfishness or external coercion, their confusion is compounded by a post-industrial environment congested by the products and bi-products of information technology and broadcast media. As Conley Wouters notes, in *The Pale King*, “characters constantly struggle to locate themselves in the face of an excess of material that they can be sure is not the self, which, in the late twentieth century, often takes the shape of data, information, entertainment, or some cross-section thereof” (448). This condition is epitomized by “fact psychic” Claude Sylvanshine, who is cognitively disabled by “abundance, irrelevance and the interruption of normal thought and attention” (Wallace, *Pale King* 118). With his cascading thoughts—“The number of frames in *Breathless*. That someone named Fangi or Fangio won the 1959

Grand Prix. The percentage of Egyptian deities that have animal faces instead of human faces. The length and average circumference of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's small intestine" (119)—Sylvanshine "lives part-time in a word of fractious, boiling minutiae that no one knows or could be bothered to know even if they had the chance to know" (120). In a less hyperbolic, but similarly paralyzing data immersion, IRS "wiggler" Lane Dean, Jr. feels "boredom beyond any boredom he'd ever felt" (377) as he works through "rote tasks just tricky enough to make him have to think, but still rote, tasks involving numbers that connected to nothing he'd ever see or care about, a stack of tasks that never went down" (379). But while information overload in *The Pale King* may produce depression and boredom, it is also an opportunity to transcend these things through the practice of mindful and attentive awareness. Fogle arrives at this understanding when, in the wake of his father's death and the realization that he "might be a real nihilist, that it wasn't just a hip pose" (223), he accidentally stumbles into an Advanced Tax lecture and is galvanized by the remarks of the Jesuit substitute lecturer: "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what true heroism is. . . . To retain care and scrupulosity about each detail within the teeming wormhole of data and rule and exception and contingency which constitutes real-world accounting—this is heroism" (229–31). The mundane "ordering and deployment" of facts and information is raised to a mystical level, culminating in the lecturer's final words "Gentleman, you have been called to account" (233). Fogle ascribes his transition from wastoid to IRS agent and civic idealist as having "something to do with paying attention and the ability to choose what I paid attention to, and to be aware of that choice, the fact that it's a choice" (187). This sentiment is echoed by auditor Shane Drinion, who, when asked by Meredith Rand whether she is interesting, says: "almost anything you pay close, direct attention to becomes interesting" (456). Drinion has mastered paying "close, direct attention" to the point that he levitates when immersed in a task: "One night someone comes into the office and sees Drinion upside down over his desk with his eyes glued to a complex return" (485). Wallace, in his "Notes and Asides,"

published at the end of *The Pale King*, links Drinion's aptitude for concentration to the character's relative contentment:

Drinion is happy. Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy+gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. (546)

For Wallace, boredom disengages us from political realities and keeps us ignorant: in *The Pale King*, David Wallace remarks that “[t]he real reason why US citizens were/are not aware of these conflicts, changes, and stakes is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull” (83). That dullness and boredom promote critical detachment and apathy is reiterated in Wallace's journalism: reporting on his time spent on the road with Senator John McCain's campaign for the Republican nomination, Wallace speculates that “Young Voters are so uninterested in politics” because “[t]he boredom itself preempts inquiry” (“Up, Simba!” n.p.). Inquiry, however, is vital to staving off benightedness. In “Deciderization 2007—A Special Report” his introduction to the 2007 edition of *Best American Essays*, Wallace states:

We are in a state of three-alarm emergency—‘we’ basically meaning America as a polity and culture . . . There's no way that the 2007 reelection [of George W. Bush] could have taken place—not to mention extraordinary renditions, legalized torture, FISA-flouting, or the passage of the Military Commissions Act—if we had been paying attention and handling information in a competent grown-up way. (313)

Thus insofar as Wallace's literary style is often dense, complex, and extravagantly detailed, it formally expresses a late-capitalist

America steeped in (sometimes dull) information that the reader must nevertheless become proficient in processing: David Letzler suggests that the cumbersome, sometimes pointless, paratextual material in *Infinite Jest* “requires us to develop our abilities to filter information to their maximum capacities” (321); for Ralph Clare, Wallace’s “aesthetics of boredom” in *The Pale King* (evinced, for example in the double-column bookkeeping passage in §25) makes clear “the attention that American citizens must pay toward civic duty and maintaining their freedoms” (443). In Wallace’s famous petition to overcome boredom, apathy and self-absorption through mindful attentiveness—his 2005 Commencement Speech at Kenyon College—Wallace advises:

if you really learn how to pay attention . . . [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 made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down. (*This is Water* 92–93)

Throughout his career, Wallace sought to counteract the cultural forces that he believed reduced individuals to anesthetized consumers. For Wallace and other authors of his generation<sup>7</sup> one of the primary culprits in this regard is television. In his essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (first published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993), Wallace argues that “televsual values influence the contemporary mood of jaded weltanschmerz, self-mocking materialism, blank indifference, and the delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive” (63).<sup>8</sup> In *A Reader’s Guide to Infinite Jest*, Stephen Burn states: “From Wallace’s perspective [near] the millennium . . . the salient facts about television were its emphasis on surface, and its adoption of self-referring postmodern irony as a form of self-defense” (15).<sup>9</sup> For Wallace, irony presents the most caustic mode of cultural participation; what was once the province of postmodern authors (Thomas Pynchon, John Barth are two of the many Wallace mentions)—“the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion”—is adopted by television, which

“bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption” (“E Unibus Pluram” 64). Wallace holds that the “chief job” of television, and entertainment in general, “is to make you so riveted by it that you can’t tear your eyes away, so the advertisers can advertise” (Lipsky 79); entertainment, Wallace asserts, “gives you a certain kind of pleasure that I would argue is fairly passive. There’s not a whole lot of thought involved” (Lipsky 80). Here Wallace perceives a relationship between passivity and pleasure—that pleasure itself may preclude a conscious, critical engagement with the world. In his essay, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” first published in *Harper’s* in 1996 (as “Shipping Out”), Wallace chronicles a program of critical-suppression-through-pleasure on a luxury cruise ship, whose staff “micromanage every iota of every pleasure option so that not even the dreadful corrosive action of your adult consciousness and agency and dread can fuck up your fun. Your troublesome capacities for choice, error, regret, dissatisfaction, and despair will be removed from the equation” (267). Wallace addresses the ethical implications of pleasure again when, reporting from the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival for *Gourmet* magazine, he asks: “Is it alright to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?” (“Consider the Lobster” n.p.). Wallace’s sense of the nefarious effects of pleasure through entertainment is perhaps most acutely represented in his fiction by the fatally addictive “Infinite Jest” film—variously referred to in *Infinite Jest* as “the Entertainment” (90) and “the anti-Entertainment” (126)—which renders its viewers enrapt to the point of dehydration and death. As Bradley Fest contends, “The apocalyptic implications of the Entertainment are clear and derive from an American media culture taken to its extreme—a media object that completely absorbs and reifies its viewers, eventually resulting in mass death” (140). The scenario is conspicuously echoed in the novel by Steeply’s description of discoveries in experimental neuroscience that “firing certain electrodes in certain parts of the lobes gave the brain intense feelings of pleasure” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 470) and that when these electrodes were implanted into rats’ brains and linked to “an autostimulation lever, the rat would press the lever over and over,

ignoring food and female rats in heat, completely fixated on the lever's stimulation, day and night, stopping only when the rat finally died of dehydration or simple fatigue" (471). Through this vision of self-annihilation, Wallace is asking, as Marathe asks Steeply, to consider a U.S.A "[w]ho would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone, unmoving . . . [C]an such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time?" (318).

## Notes

1. In "All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature," Paul Giles reads in Wallace's fiction a "global repositioning of American culture within a wider sphere" (19), and in "The World of David Foster Wallace," Lee Konstantinou argues that Wallace's global consciousness is expressed through an awareness that the "average, averagely bright" American may be "constitutionally unable to see on a planetary scale" (84).
2. See Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1989), which contends that America's "imperial overstretch" and allocation of resources to military endeavors caused a "downward spiral of slower growth, heavier taxes, deepening domestic splits over spending priorities, and a weakening capacity to bare the burdens of defense" (533); see also Loren Baritz's *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (1985), which examines how the American narrative of increasing national power was disrupted by the military defeat by an supposedly inferior adversary. Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider's "The Decline in Confidence in American Institutions" (1983) provides a cogent account of trends in public confidence of the US government during the Vietnam War.
3. Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse trace the evolution of the term 'neoliberalism' in "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan" (2009). In *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), Milton Friedman argues that economic freedom is a precondition for political freedom: "[A] free economy . . . gives people what they want, instead of what a particular group thinks they ought to want. Underlying most arguments against the free market is a lack of belief in freedom itself" (15).

4. For illuminating interpretations of neoliberalism in *The Pale King*, see Marshall Boswell's "Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" (2012) and Ralph Clare's "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" (2012).
5. See Paul Krugman's *Peddling Prosperity: Economic Sense and Nonsense in an Age of Diminished Expectations* (1994).
6. Find extensive analysis of this elevator conversation in Conley Wouters' "'What am I, a Machine?': Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*" (2012) and Adam Kelly's "Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" (2012).
7. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick says in "Network: The Other Cold War" (2001), "In the postmodern novel . . . one repeatedly finds film and television characterized as mind-numbing individual-crushing, potentially fascistic forms that are largely responsible for the deterioration of the American reading public" (34); for a broad study on the relationship between late twentieth-century writers and television, see Fitzpatrick's *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television* (2006).
8. For contrasting views on the cultural effects of televisual and other entertainments, see Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) and Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad is Good for You* (2006).
9. Wallace's conception of irony has been widely discussed in the scholarship: in *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), Marshall Boswell explores how Wallace, like other writers of his generation, confronted "the dilemma of devising a way to analyze the culture that neither reclaims discredited realism nor resurrects irony and self-reflexivity, the weapons of the enemy" (14); in "Sentimental Posthumanism," Paul Giles posits that Wallace searches "for fragments of authentic personality amidst the razzmatazz of scientific jargon and hip-hop slang, so that a novel such as *Infinite Jest* might be said to involve a putative humanization of the digital sensibility (335). In "Beyond Endless 'Aesthetic' Irony," Allard Den Dulk likens Wallace's views on irony to those of Søren Kierkegaard, who holds that for the ironist, "the given actuality has lost its validity entirely; it has become for him an imperfect form that is a hindrance everywhere. But on the other hand, he does not possess the new. He knows only

that the present does not match the idea” (*Concept of Irony* 261, Den Dulk 329). Important recent studies of irony in Wallace’s writing include Adam Kelly’s “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” (2010) and Lee Konstantinou’s “No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironical Belief” (2012).

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